Pathways to the Principalship

National Research Report
December 2025

University of South Australia
Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion
SASPA South Australian Secondary Principals' Association

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About this research

In response to 2022 ASPA / PARF research (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2022) which recommended development of "contextually relevant principal preparation programmes" including "targeted formal approaches and support" that "moved beyond informal networks" (p. 2), our research focuses on the aspirations, experiences and needs of aspiring leaders – middle leaders, and assistant and deputy principals. *Pathways to the Principalship* informs state, national and international concerns about principal retention, wellbeing and supply (Dolan et al., 2024; Arnold et al., 2021; Heffernan & Pierpont, 2020; Riley et al., 2021) and takes account of the need for diversity in the principalship (Heffernan et al., 2022; Keddie et al., 2020; Riley et al., 2021).

These concerns map onto long standing problems of: (1) recruiting principals to disadvantaged, rural, regional and isolated schools (Halsey & Drummond, 2014; Heffernan, 2021); (2) ensuring that the principalship reflects the diversity of the population (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2019); (3) that middle leaders and assistant and deputy principals are currently put off applying for the 'top job'; and (4) that system programmes to develop and support future leaders are patchy and unfit for purpose.

The research builds on some existing published evidence, viz. principals are important to middle leaders' work and development (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022; Day & Grice, 2019); middle leaders are significant in shared and distributed leadership (Dolan et al., 2024); career decisions are based in personal factors combined with type, location and size of school, regional structures and support and school and organisational cultures (Lee & Mao, 2023); talent-spotting schemes that are potentially inequitable (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2022; Woodward & Hall, 2003); and combinations of coaching, mentoring and supervision are important to leader development (Greany et al., 2023). The project draws on Australian research about principal supply and recruitment and selection practices, much of which is two decades old (Blackmore et al., 2006; Dorman & D'Arbon, 2003; Gronn & Lacey, 2006). It adds to current research about the importance of principals to middle leaders' work (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022; Day & Grice, 2019) and about the role and positioning of middle leaders in models of shared and distributed leadership (Dolan et al., 2024). The research also draws on international studies of school leaders' career intentions and leadership preparation (Young & Crow, 2017).

The research **aimed** to provide information about the principal 'pipeline' that will inform principal association programmes and policy recommendations. Its **objectives** are to:

(1) produce evidence about the career intentions of middle (Coordinators) and senior leaders (Assistant and Deputy principals)
(2) document the existing and desirable formal and informal support for potential principals and
(3) map promising practices and develop recommendations for the association, schools and the state school system.

The research questions were:

(1) What are the career intentions of middle (Coordinators) and senior leaders (Assistant and Deputy principals)?

(2) What support and development do they currently receive and is this fit for purpose?
(3) What existing leadership development practices exist that are extendable and scaleable?

The research took a co-constructed approach (Horner, 2016), bringing together the knowledge of practising school principals with research knowledge and practices. This is different from the usual approach to educational research where there is a clear hierarchy of expertise – the researcher knows and the principal/teacher implements. This is a comparatively new approach in Australian school leadership research and offers a new process to principal associations and principals.

Co-constructed research requires trust and mutual respect as well as time, formal structures and management. The South Australian Secondary Principals Association (SASPA) as project leader created a reference committee of principals that included the relevant department senior officer responsible for leadership development. The reference committee worked with the researchers at all stages of the research – devising the project and research questions, constructing and analysing a survey, formulating interview questions and developing recommendations and project outputs.

National focus

This research was conducted in South Australia. We have removed some details specific to local conditions. We have added commentary about national implications in relevant sections of the report. A more detailed state specific report is also available.

Executive summary

The research reveals both the strengths of current systems and significant challenges that create inequities, undermine confidence and limit leadership development.

The Merit Selection Paradox

The research suggests a system characterised by fundamental paradox. While robust procedural frameworks exist and leaders appreciate having transparent processes to lean on, widespread cynicism about faithful implementation undermines credibility. There is a persistent perception that can be predetermined and that selection processes may be seen as a ritual that legitimates decisions already made. Our South Australian research uncovers a range of issues contributing to some erosion of trust in the merit process:

- Writing skills become a form of gatekeeping unrelated to leadership capability, creating what participants called a 'dark art' that advantages those with mentors or coaching while sometimes disadvantaging skilled practitioners.
- Despite distributed membership designed to prevent unilateral decision-making, chairs can dominate proceedings. The capacity of other panelists to challenge chairs to ensure procedural fidelity varies substantially.
- A shift from face-to-face to online training concerns middle leaders who believe the richness of in-person learning cannot be replicated through self-paced modules.
- Equity implications compound across multiple dimensions:
    - many participants described a ‘postcode lottery’ where career advancement depends as much on location as capability
    - position classification inequities, where comparable roles carry different classifications depending on school resources, create an inequitable cycle where struggling schools cannot compete for experienced leaders
    - gender bias operates beneath procedural surfaces with participants reporting being told directly about the panel’s gender preferences
    - age discrimination compounds gender bias, with preferences for 'young and energetic' potentially masking biases against older (and often female) leaders
    - cultural and linguistic diversity creates dual disadvantages, with language barriers intersecting with failure to recognise diverse leadership experiences as equivalent to mainstream pathways.

These issues are also likely to be of concern in other states.

Pathways to Principalship: Enablers and Barriers

Most leaders do not expect to become principals soon, preferring to excel in current roles first. Concerns include heavy workloads, work intensity, and family impact, with women particularly noting the lack of job-sharing options. Those deputy principals with principal acting experience were more likely to express interest, having gained understanding of available support structures.

Enablers of Progression

- *Mentorship*: The most cited enabler; aspiring leaders noted how principals and line managers who invest in their development have a transformative impact.
- *Professional networks:* Build connections to the broader educational community and a shared understanding of system priorities.
- *Acting opportunities:* Provide critical experiences that allow leaders to test their interest and capability.
- *Personal agency and disposition:* Differentiate those who advance from those who plateau.
- *Structured professional development:* Targeted and relevant programs provide content, coaching, and peer support.

Barriers to Progression

- *Workload and competing priorities:* Particularly for those middle leaders who must maintain their teaching loads alongside of leadership responsibilities.
- *Perceived trade-offs*: Belief that middle leaders are pulled in multiple directions with leadership roles compromising teaching quality or leadership effectiveness.
- *Lack of mentorship:* Significant obstacle, especially when line managers lack the necessary skills or willingness to support aspiring leaders.
- *Geographic challenges:* Regional roles can be a 'two-edged sword' offering opportunities for advancement but limiting access to professional development and adding the barrier of travel costs.
- *System-level dysfunction:* For example, top-down demands can ignore site context; shifting priorities can create reactive cultures; bureaucracy can detract from teaching improvement.
- *Tenure structures:* Extended principal tenures may block opportunities; short cycles at middle leadership level can disrupt continuity.
- *Financial considerations:* Minimal pay difference increased accountabilities attached to middle leader career advancement.
- *Work-life balance:* Acute for women planning families; constant availability conflicts with parenting responsibilities.
- *Knowledge gaps:* Limited exposure to operational, legal, and financial aspects (e.g., budgets, staffing, compliance) of the principal role.

Professional Learning Needs

While leaders value many existing programmes they had a clear vision for more coherent, contextually relevant pathways. The strongest consensus indicated that professional learning is most powerful when relational and experiential. Leaders consistently identified growth coaching, mentoring, and networking as most valuable, with one participant referring to informal exchanges at professional events as 'waiting room conversations are gold.'

School leaders seek professional learning that reflects the full scope of their role, combining strategic vision with operational competence. However, a persistent gap exists between the pedagogical focus of most programs and the practical realities of leadership. Middle leaders

emphasise the need for training in financial management, governance, compliance, HR, and administrative systems.

Access and relevance remain major challenges for rural and regional leaders. Barriers include travel time and cost, limited relief staff, family commitments, and unsafe driving conditions. Content often feels metropolitan-centric, failing to translate to smaller regional contexts.

Leaders strongly critique "*one-day wonders"*, calling for professional learning that is sequential, connected to site priorities, supported by follow-up, and embedded in practice. A significant gap exists in structured pathways for different leadership levels, particularly for faculty leadership and team management. Time and workload pressures compound these issues. Leaders juggle teaching and leadership responsibilities, lack backfill for training, and face inefficient systems. Professional learning is often treated as an add-on rather than core business.

While occupying a crucial middle space, many participants felt undervalued and under-supported. Concerns include assumptions of readiness without preparation, pressure to advance, lack of targeted development, and financial stagnation. Current training focuses on stable aspects of leadership while neglecting emerging challenges such as complex student behaviour and demanding parents.

Leaders aspire to immersive experiences like principal internships, cross-site placements, and portfolio rotations. These opportunities would provide realistic insights into senior leadership, build confidence, and support informed career decisions.

Conclusion

The research results show that South Australian research participants see both strengths and limitations in current systems. While merit selection provides procedural frameworks and professional learning opportunities, perceptions and challenges around integrity, equity, accessibility, and coherence undermine their effectiveness. The disconnect between policy intentions and lived experience creates cynicism that may corrode organisational culture and deter some capable educators from pursuing leadership roles. Leaders expressed clear preferences for what would serve them better, particularly regarding relational and experiential learning, operational skill development, geographic equity, and systematic support throughout their career journeys. These results are likely hold true across the country.

Key Result: Pathways to the principalship are diverse and inequitable

Our research shows that the pathways to principalship are not linear, predictable routes but are complex, interconnected action networks that create profoundly different trajectories for each individual leader. In Figure 1 below, the person at the centre symbolises the middle leader whose career journey depends not on merit alone, but on the unpredictable intersection of multiple, often inequitable factors. While each individual middle leader brings a set of distinctive prior experiences, interests and knowledges about education and leadership, they sit within nested contexts that fundamentally shape their possibilities.

