

Spotlight

Improving induction: Part 2 – school leaders

November 2025



Contents

Introduction

Importance of induction

Induction guidelines

Importance of leadership identity

Adapting school leader induction

Three pathways to leadership

Adapting induction for other teacher identities

Resource list 1: School leader induction resources

Key takeaways for adapting induction for new school leaders

References

Key messages:

- ⚡ The benefits of good induction for school leaders flow from the individual leader to the school community
- ⚡ High-quality induction helps build skills, shift professional identity and is adapted to the needs of the individual leader
- ⚡ Leaders may arrive in a role via 3 different pathways:
 - 'Accidental' leaders benefit from induction that helps build networks and reduce feelings of isolation
 - 'Aspiring' leaders want induction that immerses them quickly in the context of their new role

→ 'Anointed' leaders need induction that helps shape their professional identities

⚡ The *Guidelines for the Induction of New School Leaders in Australia* provide evidence-informed practices to structure induction programs for new school leaders

.....

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands, sea countries, and waterways from across Australia. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and living cultures; and to Elders past and present.

.....

Introduction

In *Part 1 of the Improving Induction Spotlight series*, we looked at the importance of induction for early career teachers to assist them to progress from initial teacher education (ITE) to becoming fully registered, proficient teachers. Following registration, teachers continue to build their teaching skills and may take the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher certification path, as described in the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*.

While working as classroom teachers, many teachers display skills and perform informal leadership acts within a school, recognised in the research literature as teacher leaders (Gurr, 2024). However, in this Part 2 Spotlight, we highlight the support available as teachers take up formal leadership roles in middle or senior leader positions. Each new position comes with new responsibilities and identity shifts. Induction can support leaders to navigate these changes, just as induction helps early career teachers. High-quality induction helps smooth transitions, supporting leaders to adapt quickly, sustain their wellbeing, and make a positive difference for their schools.

This Spotlight draws on the *Guidelines for the Induction of New School Leaders in Australia* (the guidelines), which provide an evidence-informed framework for designing effective induction.

Definitions

Middle leaders are qualified teachers who hold recognised management and leadership responsibilities, usually in addition to their teaching responsibilities (Grootenboer et al., 2020).

Examples include:

- Head of department

- Stage coordinator
- Head of student welfare
- Learning area leader

Senior leaders are typically school principals and deputy principals (AITSL, 2025). Assistant principals are also part of this group. Senior leaders may undertake limited teaching responsibilities.

Importance of induction

The benefits of good school leader induction start with the leader themselves and flow to other teachers and students in the school. New leaders who have high-quality induction experiences transition more smoothly into their new leadership roles (Dumicich, 2021). Research highlights the many benefits resulting from high-quality induction for school leaders, such as reducing teacher turnover, boosting teacher effectiveness and even improving student outcomes (Steinberg & Yang, 2022). Other studies show a quality induction process helps new leaders build skills and apply them in context (Bush, 2018), while also supporting identity shifts to better align with their new positions (Cruz-González et al., 2021).

The experiences of those stepping into leadership vary greatly, from those shifting to middle leader positions early in their career to principals with decades in the profession. So, what makes a good induction experience, according to the evidence?

Induction guidelines

The *Guidelines for the Induction of New School Leaders in Australia* provide detailed information for planning induction processes for school leaders. They are suitable for use with induction for middle and school leaders, providing a structure for induction, advice on induction strategies and suggestions on who should be involved. The guidelines also discuss the importance of induction in shaping leadership identity during transition to a new role.

Importance of leadership identity

Transitioning into a leadership role requires teachers to re-negotiate their professional identity. Stepping into a middle leader role for the first time usually means moving from an identity grounded in classroom teaching and informal peer leadership to one centred on formal leadership responsibilities (Gurr, 2024). For new principals, leadership identity shifts again with the awareness that their vision and decisions now carry the power to influence the whole school (Bagi, 2015).

A review of more than 25 years of international research found that identities are shaped by the individual and their context, so a transition to a new role will re-define an individual’s professional leadership identity. It also showed that school leaders with strong professional leadership identities are more likely to transform schools in a positive direction by enabling teachers and students to perform at their best. Leadership identity is further strengthened when leaders have tools/resources needed to do the job, enjoy positive social interactions and community support, receive leadership training, work in stable contexts and feel that their other identities, such as gender or culture, are valued (Cruz-González et al., 2021).

