



Wisconsin  
Evaluation  
Collaborative

# Principal Professional Learning Over Time

*part of the* Wisconsin Educational Leadership Development Evaluation



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# About the Authors

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## Mark Blitz

Dr. Mark Blitz is a Research Associate at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) and the Project Director for the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL). He received his doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Mark also holds a MA in teaching from Teachers College, Columbia University and taught in New York City for eight years. Mark has researched charter school leadership as well as school-wide leadership assessment practices. As the CALL Project Director, Mark contributed to the development, piloting, and validation of the CALL instrument.

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# Information

## About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) is housed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. WEC's team of evaluators supports youth-serving organizations and initiatives through culturally responsive and rigorous program evaluation. Learn more at <http://www.wec.wceruw.org>.

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## Contact

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*part of the* Wisconsin Educational Leadership Development Evaluation

The Wisconsin Educational Leadership Development Evaluation Year I Report (Kimball et al., 2019), summarized a year-long evaluation study designed to inform the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators, the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, and the Department of Public Instruction, on the Title II supported leadership professional learning series. The evaluation was based on document analysis, observations, and surveys and interviews with participants in each of the leadership academies. As part of the impact analysis, the report examined participant responses on current and planned use of knowledge and skills supported through academy participation.

Findings related to the impact of the 2018-19 professional learning series included:

- 72% of school leader participants reported that the academy they attended provided useful leadership strategies to implement;
- 73% of school leader participants strongly agreed with the statement that they felt confident in their ability to apply the learning;
- When asked how they would use the new knowledge or skills in their context, the most common responses were:
  - incorporate the learning into my professional practice,
  - incorporate into the school improvement plan, and
  - share new knowledge with the school leadership team.

When participants were asked how they believe the changes they implement will impact their school or district, the top three themes were: improved focus and alignment, improved processes, and improved student achievement and outcomes.

Many of the academies were designed to improve principal practice by enhancing principals' knowledge and strategies that impact school conditions and teaching practices, and ultimately improve student learning. These school working conditions and improved teaching practices take time to develop. The current study follows up with participants of the academies to address how participants have applied knowledge, skills and resources from the academy they attended after the passage of several months. This study brief addresses the following evaluation question: how does participation in the training impact school leadership practice over time? In this report, we provide a summary of the participant sample, the main themes from the interviews, and key takeaways related to the evaluation question.

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## Table 1

Interviewee Sampling

ACADEMY	PURPOSEFUL	RANDOM	TOTAL
Data Leadership (DL)	1	0	1
Impactful Coaching (IC)	0	2	2
Leading for Equity (LEA)	1	2	3
New Building Administrator (NBA)	2	2	4
Professional Learning Communities (PLC)	1	2	3
SAIL	2	2	4
<b>TOTAL INTERVIEWS</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>

## Study participants

We used a combined purposive and random approach to identify study participants. The purposive group included two principals per academy with whom we spoke in the spring of 2019. In order to broaden the sample for each academy, we also randomly selected two additional principals per academy. The overall response rate was 70% - we were not able to reach all participants since some principals no longer worked in the same school district and some principals did not respond to our requests for an interview. For example, out of the 12 principals purposefully selected, one declined an interview, two did not respond to our requests, and one left the school district. The results are therefore suggestive of changes in practice and types of learning sustained by academy participants and should not be interpreted as representative of all academy participants. Table 1 displays the number of participants interviewed per academy and the total number interviewed.

Phone interviews were conducted beginning in September of 2019 and were completed at the end of November 2019. The interview protocol is included as Appendix A. Interview responses were analyzed to identify themes and patterns across participants.

## Findings

### Perceptions of the usefulness of the Academies

Principals were asked, “After several months since you completed the academy, how useful have you found the learning experience?” Almost all of the respondents began their replies with “very,” “extremely,” or “hugely,” then discussed, to varying degrees, the ways in which they continue to use the knowledge, skills, or resources. Several examples follow:

- SAIL participants stated that they continue to use 100-day plans and adult learning frameworks.
- Participants of the NBA and the IC academies indicated that they were implementing the coaching techniques and strategies learned. One principal stated the academy provided “strategies and language” and that it was “really valuable.”
- Attendees of the PLC academy responses reflected how far along their school was in implementing PLCs. Some just beginning to implement PLCs discussed building time into their schedules, developing shared visions and missions, and providing additional training to all of their staff. Participants who reported being past initial implementation stated that the training helped them to “strengthen their PLCs.”
- LEA academy participants who attended as part of a district team responded that they were currently working through the Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity (ICS) training with the rest of their district staff. One principal commented that they “appreciate the systematic approach of LEA.” LEA participants who attended as individuals or small school-level teams discussed how the academy changed their “lens,” the conversations that they had with staff, and that they are figuring out how to “roll out the training” with their staff.
- Participants from the DL academy shared that they created a data team that meets twice a month and uses an “equity lens to focus on student achievement.”

