



School Leader Lab Impact Report

Developing Leaders for School Success



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Executive Summary

School Leader Lab aims to develop exceptional instructional leaders and inspiring people-leaders who are equipped with the skills and necessary support to lead transformational change within their schools.

To assess their program impact, School Leader Lab partnered with researchers at Bellwether. The Bellwether team reviewed extant program data and gathered qualitative data via interviews with current and former School Leader Lab participants and their school leadership teams to answer the following research questions:

1. How does participation in School Leader Lab impact the overall school conditions that foster school success?
2. What is the relationship between School Leader Lab participation and retention as a school leader?
3. Do school-level outcomes such as teacher retention improve when a School Leader Lab participant leads a school?

Key findings

The School Leader Lab alumni interviewed for this study reported that the program had been instrumental in helping them improve their school leadership skills and implement strategies to help teachers and students thrive. The participants and their teams highlighted four key ways that School Leader Lab supports leaders to create conditions that foster school success:

- School Leader Lab **helps leaders identify a clear vision that keeps students at the center** of school transformation.
- School Leader Lab **provides leaders with tools and frameworks that allow them to implement their vision** effectively.
- School Leader Lab **encourages leaders to engage in shared leadership and distribute responsibilities** for school success.
- School Leader Lab **connects leaders with a community of peers** to support their ongoing development.

By developing school leaders' leadership capacity and peer networks in these ways, the School Leader Lab model is designed to improve school leaders' sustainability and foster school environments where teachers love to work. To explore whether the program is achieving these intended outcomes, Bellwether analyzed leader and teacher retention data in schools led by alumni. After participating in School Leader Lab programming, participants' survey and administrative data indicate three key outcomes.

1. The **School Leader Lab experience encouraged participants to remain as school leaders** and persist within their schools.
 - Survey data showed that 91% of participants across all four School Leader Cohort (SLC) cohorts agreed that their participation in School Leader Lab made them more likely to remain in leadership (Figure 5).

- Survey data showed that 100% of Assistant Principal Leadership Academy (APLA) participants across the two existing cohorts agreed that School Leader Lab had a deep impact on their ability to lead and sustain in schools (Figure 6).
2. **Since 2020, 100% of School Leader Lab principals and assistant principals have persisted as school leaders** as of 2025.
 - Among principals who completed the School Leader Cohort (SLC) program between 2020 and 2024 (n=20), 100% are still school leaders as of Spring 2025 (Figure 3). Of the initial 2019 cohort, 43% of principals are still school leaders in 2025.
 - Among assistant principals who have participated in APLA (n=37), 100% of both the 2024 and 2025 cohorts are still school leaders (Figure 4).
 - Among assistant principals who participated in the first APLA cohort (in 2023), 72% are still in the same school one year later
 3. As of Fall 2024, **average teacher retention in schools led by School Leader Lab alumni was similar to that of other D.C. schools.**
 - Bellwether recommends that School Leader Lab continue to explore the relationship between program participation and teacher retention over time.
 - In addition, Bellwether recommends that in future impact assessments, School Leader Lab considers exploring teacher retention within schools where there are multiple School Leader Lab participants.

The following report describes and expands upon the above findings. First, the report addresses Research Question 1 by diving into interview data from school leaders and their teams about the perceived impact of School Leader Lab on participants' leadership practices. Next, the report reviews the quantitative findings related to Research Questions 2 and 3. This report is accompanied by a separate set of case studies that explore the impact of School Leader Lab among 4 school leaders across 3 D.C. area schools. Overall, this report illustrates that School Leader Lab provides a promising approach to preparing leaders who create schools where adults want to work, students thrive, and all individuals feel valued.

Introduction

School Leader Lab is a nonprofit organization founded in 2017 to develop a steady pipeline of impactful and committed public and charter school leaders across Washington, D.C. At that time (2016-2017), the national principal turnover rate was 18%, and the average principal tenure in a single school was approximately four years.¹ Research also shows that schools with a higher percentage of students facing poverty tend to experience higher principal turnover, with a 2017 national principal turnover rate of 21%.²

School Leader Lab founders investigated principal turnover in D.C. and determined that once in their roles, local school leaders often faced challenges that could be discouraging without appropriate support. Although professional development was available to D.C. school leaders, these programs were often one-time professional development opportunities that did not fully allow them to practice implementing new skills and strategies within their school. With inadequate resources and persistent challenges, many school leaders became discouraged as they experienced an unsustainable role. In 2017, School Leader Lab aimed to break down these barriers by offering high-quality professional development to help school principals and assistant principals in the city grow as both instructional leaders and inspiring people-leaders.

School Leader Lab launched its first School Leader Cohort (SLC) in 2018. As subsequent cohorts progressed, School Leader Lab recognized that school transformation and team sustainability can only happen when there is consistent access to capable leaders at every level within the school. With this goal in mind, in 2022, School Leader Lab expanded to include teacher leaders via the Teacher Leader Cohort (TLC) and district or network leaders with the development of the D.C. Executive Leader Cohort (EdEx). One year later, School Leader Lab expanded further by creating the Assistant Principal Leadership Academy (APLA), offering tailored support for assistant principals in the D.C. area. Since then, School Leader Lab has provided additional professional development convenings to school leaders and partnered with local education agencies across Maryland, Virginia, and the Mississippi Delta.

