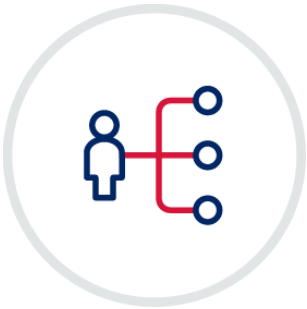
NSW Department of Education



System leadership professional learning needs and approaches

Research report

August 2026

SLI School Leadership Institute

> “School leaders who operate as systems leaders combine two characteristics: they have the skills, knowledge and experience to have a positive impact in their own schools and, at the same time, they have the standing and connections to establish links and cooperation outside the school.”
>
> (Day et al., 2020, p. 35)

Introduction

Educational leadership is crucial for improving student outcomes and driving overall school success. High-performing education systems invest in leadership preparation and development as a key strategy to strengthen the practice of individual leaders and drive school and system improvement.

The need for holistic leadership learning opportunities extends to system leadership. System leadership is the practice of influencing improvement and strategic outcomes across multiple schools, networks, and the broader education system to achieve system-wide improvement. It is exercised by school leaders whose influence extends beyond their own schools, as well as leaders who hold system-level leadership positions.

This research report highlights the need for leadership development and preparation at all stages of educational leaders’ careers – including for potential, aspiring and formal system leaders. It complements the School Leadership Institute’s (SLI) 2020 paper on system leadership within NSW public education, building on key themes about the meaning and importance of leadership development for system leaders. Drawing on educational leadership research published over 2014–2026, the report provides a research-informed definition of system leadership, identifies key areas where potential and aspiring system leaders would benefit from formal preparation and development, and reviews evidence-informed best practice approaches to system leadership professional learning.

Although the term ‘system leaders’ encompasses different types of leaders whose influence extends across multiple schools, this research report drew primarily on insights from the educational literature informing the preparation and development needs of ‘middle system’ or ‘middle tier’ leaders (Tournier et al., 2025). These system leaders sit in the organisational hierarchy between principals and the top district or regional leaders, and link these levels of the system. As these system leaders typically have significant responsibilities for supporting principals, this report also drew on the literature on effective principal preparation and development.

Executive Summary

System leaders play a crucial role in supporting school leaders and continuous improvement across multiple schools. Research highlights the need for professional learning to prepare system leaders for their challenging leadership responsibilities.

Findings from this report suggest that systematic, systemic, and ongoing professional leadership learning and development opportunities can have the most impact, especially when they encompass:

- effective system leadership
- leading improvement and change
- educational leadership
- leadership for equity
- operational leadership.

The research identified the following evidence-informed best practice approaches to the design and delivery of effective system leadership preparation and development:

- formal, planned learning opportunities at the system level
- collaborative approaches to professional leadership learning, including peer-to-peer learning, collegial support networks and joint work with school and system leaders
- consistent and systemic approaches to professional supports, including coaching and mentoring
- opportunities for engagement with research evidence and reflection on practice that supports the contextualised application of insights
- job-embedded leadership learning opportunities
- engagement with evidence-informed leadership frameworks and models.

The evidence highlights the need to provide current and aspiring system leaders with formal, systematic and structured learning, as well as sufficient opportunities for contexualisation. Supporting participants to apply and practise new skills and knowledge in context can be facilitated by connecting content, research insights, and evidence-informed leadership frameworks and models to learning opportunities that are collaborative and job-embedded.

By providing targeted, research-informed preparation and development initiatives aligned with the needs highlighted in this report, the NSW public education system supports educational leaders to build and strengthen the skills required for effective system leadership. Ongoing leadership development is critical for sustaining excellence and fostering system-wide improvement for the future of public education.