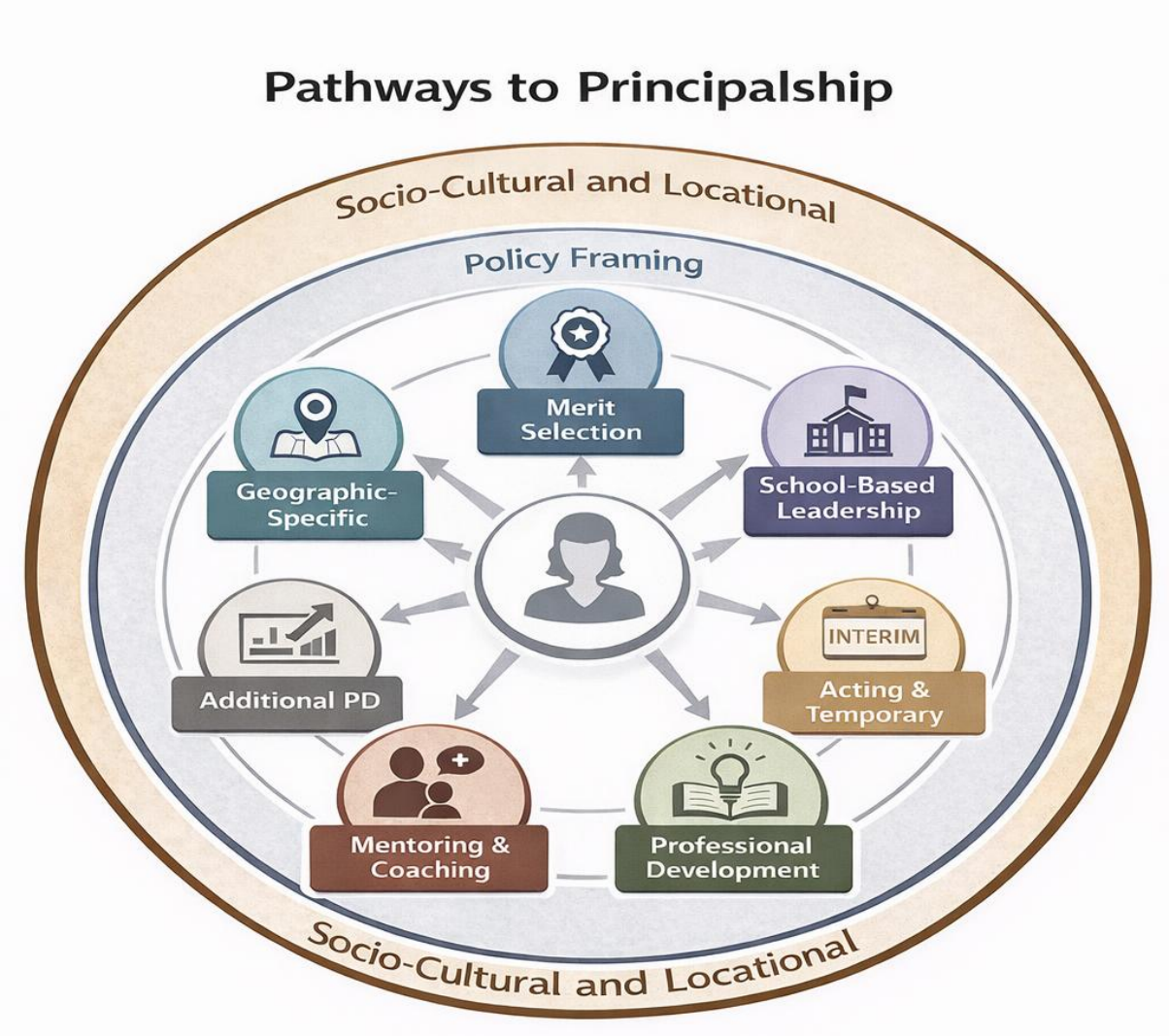

Figure 1: Multiple pathways

The Concentric Layers: Framing Individual Experience

The innermost circle in the diagram (Figure 1) contains the seven primary pathway elements that connect directly to the aspiring leader's experience. The "Policy Framing" layer represents systemic structures like merit selection procedures, professional development programmes, and tenure arrangements that are intended to provide transparent advancement processes. The outermost "Socio-Cultural and Locational" layer acknowledges that all pathways operate within broader contexts of geographic inequality, cultural bias, and structural disadvantage that create what research participants called a "postcode lottery" where location matters as much as capability.

Merit Selection: A Crucial but Problematic Practice

Positioned at the top of the inner circle, merit selection represents both the official pathway and the system's greatest source of tension. Ideally, merit selection should provide procedural fairness and transparency. In reality, the research revealed widespread cynicism about implementation fidelity. The process becomes unpredictable through inconsistent panel practices, with some conducting rigorous interviews whilst others skip them entirely. Writing skills function as gatekeeping mechanisms unrelated to actual leadership capability, creating what participants termed a "dark art" that advantages those with access to mentors or coaching. The equity implications are profound: an application successful at one site might be eliminated at another for identical credentials. This unpredictability is compounded for leaders in regional or disadvantaged schools with fewer opportunities, where flawed processes can have more severe career consequences than for metropolitan leaders with abundant alternatives.

School-Based Leadership: The Experience Recognition Problem

School-based leadership opportunities provide crucial developmental experiences, yet they operate inequitably. Position classification varies across schools: curriculum leaders might be classified as B1 in less-resourced schools whilst holding B2 classification in well-resourced ones, despite comparable or even greater complexity of work. This creates perverse inequity where leaders shouldering heavier responsibilities in challenging contexts accumulate experience that panels systematically undervalue. The research found that leaders working harder with less support often find their experience counts for less than those with favourable conditions, making this pathway fundamentally unstable for those already facing structural barriers.

Acting & Temporary Opportunities: The Confidence Gateway

Acting positions are perhaps the most powerful pathway influence. Survey data confirmed that 42.4% of those with acting principal experience saw themselves as future principals, compared to only 30% who had acted in higher middle-leader positions. Research participants described transformative experiences: "When I sat in the chair, I had to make a principal decision and then a level of confidence came over me that I never expected." However, these confidence-building opportunities are inequitably distributed. Geographic isolation limits access to acting principal roles, particularly in remote locations where aspiring leaders face impossible choices between remaining in current roles or uprooting families for uncertain advancement. The

opportunity to "try before you commit" becomes a privilege of location rather than a universal developmental experience.

Professional Development and Additional PD: The Access Divide

Professional development programmes like Orbis Future Leaders provide structured learning opportunities, yet access and relevance create stark inequalities. Rural and regional leaders face multiple compounding barriers: travel time and costs to Adelaide, limited relief staff availability, family commitments, and unsafe driving conditions for early or evening sessions. Beyond access, content often feels metropolitan-centric, failing to translate to smaller regional contexts. The research found that professional learning operates as "an add-on rather than core business," with leaders juggling teaching and leadership responsibilities without adequate backfill. This geographical inequity means that career advancement depends partly on being located where professional development is accessible, making pathways inherently unstable for regional leaders or where line-managers are less involved in career development.

Mentoring & Coaching: The Relationship Lottery

Quality mentorship emerged as the most frequently cited pathway enabler, yet it operates through what amounts to a relationship lottery. The research showed patchiness: whilst some leaders benefit from principals passionate about succession planning who provide transparent decision-making and capacity-building feedback, others experience line managers who lack either skill or willingness to develop aspiring leaders. The survey finding that the majority of respondents had not been encouraged to apply for principalship positions illustrates this gap. This variability is particularly problematic because talent spotting is often associated with unconscious gender and race-based bias, meaning the mentoring pathway can reinforce rather than challenge existing inequalities.

Geographic-Specific Factors: The Compound Effect

Geographic location operates as a node where multiple pathways intersect to create compound effects. Regional positions offer advancement opportunities due to smaller applicant pools, but simultaneously constrain progression through limited professional development access, fewer acting opportunities, reduced professional networks, and financial barriers for travel. The perception that country experience is less valuable than metropolitan experience when transitioning back to the city traps skilled leaders in regional positions. The tight-knit nature of some country communities makes it difficult for outsiders to break into established networks, whilst the necessity of relocating families to Adelaide for principalship creates impossible choices between career advancement and family stability.

Pathways Are Unpredictable, Unstable, and Inequitable

These pathways are interconnected not isolated elements. The unpredictability arises because success depends on the confluence of multiple factors: accessing quality mentoring AND geographic advantage AND acting opportunities AND merit selection panel composition. Each element operates with its own internal variability and bias, making outcomes fundamentally uncertain even for highly capable leaders.

The instability arises because pathway elements are neither consistent nor reliable. Professional development access fluctuates with geography and workload. Mentoring quality depends on individual relationships that can change with principal turnover. Merit selection outcomes vary with panel membership. Acting opportunities emerge sporadically and inequitably. Each individual's trajectory therefore depends on unique combinations of circumstances largely beyond their control.

The inequity is systemic and compound. Geographic disadvantage restricts both professional development and acting opportunities. Position classification inequities mean comparable work receives different recognition depending on school resources. Gender and cultural biases operate beneath procedural surfaces. Age discrimination compounds gender bias. The "Band B dilemma" creates particular barriers where teaching loads must be maintained alongside leadership responsibilities. These inequities don't simply add together - they multiply through interaction, creating cumulative barriers for those already facing structural disadvantages whilst those with initial advantages experience compound benefits.

A Distinctive Individual Trajectory

Each middle leader's pathway emerges from their navigation of these interconnected networks, shaped by their starting location, their access to mentors, the timing of opportunities, their school's resource level, their demographic setting(s), their understanding of the pathways to the principalship and countless other factors. The research found that what appears as lack of ambition is often sophisticated decision-making about career trade-offs in the face of these systemic barriers. Two leaders with identical capability and aspiration may have profoundly different career trajectories depending on these pathway intersections - not because merit doesn't matter, but because merit operates within systems that are often unpredictable, unstable, and inequitable. This explains why systemic transformation, rather than simply individual pathway improvement, emerges as the research's central implications for change.

Introduction

The research literatures (e.g., Grootenboer, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2021; Lipscombe, Grice, Tindall-Ford & De Nobile, 2020; Thompson & Stokes, 2023; Tindall-Ford, Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Attard, 2024) suggest that middle leaders occupy a particularly significant space in the enactment of distributed leadership within schools. They are the people who translate vision into practice, who work at the boundary between senior leadership's strategic intentions and the everyday realities of teaching and learning in classrooms and departments. When we think about distributed leadership – leadership stretched across multiple people and situations rather than concentrated in a single figure – middle leaders become absolutely central to how leadership actually functions in schools.

These are the assistant and deputy principals, heads of department, the curriculum coordinators, the year-level leaders who hold formal leadership positions but remain deeply embedded in the teaching work of the school. They experience leadership as something inherently relational and contextual. They learn to influence without always having formal authority, to negotiate competing priorities, to build consensus among colleagues who are also their peers. They develop what we might call a distributed leadership sensibility, an understanding that getting things done in schools requires working through others, building networks of influence, and understanding that expertise is dispersed throughout the organisation.

This experience can be valuable preparation for principalship. Middle leaders can develop sophisticated political skills as they navigate between different constituencies. They advocate upward to senior leadership while also representing leadership decisions to their teams, often absorbing criticism from both directions. They learn to read organisational culture, to understand the informal power structures that exist alongside formal hierarchies, and to work within the constraints of limited resources and competing demands. They also typically develop strong subject or pedagogical expertise, maintaining credibility as educators even as they take on leadership responsibilities.

However, there are ways that these experiences might actually hinder the transition to principalship. The very strength of distributed leadership, with its emphasis on collaborative decision-making and shared responsibility, can leave aspiring principals underprepared for the loneliness and ultimate accountability of the principal role. Middle leaders often work in spaces where responsibility is genuinely shared, where they can defer final decisions to someone above them, where they have the luxury of focusing on particular areas rather than the whole school. The shift to principalship requires a different kind of judgment about when to distribute leadership and when to make decisive individual calls, particularly in crisis situations or when dealing with external accountabilities.

There is also a potential tension around identity. Successful middle leaders often define themselves through their subject expertise or their particular educational passion. They are the brilliant science coordinator or the innovative literacy leader. But principals need to develop what might be called a whole-school identity, caring equally about areas where they have no particular expertise or personal interest. This can feel like a loss of the very thing that made them successful middle leaders.

Furthermore, middle leaders typically exercise leadership within relatively bounded domains - their department, their year level, their curriculum area. They can often succeed by building strong relationships with a relatively small group of colleagues. Principalship requires operating at scale, maintaining relationships across an entire staff, building coalitions among groups who may have competing interests, and representing the school to multiple external communities. The interpersonal skills that work in leading twelve people don't always scale effectively to leading eighty or a hundred and twenty.

Perhaps most significantly, middle leaders in schools with strongly distributed leadership cultures may not get sufficient experience with the more managerial and bureaucratic aspects of principalship, such as budget management, staff performance management, legal compliance, facilities management, and the increasingly complex external accountability frameworks. These aren't the exciting parts of educational leadership, but they're inescapable realities of the principal role. A middle leader who has thrived on the pedagogical and relational aspects of distributed leadership may find themselves both unprepared for and temperamentally unsuited to these aspects of the role.

The question is how to structure leadership pathways that preserve the benefits of distributed leadership experience while also preparing middle leaders for the distinctive demands of principalship. Three suggestions are: deliberately rotating middle leaders through different portfolios, including those with budgetary or compliance responsibilities; creating opportunities for acting or deputy principal roles that provide supported experience of whole-school leadership; and conversations with aspiring principals about what the role actually entails, so they can make informed decisions about whether it's truly the right next step for them.

The Research Process

The research took a mixed method approach. The data collection had two components:

- a survey (or 'quantitative' component), and
- a series of group interviews (or 'qualitative' component).

Survey

Middle leaders in state secondary school across South Australia were invited to complete an online survey consisting of 27 questions. The survey was focused on middle leader experiences of, and views on, contemporary school leadership and included questions about professional role and identity, wellbeing, professional development and career experiences and plans.

A total of 287 middle leaders responded to the survey over a two-month period. The majority of respondents worked in secondary and R-12 school settings (93%), with the larger proportion having enrolments of 500+ students (87%). Most respondents' schools were in metropolitan Adelaide (68%). Respondents' schools ranged across all categories of disadvantage. Table 1 provides some characteristics of the survey respondents.