As School Leader Lab continues to serve education leaders, it aims to demonstrate its impact by illustrating how it supports leaders in enhancing school conditions that promote improved educator sustainability, student academic achievement, and overall school climate.

About this Report

In 2025, School Leader Lab partnered with researchers at Bellwether, a national nonprofit that partners with education organizations to help deepen their impact, to explore evidence of the program's outcomes in D.C. schools. Using extant data and interviews with School Leader Lab participants and their teams, this report examines how School Leader Lab

¹ Stephanie Levin and Kathryn Bradley, *Principal Turnover and Retention: A Research Review* (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020), https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/NASSP_LPI_Principal_Turnover_Research_Review_REPORT.pdf.

² Ibid.

supports leaders in building their leadership skills and improving conditions for teachers and students at their schools. The report begins with an overview of School Leader Lab's model and intended impact. Next, it summarizes interview findings about school leader and staff perceptions of the impacts of School Leader Lab participation. Finally, the report concludes with a review of findings about educator retention outcomes at schools led by former participants.

Overview of School Leader Lab Model and Intended Impact

School Leader Lab's mission is to develop leaders who create schools "where adults want to work, students thrive, and all school community members feel valued." School Leader Lab aims to achieve this by delivering a comprehensive professional development experience focusing on three pillars:

- Improving instructional leadership through rigorous academics
- Supporting people leadership to build meaningful connections
- Building inclusive schools where all students are welcome

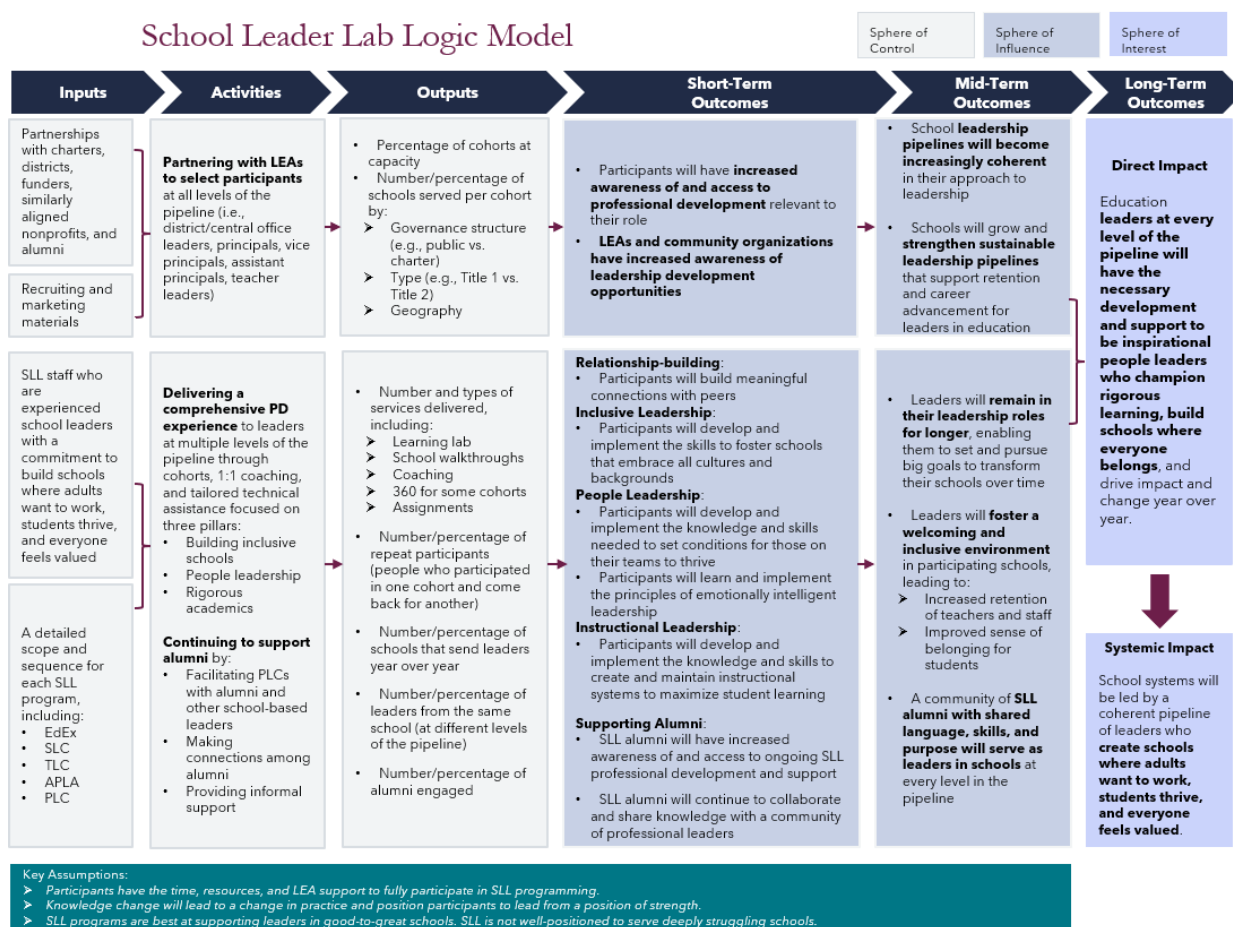
In addition, School Leader Lab helps participating leaders establish a network of continuing support by providing cohort members with mentors and connecting them with alumni who lead transformative schools.