System leadership professional learning needs and approaches

Systematic, systemic and ongoing professional learning opportunities for system leadership

System leadership professional learning needs

- **Role preparation and ongoing development in:**
- **Effective leadership**
- **Leading network improvement**
- **Educational leadership**
- **Leadership for equity**
- **Operational leadership**

Professional learning design and delivery approaches

Formal learning	Collaborative learning	Professional supports	Research engagement	Job-embedded learning	Evidence-informed leadership frameworks

The system leadership imperative

Defining system leadership

System leadership is the practice of leading beyond the bounds of individual schools to impact improvement across multiple schools or networks within a system. It requires expertise in building the professional capabilities of other leaders and fostering collaboration. This contributes to establishing the conditions for learning to thrive across the whole system.

System leadership is exercised by school leaders whose influence extends beyond their own schools, as well as leaders who hold formal system-level leadership positions. In the NSW public education system, there are some formal system leader roles such as director, educational leadership (DELs), that have significant responsibilities for supporting principals and leading improvement over networks of schools. These formal system leader roles are of particular relevance here, as the evidence base informing this research report draws strongly on research about the professional learning needs and responsibilities of comparative roles in other systems, such as principal supervisor and district superintendent.

Effective system leadership expands learning beyond individual schools by leveraging expertise across the system and connecting leaders across traditional boundaries. Its success depends on building relationships and collaborations that enhance the collective capacity of school leaders and teachers, supporting large-scale educational change.

The notion of 'system leadership' goes beyond 'systems thinking' to posit "an adaptive leadership style or disposition that is based on an understanding of the complexity of educational contexts" (Harris, Jones, & Hashim, 2021, p. 394). Research suggests that system leadership effectiveness is founded on prioritisation of the common good and building capacity for system-wide change and improvement.

In their review of literature on system leaders and leadership, Harris et al. (2021) concluded that system leaders need to be carefully selected to ensure they have the relevant skill set and expertise, which includes the ability to:

- lead others at different levels in the system, which is considered more important than seniority or length of service
- be thought leaders and practical leaders who understand how to lead and manage change
- enact a clear theory of action to positively influence others.

System leadership in this sense functions as a broad policy driver supporting improvement by working in tandem with the role enactment and actions of educational leaders at the system, network, and school levels to achieve meaningful change.

> "System leaders…care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own. Crucially they are willing to shoulder system leadership roles because they believe that in order to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way."
>
> **(Hopkins et al., 2008, p. 14)**

The need for system leadership professional learning

The need for and value of system leadership professional learning opportunities is strongly attested in the international literature. To support all students' success, the research further suggests that system leadership development should be systematic, systemic and ongoing:

- Systematic provision of leadership learning requires that educational leaders at all stages of their career have access to formal, planned, and high-quality learning opportunities that support the enactment of their current role and build their preparedness for future leadership roles.
- Systemic approaches to leadership development ensure that leadership growth is coordinated and strategic across the system, whilst simultaneously offering opportunities for contextualisation that can tailor learning experiences to leaders' unique contexts. It enables equitable leadership learning access, experiences and outcomes for all leaders.
- Ongoing development opportunities that foster and sustain a commitment to life-long learning are also emphasised in the literature. These ongoing development opportunities support leaders through the complexities of assuming and modelling a lead learner role in continuously improving systems.

Systematic, systemic, and ongoing leadership development opportunities are key to strengthening system capability while also ensuring that individuals are prepared to step into roles as opportunities arise. These approaches need to be underpinned by equity in access, experiences and outcomes to support the diversification of the educational leadership workforce.

Summary: The need for system leadership development

The importance of system leadership
Effective system leaders connect across boundaries, leveraging collaboration and expertise to build collective capacity and drive large-scale improvement.

Value of leadership development
Systematic, systemic, and ongoing leadership preparation and development can strengthen leadership capability individually and collectively. Approaches to leadership development must be underpinned by equity in access, experiences and outcomes.

Preparation for system leadership roles
Targeted initiatives can support effective, experienced school leaders aspiring to enhance their system leadership capability and pursue formal system leadership roles, ensuring a diverse and well-prepared pool of candidates that can advance equity and excellence for all students.

System leadership professional learning needs and approaches

The overall conclusion from this research report is the need for systematic, system-wide and ongoing learning opportunities that supports leadership between and across groups of schools, as well as cohesive succession planning.