Respondent characteristics	
Gender	Female *(171)*; Male *(115)*; Prefer not to say *(1)*
Age	<30 *(19)*; 31-40 *(119)*; 41-50 *(87)*; 51-60 *(49)*; >60 *(12)*; Prefer not to say *(1)*
Current position	Coordinator *(121)*; Assistant Principal/Senior Leader *(98)*; Deputy Principal *(42)*; Acting Principal *(4)*; Other *(21)*
Time in position	<1 term *(10)*; <1 year *(64)*; 1-5 years *(151)*; 5-9 years *(43)*; >9 years *(18)*

Table 1: Characteristics of survey respondents

We asked respondents to tell us about their identity and related factors known to effect pathways to the principalship (Figure 2).

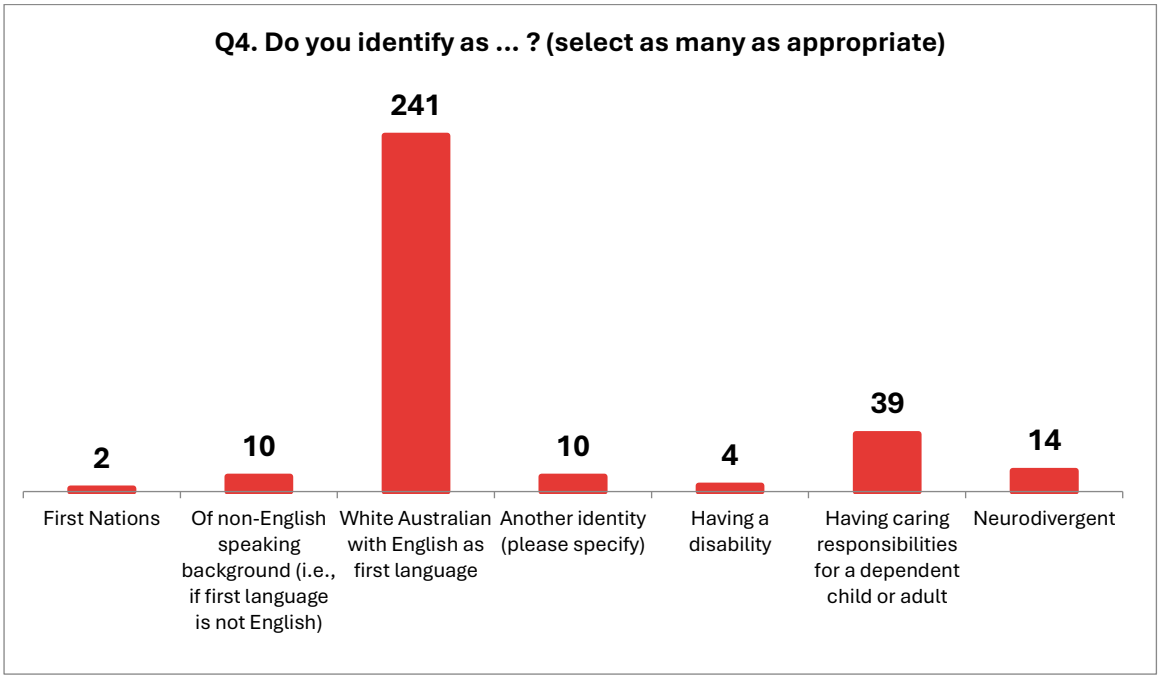

Figure 2: How respondents identified

Group Interviews

At the close of the survey, groups of middle leaders volunteered and/or were selected to take part in a series of group discussions. In all, 12 groups were conducted across the state. Discussions addressed the wants and needs of aspiring principals, their experiences of the current pathways to principalship, and how these might be changed. Participants were also asked about the principal job as it currently stands and what would make it more attractive.

Two additional online group interviews were organised to address a lack of representation of the views of middle leaders from low SES schools. All discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers with the assistance of AI software. Table 2 summarises the interview component of our research.

Location / Region	No. of Groups	Total participant numbers	Composition (according to current leadership position)
Metropolitan Adelaide	4	20	DP (5); AP/Senior Leader (6); Coordinator/other middle leader (9)
Regional / Country Rural	6	52	Acting Principal (1); DP (8); AP/senior Leader (25); Coordinator / other B-level leader (18)
Online	2	16	Acting Principal (1); Deputy Principal (5); AP / Senior Leader (10)

Table 2: Characteristics of group interviews

Pathways not pipelines to the principalship

We began the group interviews by asking participants to tell us about their aspirations and to provide us with a sketch of the general promotion landscape. Some points that appear in this section are expanded in the next sections on merit selection and professional development.

Aspirations

The majority of interview participants did not aspire to be principals in the near future. Many told us they had answered "no" to Q 13 (Figure 3) but had not ruled out the possibility at some point in the future. Most wanted to stay at their current level until they felt they were excelling and then move to what they saw as the next step. This reticence is reflected in the number of survey respondents who remain undecided and the preference for a delayed timeline in applying for a principal position. In interviews, many participants felt strongly that they needed to know much more before they could even think about the top job.

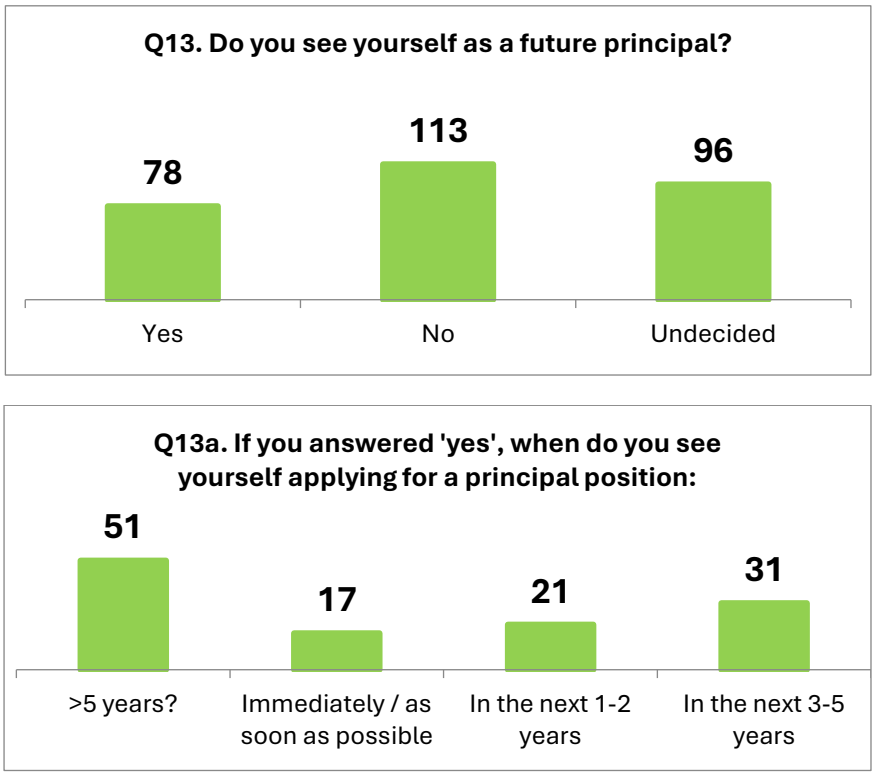

Figure 3: Aspirations for principalship

Participants who were new to middle leadership were more likely to reflect on the lack of formal training for this position and their concern not to be unprepared again. They also said that they had little idea of what the principal did other than a lot of paperwork, dealing with complex crises and being "*where the buck stops*"[1]. All participants were concerned about additional time demands as well as work intensity. Many commented on their inability to see support structures and a clear pathway to the principalship, and on a lack of confidence in their ability and readiness to step into the principal role. Women in particular were concerned about the

[1] We note that the usual secondary school management structure of executive and middle leadership teams may contribute to lack of knowledge about what principals actually do.

impact on family life and the lack of opportunity to job-share. While the majority talked of reluctance or delay in going for a principal position, several participants made reference to the need for a bolder approach, for example, in a "*willingness to give it a try for the right reasons"*, in needing to "*be able to back yourself*" and in finding motivation in "*the opportunity to change the school's narrative*".

Seeing yourself as a future principal was strongly linked to the positive opportunities provided by acting up in the job. One participant noted that they '*didn't have any aspiration whatsoever to pursue a principal role'* and that taking up an "*opportunity to do an acting role … (had) had a really positive effect"* in changing their mind. Another claimed that "*even in those short stints, it gives you confidence and understanding of what the role entails*". As another participant put it:

> *When I sat in the chair, I had to make a principal decision and then a level of confidence came over me that I never expected. I realised I had to make those calls, and I felt more comfortable.*

Deputy principals who already had acting experience were more likely to say that they were interested in being principals. They had some idea of the support available to newly appointed principals and were relatively confident they wouldn't be "*hung out to dry*". The equity of opportunity to act up is thus an important factor in leadership recruitment.

What Supports Pathways to Principalship

1. *Structured Professional Development Opportunities*

The array of system-level professional learning opportunities for aspiring leaders – complemented by principal association programs – were generally, although not universally, seen as enablers in the pathway to principalship. The provision of content knowledge, skill development, extended coaching / peer connections, and specialised support for different leadership contexts were seen as strengths of these programs. The availability of comprehensive, cost-neutral and structured learning opportunities (characterised by multi-day programs delivered over extended periods) allowed for deep engagement with leadership concepts rather than superficial one-off sessions.

2. *Mentorship and Relational Support*

The most frequently cited enabler of leadership progression was high-quality mentorship. Aspiring leaders emphasised the impact of principals and line managers who invested in their growth through coaching, modelling difficult conversations, and exposing them to the operational realities of school leadership. Effective mentors were transparent in decision-making, practised inclusive leadership, and offered feedback that built capacity rather than simply judging performance. Mentoring often extended into relational and cultural aspects of leadership, helping future principals to think about how they might navigate school politics. When embedded in supportive, collegial leadership teams - especially those led by principals committed to succession planning - mentorship created a natural, collaborative pathway for leadership development.

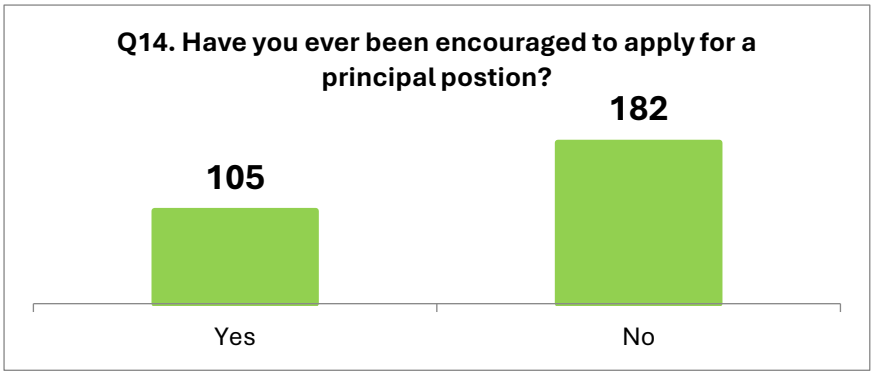

Figure 4: Encouragement to apply

The patchiness of mentoring support can be read from the survey finding (Figure 4) showing that the majority of respondents had not been supported to think about the principalship.

The talent development literatures (e.g., Kibum & Soebin, 2022) warn that selecting only some people to encourage and support as leaders can be a flawed strategy as what people can do is always limited by their current role. Talent spotting is often also associated with unconscious gender and race-based bias (Swanson & Van Sickle, 2021).

3. Professional Networks and Collaborative Communities

Professional networking was seen as both a formal and informal pathway enabler that:

- creates bridges between aspiring leaders and the broader educational community
- builds shared understanding of system priorities and school improvement strategies
- facilitates opportunities for leaders at similar levels to debrief, share challenges, and learn from diverse contexts
- provides access to peers facing similar challenges in order work out practical solutions and gain emotional support
- helps form a more sophisticated understanding of leadership beyond one's immediate context in visits to other sites, engagement in joint curriculum development, and participation in regional discussions.

When schools actively engaged with these network structures rather than operating in isolation, aspiring leaders accessed multiple perspectives and approaches, enriching their leadership repertoire and building the professional capital necessary for advancement.

