

The Principal Report: The State of School Leadership in Illinois

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Although principals play a vital role as school leaders, exactly how principal leadership affects student learning is only beginning to be understood. In fact, only a few states have analyzed basic profile data on their principals—their demographics, education, and prior experience before leading a school. Most states also have yet to examine how principals change jobs over time or why they leave the profession.

The research presented here marks the most comprehensive profile undertaken to date of Illinois principals. With support from The Joyce Foundation, the Illinois Education Research Council (IERC) at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville integrated its research on principal demographics and turnover with research on principal effectiveness and a survey of current Illinois principals' job-related beliefs and practices.

The IERC analyzed demographic and employment trends among over 7100 individuals serving as Illinois public school principals between 2001 and 2008, statistically modeled principal impact on student achievement and teacher qualifications in over 3500 Illinois public schools, and surveyed more than one in five active public school principals in the 2010-2011 school year. Only charter schools were excluded from the analyses because their personnel are not consistently included in state records of educator employment.

This report highlights emerging trends among Illinois principals, synthesizes key findings from the research, and offers recommendations for policy, practice, and preparation to enhance principals' ability to increase student achievement.

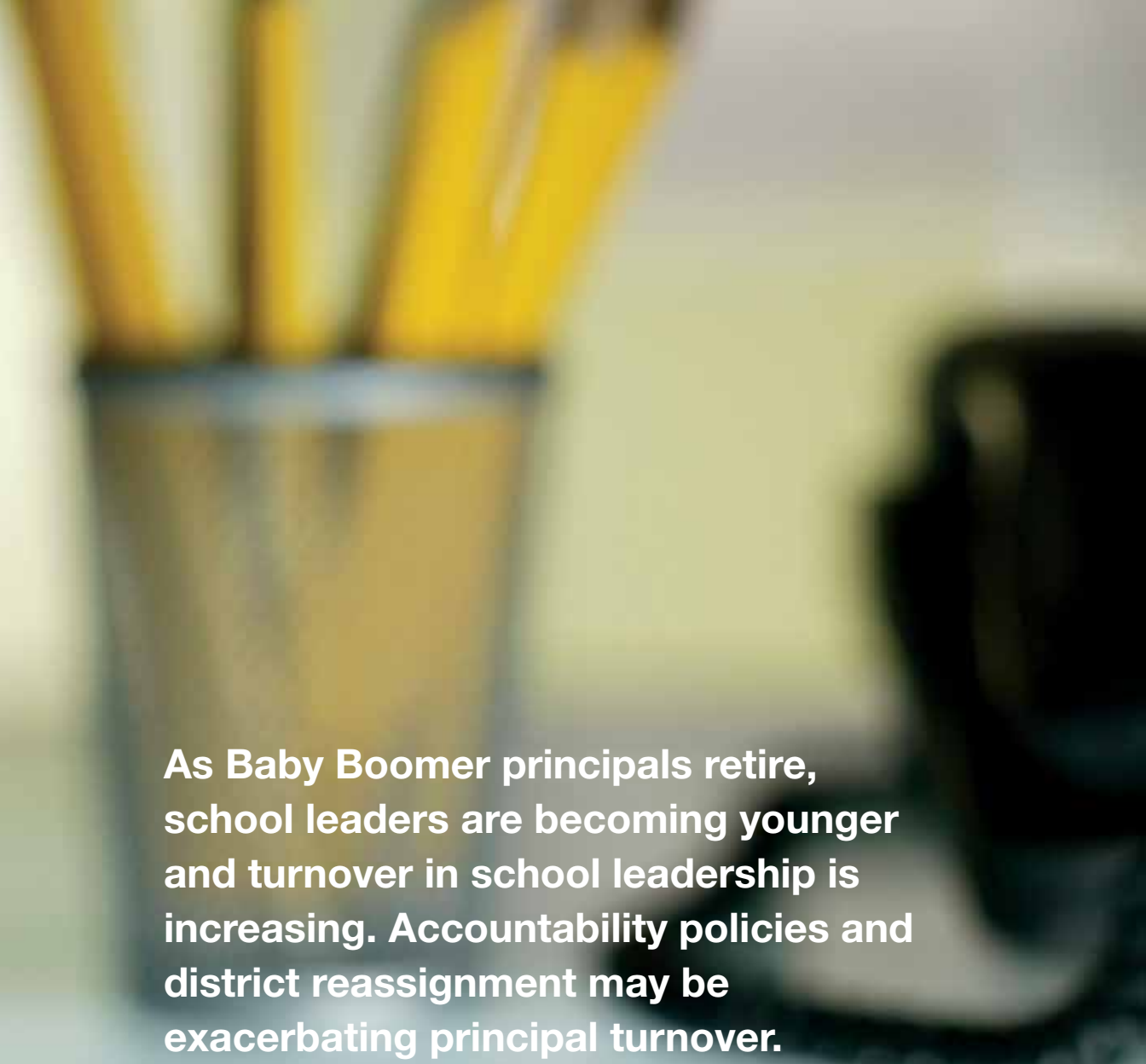


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Research tells us much more about how teachers can affect student learning than how principals can do so. Policymakers and practitioners are asking, “What can principals do to improve teaching and learning in our schools?” Recent research shows that principals make a substantial yet indirect impact on student achievement by choosing school curricula and by creating norms of school culture and working with teachers.¹ Researchers are now zeroing in on principals’ abilities to recruit, develop, and retain highly effective teachers as key skills related to their effectiveness.²