System leadership preparation professional learning needs

Research highlights that educational systems benefit from evidence-informed approaches that identify and prepare leaders for the demands of both formal and informal system leadership, ensuring the system is ready to meet the future needs of diverse schools and communities. Experienced and capable principals aspiring to enhance their system leadership capabilities and pursue formal roles are most likely to benefit from targeted preparation opportunities. Research highlights system leadership "needs to develop and emerge from principals themselves and from agencies committed to working with them" (Day et al., 2020, p. 35).

"Leaders within a system are not automatically system leaders, as they need to have the right skill set (e.g. facilitation, advocacy, mobilisation and challenge) and the ability to lead beyond their own school."

(Harris & Jones, 2023, p. 452)

Research indicates that system leadership preparation can be supported by targeted professional learning that addresses the following broad themes: effective leadership, leading network improvement, educational leadership, leadership for equity, and operational leadership[1].

Effective leadership
Extensive research details the practices, skills, and mindsets of effective educational leaders. For system leadership, research suggests that honing leader-to-leader communication is a key area where professional learning could have high impact. This would ideally encompass learning opportunities on building relational trust and credibility, balancing challenge and support, provision of professional supports (including coaching and mentoring), goal-setting advice, feedback, and dynamic and context-sensitive formative evaluation. Strengthening the capacity to foster collaborative relationships in a way that is responsive to context, including in specific settings or during times of crisis, can be beneficial.

Emerging research suggests that professional learning experiences highlighting how system leaders can model leadership best practices and identify and develop future leaders may be an impactful strategy. This approach has the potential to support improvement and strengthen systemic leadership capability.

"System leaders…must have the ability to refine and extend the practice of others through modelling 'next practice' not simply sharing 'existing or best practice'. They should be able to add value to the system by building the professional capacity, capital, and capability of others, in ways that are tangible and demonstrate a clear impact."

(Harris et al., 2021, p. 402)

Leading network improvement
System leadership is more effective when it works in conjunction with and supports strong school leadership to lead change and improvement across groups of schools. Collective sense-making is a key aspect and involves "translating narrative, policy and practices into a local context, while also drawing on local practical wisdom and expertise to generate knowledge and solutions that will work for their particular context and place." (Campbell-Allen, 2024, p. 14).

[1] These themes are aligned with NSW Department of Education frameworks and resources, such as the School Excellence Framework and What Works Best

Research shows that developing a systems perspective on continuous improvement, working collaboratively with school leadership, and using data effectively are essential skills for system leaders. These skills can be strengthened through targeted professional learning opportunities, where leaders engage in contextualised practice, learn from experienced mentors, and collaborate with peers to build their capacity for driving meaningful improvement.

Educational leadership

Research shows that instructional or learning-centred leadership positively impacts student experiences and outcomes. This approach is most effective when leaders prioritise relationships, align professional development, and focus efforts towards teaching and learning.

The literature highlights that system leaders have a key responsibility for supporting school leaders in the educational leadership aspects of their roles, and that they require specific and substantial professional development to effectively fulfill this responsibility.

> "The more leaders focus their relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes"
>
> **(Robinson et al., 2008, p. 636)**

Leadership for equity

Emerging research shows that effectively leading change for equity, diversity, and inclusion takes specific skills and mindsets. Equity-oriented educational leadership goes beyond general improvements in teaching and learning for all students, requiring system leaders to adopt new strategies to effectively support principals in this work. This suggests that aspiring system leaders would benefit from focused leadership learning opportunities in these areas.

Research also indicates that educational professionals are unrepresentative of student populations, and that more diverse and representative school leadership can improve retention, attendance, behaviour, wellbeing and academic outcomes for students. It can also contribute to recruitment and retention of a more diverse pool of effective, responsive teachers and school leaders. Targeted professional learning could support aspiring system leaders in enacting this aspect of leadership for equity.

Operational leadership

Research strongly supports the need for professional learning in relation to system leadership aspects of complex operational issues including finance, legal, safety, crisis management and conflict management. This need can be addressed through professional learning that enables aspiring system leaders to understand and apply effective system leadership perspectives, behaviours, and skills in leading responses to high level and complex operational challenges across groups of schools.