School Leader Lab is designed to build participants' capacity in the three pillars through practice-based learning. Depending on the program, cohort members meet monthly for six to 18 months to engage in interactive and collaborative sessions with their peers. Participants engage in customized leadership development projects that focus on real-world problems of practice in their school communities. Leaders also receive one-on-one or group coaching and attend school visits to learn from exemplars.

School Leader Lab's intended impact is to develop inspirational people-leaders who champion rigorous learning and build welcoming and inclusive schools. The program is grounded in the belief that with increased sustainability, efficient managerial and organizational frameworks, and greater connection, former participants will remain in their roles as school leaders longer. As outlined in the logic model (Figure 1), School Leader Lab posits that as relationships between leaders and their teams improve, team members experience a greater sense of efficacy and feel empowered, resulting in increased satisfaction and retention for both leaders and teachers. The desired result is that overall school conditions will improve as schools become a place where teachers want to work and students thrive academically.

For this study, Bellwether researchers analyzed programmatic, public, and interview data, as described in the next section, to investigate the extent to which School Leader Lab is achieving key elements of its intended impact.

FIGURE 1: SCHOOL LEADER LAB LOGIC MODEL



Research Methods

Through an analysis of network participant data, survey data, and in-depth interviews with program participants and their teams, Bellwether explored School Leader Lab participant retention, staff retention, and changes in leadership skills. This report addresses three research questions:

1. How does participation in School Leader Lab impact the overall school conditions that foster school success?
2. What is the relationship between School Leader Lab participation and retention as a school leader?
3. Do school-level outcomes such as teacher retention improve when a School Leader Lab participant leads a school?

To explore how participating in School Leader Lab influences leader behaviors and subsequent changes in the overall school conditions (Research Question 1), Bellwether interviewed four School Leader Lab participants across the SLC, APLA, and EdEx. To understand the perceived impact of School Leader Lab participation on their school teams, Bellwether also hosted focus groups for colleagues and direct reports and interviewed each participant's supervisor, capturing perspectives from 12 total colleagues, direct reports, or supervisors.

To understand the relationship between School Leader Lab participation and leader retention (Research Question 2), Bellwether reviewed SLC and APLA participant records and survey data administered at the end of each cohort, from 2019 to 2024. Participant records include demographic and school characteristics such as ward, role, and employer when participating in the program. End-of-programming survey data were also used to assess leaders' self-reported likelihood of staying in their role.³ To determine each former School Leader Lab participant's role and employer as of January 2025, Bellwether reviewed online articles, resumes, and school and network websites.⁴

To understand patterns of teacher retention for schools led by School Leader Lab participants (Research Question 3), Bellwether used publicly available DC Educator Workforce data published by the Office of the School Superintendent (OSSE). Bellwether implemented t-tests of statistical significance across three years of teacher retention data to compare the average teacher retention among schools with at least one former School Leader Lab participant to schools that did not staff former School Leader Lab participants.

Figure 2 illustrates the data sources Bellwether used to address each research question and identifies the cohorts for which comprehensive data were available to assess the program's impact.

FIGURE 2: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DATA SOURCES, BY COHORT (SCHOOL LEADER COHORT, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY, EXECUTIVE LEADER COHORTS)

Research Question	Data Sources	School Leader Lab Cohort		
		SLC	APLA	EdEX
Research Question 1: How does participation in School Leader Lab impact the overall school conditions that foster school success?	Qualitative Interviews (Participants; their colleagues, direct reports, and supervisors)	☑	☑	☑
Research Question 2: What is the relationship between School Leader Lab participation and retention as a school leader?	School Leader Lab Participant Information	☑	☑	N/A
	End-of-Program Closing Survey	☑	☑	N/A
	Publicly Available Employment Data	☑	☑	N/A
Research Question 3: Do school-level outcomes such as teacher retention improve when a School Leader Lab participant leads a school?	School Leader Lab Participant Information	☑	☑	N/A
	OSSE Teacher Retention Data for 2022, 2023, and 2024	☑	☑	N/A

Note: While School Leader Lab offers many leadership development programs, this report primarily focuses on data from two cohorts, SLC and APLA. Due to these cohorts' longevity and frequency, their data provide the most comprehensive view of School Leader Lab programming and potential impact and are used to address Research Questions 2 and 3. To understand how School Leader Lab impacts overall school conditions (Research Question 1), we explored data representative of assistant principals, school leaders, and district and network leaders (e.g., SLC, APLA, and EdEx).