4. Experiential Learning Through Acting and Project Opportunities

Interviewees told us that time-release and acting opportunities provided critical "*try before you commit*" experiences that allowed aspiring leaders to test their interest and capability in leadership roles without immediately abandoning their current positions. Numerous benefits were noted, including increased confidence, development of practical knowledge that cannot be acquired through formal training alone and offering of authentic contexts for demonstrating leadership capacity. These experiences were particularly valuable in smaller or regional schools where the proximity to leadership created natural opportunities for involvement in whole-school approaches and cross-portfolio coordination. The ability to lead initiatives without holding formal positional authority helped some aspiring leaders develop the influence

skills essential for principalship while allowing current leaders to assess readiness for progression. However, these opportunities to 'act up' are not equitably distributed (Figure 5).

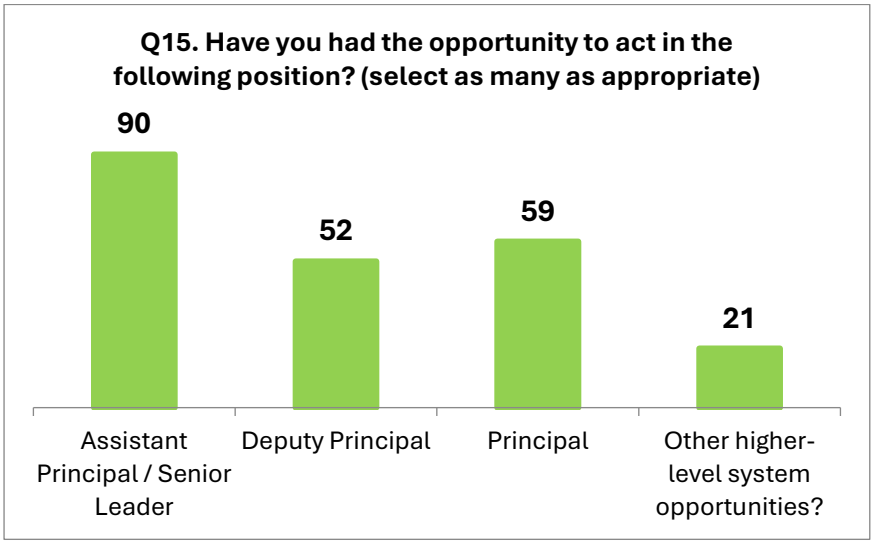

Figure 5: Opportunities to act up

Using survey data, we tested the hypothesis that respondents who have filled acting principal positions are more likely to see themselves as future principals than those who have only acted in higher level middle-leader positions. Cross tabulation of these variables supported this hypothesis, with 42.4% of those with acting principal experience saying that they do see themselves as a future principal, compared to 30% in the cohort that had acted in Assistant Principal / Senior Leader roles and 38.5% of those who had acted in Deputy Principal roles. This reinforces concerns about patchiness of opportunity to act up.

5. *Personal Agency and Professional Disposition*

Personal agency and proactive career management were seen as critical for leadership progression. Aspiring leaders who actively seek out professional development, take on leadership projects, and gain experience across diverse contexts positioned themselves favourably for advancement. Building strong professional relationships, demonstrating commitment, and navigating organisational dynamics effectively distinguish those who progress from those who plateau. Ambition, combined with a genuine passion for educational leadership and student wellbeing, fosters resilience in challenging roles. Success is amplified when individuals possess specialised knowledge, adaptive skills, and dispositions aligned with system priorities and evolving educational contexts.

6. *Progression Pathways and Merit-Based Systems*

Participants recognised that the differentiation in middle leader roles – e.g. focusing on curriculum, wellbeing, organisation and behaviour – allowed individuals to align their career trajectory with their strengths and interests while building comprehensive leadership capacity over time. Short-term position cycles did create some opportunities for movement and development, preventing stagnation while allowing time to demonstrate some impact. The merit-based selection process, when functioning effectively (see later), provided equity of access and ensured that progression was based on demonstrated capability rather than

arbitrary factors. Transparency was enhanced when principals articulated clear expectations and when the connection between role requirements and system strategy was made explicit. But while participants recognised the importance of pathways and merit-based systems, the majority had significant concerns.

7. Regional and Country Advantages

Geographic location acted as both an enabler and a barrier to leadership progression. Regional and remote schools often offered faster advancement due to smaller applicant pools, higher turnover, and broader responsibilities. Larger country schools provided diverse leadership roles and close-knit communities where impact was visible and valued. The need to cover multiple roles accelerated skill development, creating versatile leaders with wide-ranging capabilities. These advantages were strongest when supported by regional structures, active partnership networks, and leaders willing to embrace the lifestyle and challenges of rural service. In contrast, metropolitan settings typically involved greater competition and slower progression.

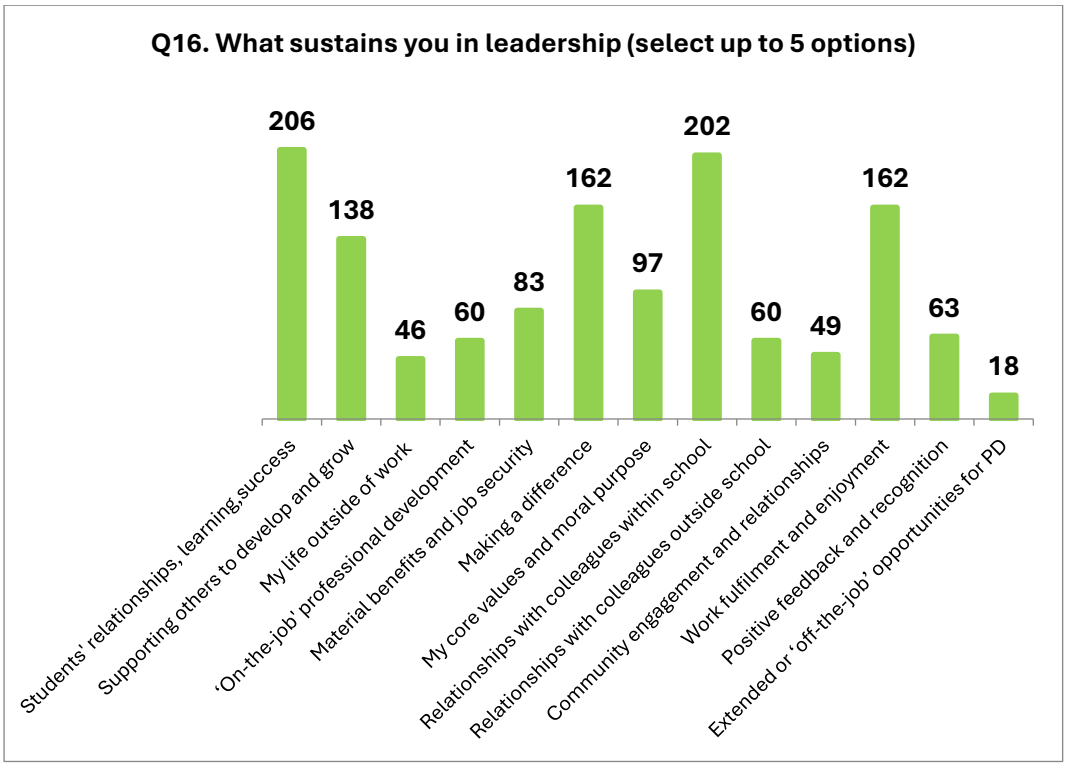

Figure 6: What sustains leaders

8. Rewards in Current Leadership Position

The vast majority of interview participants said that their current position carried rewards. The most important were the relational aspects of the work and knowing that they were making a positive difference. This observation is supported by survey responses (Figure 6) which provide a broad overview of those factors that 'sustain' middle leaders in their current role. Many participants were concerned that if they changed roles, particularly if this also meant changing schools and/or taking on the "*top job*" that the current rewards they experienced in their leadership work might suffer. Their assessment of benefits and risks often led to participants thinking that they might stay where and as they are for an extended period of time. Many said

that staying at the current level was seen as a lack of ambition, rather than being a positive expression of the value of middle leadership per se.

What Works Against Pathways to Principalship

1. *Overwhelming Workload and Role Complexity*

The workload and complexity of leadership roles, particularly those where teaching loads must be maintained, was the most significant deterrent to leadership aspirations. Middle leaders described feeling pulled in multiple directions by competing local and systemic priorities and the demands of parents, staff, and students. The emotional labour of being "*in the firing line from all quarters*" and the impossibility of paying simultaneous attention to all demands compounded the practical challenges of role complexity. Time emerged as the scarcest resource, with aspiring leaders observing that the vital work of building culture, mentoring staff, and focusing on learning was consistently displaced by urgent administrative demands. Responses to survey question 17 (Figure 7) further illuminate these issues of workload and role complexity.

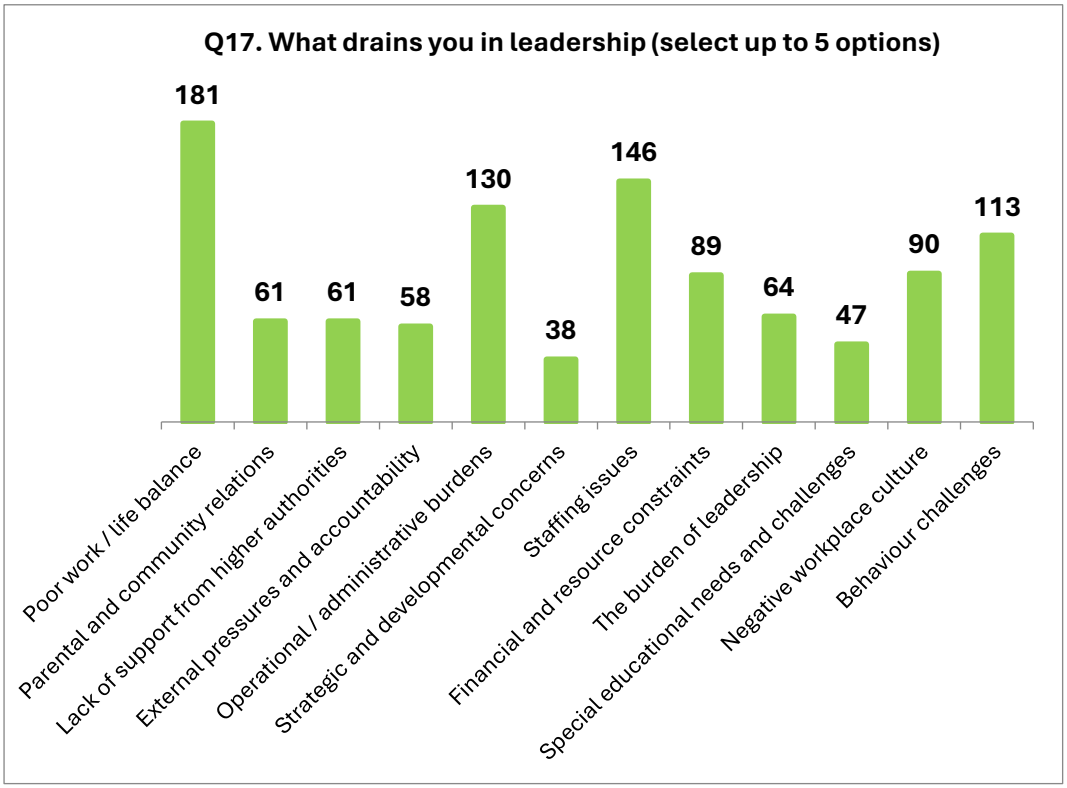

Figure 7: What drains leaders

Aspiring leaders also witnessed their principals responding to department requests with unrealistic deadlines while managing the daily complexities of students, families, and staff. The perception that senior leadership positions required sacrificing either teaching quality or leadership effectiveness created an untenable choice for many participants. If the current position is hard, why choose one that is even more demanding?

2. *Merit Selection System Challenges*

While merit-based selection theoretically provides equitable access to leadership positions, the majority of participants agreed that the system presented some barriers to aspiring leaders. The application writing process itself required a specialised skill set that many educators lacked, particularly those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds or those transitioning from outside the government sector. The lack of transparency in panel expectations, the guesswork involved in interpreting job and person specifications, and the emphasis on format over substance created confusion about what actually constitutes evidence of capability. Perceived panel manipulation, whether through pre-determined candidates or bias toward internal applicants, undermined the integrity of the process and led to cynicism about advancement opportunities. The subjective interpretation of experience, particularly the devaluation of country school experience when applying for metropolitan positions or the dismissal of expertise developed outside of education, restricted mobility and progression. For skilled immigrants, the process was particularly impenetrable, with language proficiency overlooked as a valuable asset and cultural differences mistaken for incompetence. The lack of transparency in how selection decisions were made, combined with insufficient feedback to support growth, appears to transform what should be a developmental process into a mysterious rite of passage. We say more about this in the next section.

