




# THE PRINCIPAL STORY



**CONVERSATION GUIDE**  
Building a Better Pipeline  
to the Principalsip:  
The SABLE Story





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## CONVERSATION GUIDE

### Building a Better Pipeline to the Principalship: The SABLE Story

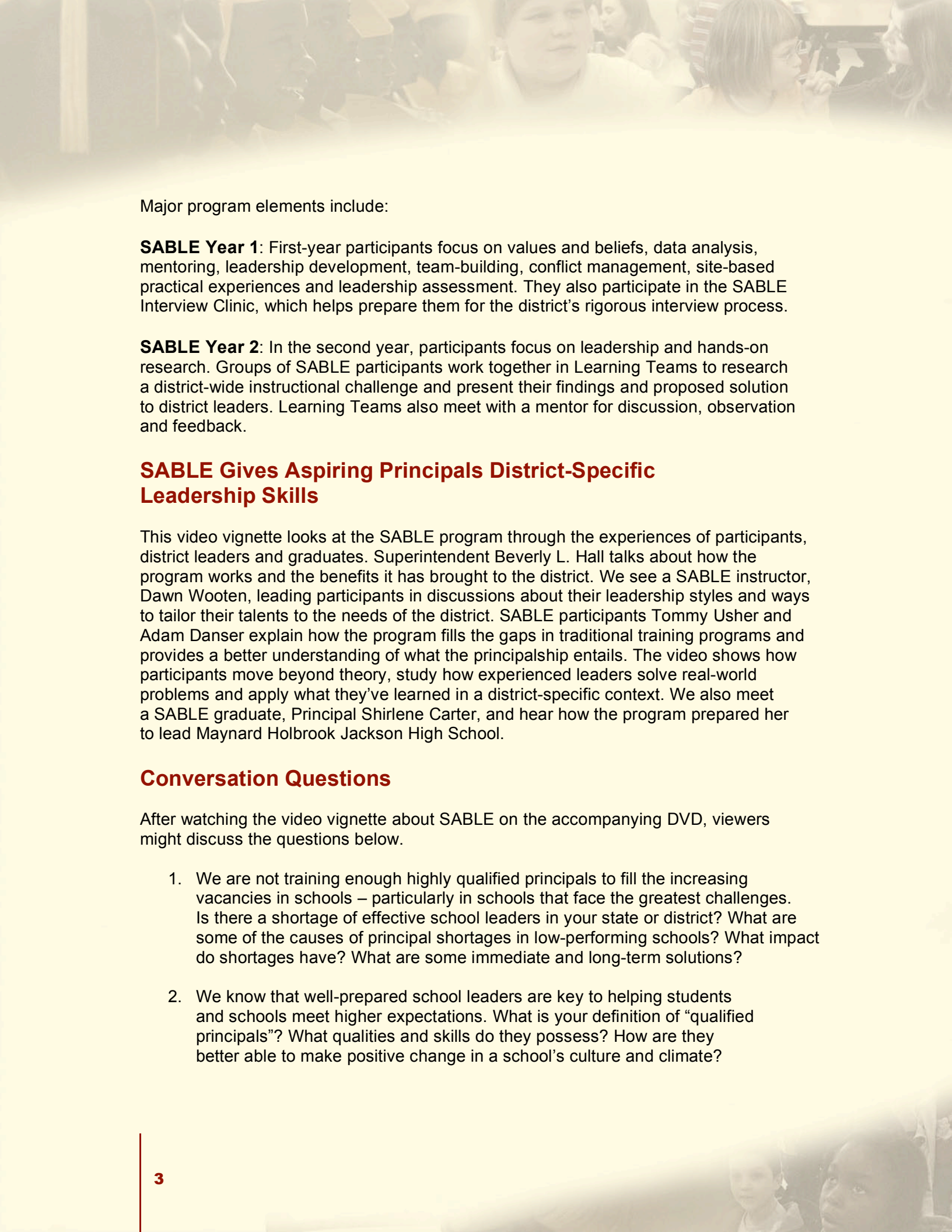
#### What Is the Issue?

Urban superintendents are struggling to find enough effective principals and other leaders to staff schools in their districts. More principals are eligible to retire each year, and there are few qualified candidates in the pipeline to replace them. How can superintendents address a leadership crisis in their districts? Every public school system presents distinct challenges, needs and reform priorities for school leaders. The crucial question is not just how can we train future leaders, but how can we train leaders that will succeed in specific school environments and be part of a sustainable reform effort.