³ Surveys for SLC 2020 were not included due to the low response rate (21%).

⁴ Due to missing data, current employer and role records were unavailable for 16 of 126 (13%) participants.

Key Findings

1. According to school leaders and their teams, the School Leader Lab model effectively contributes to improved leadership capacity and successful outcomes for leaders, teachers, and students

To investigate educators' perceptions of how School Leader Lab participation impacts the school conditions that contribute to school success (Research Question 1), researchers interviewed former program participants and their colleagues, direct reports, and supervisors. Interviewees felt that participation in School Leader Lab positively contributed to school leader job sustainability. They also perceived positive impacts on leader effectiveness, teacher satisfaction, and student outcomes. Interviewees pointed to four key aspects of School Leader Lab's model to explain how the program contributed to these outcomes:

- School Leader Lab **helps leaders identify a clear vision** that keeps students at the center of school transformation.
- School Leader Lab **provides leaders with tools and frameworks** that allow them to implement their vision effectively.
- School Leader Lab **encourages leaders to engage in shared leadership** and distribute responsibilities for school success.
- School Leader Lab **connects leaders with a community of peers** to support their ongoing development.

These interview themes are discussed in greater detail below, outlining how participants and their teams believe each program element contributed to leader and school success.

School Leader Lab helps leaders identify a clear vision that keeps students at the center of school transformation

Current and former School Leader Lab participants highlighted that the program helped them define a vision for their school that sets a bar for academic rigor, school climate, and strategic support – all aimed at improving student outcomes. To develop the vision, School Leader Lab facilitates collaborative opportunities with coaches, peers, and other school leaders to clarify their goals and expectations. For example, each leader develops their Leadership Story to define their “why” and participates in a school visit to help them imagine what's possible. Leaders also receive iterative feedback on their vision, ensuring alignment with educational standards and crafting a compelling leadership narrative. School Leader Lab mentors coach leaders in using their vision as a North Star when making decisions about instruction, operations, and school culture.

According to School Leader Lab participants, the program's structured approach to building a vision has helped them clearly communicate their expectations to their teams and ensure that all activities are driving toward the same goals. School leaders reported that the vision

has also made decision-making more transparent, as they now have a clear “why” behind each decision. As explained by one leader:

We’ve done a lot of work as an organization and at School Leader Lab around having a vision, how I spend my time, and how I ask my team to spend their time in pursuit of that vision ... We have weekly touch points where people know what to expect, what to bring, and what we’re looking for in pursuit of data that drives towards our vision. Ninety percent of the time, those conversations go well because there are clear expectations and a clear vision.

—School Leader Lab SLC Participant

In multiple interviews, colleagues, direct reports, and supervisors agreed that the clear, student-centered vision their school leader crafted in School Leader Lab helped the team align their efforts to be more effective. One supervisor of a School Leader Lab participant observed that Tier 1 instruction in the school improved as the vision and expectations for teaching and learning became clearer. Other interviewees reported that as their teams improved in their ability to work together toward a common vision, they began seeing improvements in student outcomes like attendance, sense of efficacy, and students’ belief that they are held to rigorous expectations. According to participants and their teams, the clear vision was a first step in ensuring that students’ best interests remain the central consideration in all decisions and activities. As one school leader explained:

There has been a lot of work in School Leader Lab to keep the standards and instruction for kids at the forefront and then build everything around it ... working with School Leader Lab has shown me that to build strong relationships we need to be more direct and help folks understand that the feedback I am giving is in service of kids.

—School Leader Lab SLC Participant

School Leader Lab provides leaders with tools and frameworks that allow them to implement their vision effectively

In addition to helping them develop a vision, participants reported that School Leader Lab provided essential leadership strategies and frameworks that have helped them effectively support their teams to implement that vision. School Leader Lab guides executive leaders in developing Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) that align with their vision and allow them to track progress toward their outcomes. In addition, participants work with School Leader Lab coaches to adopt facilitation materials and techniques (e.g., data meeting guides and meeting facilitation templates) designed to improve the efficiency of team collaboration and decision-making. School Leader Lab also shares a problem-solving framework (comparing adaptive and technical problems) that helps leaders identify how to respond to complex challenges.

In interviews, participants consistently reported that these leadership techniques and tools have increased their efficiency and effectiveness as leaders. For example, one leader

explained that having strategies to guide their team toward clearly defined goals has increased their confidence: “Through School Leader Lab ... I’ve started to feel bolder in my statements and even my decision-making or pushing the team.” Similarly, another participant described how they used School Leader Lab’s frameworks to make their meetings more productive, helping them guide the team to execute their vision:

As a school, we’ve always had a lot of meetings. Sometimes, we walked away without knowing what to do next, or we had more questions. One of the strategies we use from School Leader Lab is to decide when you are having a strategy meeting versus when you are having a tactical meeting. I used the agendas School Leader Lab shared and developed a process to fit our context. I’ve implemented what we call a C.A.P.E. meeting, which stands for Connect, Align, Plan, and Execute. We all come together and follow the agenda that School Leader Lab developed. That has been very helpful.