3. *Absence or Poor Quality of Mentorship*

The absence of effective mentorship creates major barriers to leadership progression. When principals or line managers lack the skill or willingness to develop aspiring leaders, opportunities for growth diminish. Poorly performing principals cannot model or guide succession planning, and some avoid mentoring due to operational pressures or fear of emerging talent. In smaller schools, development often relies on individual initiative and the goodwill of busy leaders, as structured programs are rare. Mentorship quality varies widely across schools and regions, with no systemic approach ensuring consistent support. Limited coaching beyond short-term programs leaves gaps in critical areas such as managing difficult conversations, addressing underperformance, and navigating HR complexities. These deficits are most acute during transitions to senior roles, where sponsorship relationships are essential but inconsistently available. While some performance development processes foster growth, others remain perfunctory and accountability-driven, highlighting the need for mentoring embedded in professional development frameworks.

4. *Geographic and Mobility Constraints*

Geographic location operated as a double-edged sword, with regional positions offering opportunities while simultaneously constraining career progression. The cost of professional development for country educators, including flights, accommodation, and relief teacher coverage, created financial barriers to accessing the same development opportunities available to metropolitan colleagues.

The limited frequency of leadership positions in rural areas meant aspiring leaders might get only one opportunity for advancement without relocating, while the tight-knit nature of some country communities made it difficult for outsiders to break into established networks.

The necessity of moving families to the metropolitan area for principalship created difficult choices between career advancement and family stability, particularly for those with partners employed locally or children settled in country schools. The perception that country experience is less valuable than metropolitan experience when seeking to transition back to the city was seen as trapping skilled leaders in regional positions. Geographic isolation also limited access to professional networks, reduced opportunities to visit diverse school contexts, and created logistical challenges for attending regional meetings or state-wide professional learning. For aspiring principals in remote locations, the inability to access local acting principal opportunities that represent the next level of responsibility forced a choice between remaining in current roles or uprooting entire families for uncertain advancement.

5. *System-Level Dysfunction and Bureaucracy*

Systemic barriers create frustration and disillusionment among aspiring leaders due to a perceived disconnect between policy rhetoric and operational reality. Participants reported cases of top-down demands that ignore site context, manufactured urgency around reporting, and shifting priorities that foster reactive rather than proactive leadership cultures. Frequent changes to strategic requirements, such as principal role descriptions or new initiatives introduced before previous ones embed, may cause confusion about what competencies matter for advancement. Bureaucratic compliance burdens can pull leaders away from improving teaching and learning, making principalship appear more managerial than educational. Enterprise Bargaining restrictions limiting staffing flexibility and failure at systemic level to enforce leadership decisions when challenged can undermine authority. The perceived teacher-centric focus of unions leaves leadership concerns unaddressed, reinforcing isolation rather than collegial support. Finally, inconsistent moderation of middle leader job descriptions creates inequities across the state, affecting aspiring leaders' ability to compete for promotion. Anecdotal evidence suggests this may be a national problem.

6. *Tenure Structures and Opportunity Constraints*

In South Australia the timing and duration of leadership tenures created significant barriers to career progression. Participants were unanimously afraid that newly introduced ten-year principal tenures, while providing stability for schools, would block opportunities for aspiring principals who would have to wait for rare vacancies to emerge. The rollover of tenures for incumbent leaders, sometimes apparently regardless of performance or alternative candidates' readiness, prioritised continuity over merit and limited opportunities for new leaders to enter principalship. Conversely, short cycles at middle leadership levels created constant disruption as leaders left just as they developed sufficient expertise to drive meaningful improvement. The loss of permanency when accepting fixed-term contracts in higher positions created financial and professional insecurity. In smaller or regional contexts, limited position availability meant aspiring leaders faced years of waiting or accepted that progression requires leaving communities and effective school cultures. The timing of position advertisements and the infrequency of opportunities in specialised areas like curriculum or wellbeing leadership was said to create bottlenecks where capable aspiring leaders became trapped in holding patterns, watching their readiness and motivation erode while waiting for positions to become available.

While these details of concerns about recruitment and tenure are state-specific, there are likely to be similar issues in other states.

7. Financial Considerations and Work-Life Balance

The financial context of leadership progression was increasingly unattractive as the gap between remuneration and responsibility expanded. Initial steps into leadership and progression through the middle leadership ranks were seen by many as financially questionable. At higher levels, income ceilings limited financial growth regardless of expanding responsibilities. The general perception that principalship demands impossible hours and carries crushing weight of responsibility without commensurate compensation deterred potential leaders from pursuing advancement. As noted earlier, participants perceived the principal role as riskier and more complex than their current leadership position. Several cited contemporary contributing factors such as "*increased parental expectations*", "*negative perceptions of educators in society*", and putting "*the principal on a pedestal*" as feeding their reluctance to apply for a principal position.

Work-life balance concerns were particularly acute for women planning to have a family or already with young children, as the expectation of constant availability conflicted with parenting responsibilities. The inability to work part-time or job-share in senior leadership positions excluded capable educators who cannot or will not sacrifice family life for career advancement. Unsupportive families who observed the toll of leadership roles and resisted the long hours and stress further constrained aspiration. The cost-benefit analysis of leadership increasingly, participants said, tips toward remaining in teaching roles that offer greater financial security relative to demands, better working hours, and less personal exposure to criticism and conflict.

8. Knowledge Gaps and Preparation Deficiencies

Aspiring leaders face significant knowledge gaps that hinder readiness for senior roles, particularly in operational, legal, and financial areas[2]. Limited exposure to budgets, staffing, compliance, and enterprise agreements means many learn these competencies on the job rather than through structured preparation. Skills in timetabling, facilities management, and HR processes cannot be gained through observation alone, yet training is scarce and costly. Added leadership responsibilities often feel overwhelming, not developmental, and first-time leaders report being ill-equipped for the business and political dimensions of principalship. Patchy induction programs force new leaders to learn through trial and error, often during crises. Professional development in critical areas (e.g., performance management, conflict resolution, and difficult conversations) is limited, leaving leaders to self-teach. Combined with inconsistent mentoring, these gaps fuel low confidence and "imposter syndrome," reinforcing perceptions that aspiring leaders need far more encouragement and support to step up.

9. Isolation and Limited Professional Horizons

Professional isolation, particularly in regional areas, limits leadership development and career progression. Aspiring leaders often lack opportunities to visit other schools, observe diverse practices, and build system-wide relationships, narrowing their understanding of effective leadership. Heavy day-to-day demands leave little time for reflection on broader trends or system priorities, while the disconnect from regional meetings and statewide conversations create knowledge gaps about reforms. Limited networking, especially for those unable to afford

[2] This concern is congruent with the AITSL Professional Practices lens for *Leading the management of the school.*

travel, reduces access to professional connections that support advancement. Exposure to only one school context builds deep local knowledge but restricts transferable skills needed for principalship. Many leaders become specialists in narrow domains, such as curriculum or wellbeing, rather than developing the generalist capacity expected of principals. Without deliberate interventions such as virtual networking, rotational placements, or funded visits, aspiring leaders risk constrained leadership identities that limit competitiveness for senior roles.

Survey respondents (see Figure 1) mirror the cultural composition of the leader workforce. We did attempt to secure a better balance in group interviews but had a limited pool to draw from. Our data on gender is thus more secure than that on cultural issues.

Nevertheless, we were told that beneath formal merit selection structures, cultural patterns persist that advantage some and marginalise others. In country regions, informal networks and social ties often influence appointments as much as qualifications, with some evidence of nepotism in short-term vacancies and panels favouring known candidates to minimise disruption. Gender bias continues to disadvantage women, while personality-driven cliques around charismatic principals can create exclusive circles. For culturally and linguistically diverse educators, accents and unfamiliarity with unwritten norms may act as barriers, and multilingual skills can be undervalued. Other biases include sector hierarchies that devalue primary experience for secondary roles and narrow definitions of leadership that prioritise curriculum expertise over strengths in wellbeing, community engagement, or operations. Power dynamics can privilege those who are adept at navigating politics while disadvantaging those who expect merit to prevail.

Merit Selection

All Australian states use merit selection for leadership positions. While some of the following details are South Australian, the more general patterns are highly likely to be Australia-wide. This section details how leaders saw the potential strengths of merit selection and then examine the challenges that undermine confidence in the system.

The vast majority of survey respondents and interview participants were familiar with merit selection and Departmental processes (Figure 8). Most had participated in both internal and external panel processes as applicants and as panel members.

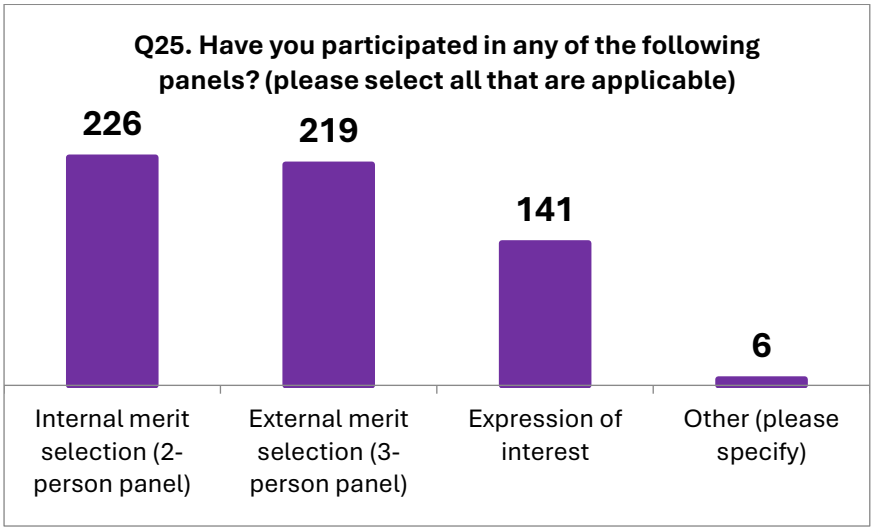

Figure 8: Panel experience

The following data can thus be read as coming from direct experience. However, among survey respondents, only 42 had applied for Band A (i.e., Principal level) positions (240 had not) whereas all but 6 had applied for Band B (i.e., middle leader, and Assistant / Deputy Principal) positions.

Most of those who had applied for principal positions were relatively positive about the experience with 30 suggesting that the process had been well or quite well run. This apparently positive picture was mirrored in the Band B selection data which showed a minority saying the process was not carried out well (Figure 9).

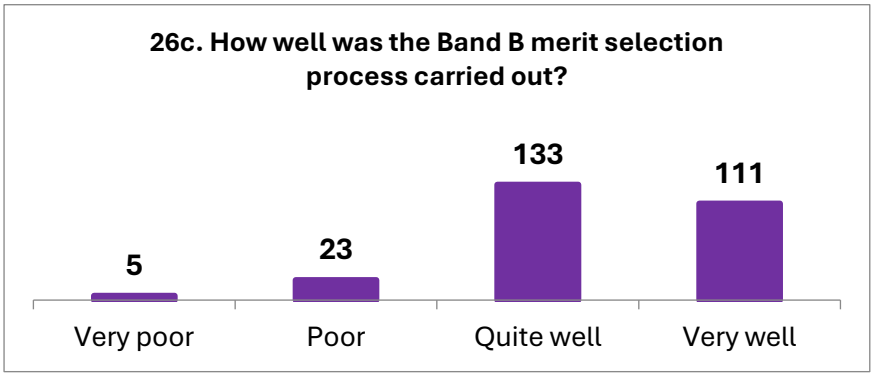

Figure 9: Merit selection process

However, when “quite well’ is taken together with the “very poor” and “poor” answers there is a strong suggestion that there are some problems in the merit selection process that need attention. In interviews s it became clear that “quite well” means there is room for procedural improvements.

