IASA 2026 Summer Conference Proposal

Proposed Title: Building Leadership Pipelines Through District-University Partnerships

Session Description

Across the United States, school districts are facing increasing challenges related to principal turnover, administrator shortages, educator burnout, and leadership succession planning. Research from the Learning Policy Institute estimates that approximately 20% of principals leave their schools each year, with turnover rates often higher in high-needs and rural schools (Levin et al., 2020; Taie & Lewis, 2022;). In Idaho, rural districts and geographically dispersed communities continue to face unique barriers related to leadership recruitment, retention, and access to preparation programs. At the same time, research consistently demonstrates that school leadership is one of the most important school-based factors influencing student outcomes, school climate, teacher retention, and overall school improvement (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). As expectations for school leaders continue to expand, districts are increasingly seeking leadership preparation models that are flexible, collaborative, practice-centered, and connected directly to local community needs. This session explores how intentional district-university partnerships can help Idaho districts strengthen leadership pipelines while building collaborative leadership cultures rooted in mentorship, innovation, and community engagement. Rather than viewing leadership preparation as solely the responsibility of higher education institutions, this session highlights how districts and universities can co-design leadership development experiences that are responsive to local needs and grounded in authentic leadership practice.

Drawing from Boise State University's Educational Leadership programs and district partnerships across Idaho, participants will examine innovative approaches to leadership development that move beyond traditional coursework and position districts as active partners in preparing future school leaders. Examples shared during the session will include:

- District-led leadership cohorts designed around local district needs
- Regional partnership conversations to increase access for rural educators
- Flexible hybrid and summer models that support working professionals
- Embedded internships connected directly to district leadership work
- Superintendent and practitioner mentorship structures
- Problem-based learning tied to real district challenges and initiatives
- Leadership inquiry and capstone projects connected to school and district improvement efforts

The session will highlight how these partnerships can help districts:

- Grow leadership talent from within
- Support leadership succession planning
- Increase retention of aspiring administrators
- Reduce barriers for rural and geographically dispersed educators

- Strengthen mentorship and professional support systems
- Align leadership preparation with district priorities and Idaho leadership standards
- Foster collaborative leadership cultures that support thriving schools

Participants will also explore how leadership preparation can become a shared responsibility between districts, universities, and communities rather than existing as a disconnected higher education process. This session is designed specifically for Idaho superintendents and district leaders who are thinking strategically about the future of leadership development in their schools and communities. Participants will leave with practical ideas, partnership strategies, and collaborative models that can be adapted to fit the unique needs of Idaho districts and regions.

Connection to Conference Theme: ***Leading Schools Where Students Thrive***
Thriving schools are built on strong leadership, collaborative cultures, and sustainable systems of support. This session connects directly to the conference theme by exploring how district-university partnerships can help Idaho schools strengthen leadership pipelines while creating learning environments where students, educators, and communities thrive. As districts across Idaho continue to experience leadership shortages, administrator turnover, and increasing student needs, developing future leaders has become a shared responsibility. This session highlights how collaborative partnerships between school districts and universities can support leadership succession planning, mentorship, professional growth, and community-centered leadership development. Through examples of district-led cohorts, embedded internships, leadership retreats, and mentorship structures, participants will examine how leadership preparation can move beyond traditional coursework to become a locally responsive and practice-centered experience. By investing in leadership development systems that are grounded in collaboration and real district needs, schools are better positioned to cultivate positive school cultures, retain strong educators, and support student success.

Learning Outcomes
Participants will:

1. Explore strategies for strengthening Idaho's school leadership pipeline through district-university partnerships.
2. Examine innovative leadership preparation models that respond to the realities of Idaho schools and communities.
3. Identify ways mentorship, internships, and collaborative learning experiences can support leadership development and retention.
4. Reflect on approaches for building sustainable leadership cultures within districts.
5. Develop ideas for future partnerships that support thriving schools and long-term leadership sustainability.

Intended Audience

- Superintendents

- Assistant Superintendents
- District Leadership Teams
- Principals
- Leadership Coaches
- Aspiring School Leaders

Interactive Elements

The session will include:

- Individual reflection: "*how are you currently identifying and developing future leaders?*" and other related questions.
- Collaborative Discussion Around Leadership Challenges Facing Idaho Districts
- Opportunities for Participants to Share Ideas and Explore Future Partnership Possibilities *Activity:* "Partnership Design Lab"
- Closing Interactive Activity:
    - Commitment to Action: Ask Participants to Complete: "*One action I will take to strengthen leadership pipelines through partnership is…*"

Why This Session Matters

Strong schools require strong leaders, and Idaho districts are increasingly being called to develop leadership capacity from within their own communities. As leadership shortages continue to impact schools across the state, district-university partnerships offer opportunities to rethink how leaders are identified, supported, and prepared. By creating collaborative leadership ecosystems grounded in mentorship, flexibility, and community connection, districts can build sustainable pathways that support both aspiring leaders and thriving schools. This session provides practical examples and partnership ideas that are directly connected to the realities facing Idaho educators, schools, and communities today.

References

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited*. School Leadership & Management, 40(1), 5–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077

Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). How principals affect students and schools. *Wallace Foundation*, *2*(1), 30-41.

Levin, S., Bradley, K., & Scott, C. (2020). *Principal turnover: How principal attrition affects students and schools.* Learning Policy Institute. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606480.pdf

Taie, S., & Lewis, L. (2022). Characteristics of 2020-21 Public and Private K-12 School Teachers in the United States: Results from the National Teacher and Principal Survey. First Look. NCES 2022-113. *National Center for Education Statistics*.