Summary: System leadership professional learning needs

Effective leadership
Supporting system leadership capability in key areas including leader-to-leader communication, building relational trust and best-practice modelling.

Leading network improvement
Strengthening skills in supporting principals and fostering continuous improvement across schools.

Educational leadership
Preparing aspiring system leaders to support principals in the educational leadership aspects of their role, particularly prioritising relationships, aligning professional development, and focusing efforts towards teaching and learning.

Leadership for equity
Professional growth opportunities that prepare aspiring system leaders to lead for equity, diversity and inclusion.

Operational leadership
Building capability in leading responses to high level and complex operational challenges across groups of schools.

System leadership professional learning design and delivery approaches

Recent research can provide guidance on best practice approaches to developing and delivering professional learning that supports preparation for system leadership roles. This small but growing body of evidence identifies the following characteristics of effective system leadership professional learning: formal learning opportunities that are collaborative and job-embedded, employ a range of professional supports, support research engagement, and are structured around evidence-informed leadership frameworks and models.

Formal professional learning

Research highlights the limitations of self-directed and district-level leadership development opportunities for system leaders, and underscores the importance of formal, planned learning opportunities at the system level. Emerging research also suggests that professional learning for system leaders requires scope for contextualisation and tailoring to the specific needs of leaders, as generic learning approaches are less likely to be as effective or easily applied.

Collaborative learning

There is strong evidence supporting the value of collaborative approaches to professional leadership learning for system leaders, including peer-to-peer learning, collegial support networks and joint work approaches. The research indicates that collaborative learning has impact potential, aligning with evidence that peers of system leaders have the greatest influence on their decision-making and that small study groups are a preferred learning method.

Professional supports

Developmental guidance and professional supports including coaching and mentoring represent an impactful type of professional leadership learning. There is strong and growing evidence for the benefits of coaching and mentoring for system leaders, when delivered effectively.

Research on other forms of professional supports for system leaders is limited. However, insights from broader leadership development literature suggest that supports including facilitation, shadowing, sponsorship, and reflective supervision may be beneficial for system leadership preparation.

Research engagement

Research supports the benefits of engaging with academic research and formal study for aspiring and current system leaders. System leaders report challenges with enrolling in and completing postgraduate programs, which the available research attributes to workload pressures. However, informal engagement and partnerships with academics on relevant research has been reported to be beneficial for system leaders and principals, especially when tailored to highlight practice implications.

A related, emerging theme in the research highlights that contextualising leadership learning enables leaders to become researchers of their own practice, aligning their growth with evidence-informed, student-centred practices relevant to their specific context.

Job-embedded learning

There is increasing evidence that professional development for system leaders should be applied and ideally be collaborative with school leaders, consistent with research findings that principal professional learning is particularly effective when it is job embedded and collaborative. This highlights the value of considering how to integrate opportunities to enhance system leadership capabilities and impact within the role and routine work of experienced and effective principals.

Evidence-informed leadership frameworks

To provide a strong foundation for leaders to enhance their leadership capabilities, system leadership preparation and development programs should be underpinned by evidence-informed leadership theories, frameworks and models. For example, the SLI's Leadership Learning Framework highlights system leadership as one of the Key Drivers of leadership effectiveness. These drivers, which describe research-informed practices contributing to effective leadership, can help current and aspiring system leaders to identify aspects of practice to strengthen, according to their context and development needs.

Summary: System leadership design and delivery approaches

Formal professional learning
Formal, planned learning opportunities at the system level that are contextualised and tailored to the specific needs of leaders.

Collaborative learning
Collaborative approaches including peer-to-peer learning, collegial support networks and joint network approaches.

Professional supports
Professional guidance and professional supports including coaching and mentoring, facilitation, shadowing, sponsorship and reflective supervision.

Research engagement
Supporting system leaders to engage with academic research and formal study, especially those that highlight practice implications.

Job embedded learning
Integrating opportunities to enhance system leadership capabilities within the routine work of principals.