The strengths of merit selection

Interviewees reported five strengths of merit selection, noting that while imperfect, it was far better than alternatives.

1. *Structural Integrity and Transparent Process*

The most consistently cited strength lies in merit selection as formalised and documented. Leaders appreciate that "*there is a process to lean on for protection*" and that this process is "*quite clear and known."* One participant noted: *"The principles of merit selection are good – serve a purpose well when enacted with integrity."*

This procedural clarity establishes transparent expectations for applicants, creates accountability mechanisms, and supports professional development. The existence of clear selection criteria offers applicants concrete targets, while documentation requirements theoretically constrain arbitrary decision-making. Some participants identified merit selection training as transformative: *"Doing merit selection training was one of, if not the best thing I did in terms of my development as a leader."*

2. *Panel Composition as Safeguard*

The requirement for diverse panel membership, peers, AEU representatives, and Governing Council members for principal positions, was seen to create multiple perspectives which countered individual bias. Participants particularly valued the peer role. One leader contrasted South Australian practice with Victorian experience: *"My principal at my last school was just like a cowboy and just did whatever they wanted... That's what I really love about our system is that you've got that person that can question, actually, no, that application is not very good."* The peer panelist serves as *"a great leveller if they are confident,"* someone who can challenge chair preconceptions and ensure procedural fidelity. At its best, the panel composition distributes decision-making power, preventing unilateral decisions.

3. *Professional Development*

The application process offers developmental benefits. Leaders described how crafting applications forced valuable reflection. One participant explained: *"As a leader you've got to think what was your need and what was your process”*. This reflexivity encourages leaders to document their practices and their impact systematically, developing evaluative practices transferable to ongoing professional work: *"It gives us stuff to work towards if we know what the next level entails."*

4. *Multiple Assessment Points*

When implemented faithfully, merit selection ensures equitable access through multiple assessment points, application, interview, and referee statements, creating a holistic evaluation of candidates. The interview allows candidates to extend on the application: *"You*

can elaborate and have the opportunity to really explain what you have written about." Reliance on multiple sources of information prevents any single factor from dominating decisions.

5. *Feedback and Learning Opportunities*

When available and done well, feedback provides developmental guidance. Professionally, serving on panels also provides learning for emerging leaders. Participants said that panel membership enhanced understanding: *"Sitting on panels, I found the process helpful for knowledge of process plus role."* The survey results, backed up the interviews in suggesting that there is considerable potential, sometimes achieved, for the application process to be a productive experience (Figure 10)

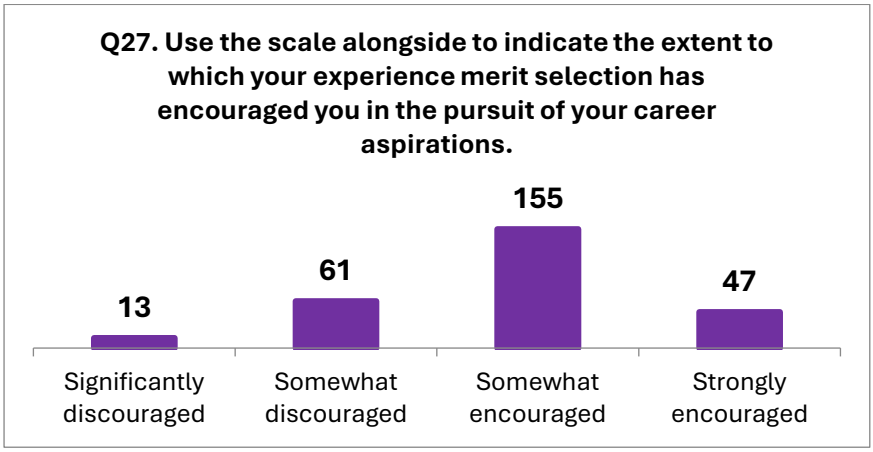

Figure 10: Merit selection and career progression

The challenges of merit selection

1. *A Process Challenge*

Despite procedural strengths, the interview data reveals profound cynicism about how well the process is carried out. The persistent perception that outcomes are very often predetermined and formal processes merely legitimate decisions already made is concerning. One participant stated: *"When it is known by staff that the principal 'games' the merit selection process it is no longer merit selection and staff have no confidence in it."*

Participants reported 'gaming strategies' which include writing position descriptions targeting specific individuals –*"you see these little specific nuances in the J&P that you see in the person who is in the role right now"* – and manipulating panel composition through strategic peer selection. The result: *"There's a broad cynicism… perception that nepotism wins."* Lack of confidence in the process affects both unsuccessful and successful applicants. Winners may face scepticism: *"You feel like you're really constantly on this sort of proving bandwagon."* As one leader noted: *"The pretend merit process that everybody sees and everybody plays the game, it just erodes trust."*

2. *The Written Application Barrier*

Heavy emphasis on written applications emerged as the most contentious aspect of the process. The fundamental disconnect: *"Being able to write a great application and also being*

able to enact great leadership are two different skills." The application barrier operates in multiple ways. For example:

- The word limit constrains demonstration of complex work:*"not everything can be quantified or detailed."*
- Writing skill becomes gatekeeping unrelated to leadership: *"Someone who would be good in the job doesn't get it because they can't write a good application."*
- Some worthy candidates appear to be missing out: *'… people might be fantastic leaders, sort of like hidden gems, but they struggle to write applications capable of upstaging others who are really strong in that sense'*
- The "*dark art*" of application writing creates informational asymmetry favouring those with mentors or coaching.

AI tools add further complexity. While potentially democratising –*"leveling playing field for people who don't write as well"* – the ubiquity of AI raises concerns about who actually wrote application.

3. Context Versus Transferability

Persistent tensions are evident between valuing contextual knowledge and recognising transferable skills. Internal candidates possess intimate school understanding, creating advantages but also perception problems. One leader acknowledged: *"I was in a very advantageous position because I was already at the site… but that could also be perceived as the job was written for you."* External candidates sometimes struggle: *"When you don't know the school, it's hard to know what the panel is looking for."* Geographic stereotypes compound the problem: *"The bias was that they had experience in the northern suburbs* (disadvantaged)*, and that wouldn't be transferable to the* (more wealthy) *eastern suburbs."* While a few interviewees had crossed rural-city and disadvantage barriers, the perception was that location was a serious barrier for selection.

There was also a problem with the notion of 'experience'. Many interviewees reported that their current specialist middle leadership role worked against gaining the generalist experience needed for a more senior role. Even if they had previously had other experience, currency seemed to dominate and transferability and potential did not seem to count.

4. Panel Chair Dominance

Despite distributed membership, chairs often dominated panels. Participants described chairs being *"very clear that they had someone in mind"* or who *"lead or dominate discussion subjectively."* Participants reported that peer and AEU effectiveness varies substantially[3]. One participant described a panel report changed *"because the chair was found to have lied… What worries me more is that the AEU rep and peer didn't pull the chair up."* The shift from face-to-face to online training also concerns participants: *"The panel training now is just an online course… you lose a lot of the richness."*

[3] Panel members have the option of submitting a minority report, however, no interviewees talked about this process.

5. *Referee Statement Reliability*

Participants had substantive concerns about referee statements. Many of the participants had chaired panels and saw first-hand that referee quality varies dramatically: *"It really depends on their skill to speak about you… If they are having a busy day they may forget opportunities."* Strategic manipulation occurs: *"The principal was trying to get rid of an employee and giving an outstanding referee statement to get rid of them."* Interviewees noted that line manager requirements may disadvantage those with fractured relationships. Many participants saw referee statements as in need of an overhaul and as potentially working to some form of template.

6. *Feedback Quality Variability*

A substantive minority reported never having had any feedback on applications. And where it existed, participants reported significant variations in the quality of feedback. Some noted extremely helpful detailed guidance - *"five pages worth of written notes… dot point by dot point."* More commonly, feedback is generic: *"Your application was good but the other person was slightly better."* While recognising that time constraints clearly limit the quantity and quality of feedback most participants felt that feedback often served defensive rather than developmental purposes.

7. *Systemic Inconsistencies around Band B positions*

Despite uniform policy, practice in determining Band B level roles varies substantially. We heard in interviews that there was a very wide range of responsibilities at the same level and salary. Some schools appeared to manipulate classifications, offering higher levels and salaries in order to attract a pool of experienced applicants. This is not a strategy available to disadvantaged schools. We were also told that procedures varied from school to school. Some panels conduct systematic interviews; others skip them. One participant noted: *"Lack of process being followed 80% of the time"*. Schools made varying decisions about when to roll positions over, with highly variable tenure lengths for jobs that were essentially the same.

8. *Time and Workload Burden*

There were three key time concerns.

- *Time taken to undertake a fair process:* Merit selection imposes substantial time costs. Applicants invest *"20 hours trying to refine a written application."* For those in demanding roles: *"The busy leader has the potential of writing a less higher quality application, not through not wanting to, but not having that time."* Panel members and chairs face similar constraints, with time-poverty affecting quality. In regional and rural locations, a small pool of trained peers may experience very significant time burdens as the bulk of panel work falls to them.
- *Time delays:* The panel process also sometimes takes a long time, spanning months and creating uncertainty. Delayed panel decisions sometimes had detrimental knock-on effects on partners, families and housing.
- *Release time:* Participants discussed challenges in finding relief teachers, particularly in country areas, which limit peer availability.

9. *The Band A / Band B Difference*

Interview data shows distinct experiences moving between levels. A-level applications require writing to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Principal Standard. These were sometimes seen as better and fairer than B-level contextual job descriptions. However, they were also unfamiliar and participants reported a need for more support to make the move from B to A: *"The first time writing a principal one, I was well out of my depth."* Access to preparation support varies: *"Who will I go to for support? Will I be judged by my principal for not knowing?"*

There was also concern about possible nepotism in Band A panels. Informal networks appeared to sometimes operate at A-level, with references to *"informal dinners"* where appointments are pre-decided. One noted that nepotism could create career bottlenecks for particular people.

10. *The Incumbent Problem*

No issue generated more ambivalence than the issue of incumbency. Incumbents may be immediately best suited to a position because of their thorough contextual knowledge. They may be part of an established and effective middle leadership team in the school and well regarded in the community. However, their advantage deters external candidates: *"There's a perception that if there is an incumbent in the role, they'll automatically win it."* This discourages other applicants: *"People don't apply for jobs sometimes when they know the incumbent is applying."* However, participants noted that there may well be external candidates who would ultimately be better for the position, bring new energy and ideas and be more effective in the long term. They also noted the negative consequences for morale when a valued staff member failed to win back their position.

Equity in merit selection: The systematic consequences of inconsistent practice

While merit selection aims to serve equity by ensuring *"the best person for the job should be in the job,"* the data reveals how inconsistent implementation creates profound equity problems both for individual career trajectories and for system-wide workforce distribution. These consequences operate at multiple levels, from how experience is recognised, to how incumbents are treated, to the fundamental tension between site autonomy and system fairness.

Inconsistent Processes: The Postcode Lottery

Despite uniform policy frameworks, the data suggests that merit selection practice varies across sites, creating what some participants saw as a 'postcode lottery' where career advancement depends as much on location as capability. Merit selection practices appear to vary widely across sites, undermining the system's promise of equity. Equity issues are compounded for leaders in regional, disadvantaged, or smaller schools with fewer opportunities. Geographic and socioeconomic factors often shape judgments unfairly, with biases devaluing experience in challenging contexts. When flawed processes intersect with limited opportunities, career consequences are far more severe for those already facing structural barriers.

Whose and What Experience Counts? The Problem of Recognition

Position classification inequities compound systemic inequities. When comparable roles carry vastly different classifications depending on school resources, leaders performing complex work in less-resourced schools face disadvantage when competing even though they may possess equivalent or superior experience.

This creates perverse equity: leaders shouldering heavier responsibilities in challenging contexts accumulate experience that panels systematically undervalue. As one participant observed: *"The complexities of their roles were completely unmatched… but for the same role."* Those working harder with less support can find that their experience counts for less than those with favourable conditions.