—School Leader Lab EdEx Participant

Many of the team members interviewed agreed that school leaders’ use of School Leader Lab facilitation and planning techniques has improved collaboration and decision-making within their schools. Setting OKRs and metrics, for example, has helped team members stay focused on priority tasks and monitor progress toward clear goals. Tools like data meeting guides and meeting facilitation templates helped team members feel heard and stay focused on shared goals:

The [School Leader Lab participant] has improved tremendously in supporting my team and me in creating project plans and agendas ... [The participant] is very empowering and very empathetic. They launched weekly meetings for our leadership team. Every single person has the space to voice their opinions and reflect on how we can be solution-oriented.

—Colleague of an EdEx Participant

In addition to tangible tools, multiple School Leader Lab participants cited the adaptive leadership framework as having a big impact on how they respond to challenges. These leaders described how, when faced with adaptive challenges, they now lean into relationships with their team, rather than focusing on policies and procedures. As one SLC participant explained, “It’s tempting to think about going about the policies and rules, but what are the challenges and barriers? That allows you to connect with people and humanize them.” Interviewees expressed that this leadership approach has helped them build deeper connections with staff, further increasing trust.

School Leader Lab encourages leaders to engage in shared leadership and distribute responsibilities for school success

The School Leader Lab participants interviewed consistently expressed appreciation for how the program emphasizes a shared leadership model, fostering a positive team culture and reducing conflicts due to overlapping responsibilities. Interviewees acknowledged that it can

be hard for newly promoted leaders to relinquish previous responsibilities and adjust to leading through others. Through School Leader Lab, participants explained that they learned how to clarify and share leadership responsibilities across their direct reports, helping them establish clear role expectations and reducing potential friction with team members.

One aspect of School Leader Lab's training on shared leadership that participants found particularly helpful was the mindset shift from completing critical tasks themselves to developing the skills of individuals across their teams to take the lead on various tasks. School Leader Lab mentors coached leaders to move beyond the metaphorical dance floor (i.e., the day-to-day nuances of school operations) to the "balcony view" to assess how well their teams function as a whole.^{5,6} As one School Leader Lab alumni principal explained, this shift is crucial for developing a team with a shared vision, leadership, and expertise, ensuring that not only the leader but the entire team is equipped to address concerns. Direct reports emphasized that this approach helped the team operate efficiently and effectively.

Our school leader believes in shared leadership. Our school leader isn't the leader who does everything. Our leader assigns tasks and expects you to facilitate them. Our leader believes in building systems and structures, allowing the team members to run the school, and then they check in. Every team member has a weekly check-in to review the various areas we manage.

—Direct Report to an SLC Participant

To accompany School Leader Lab's shared leadership frameworks, participants also engaged in feedback loops (i.e., 360-degree evaluations) with their direct reports and supervisors during their cohort programming to identify the school leader's strengths and areas for growth. Interviewees believed that these evaluations provided clarity on how their staff view their actions as leaders, allowing them to make adjustments as needed to maintain positive staff relationships.

Across multiple interviews, school leaders and direct reports described the shared leadership approach as instrumental in contributing to the team's job satisfaction and sustainability. Team members described feeling encouraged to lean into their expertise and seek opportunities to expand their skills. In addition, the autonomy that the shared leadership model affords teachers and staff helps build trust between the school leaders and their teams. As one leadership team member articulated, a collaborative work environment and support from a school leader can make staff members more likely to remain at their school for the long term:

Having [my leader's] support makes this work feel more sustainable ... no matter how long we've been here, every year brings new challenges. So [my

⁵ Heifetz et al. (2009) introduced the concept "Moving from the dance floor to the balcony" as a component of developing adaptive leadership theory, based on their research at Harvard University. Adaptive leadership theory is a practical framework that assists individuals and organizations in adapting to changing environments and effectively addressing recurring problems.

⁶ Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Harvard Business Press, 2009).

leader's] approach goes a long way to us feeling like the work can be sustainable and we can meet needs as they change over time.

—Direct Report to an SLC Participant

School Leader Lab connects leaders with a community of peers to support their ongoing development

A common theme across School Leader Lab participant interviews was that the program gave them access to a network of external support they otherwise would not have. One source of support that participants appreciated is their School Leader Lab coach, who engages in school and instructional visits and assists them as they develop specific skills such as vision-aligned decision-making or role distribution. Several interviewees explained that their School Leader Lab mentors and coaches serve as valuable thought partners, advisors, and cheerleaders; many participants continue to maintain connections with School Leader Lab coaches post-program completion.