Evidence-informed leadership frameworks
Drawing on evidence-informed leadership theories, frameworks and models to enable effective system leadership professional learning.

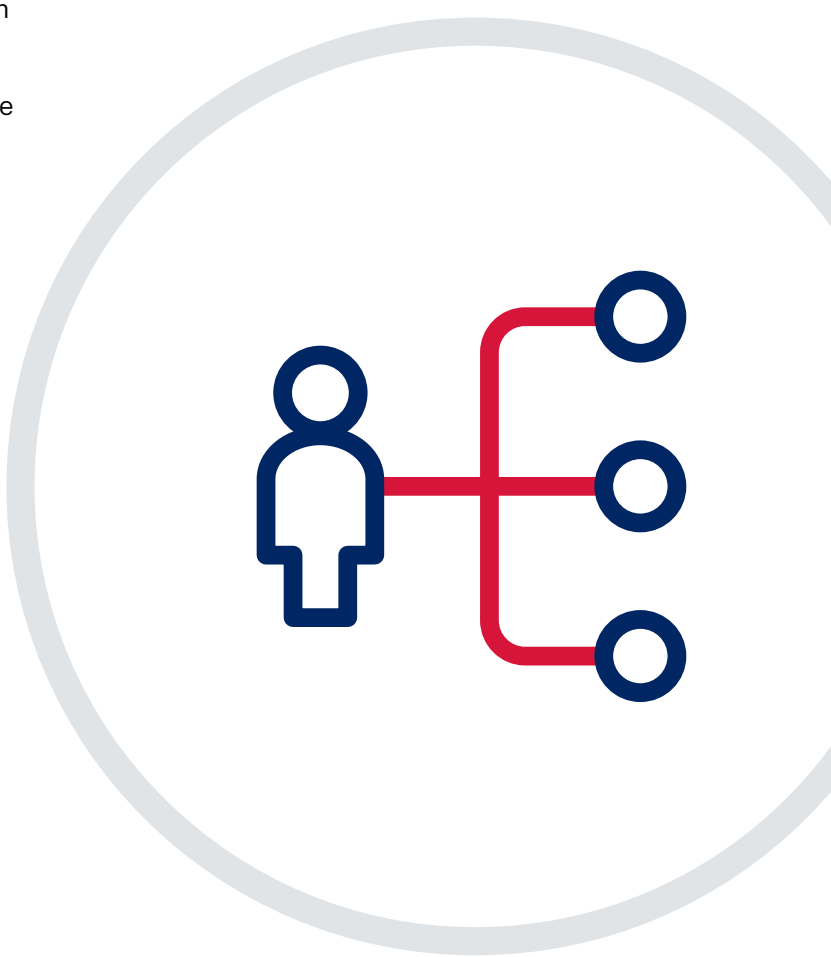
Conclusion

This report provided a definition of system leadership and outlined the value of systematic, systemic and ongoing system leadership preparation and development in the NSW context. Next, it summarised research findings synthesis on system leadership preparation professional learning needs and provided an overview of the evidence base on best practice approaches to design and delivery of development initiatives for aspiring system leaders.

System leaders hold key strategic responsibilities for supporting the continuous improvement of schools and groups of schools across the NSW system. The need for professional leadership learning that supports preparation for the challenging accountabilities of system leadership roles is well evidenced in the research.

> "The ability to lead others at different levels in the system is the most important characteristic of effective system leaders."
>
> **(Harris et al., 2021, p. 402)**

The equitable provision of targeted, specific, and strategic system leadership preparation initiatives that are research-informed and address the needs identified in this report enables the NSW public education system to strengthen support for aspiring system leaders. This support is designed to enhance their leadership capability and build their preparedness for the effective enactment of system leadership roles. In doing so, it fosters a collective momentum that drives meaningful, sustained improvement across the system.



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For more information:

School Leadership Institute
slicorrespondence@det.nsw.edu.au

SLI School Leadership Institute

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@NSWDepartmentofEducation

education.nsw.gov.au
1300 679 332

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