This video vignette, available on the accompanying DVD, features the Superintendent's Academy for Building Leaders in Education (SABLE), a two-year leadership development program created in 1999 by then newly hired Atlanta Public Schools (APS) Superintendent Beverly L. Hall to avert a crisis. Two-thirds of APS principals were eligible to retire, and neither they nor their successors were focusing on leading instructional improvement. To make matters worse, only a few qualified principals were in the pipeline. This video shows how SABLE trains leaders in the skills and behaviors that meet the needs of Atlanta's schools.

#### Background of the Program

Initially funded by The Wallace Foundation, SABLE prepares up to 20 aspiring leaders annually with the specific standards, core values, knowledge and skills required of all principals in the Atlanta Public Schools. The SABLE curriculum is grounded in what research says is critical for urban instructors. As part of the selection criteria and prior to enrolling in SABLE, all participants obtain their leadership certification. They begin their two-year program with a week-long training session. Thereafter, participants meet once a month for two full days. SABLE graduates who become principals also receive executive coaching throughout their first year.



Major program elements include:

**SABLE Year 1:** First-year participants focus on values and beliefs, data analysis, mentoring, leadership development, team-building, conflict management, site-based practical experiences and leadership assessment. They also participate in the SABLE Interview Clinic, which helps prepare them for the district's rigorous interview process.

**SABLE Year 2:** In the second year, participants focus on leadership and hands-on research. Groups of SABLE participants work together in Learning Teams to research a district-wide instructional challenge and present their findings and proposed solution to district leaders. Learning Teams also meet with a mentor for discussion, observation and feedback.

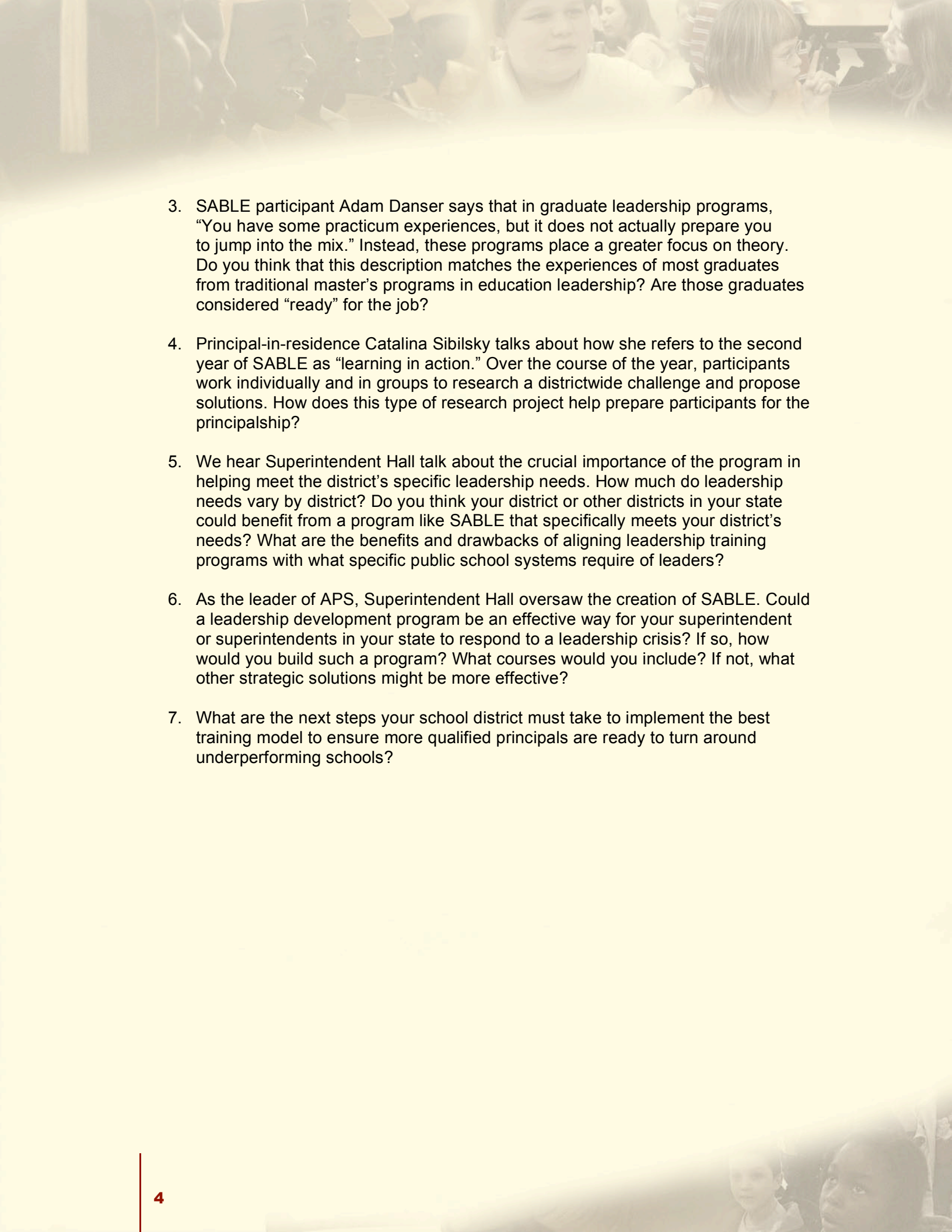
## **SABLE Gives Aspiring Principals District-Specific Leadership Skills**