Interpersonally, Erica was my personal leadership coach. I feel really lucky to have a really deep bonding connection with her. I know I have someone who's always in my corner. Even in times when I don't know if I should be celebrated, she's always going to celebrate me. School Leader Lab will always have your back.

—School Leader Lab SLC Participant

In addition to their coaches, School Leader Lab participants reported finding deep value in the network of peers that they developed through the program's cohort model. During the cohort experience, School Leader Lab engages leaders in discussions about common problems of practice, allowing participants to share ideas and strategies. After program completion, School Leader Lab alumni events provide a space for school leaders to continue networking with peers. Interviewees reported that this sense of belonging and connection to a broader leadership network helps them feel supported and understood in a profession that can be challenging, fostering their commitment to remain in their roles for the long term.

"I interviewed our School Leader Lab participants this year as part of my own monitoring of the impact of the program and my participants' satisfaction with their development. When I met with them, each one of them said they never get to talk to colleagues across the [charter] network [prior to School Leader Lab].. Each participant described a level of camaraderie [in School Leader Lab].... The impact I foresee is that I now have three people in my principal pipeline who have strong relationships with one another."

—Supervisor of SLC Participants

2. Since 2020, 100% of School Leader Lab principals and assistant principals have persisted as school leaders, as of 2025

To understand if School Leader Lab participation contributes to leader sustainability and retention (Research Question 2), Bellwether analyzed retention data for all principals and assistant principals who have participated in SLC and APLA cohorts, respectively, since the program was founded. In the SLC program, 100% of all principals who completed the program between 2020 and 2024 are still school leaders as of Spring 2025 (Figure 3). Only the 2019 cohort shows a lower retention rate by 2025 (43%). In addition, the majority of these principals remain within the same schools they were leading when they first participated in the SLC program. Among assistant principals who have participated in APLA, which launched in the 2023-2024 school year, 100% of both cohorts are still school leaders (Figure 4). Of the 2023 APLA cohort, 72% are still in the same school one year later (the second APLA cohort had just completed the program at the time of this report).

FIGURE 3: PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP RETENTION AS OF 2025

Cohort	Years Retained Since Completion	...As a School Leader	...Within Same School
SLC 2024 (N = 6)	Program Ongoing	100%	100%
SLC 2023 (N = 5)	1 year	100%	100%
SLC 2022 (N = 4)	2 years	100%	80%
SLC 2021 (N = 3)	3 years	100%	100%
SLC 2020 (N = 2)	4 years	100%	100%
SLC 2019 (N = 7)	5 years	43%	29%

Note: School Leader Lab's D.C. School Leader Cohort is an 18-month cross-school program focused on developing exceptional leaders, including principals in D.C. schools. Retention rates were collected in January 2025 to determine if school leaders either remained employed within the same school or continued as school leaders within another school or LEA. Current employer data is missing for 3 out of a total of 30 principals who have participated in SLC. Retention rates across all leadership roles within the cohort can be reviewed in Appendix A.

FIGURE 4: ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP RETENTION AS OF 2025

Cohort	Years Retained Since Completion	...As a School Leader	...Within Same School
APLA 2024	Completed Spring 2025	100% (N = 19)	100% (N = 19)
APLA 2023	1 year	100% (N = 18)	72% (N = 13)

Note: School Leader Lab's AP Leadership Academy (APLA) Cohort is a 10-month program that develops DCPS assistant principals in their second year and beyond. The APLA Cohort typically begins in the summer and

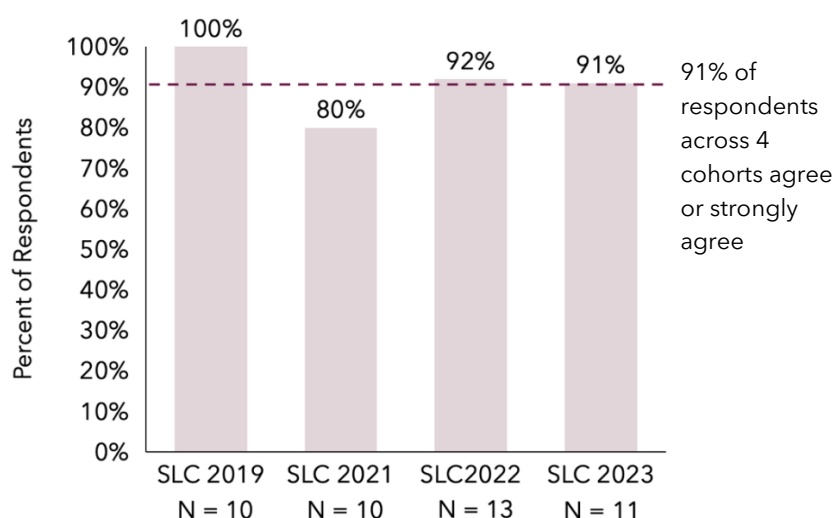
concludes in the spring. Retention rates were collected in January 2025 to determine if school leaders either remained employed within the same school or continued as school leaders within another school or LEA. Across both cohorts, 39 assistant principals participated in APLA. Current employer data is missing for 2 out of 39 assistant principals who have participated in APLA. Current role data is missing for 7 out of 39 assistant principals who have participated in APLA.