¹Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Riehl 2003

²Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2010



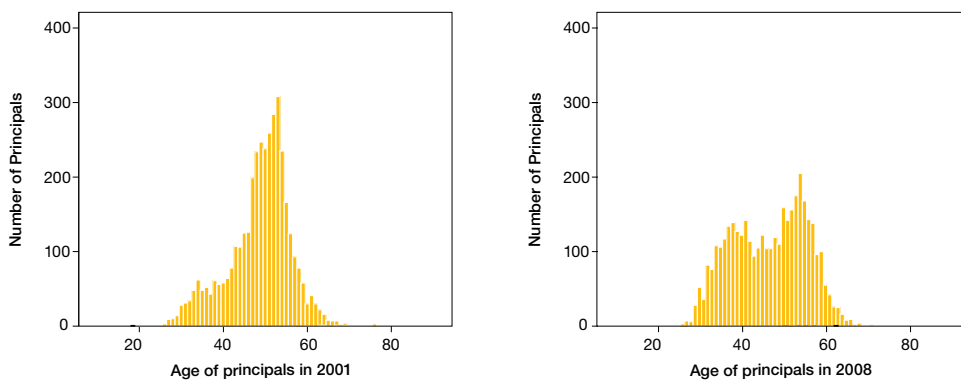
As Baby Boomer principals retire, school leaders are becoming younger and turnover in school leadership is increasing. Accountability policies and district reassignment may be exacerbating principal turnover.



Baby Boomer principals (those born between approximately 1946 and 1964) are retiring in large numbers. These retirements have changed the demographics of Illinois principals and increased turnover in principal positions. The principal corps is becoming younger and its background experience is changing—with less time spent as classroom teachers before rising to lead schools.

The wave of retirements has caused a significant change in the age distribution of Illinois principals. In 2001, the age distribution of principals looked like a bell curve—few very young or very old, many between the ages of 40 and 60. By 2008, the distribution had become bi-modal, or two-humped. Principals today tend to concentrate at either end of the age spectrum—either nearing retirement age or under 40 and just beginning their careers as school leaders. The proportion of principals under 40 years old doubled during this time frame, from 15% to 30%.

Figure 1
Retirement Wave Leaves Youngest, Oldest Principals on the Job



As one would expect, with the increase in retirements has come an increase in principal turnover. During the 1990s, year-to-year principal retention averaged around 86%³, but our data show that the retention rate has decreased to 79% in the past ten years. Unsurprisingly, the most commonly cited reason for leaving the principalship in Illinois between 2001 and 2008 was retirement. Almost one quarter of principals ages 55+ left the profession in 2008, compared to roughly 5% of principals ages 54 and younger. However, district reassignments, not principals' personal decisions to leave schools or retire, played a role in nearly one-quarter of principal changes between 2001-2008.