This video vignette looks at the SABLE program through the experiences of participants, district leaders and graduates. Superintendent Beverly L. Hall talks about how the program works and the benefits it has brought to the district. We see a SABLE instructor, Dawn Wooten, leading participants in discussions about their leadership styles and ways to tailor their talents to the needs of the district. SABLE participants Tommy Usher and Adam Danser explain how the program fills the gaps in traditional training programs and provides a better understanding of what the principalship entails. The video shows how participants move beyond theory, study how experienced leaders solve real-world problems and apply what they've learned in a district-specific context. We also meet a SABLE graduate, Principal Shirlene Carter, and hear how the program prepared her to lead Maynard Holbrook Jackson High School.

## **Conversation Questions**

After watching the video vignette about SABLE on the accompanying DVD, viewers might discuss the questions below.

1. We are not training enough highly qualified principals to fill the increasing vacancies in schools – particularly in schools that face the greatest challenges. Is there a shortage of effective school leaders in your state or district? What are some of the causes of principal shortages in low-performing schools? What impact do shortages have? What are some immediate and long-term solutions?
2. We know that well-prepared school leaders are key to helping students and schools meet higher expectations. What is your definition of “qualified principals”? What qualities and skills do they possess? How are they better able to make positive change in a school's culture and climate?

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3. SABLE participant Adam Danser says that in graduate leadership programs, “You have some practicum experiences, but it does not actually prepare you to jump into the mix.” Instead, these programs place a greater focus on theory. Do you think that this description matches the experiences of most graduates from traditional master’s programs in education leadership? Are those graduates considered “ready” for the job?
  4. Principal-in-residence Catalina Sibilsky talks about how she refers to the second year of SABLE as “learning in action.” Over the course of the year, participants work individually and in groups to research a districtwide challenge and propose solutions. How does this type of research project help prepare participants for the principalship?
  5. We hear Superintendent Hall talk about the crucial importance of the program in helping meet the district’s specific leadership needs. How much do leadership needs vary by district? Do you think your district or other districts in your state could benefit from a program like SABLE that specifically meets your district’s needs? What are the benefits and drawbacks of aligning leadership training programs with what specific public school systems require of leaders?
  6. As the leader of APS, Superintendent Hall oversaw the creation of SABLE. Could a leadership development program be an effective way for your superintendent or superintendents in your state to respond to a leadership crisis? If so, how would you build such a program? What courses would you include? If not, what other strategic solutions might be more effective?
  7. What are the next steps your school district must take to implement the best training model to ensure more qualified principals are ready to turn around underperforming schools?

## Additional Resources

- To learn more about SABLE, visit [www.atlanta.k12.ga.us](http://www.atlanta.k12.ga.us) or contact:

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- To read a journalistic account of how Atlanta is “growing its own” school leaders through SABLE, visit <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Pages/improving-leadership-for-learning-stories-from-the-field.aspx>

This project is part of THE PRINCIPAL STORY outreach campaign, which is made possible by a generous grant from The Wallace Foundation, a source of ideas for improving school leadership. Visit [www.wallacefoundation.org/principalstory](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/principalstory)



For more information and research about education leadership, visit the Wallace Knowledge Center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