### Reported use of the new knowledge and skills

Participants were also asked to share an example of how they used the learning as part of their leadership practice. Responses can be categorized as either schoolwide structures and policies that they implemented or individual practices that they implemented. The following are examples of school structures and policies reported:

- Develop a schoolwide discipline program where no Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program previously existed
- Change instructional coaching approach to connect coaching to school improvement goals and to provide ongoing feedback
- Work towards a co-plan to co-serve instructional model
- Create a data team that meets twice a month
- Implement structures that support PLCs
- Use adult learning frameworks, and ensure that professional learning is aligned
- Implement 100-day plans with the school leadership team so that their process mirrors the district leadership team

Changes in individual practices that were shared by respondents include:

- Use coaching framework and template in conversations with teachers
- Use coaching and evaluation information in walkthroughs
- Help to keep principals, leadership teams, and teachers focused on identified school priorities through the use of 100-day plans and the coherence framework
- Have equity conversations with staff in order to build a foundation to start the equity work
- Survey teachers to identify their needs and respond accordingly

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### Perceived impact on the school

Participants were asked to share how they believe the application of what they learned will impact their schools. More than half of the respondents indicated that the implementation will improve student achievement, some generally (e.g., “it will improve student achievement”), and some with specific statements of what they are implementing and how it will improve student learning. For example, several respondents discussed improving school culture and climate as a way to address student achievement. They talked about “tightening [the collective] focus on student achievement;” “breaking down barriers” between teachers; creating a “collective atmosphere;” “transforming school culture to be more student-focused;” and improving the climate for all students so that they “feel safe” and that they “belong.” One respondent said that the work will empower teachers through shared leadership, which will positively impact students. Other participants stated that implementation will improve instruction through improved coaching, improved focus and consistency, and PLCs.

### Barriers to implementation

We asked participants if there were any barriers to implementing their learning and skills and how they handled those. Of the 17 participants interviewed, nine discussed challenges they faced. These challenges related to staff willingness to engage (e.g., not all staff want a coach), focusing attention on what was learned when there is so much competing attention, and time constraints. For example, a principal who attended the PLC academy shared the following, “I guess the only barrier, just my staff willingness to try and I don’t want to make it a directive, I want to get people who truly want to do this, want to have positive, effective PLCs. So, I have a small group that is doing the leg-work and talking about things...” An attendee of the IC academy commented that, “one barrier has been fractured attention in general. A lot is going on, [there are] a lot of demands.” And those who stated time was a barrier made general statements such as, “just time” and “barrier is always time.”

### School district support

Top supports reported by participants included superintendents, district teams, consistent work across the district, financial, and ongoing support from AWSA. Additional comments included a response that the district support received was “adequate” and that the district is trying to get its different schools “on the same page.”

### Additional training needs

Participants of the IC, PLC, NBA, and SAIL academies talked about ongoing trainings that build on what they have learned and focus on next steps. For example, an IC participant talked about training on “how to shift belief systems”

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and how to have “courageous conversations.” One PLC participant stated that they would like to have an external person evaluate their PLC structures and provide feedback on where they can make improvements. An NBA participant said they are currently enrolled in the Building Effective Leadership (BEL) academy. Two of the LEA participants stated that they want additional district staff, including leadership, to go through the training. DL and SAIL participants shared that they felt they could reach out to AWSA or their CESA when they need additional support. Finally, a couple of respondents indicated that they would like more opportunities to “share with other districts” and participate in district “site visits.”

### Professional learning pursuits this year

Participants identified a number of other in-district and external professional learning activities they were involved in during the 2019-20 school year. External activities included:

- Leading for Learning Series
- Mental Health and Resilience Academy (previously attended SAIL)
- Building Effective Leadership Academy (previously attended NBA)
- Impactful Coaching Academy (previously attended DL)
- AWSA principal conferences
- Athletic conference meetings

Internal activities included learning on their own, such as online programs related to math and literacy programs, research on community schools, book studies (e.g., work by Hattie), and in-district leadership coaching provided through AWSA.

### Conclusion

Each principal with whom we spoke had positive reflections on the academies and shared examples of how, six to nine months after completing the academy, they are implementing the knowledge, skills, or resources shared through the academy. They stated that the new knowledge, skills, or resources changed their leadership practices in the form of new structural school changes

or new individual practices. They all believed that implementation would positively affect their school, most citing expectations for improved student outcomes and improved instruction. The majority of the participants felt supported in their work from their districts either directly from their superintendent, from their district level teams, or through district financial support. Participants also discussed additional professional learning needs that included shorter, topic-focused follow-up learning experiences, having other staff attend the same session they had, or ongoing, as-needed support from AWSA or their CESA. The principals we spoke with were participating, to varying degrees, in professional learning activities this year that involved attending a different AWSA academy or conference, engaging with peers in athletic conferences, attending the Department of Public Instruction’s Leading for Learning series, or focusing on in-district learning experiences.

This study attempted to assess how academy participants are trying to use the knowledge and skills they learned, what related support they receive from their district, what challenges they face, and what related professional learning opportunities they are currently engaged in. These results are limited due to several participants being unavailable or declining participation, but provide some insights into sustained learning experiences and desired support going forward. Future studies could continue to follow the work of these participants, focus on specific aspects that the participants highlighted (e.g., coaching), or assess how either attendance at multiple academies by an individual or attendance by multiple district staff at one academy lead to sustained leadership, school, or district level changes.



### Appendix

#### Professional Learning Academies (Tier II) Evaluation: Principal Interview Protocol

Evaluation Question 4: How does participation in the training impact school leadership practice?

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. As I mentioned in my email, we are following up with principals who attended AWSA/WASDA professional learning academies last year to discuss how they are using the new knowledge and skills. Your responses to my questions will remain confidential and shared only in aggregate with no individual identifiers. Academy planners and facilitators will use responses to develop and revise academies. May I record our conversation for note taking purposes? I will delete the recording once I have cleaned up my notes. Do you have any questions?

1. After several months since you completed [the academy] how useful have you found the learning experience?
2. Can you share an example of how you used the learning as part of your leadership practice?
3. If you have not been able to apply the learning, what barriers have you faced?
4. How have integrated the practices from the learning experience into your principal educator effectiveness process? (i.e. developed related SLOs or PPGs)
5. How do you believe the application of what you learned will impact your school?
6. What additional training or support do you believe you need in order to continue to improve in [this area]?
7. What supports do you receive from your district related to [this area]?
8. What other professional learning are you pursuing this year?

# WEC

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