Survey data from the SLC and APLA cohorts provide supporting evidence that most participants believe that being part of the program has increased their likelihood of staying in their role. When asked on their Closing Survey whether their participation in School Leader Lab made them more likely to remain in leadership, 91% of participants across four SLC cohorts responded positively (Figure 5). Similarly, on the APLA Closing Survey, 100% of participants across both cohorts reported that School Leader Lab participation had a direct impact on their likelihood of persisting as a school leader (Figure 6).

Compared to principals nationwide – 42% of whom reported considering leaving their roles in 2021 – school leaders who completed the School Leader Lab program appear more motivated to remain in their positions.⁷ These findings suggest that School Leader Lab is effectively meeting its goal of providing the necessary support and resources that promote sustainability and leadership retention among its participants.

FIGURE 5: SCHOOL LEADER COHORT PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS' REPORTED LIKELIHOOD OF REMAINING IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Percent of surveyed School Leader Cohort participants who agreed or strongly agreed they are more likely to remain in leadership due to School Leader Lab participation (N = 44)



Note: The 2020 D.C. School Leader Cohort (SLC) Closing Survey responses were excluded due to a low response rate (21%). This question was not asked on the APLA Closing Surveys.

⁷ Peter DeWitt, "42% of Principals Want to Leave Their Position. Will You Let Them?" *Education Week*, April 18, 2021, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-42-of-principals-want-to-leave-their-position-will-you-let-them/2021/04>

FIGURE 6: ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS' REPORTED IMPACT ON ABILITY TO LEAD AND SUSTAIN IN SCHOOLS

Percent of surveyed Assistant Principal Leadership Academy (APLA) participants who agreed or strongly agreed School Leader Lab had a deep impact on their ability to lead and sustain in schools (N = 35)



3. Average teacher retention rates in schools led by School Leader Lab graduates were not significantly different from other D.C. schools

To explore whether School Leader Lab participation is related to school-level outcomes like teacher retention (Research Question 3), Bellwether used publicly available DC Educator Workforce data published by the Office of the School Superintendent (OSSE) to compare average teacher retention rates between two groups of D.C. schools over a three-year period. These two school groups included: 1) schools participating in School Leader Lab (i.e., schools with at least one School Leader Lab SLC or APLA participant from 2020 to 2024) and 2) schools not participating in the program (i.e., schools that did not have a School Leader Lab participant who completed the program in the specified period).⁸ As shown in Figure 7, teacher retention trends were similar across both groups. In 2022, schools with a School Leader Lab participant had an average teacher retention rate of 78%, compared to 72% in schools without a participant. However, this difference is not statistically significant. In 2023, overall teacher retention in D.C. declined from 73% to 69% (with no statistically significant differences observed between School Leader Lab schools and other schools), reflecting a broader national trend of mass teacher turnover that researchers termed “The Great Resignation.” By 2024, retention rates in D.C. returned to typical levels, with no statistically significant differences observed between schools with and without a School Leader Lab participant.

⁸ The identification of schools with and without a School Leader Lab participant was determined based on the leader’s year of participation in School Leader Lab. For instance, if a leader participated in 2020, the school was identified in 2021 and each year going forward as having a School Leader Lab participant.

FIGURE 7: AVERAGE TEACHER RETENTION IN D.C. SCHOOLS WITH AND WITHOUT A SCHOOL LEADER LAB PARTICIPANT

School Year	Schools With a School Leader Lab Participant	Schools Without School Leader Lab Participants	Overall Average Teacher Retention Across D.C. Schools
21-22	78% (N = 18)	72% (N = 225)	73% (Total N = 243)
22-23	63% (N = 24)	69% (N = 226)	69% (Total N = 250)
23-24	71% (N = 47)	73% (N = 206)	73% (Total N = 253)

Note: Teacher retention refers to the percentage of teachers who continued teaching at the same school from one academic year to the beginning of the next. For example, OSSE's reported retention rate for the 2021-22 school year includes teachers who were employed during the 2020-2021 school year and were at the same school in the fall of the 2021-2022 school year. The teacher retention data provided by OSSE was missing data for newly opened schools.

Although these data do not suggest an immediate impact of School Leader Lab on teacher retention, future research could investigate whether teacher retention improves over time as teachers gain prolonged exposure to leaders who excel in people-centered leadership. Additional research could also explore whether teacher retention is impacted when multiple leaders in a school participate in the School Leader Lab program. To better assess the impact of School Leader Lab on teacher retention, School Leader Lab should consider collecting longitudinal data that monitors leaders' attrition for multiple years post-participation and examining schools with two or more School Leader Lab participants.