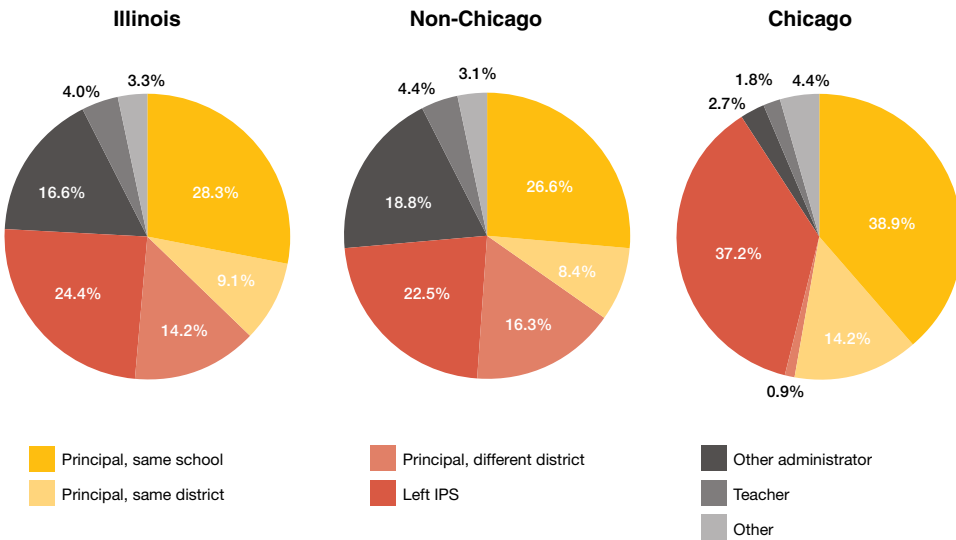
One potential side effect of this wave of turnover has been a simultaneous increase in mobility among new principals, as younger school leaders have been asked to fill newly vacated positions. Currently, only 28% of first-time principals remain in their initial post for at least six years, compared to 38% in the previous decade.⁴

³Ringel, Gates, Chung, Brown, & Ghosh-Dastidar, 2004

⁴Ibid.

Contrary to popular perception, Chicago is experiencing less year-to-year principal turnover in its public schools than the rest of the state, for both new and experienced principals. (See Figure 2 below, which shows where Illinois principals who began their careers in 2001 and 2002 were working six years later.) Also, very few Chicago principals leave the city for other Illinois districts, likely because the Chicago Teachers Union’s pension system is separate from that of the rest of the state. Thus, even though greater proportions of Chicago principals stay in the same school from year to year, greater proportions also tend to leave the profession altogether, compared to the rest of the state.

Figure 2
New Chicago principals more likely to stay in same school



Survey results and the analysis of principal job changes indicate accountability pressures may be exacerbating principal turnover. More than half the principals surveyed cited accountability pressures as among the most stressful parts of their job. Even after controlling for other measures, like student achievement and teacher characteristics, schools that failed to make AYP and schools with higher proportions of teachers rated “not highly qualified” under No Child Left Behind experienced higher levels of principal turnover. However, this analysis cannot determine whether the turnover represented a net positive—reflecting the replacement of ineffective principals with more effective successors—or a net negative—reflecting the departure of effective principals frustrated by the stress of accountability policies.

Illinois' principals are becoming more diverse by gender and race, and are a more diverse group than Illinois' teachers.

The gender and racial dynamics of the state's principal corps are shifting to include more women and minorities. Between 1990 and 2008, the proportion of female principals doubled, from 26 to 52 percent. Since 2005, more women than men have led Illinois public schools. As a whole, Illinois principals are a more diverse group than Illinois teachers, and their diversity is increasing while that of Illinois' teachers is declining.

Figure 3
More women lead Illinois schools

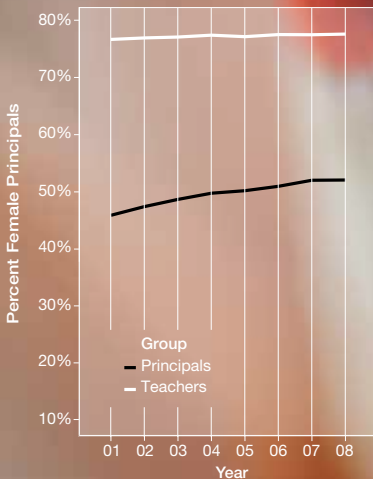
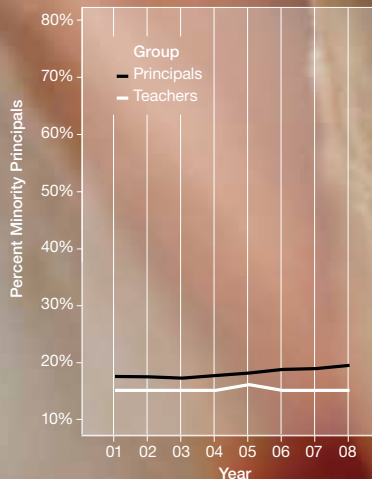
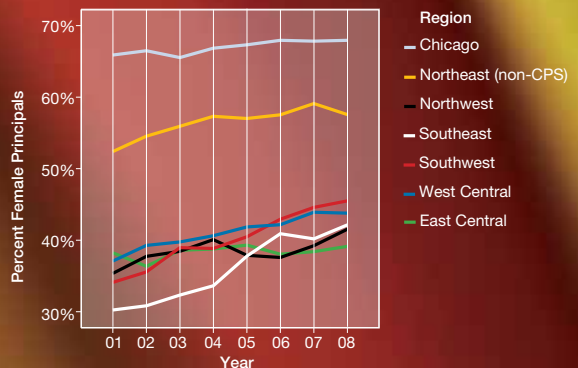