Adapting school leader induction

When adapting induction programs, the guidelines note induction is most effective when consideration has been given to different contexts such as the workplace, community, regionality, cultural values and specifics of the role and responsibilities. This Spotlight explores how insights from recent research can help adapt induction processes. The research found three common pathways to middle leadership in Australian schools.

Three pathways to leadership

Research has identified 3 common pathways to middle leadership in Australian schools: aspiring, anointed and accidental (Grootenboer et al., 2023). Table 1 summarises how these different pathways influence the skills, knowledge and characteristics new middle leaders bring to a new role.

Having the awareness of how a new school leader has arrived in the leadership role can provide valuable knowledge for adapting a highly effective induction to best meet their needs.

Table 1. Characteristics of the 3 pathways to leadership for Australian middle leaders. Adapted from recent Australian study findings (Grootenboer et al., 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2025).

Pathway to middle leadership	Aspiring	Anointed	Accidental
Pathway definition	Planned to be a leader	Invited into the role by another person	Did not plan to be a leader
Proportion of Australian middle leaders	60% or more	15 to 20%	2.5 to 20%

Pathway to middle leadership	Aspiring	Anointed	Accidental
Leadership skills and knowledge	Made targeted efforts to develop	Recognised by other/s	Unknown
Leadership personal qualities/ characteristics	Developed over time	Developed over time	Unknown
Leadership preparation	Curated by aspiring leader over time	No formal or informal preparation for role	No formal or informal preparation for role

Leaders taking on a position via each of these pathways are likely to have different professional leadership identities and induction needs. Viewing school leadership and induction research through the lens of these pathways offers useful insights with generalisations about valuable induction processes discussed here.

While research could not be found on transitions directly from teaching to principalship, it is likely that the three pathways described above are relevant to this group as well.

Accidental leaders and induction

Recognising accidental leaders

Accidental leaders are the teachers who enjoy their teaching role with no prior plans to become a leader. Although they may now find themselves in a leadership position, these teachers had not specifically prepared themselves for leadership. They may fall into middle leader positions in the following ways:

- being the only teacher available to fill a leadership gap (Grootenboer et al., 2023)
- taking on an ad-hoc or temporary position (Grootenboer et al., 2023)
- accepting a short-term or fill-in position which becomes more permanent (Grootenboer et al., 2023)
- filling a vacant position (Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- stepping in for an underperforming incumbent (Lipscombe et al., 2025)

The leadership skills, knowledge and personal qualities of accidental leaders are unknown. They may have leadership experience outside education, have taken on informal leadership roles within the school or may have no experience beyond observing school leaders from their positions as teachers. While their identities as teachers may be strong, they may not have developed professional leadership identities.

Adapting induction processes for accidental leaders

Planning induction for accidental leaders is challenging, as they lack traditional preparation for the role. Using reflective tools can be a useful way to start adapting induction processes for any leader (AITSL, 2023) and it can be especially useful for accidental leaders (see resources list below).

Of the 3 pathways to leadership, it is the accidental leaders who are most likely to be unwilling to continue in leadership roles in which they may find themselves. Common reasons for this have been described by recent Australian research, including:

- the additional administrative responsibilities that come with leadership are seen to be overwhelming (Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- balancing leadership demands with maintaining the quality of their teaching (Grootenboer et al., 2023), this is particularly important as accidental leaders often have a strong teacher identity
- feeling that they do not receive enough support, guidance, encouragement or backing from their principal when carrying out their leadership responsibilities (Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- experiencing a sense of being cut off from colleagues or lacking opportunities to connect with others in similar roles (Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- the challenges of the leadership role (Lipscombe et al., 2025)

If accidental leaders are well supported to experience success, they may be more willing to continue in leadership positions (Lipscombe et al., 2025). It is necessary to first recognise an accidental leader and tailor an induction to their needs to help overcome these challenges and improve their willingness to continue as leaders. For example, induction that builds management skills and knowledge can help them balance their administrative load and feel more able to balance competing priorities. Similarly, induction that connects a new middle leader to a network can help them feel less isolated.

Guidelines in action: 3 strategies for accidental leaders

The guidelines highlight the importance of tailoring induction to context. Here are three ways strategies from the guidelines can be adapted to support accidental leaders.