Conclusion: Advancing Leadership for Lasting Change

Since 2017, School Leader Lab has supported nearly 300 school leaders through partnerships with charter networks, school districts, and various nonprofit organizations.⁹ These collaborations have expanded their reach to education leaders at every level of the pipeline, from teachers and instructional coaches to school principals and district supervisors.

The findings from this impact study suggest that School Leader Lab provides benefits that last beyond the end of the program. In interviews, leaders credited School Leader Lab with providing critical support to create and communicate a clear vision focused on ensuring successful outcomes for students. These leaders also felt that School Leader Lab equipped them with the tools, resources, and practical leadership experience necessary to implement that vision and build a more efficient, empowered shared leadership team. Over the six to 18

⁹ School Leader Lab. "Our Impact." Accessed March 27, 2025, <https://www.schoolleaderlab.org/impact>.

months of their program, participants also found that they developed strong bonds with their cohort and mentors, building an ongoing network of support.

Ultimately, study findings suggest that leaders who complete School Leader Lab walk away with not only enhanced relationship-building and people-leadership skills but also an increased sense of effectiveness and confidence in their roles as they drive instructional rigor and build inclusive schools. As a result, participants feel that their School Leader Lab experience increases their job sustainability, making it more likely that they will remain in their role. This sentiment is corroborated by the fact that since 2020, 100% of APLA and SLC assistant principal and principal alumni are still school leaders as of 2025.

As schools and their leaders face growing challenges, now more than ever it is crucial to develop and retain capable school leaders. School Leader Lab's model provides a promising approach to preparing leaders who create schools where adults want to work, students thrive, and everyone feels valued.

Appendix

Limitations

To answer Research Question 2, Bellwether used participant data from School Leader Lab's SLC and APLA cohorts. These cohorts represent School Leader Lab's primary programming and provide survey data across multiple years with substantial response rates. Data from the SLC 2020 cohort was not included in the survey analysis due to its low response rate.

FIGURE A1: SCHOOL LEADER COHORT END-OF-PROGRAM CLOSING SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

Cohort	Response Rate
SLC 2024 (N = 19)	100%
SLC 2023 (N = 12)	92%
SLC 2022 (N = 17)	76%
SLC 2021 (N = 11)	91%
SLC 2020 (N = 14)	21%
SLC 2019 (N = 14)	71%

FIGURE A2: ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY END-OF-PROGRAM CLOSING RESPONSE RATES

Cohort	Response Rate
APLA 2024 (N = 20)	95%
APLA 2023 (N = 19)	84%

In addition, current leader employer data was identified via online articles, resumes, and school and network websites, and were not verified by the cohort participants. Bellwether recommends that in the future School Leader Lab collect this data directly from school leaders to capture the most accurate and current data.

To answer Research Question 3, Bellwether reviewed publicly available OSSE data. Although School Leader Lab hosted its first cohort in SY 2018-2019, publicly available data for teacher retention is only available beginning in 2022. The identification of schools with and without a School Leader Lab participant was based on the leader's year of participation in School Leader Lab. For instance, if a leader participated in the 2020 cohort, the school was identified in 2021 and each year going forward as having a School Leader Lab participant. This data measurement approach aimed to capture the impact of having a School Leader Lab participant before 2022, but it may overlook shifting role effects.

Additional Figures

FIGURE A3: SCHOOL LEADER COHORT RETENTION AS A SCHOOL LEADER AS OF 2025 (PRINCIPALS AND OTHER SCHOOL LEADER ROLES)

Cohort	Years Retained Since Completion	...As a School Leader
SLC 2024 (N = 17)	Program Ongoing	100%
SLC 2023 (N = 12)	1 year	100%
SLC 2022 (N = 15)	2 years	100%
SLC 2021 (N = 10)	3 years	80%
SLC 2020 (N = 12)	4 years	92%
SLC 2019 (N = 12)	5 years	50%

Note: School Leader Lab’s D.C. School Leader Cohort is an 18-month cross-school program focused on developing exceptional leaders, including principals in D.C. schools. Retention rates were collected in January 2025 to determine if school leaders either remained employed within the same school or continued as school leaders within another school or LEA. Current role data is missing for 9 SLC participants.

FIGURE A4: SCHOOL LEADER COHORT RETENTION WITHIN THE SAME SCHOOL AS OF 2025 (PRINCIPALS AND OTHER SCHOOL LEADER ROLES)

Cohort	Years Retained Since Completion	...Within Same School
SLC 2024 (N = 17)	Program Ongoing	100%
SLC 2023 (N = 12)	1 year	100%
SLC 2022 (N = 16)	2 years	81%
SLC 2021 (N = 10)	3 years	70%
SLC 2020 (N = 12)	4 years	58%
SLC 2019 (N = 12)	5 years	17%

Note: School Leader Lab’s D.C. School Leader Cohort is an 18-month cross-school program focused on developing exceptional leaders, including principals in D.C. schools. Retention rates were collected in January 2025 to determine if school leaders either remained employed within the same school or continued as school leaders within another school or LEA. Current employer data is missing for 8 SLC participants.

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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.