The Incumbent Paradox

Incumbent advantages, as explained earlier, presents perhaps the most complex equity problem. Acting positions exemplify these tensions. Extended acting provides invaluable opportunity to demonstrate capability in context, theoretically the fairest assessment. Yet participants noted: *"Perception that when applicant is in an acting role… they are in the 'box seat.'"* The fairness of assessing proven performance creates unfairness for external candidates unable to demonstrate equivalent contextual capability.

This is a paradox with system-level consequences. When incumbents regularly win, leadership cohorts become less diverse and renewal slows. When incumbents regularly lose, schools suffer instability and capable leaders avoid acting roles. Either outcome creates equity problems.

Challenges for country schools and educators

Data collected in regional interview groups revealed a range of merit selection challenges that were either founded in or exacerbated by a rural or remote school location.

Many of these challenges related to working in a small community with high levels of familiarity amongst colleagues. As one participant commented, "*In the country, people know everyone as well… (that) has its own challenges*." For example, in regional or rural areas applicants and referees often know each other well, which can lead to biases and difficulties in maintaining fairness. The familiarity among staff may also influence perceptions and decisions, complicating the assessment of merit objectively. Additionally, participants noted that line managers in smaller country schools are often referees for multiple applicants, leading to defensive or inaccurate provision of feedback and to compromising the panel's understanding of the candidate's abilities and fit. On the merit selection challenges of familiarity one participant said:

> *The best panel is one where all members have absolutely nothing to do with the area, or the position or the people involved. Objectivity is very, very rare … it's one of the things I think is a country problem*.

In terms of the quantity and quality of applicants, multiple participants observed that country schools have fewer candidates applying for leadership roles, adversely impacting the rigour and competitiveness of the merit process and potentially reducing the quality of the applicant pool.

Moreover, the familiarity of a community-based context means that standard merit selection procedures might not always align well with regional realities. For example:

- the merit selection methods used (i.e., written application, interview, referee statement) might not adequately capture a candidate's potential or skills in a rural context
- balancing community knowledge with procedural fairness may pose conflicts of interest or bias, with the community often expecting and asserting the view that local knowledge should inform the selection process.

The Local-Central Dilemma: Site Needs Versus System Equity

Perhaps the most fundamental equity challenge involves tension between site-based decision-making and system-level fairness. Schools legitimately need to design positions matching their contexts, budgets, and priorities. Yet this autonomy creates systematic inequities.

Participants reported that well-resourced schools offer positions at higher classifications with favourable conditions. This 'bracket creep' means identical work carries different classifications depending on school wealth. One participant identified consequences: *"Rich schools prop up these positions… so they get the better candidates."* A vicious cycle emerges where struggling schools, those most needing strong leadership, cannot compete for talent. Additionally, struggling schools become 'training grounds' where leaders develop capability before moving to better-resourced sites: *"These lower schools will train up a B1… and then they leave."* Schools bearing development costs never reap benefits, while advantaged schools harvest the talent.

The tension extends to position design. Schools write specific descriptions targeting preferred candidates: *"Positions being written for someone… you see these little specific nuances."* While schools claim this ensures 'fit', it excludes capable external candidates and perpetuates existing networks. One participant questioned: *"Who is checking… where is that consistency across the system?"*

Constraining school autonomy creates different problems. Principals understand their contexts better than central office. Standardising classifications might prevent creative responses to unique challenges. This dilemma admits no easy resolution. Pure site autonomy allows inequities systematically advantaging privileged schools. Pure central control removes flexibility enabling contextually appropriate solutions. Current arrangements split the difference uncomfortably, creating neither genuine autonomy nor system equity.

Toward Equity in Practice

Addressing these equity challenges requires acknowledging their interconnection. Inconsistent processes enable differential experience recognition, which combines with incumbent advantages and local autonomy to create cumulative inequity. Leaders in disadvantaged schools, challenging contexts, or regional areas face compounding barriers.
Improving equity requires action at multiple levels:

- Procedural consistency means ensuring core elements - interview requirements, referee checking, indicator transparency - operate uniformly.

- Experience recognition requires panels to genuinely examine transferable capabilities rather than defaulting to prejudices.
- Incumbent treatment needs explicit protocols balancing proven performance against competitive opportunity.

Most fundamentally, the local-central tension requires honest conversation about what and how we value site autonomy and system fairness. The current uneasy compromise serves neither well. If we genuinely believe merit should determine advancement, we must accept constraints on local discretion preventing systematic advantage. If we value site autonomy above equity, we should acknowledge this explicitly rather than maintaining a fiction of a merit-based system while allowing practices that systematically privilege some and disadvantage others. If we want to maintain both, we have to continually monitor the tensions and balance between the two.

The stakes extend beyond individual careers. An inequitable merit selection system misallocates leadership talent, concentrating capability where least needed while denying it to schools and students who need it most. These equity consequences directly impact educational outcomes for the most vulnerable young people.

Gender and cultural bias: Hidden discrimination in merit selection

While merit selection claims to remove bias through formalised process, the data suggests that gender and cultural prejudices operate beneath procedural surfaces, often unacknowledged yet profoundly consequential. These biases manifest both explicitly and implicitly, systematically disadvantaging particular groups.

The most disturbing evidence involves explicit discrimination. One participant described being told directly about gender preferences: *"A piece of information, so suggesting that the school, ie the Governing Council really wanted a male or a female specifically, rather than just the person who was best selected."* This reveals how gender becomes 'unwritten criteria', with factors that never appear in position descriptions, shaping selection decisions fundamentally. Women, in particular, also reported assumptions about availability at all hours built into role descriptions, and the lack of opportunities for job-sharing particularly at the most senior levels.

Age discrimination compounds gender bias. One participant reported: *"I have literally been on a panel where I've been told that the school wants someone young. They want someone young and energetic. They don't want old and stodgy."* Such preferences often intersect with gender in complex ways, with stereotypes about 'energy' potentially masking preferences for younger women or biases against older female leaders.

The data indicates discrimination is sufficiently widespread that participants referenced it as systemic: *"Rife with discrimination (sex, nationality etc)."* The casualness of this observation suggests such bias may be pervasive, woven into merit selection's fabric rather than representing isolated incidents.

Cultural and linguistic bias operates through different mechanisms, often disguised as neutral capability assessment. Written application emphasis particularly disadvantages those from non-English-speaking backgrounds or educated in different systems. One participant observed:

"Language is a barrier – even to native English speakers. Outsiders to the system struggle to adjust, range of types of leadership experience is not recognised as such." This identifies dual disadvantage: linguistic barriers and failure to recognise diverse leadership experience as equivalent.

The application writing requirement also privileges particular cultural capital, understanding implicit expectations, accessing coaching networks, and knowing the "*dark art*" of application writing. Leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds may possess exceptional leadership capabilities yet lack cultural insider knowledge necessary to translate these into applications panels see as meritorious.

Furthermore, valued experience types reflect cultural assumptions about legitimate leadership. Experience gained in culturally diverse contexts may be devalued as 'different' rather than understood as bringing valuable alternative perspectives. The geographic biases documented earlier can intersect with cultural bias, with experience in diverse communities often undervalued.

Critically, biases appear to sometimes operate without accountability. One participant noted: *"I've never seen action occur for a poorly run panel. I've never seen someone dispute the process which has caused any change in the outcome."* The appeals process cannot address discrimination that does not appear in documented criteria or panel records.

The cumulative effect is a merit selection system that, despite its equity goals, may reproduce existing demographic patterns in leadership. When gender preferences operate as unwritten criteria, when linguistic and cultural capital determine application success, and when diverse experience faces systematic devaluation, 'merit' becomes code for conformity to existing leadership demographics, perpetuating homogeneity while claiming to pursue excellence.

Training for merit selection: Building capability across the system

If merit selection is to function as intended, identifying and advancing genuine leadership capability, then systematic training across all participant roles is essential. The research shows both the transformative potential of quality training and gaps in current provision.

The Power of Quality Training

When delivered effectively, merit selection training proves transformative for leadership development. One participant stated emphatically: *"Doing merit selection training was one of, if not the best thing I did in terms of my development as a leader."* This wasn't merely about understanding panel mechanics; it fundamentally shaped leadership practice itself.

Training explains what panels seek in applications, demystifying advancement pathways: *"It helped me understand what schools are looking for... I needed to show that there was some sort of need in your school, and that you did something about that, and then you show your process and your outcome."* Leadership was explained as using strategic, evidence-based approaches, and thus applicable far beyond merit selection.

In-person training particularly enhanced learning. One participant described sessions where *"you could ask questions and clarify, and you were talking to other people... you could bounce off of each other."* This interactive environment enabled shared knowledge building that online

modules cannot replicate. The face-to-face format also built professional networks, connecting emerging leaders across sites. Serving on panels provides additional informal training: *"Being on a few and knowing process has helped."*

Current Training Deficits

Despite these positive experiences, serious training deficits were seen to undermine merit selection quality. The shift from face-to-face to online delivery particularly concerns participants who noted that it sacrificed depth, nuance, and opportunity for guided practice.

Access to training was also problematic. While there were workshops on offer, uptake appears to be limited because of the difficulties of securing release time, the perception that training represents "another thing" added to overwhelming workloads, and insufficient promotion.

Figure 11 shows four different training necessities identified by interviewees:

Training for Panel Chairs and Members	Training for Applicants
Chairs carry significant responsibility for shaping careers and school leadership quality. Chairs need to develop advanced skills in legal compliance, managing group dynamics, probing applications, conducting fair interviews, providing developmental feedback, and mitigating bias. Peers and AEU representatives require specific training to execute their oversight functions. In order to confidently challenge chairs and ensure process integrity, training must empower panellists to recognise violations, articulate concerns effectively, and persist when chairs resist.	Application writing represents a distinct skill requiring explicit instruction. Training should be differentiated according to the applicant's needs (especially given substantially different requirements at different leadership points). Training should cover strategic approaches and develop aptitudes in: • identifying relevant achievements • constructing evidence-based narratives • addressing selection criteria comprehensively • demonstrating impact (not merely teaching formulaic responses).
Training for Referees	**Training for Feedback Providers**
Referee statements significantly influence outcomes, yet quality varies widely. Training should focus on: • understanding panel expectations, • undertaking thorough preparation • structuring responses according to selection criteria • providing specific examples while balancing honesty with support.	Feedback quality ranges from exemplary to perfunctory. Chairs need training to deliver actionable, criterion-linked guidance within time constraints. Feedback should serve developmental purposes, not merely defend decisions, and include ethical considerations.

Figure 11: Essential training programmes

Making Training Systematic

The training challenge is ultimately systemic. Quality merit selection requires trained participants at every level; chairs, panelists, applicants, referees. Current approaches appear to leave gaps undermining system integrity.

Participants believed that moving forward requires:

- mandatory training for all panel participants
- differentiated programs addressing different roles and career stages
- face-to-face delivery for complex content

- regular refresher training as practices evolve
- sufficient resourcing enabling participation without impossible workload trade-offs.

An investment in comprehensive training isn't merely about improving process but is also building leadership capability across the system. As positive experiences demonstrate, quality merit selection training develops strategic thinking, evidence-based practice, and reflective capability that enhance leadership work far beyond selection contexts.

Conclusion: Toward trustworthy merit selection

The analysis reveals merit selection as a system of noble principles somewhat undermined by inconsistent implementation[4]. The perceived gap between espoused values of fairness, transparency, equity and lived experience creates a crisis of confidence and erodes trust.

Five implications for change are revealed in our analysis of merit selection:

1. *The Integrity Imperative:* Trust is merit selection's fundamental currency. Perceived gaming breeds cynicism corroding organisational culture. As one participant noted: *"Less artifice around merit when there is someone eyed for the role would build trust in process."* Where genuine site needs align with internal candidates, transparency may serve better than elaborate formal processes perceived as theatre.

2. *Beyond the Written Application:* The overwhelming critique of the application deserves serious attention. The question *"Is this written application process the best way to get the best people into positions?"* merits genuine exploration. Options might include mandatory interviews, regional presentations, work samples, or panel observations assessing leadership holistically.

3. *Panel Quality and Training:* Panel capability fundamentally shapes outcomes. The shift to online training raises concerns about understanding. The system may need to investigate mandatory training requirements, periodic recertification, or external panel members for high-stakes positions.

4. *Feedback as Development:* Variable quality suggests need for standardization. If feedback serves developmental purposes, support chairs to provide substantive guidance through training, time allocation, or standardized frameworks.