- Formal training to build administrative skills and learn how to manage competing priorities
- Mentoring by the principal to build feelings of support
- Networks with others in similar roles to help build professional leadership identity

Aspiring leaders and induction

Recognising aspiring leaders

Aspiring leaders often have their eyes on a leadership role years before they gain it. They take the initiative to use a range of strategies to prepare for the role, building their skills, knowledge and professional leadership identities. Strategies of aspiring leaders featured in recent Australian research include:

- leadership preparation programs and university courses (Elliott & Hollingsworth, 2020; Gurr, 2024; Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- building professional networks (Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- working with mentors (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2022; Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- shadowing experienced principals (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2022)
- stepping through roles with increasing scope and strategic responsibility (Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2022)
- testing their readiness for a role by acting in the position (Lipscombe et al., 2025)

Each of these experiences help to develop the professional leadership identities of aspiring leaders well before they take on their new role.

Adapting induction processes for aspiring leaders

This group makes up the highest proportion of middle leaders in Australia and has received greater research attention. Study findings can be used to adapt induction processes. Leaders who fit this profile appreciate induction that helps them apply their training knowledge to the specific role, school and community contexts. Most importantly, they want a structured induction to begin before the role starts to allow adequate preparation time. This is especially true when starting in a new school or community. Valued induction processes for aspiring leaders include:

- access to accurate and specific information about the school, its status, its policies and its traditions (Bagi, 2015; Domicich, 2021; Hine, 2013)
- interactions with school council, the current incumbent in the role and the broader leadership team prior to commencement (Hine, 2013)
- introductions to school staff, students and parents, especially for those commencing in regional areas (Bagi, 2015)
- access to staff lists and photos (Domicich, 2021)
- connections to key partners and networks (Hine, 2013)
- physical introductions including keys, alarms, room locations and IT systems associated with the role (Bagi, 2015; Domicich, 2021)
- when beginning a senior role, school access over the preceding school holidays and information about staff who will be onsite during that time (Bagi, 2015; Domicich, 2021)

Establishing support networks can help new leaders when they face unanticipated challenges. Aspiring leaders systematically prepare for the leadership role and develop their leadership professional identity alongside their skills and knowledge. Unmet challenges can be especially difficult to aspiring leaders in a new role, as these experiences may destabilise their emerging professional identity. This is especially true for new principals. Induction processes helping new leaders to develop support networks include:

- establishing mentoring or coaching relationships with expert leaders (if not already in place) who can offer strategies (Bagi, 2015)
- attending courses and conferences with other new leaders in similar roles to forge networks of others who have shared experiences (Bagi, 2015)

Induction that helps build support networks and set themselves up within the context of the new role is useful for aspiring leaders.

Guidelines in action: 3 strategies for aspiring leaders

Drawing on the guidelines, these strategies help aspiring leaders apply their preparation to a new role and context.

- Formal process for participation in school improvement initiatives
- Mentoring by expert leaders (if not already in place)
- Networks with key partners and community organisations to embed the new leader in the school community

Anointed leaders and induction

Recognising anointed leaders

Anointed leaders have the recognised leadership qualities of aspiring leaders but lack formal preparation - a commonality with accidental leaders. Anointed leaders most often gain a middle leader role after being tapped on the shoulder by the school principal, meaning they are likely to be taking on a position within the same school. Similarities among anointed leaders found from recent Australian research include:

- support from a senior leader who takes an interest in their work (Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- well-established identities as teachers and see leadership responsibilities being added to this work (Grootenboer et al., 2023; Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- pre-existing strong relationships with colleagues (Grootenboer et al., 2023)
- often taking on a leadership role early in their careers before they felt ready for the role (Lipscombe et al., 2025)
- preferring to 'lead by example' using collegiate and collaborative practices (Grootenboer et al., 2023)
- often having had no leadership training as they were not planning to become a leader (Grootenboer et al., 2023)
- a desire to work with a leadership mentor to assist them to successfully transition into the leadership position (Grootenboer et al., 2023).

Adapting induction processes for anointed leaders

Australian research notes that leaders can feel isolated once they take on a leadership position (Bagi, 2015; Grootenboer et al., 2023; Heffernan & Pierpoint, 2022; Lipscombe et al., 2025). This is prominent in research on principals, but it is also noted for those moving from teaching to middle leadership. With strong teacher identities and relationships with colleagues, anointed leaders may be among those who feel isolated as they take on leadership roles.

To help anointed leaders, an effective induction process builds professional leadership identity, helping them feel more comfortable in a leadership role. Internationally, formal leadership programs have been found to shape professional leadership identities. Programs that allow leaders to grapple with moral problems and complex situations are especially useful (Cruz-González et al., 2021). Collaborating with mentors is another effective way of supporting anointed leaders to feel comfortable in their new role.

Guidelines in action: 3 strategies for anointed leaders

The guidelines emphasise identity development. These adaptations can support anointed leaders as they step into new roles.

- Formal training which allows leaders to grapple with complex situations to build professional identity
- Mentoring by experienced leaders with similar roles to help the new leader feel comfortable with the role and responsibilities
- Networks with other leaders to reduce feelings of isolation

Adapting induction for other teacher identities

Adapting induction to support the leadership pathways described here is only one factor requiring consideration. A high-quality induction program for school leaders should also take into account the school context and the characteristics of the new leader. This is especially true when a leader's identity is under-represented in school leadership more broadly. For example, migrant teachers are represented among middle leaders in line with their presence in the workforce, but they are less likely to be principals (AITSL, 2025). Adapting induction to connect leaders with others who share their identities can strengthen professional leadership identities and foster a sense of belonging. The Guidelines provide further practical guidance here.

The how and the what

The *Guidelines for the Induction of New School Leaders in Australia* outline the focus and strategies for effective induction. They work alongside the *Professional Standards for Middle Leaders* and the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals*, which describe

the knowledge, skills and attributes expected of leaders. Together, the Guidelines address how to support transitions into leadership, while the standards define what effective leadership requires.

Resource list: School leader induction resources

[Guidelines for the Induction of New School Leaders in Australia](#)

[Professional Standards for Middle leaders](#)

[Australian Professional Standard for Principals](#)

[Coaching resources](#)

[Mentoring resources](#)

[Leadership Reflection Tool](#)

[Australian guidelines for school leadership development](#)

[School leadership in rural and remote contexts](#)

[Prepare future leaders](#)

[Leadership scenarios](#)

Key takeaways for adapting induction for new school leaders

Understanding the pathway a leader has taken can help in planning induction processes. Considering the context in which they will be working also supports effective induction. The [Guidelines for the Induction of New School Leaders in Australia](#) provide a framework for conducting and adapting induction to help leaders hit the ground running and make a difference to their schools.

References

- AITSL. (2023). *Guidelines for the Induction of New School Leaders in Australia*. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/lead-develop/induction/guidelines-for-the-induction-of-new-school-leaders-in-australia>
- AITSL. (2025). *ATWD National Trends: Teacher Workforce (June 2025 ed., 2019-2023)*. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/australian-teacher-workforce-data/atwd-reports/national-trends-teacher-workforce-jun2025>
- Bagi, S. (2015). *Journeys into principalship: The experiences of beginning principals of independent schools*. (aeipt.215957) [Thesis, Griffith University]. <https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/1383>
- Bush, T. (2018). Preparation and induction for school principals: Global perspectives. *Management in Education*, 32(2), 66–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020618761805>
- Cruz-González, C., Rodríguez, C. L., & Segovia, J. D. (2021). A systematic review of principals' leadership identity from 1993 to 2019. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(1), 31–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219896053>
- Dumicich, L. (2021). What is in a name (badge): The induction of new school leaders. *Christian Teachers Journal*, 29(2), 18–21. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.788547361807815>
- Elliott, K., & Hollingsworth, H. (2020). *A case for reimagining school leadership development to enhance collective efficacy*. Australian Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.37517/XYQS1429>
- Grootenboer, P., Attard, C., Tindall-Ford, S., Ahern, S., & Edwards-Groves, C. J. (2023). Becoming a middle leader: Accidental, aspirational, or anointed. *Leading and Managing*, 29(1), 43–50. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.193436153848816>
- Grootenboer, P., Edwards-Groves, C., & Rönnerman, K. (2020). *Middle Leadership in Schools: A Practical Guide for Leading Learning* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003026389>
- Gurr, D. (2024). Teacher and Middle Leader Research: Considerations and Possibilities. *Education Sciences*, 14(8), 875. ProQuest Central; Publicly Available Content Database. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14080875>
- Heffernan, A., & Pierpoint, A. (2022). *Attracting and Retaining Australia's Principals*. Australian Secondary Principals' Association. https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/222712348/ASPA_Attraction_Retention_Final_Report_July_2022.pdf
- Hine, P. (2013). Managing transition: Leadership changeover. *Independence*, 38(2), 60–61. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.173948603301162>

Lipscombe, K., Tindall-Ford, S., Grice, C., De Nobile, J., & Davidson, J. (2025). School middle leadership: Aspirations, identification, appointment, development and advancement. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 39(1), 70–87. ProQuest Central.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-06-2024-0326>

Steinberg, M. P., & Yang, H. (2022). Does Principal Professional Development Improve Schooling Outcomes? Evidence from Pennsylvania's Inspired Leadership Induction Program. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 15(4), 799–847.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2022.2052386>