5. *Systemic Consistency:* Wide variation undermines equity. While site autonomy has merit, fundamental procedural elements might require further attention: inequitable variation in job descriptions across schools is of particular concern.

[4] We have omitted from this report state-specific concerns about systems infrastructure and technology.

Professional Learning for School Leaders

Nearly a third of the survey respondents had undertaken formal study beyond their initial qualification (Figure 12). This was self-initiated and likely self-funded professional learning. Nearly all of them had participated in multiple organisational learning programmes.

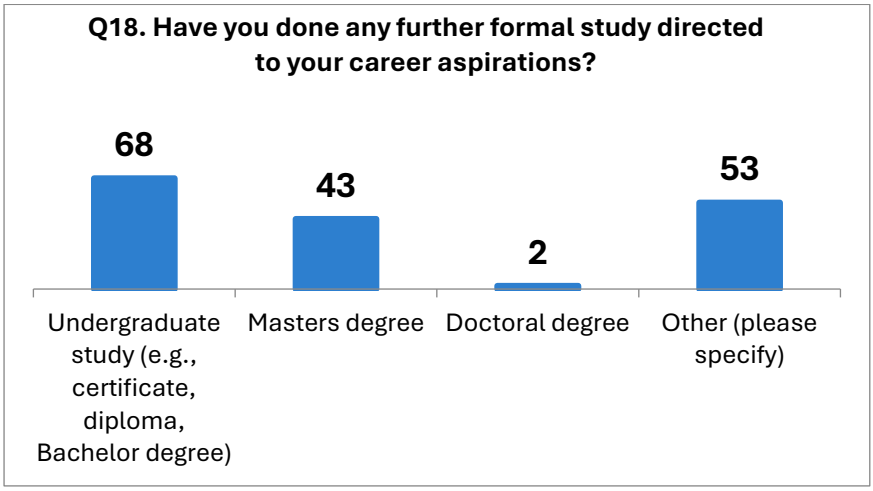

Figure 12: Formal study experiences

Eight key themes

Analysis of interviews and survey responses shows that while participants value existing programs, they have a clear vision for more coherent, contextually relevant pathways that address both operational and strategic dimensions of leadership. Eight key themes emerge, underpinned by eight principles, pointing toward future professional learning centred on experiential placement, structured pathways, and enhanced relational learning.

1. *Relational and Experiential Learning as Core*

Professional learning is most effective when it is relational and experiential. Leaders consistently value growth coaching, mentoring, networking, and authentic exchanges. Effective programs involve face-to-face collaboration, sustained mentoring, work shadowing, and coaching from experienced practitioners, enabling learning grounded in real challenges rather than abstract theory. However, a significant gap exists: many leaders are expected to mentor without training in how to do so effectively. This highlights a systemic weakness – strong relational structures exist, but essential mentoring skills are often underdeveloped.

2. *The Operational Knowledge Gap*

Participants reported a persistent disconnect between the strategic, pedagogical focus of much professional development and the operational realities of school leadership. Middle leaders wanted practical training in:

- *Financial management and budgets* – participants questioned where teachers who become principals can get budgetary expertise
- *Governance and compliance* – School Council procedures, AGMs, policy requirements
- *Human resources* – performance management, difficult conversations, conflict resolution

- *Administrative systems* – navigating Department systems efficiently

One participant described learning compliance through error rather than through systematic preparation. This reactive approach creates unnecessary stress and risk.

3. Context Matters: The Rural-Metropolitan Divide

Geographic context significantly affects access to and relevance of professional learning. Rural and regional leaders face multiple barriers:

- *Travel time and cost* - long drives to the capital city for potentially brief sessions
- *Limited relief teacher availability* - difficulty releasing staff for professional learning
- *Family commitments* - young children making overnight trips challenging
- *Timing challenges* - early morning or evening sessions requiring dangerous driving conditions.

The comments of participants from rural settings describe some of the effects of effects of the rural-metropolitan divide. The issue of isolation, according to one participant, negatively impacts *"networking and connection"* so that *"the longer you stay the more you lose connection with the profession"*. Another participant laments the *"disjointed"* experience of professional learning for country leaders with limited opportunities for collaboration as *"everyone goes off on different PD days"*. This fragmentation of opportunities in regional areas is further highlighted in the observation that "*the challenge of trying to coordinate PD across scattered sites highlights the need for more accessible and consolidated opportunities."*

4. Coherence and Sustainability Over One-Off Events

Participants noted there is very little ongoing, frequent, regular professional learning that is likely to result in some sort of school change.

Effective professional learning was described as sequential and building, connected to site priorities, supported by follow-up, and embedded in practice with immediate application opportunities. The contrast was stark with one-off sessions. Leaders would walk out excited, but then return to their site reality, check emails, and suddenly two weeks later had not even had time to process what they learned.

5. Developmental Pathways and Role-Specific Training

A significant gap exists in structured professional learning pathways for different leadership levels. Participants noted a lack of training for people to actually become a good faculty leader, no guidance on how to lead curriculum, manage a curriculum budget, or lead people through conflict management within their team.

Leaders wanted role-specific training for each level, preparation before promotion, clear articulation of required knowledge and skills, and gradual skill-building preparing for future roles. The idea of internships or extended work shadowing emerged repeatedly.

6. Time, Workload, and System Inefficiencies

Leaders face a persistent tension between pursuing professional learning and managing heavy workloads. Expectations of constant availability create unsustainable conditions, prompting some to reconsider career aspirations. Leaders juggle multiple roles, often teaching while

leading, and lack backfill for professional learning. Participants argued that time is undervalued, with no cost analysis on wasted effort. Professional learning is perceived as an add-on rather than core business, forcing leaders to attend sessions, maintain responsibilities, and implement new practices within existing time constraints.

7. Recognition and Development of B-Level Leaders

Band B leaders occupy a crucial middle space in the school, but many said they felt undervalued and under-supported. Key concerns included:

- *Assumption of readiness*: The assumption is that once someone becomes a B1 leader they are a leader, but without systematic preparation.
- *Pressure to advance:* Not all professional learning should be directed to advancement. Leaders wanting to remain in B-level positions and excel sometimes feel devalued by constant questions about applying for principalships. Some want to be excellent assistant leaders and questioned whether the system values that choice.
- *Lack of targeted development:* Limited professional learning specifically for B-level leaders, particularly around leadership skills needed at that level.
- *Financial plateau:* Unlike teachers with clear progression, B-level leaders plateau financially, raising questions about recognising and retaining excellent leaders not wanting principalships.

8. Adaptability in a Changing Landscape

Leaders expressed concern that professional learning addresses stable, predictable aspects while failing to prepare them for emerging complexities, e.g., increasingly complex student behaviour, demanding parents, unprecedented situations, and rapid policy changes. Participants noted they were not trained to manage the sorts of incidents they now face.

This points to need for professional learning models building adaptive capacity rather than just transmitting knowledge. Leaders need spaces to think together about novel challenges and develop wise and ethical judgment required for complex situations without clear precedents.

Underlying principles for effective professional development

The analysis of valued and critiqued experiences reveals eight principles that should underpin professional learning (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Principles for professional development

Future professional development: Participant aspirations

Participants shared their visions for ideal professional learning. They identified eight key categories:

1. *Structured Pathway Programs*

Leaders envisioned comprehensive Pathway to Principalship programs over 12-24 months including online modules covering operational aspects, work shadowing and site visits, mentoring relationships with experienced principals, application-based entry for committed

aspiring leaders, a mix of asynchronous learning and face-to-face experiences, and certification of readiness building confidence.

2. *Internship and Work Shadowing Opportunities*

The most frequently mentioned aspiration was for immersive leadership experiences such as principal internships, cross-site placements, portfolio rotations, interstate exchanges, and external placements. These opportunities would build authentic skills, confidence, relationships, and informed career decisions by providing realistic insights into principalship and diverse educational contexts before committing to senior leadership roles.

3. *Enhanced Mentoring and Coaching Programs*

While valuing current experiences, participants wanted more systematic and high-quality mentoring including training for mentors to ensure effective capability, dedicated time through release time or compensation, structured frameworks with clear expectations, choice and matching to ensure good fits, external mentors to provide fresh perspectives, and peer coaching networks to create formal structures for similar-level leaders. Having line managers as mentors was seen by some as helpful and others as not.

4. *Regional and Local Professional Learning*

To address geographic inequities, participants wanted regional hubs bringing professional learning to country areas, partnership-based learning leveraging local networks, hybrid models combining online with periodic face-to-face intensives, whole-school days allowing entire teams to learn together, and mobile facilitation with experts traveling to schools. One creative suggestion: a rural-metro leadership buddy system with Department-funded travel, accommodation, and backfill for paired cross-context learning.

5. *Operational Skills Development*

Participants were specific about the operational competencies they wanted:

- *Finance and Budgets:* Understanding school budgets, strategic resource allocation, procurement processes, financial reporting and accountability.
- *Governance:* Running effective School Council meetings, AGM procedures, standing orders, compliance with policies and regulations.
- *Human Resources*: Performance management, difficult conversations with staff, managing underperformance, conflict resolution, staff wellbeing and workload management.
- *Strategic Planning:* Developing school improvement plans, data analysis, change management, building shared vision and culture.
- *Systems and Technology***:** Navigating Department systems efficiently, using data systems effectively, understanding policy requirements, managing compliance.

6. *Micro-Credentials and Flexible Learning*

To accommodate busy schedules while ensuring sustained engagement: shorter focused modules completing in manageable timeframes, online self-paced components with periodic face-to-face gatherings, just-in-time learning available when facing specific challenges,

stackable credentials building toward larger qualifications, and clear learning outcomes with formal recognition.

7. *Networking and Collegial Learning Structures*

Participants wanted more intentional peer learning structures including role-based networks connecting leaders in similar positions across schools, regional networks for geographic area connections, cross-sector connections for learning from private, Catholic or interstate schools, problem-focused communities addressing specific challenges, online communities of practice for sustained engagement between face-to-face events, and conference attendance particularly principals', and professional associations.

8. *Leadership Wellbeing and Sustainability*

Several participants raised concerns about sustainability, wanting professional learning that addressed workload management and task prioritisation, self-care and boundaries including right to disconnect, stress and resilience for managing emotional demands, team development for building leadership teams sharing the load, and delegation and empowerment for distributing leadership effectively.

Implications for System Design

These themes and aspirations have significant system-level implications:

- *Create a Comprehensive Professional Learning Prospectus:* Make all opportunities visible in a single searchable database with clear descriptions, prerequisites, expected outcomes, registration processes, and effectiveness evidence.
- *Develop Role-Based Competency Frameworks:* Articulate what competencies at each leadership level to help aspiring leaders understand pathways, guide professional learning design, inform selection processes, and support performance conversations,
- *Invest in Relational Infrastructure:* Rather than only adding content workshops, invest in mentor training programs, network facilitation, coaching capacity development, relationship-building events, and community platforms.
- *Address Geographic Inequities:* Ensure rural and regional leaders have genuinely equivalent access through regional delivery, enhanced online options, travel and accommodation support, longer but less frequent sessions, and additional time allowances that recognise travel burden.
- *Streamline Administrative Burdens:* Parallel work should automate routine tasks, improve Department systems, create realistic workload expectations, and protect time for learning and implementation.
- *Recognise and Develop B-Level Leaders:* Create targeted professional learning which values choice to remain at that level, developing specific competencies, recognising excellence, preparing them for next roles if desired, and building capacity as mentors.
- *Build Adaptive Capacity:* Design professional learning developing critical thinking and judgment, collaborative problem-solving, reflection and learning from experience, navigating ambiguity and complexity, and ethical decision-making.

- *Evaluate and Iterate:* Systematically gather data on which programs have highest satisfaction and impact, where gaps exist, how equitable access is, what barriers prevent participation, and which models produce lasting change.

Conclusion

Leaders who participated in the research demonstrate sophisticated understanding of their professional learning needs. While they generally value what exists, they offered a clear vision for what would serve them better. Most powerfully, participants want a system which trusts them as adult learners capable of directing their own development, while providing structures, resources, and support making this possible. As one participant noted, there is probably more leadership training about being a leader, but not about how to do the actual jobs of leadership.

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