Figure 4
Illinois principals grow more diverse



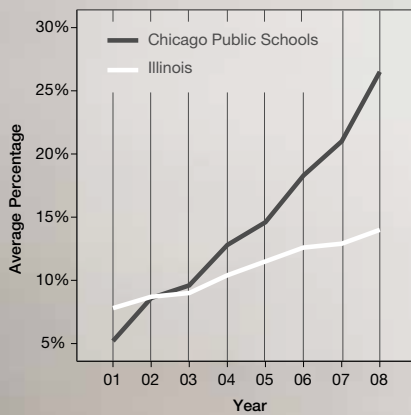
However, principals outside of Chicago and its suburbs are still largely white and male (see Figure 5). It is especially interesting that women have yet to assume leadership of more schools in small-town and rural Illinois, given that teacher faculties in those schools are heavily female and that large proportions of women principals surveyed said they would prefer working in small-town or rural schools over urban settings.

Figure 5
Women principals concentrate in Chicago metro area



Principals' effectiveness at raising student achievement is associated with prior experience as an assistant principal in their current schools and with earning advanced degrees at research universities.

Figure 6
Illinois public school principals' AP experience at current school by locale, 2001-2008



Recent national research shows that students in schools where principals had more experience—especially experience as assistant principals in their school prior to assuming top leadership—showed greater gains in academic achievement.⁵ This study found similar effects in Illinois’ elementary and middle schools. In addition, increasing numbers of Illinois principals are assuming leadership with prior experience as assistant principals in their schools. Chicago is leading the state in this trend.

Ten years ago, only about one-third of Illinois’ principals had experience as an assistant principal (AP), whereas almost half of Illinois principals had AP experience by 2008. In Illinois, the proportion of principals who had previously served as AP at their current school increased, and in Chicago, this proportion increased fivefold over the course of our study (see Figure 6). This is important because, as noted above, recent research suggests that principals who served as AP at their current school tend to show greater gains in student achievement. IERC’s analyses of Illinois data confirm this trend for the state’s elementary and middle schools.

Moreover, this study shows that principals who earned advanced degrees from doctorate-granting universities, as opposed to master’s-level institutions, had positive effects on teacher qualifications (see Table 1 below). Additional IERC research shows that principals who earned master’s or doctoral degrees from more academically rigorous institutions tended to work in schools with higher student achievement and helped to recruit teachers who also had stronger academic backgrounds.

Table 1
Principals with experience, strong academic preparation = increased student achievement

Principal characteristics	Improvement in teacher qualifications	Impact on student achievement growth
First-year principal at school	No effects	Negative effects*
Experience as assistant principal at school	No effects	Positive effects*
Competitiveness of undergraduate college	No effects	Positive effects only for principals in first year at school.*
Advanced degree from research institution (as opposed to a less intensive college)	Positive effects*	No effects

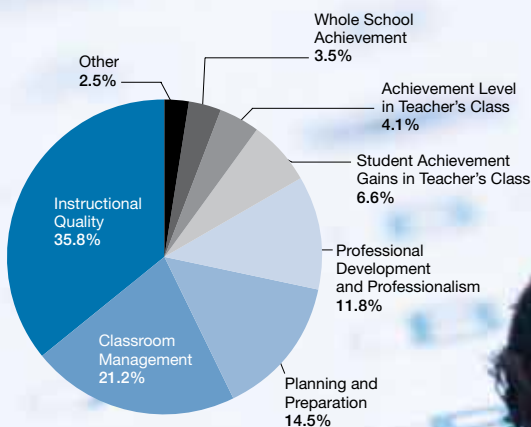
*In at least one statistical model. See <http://ierc.siu.edu/documents/2011-3%20Principal%20Effects.pdf> for detailed results.

Many Illinois principals' teacher evaluation and hiring practices are inconsistent with current educational policy reforms and recent research.

There is longstanding debate and controversy among educators regarding the proper role student performance on standardized tests should play in measuring the effectiveness of teachers, principals, and schools. Federal accountability through No Child Left Behind raised the importance of ensuring that more students meet test score targets, and Illinois' Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) makes student year-to-year gains on test scores a central focus in teacher and principal evaluation. Despite these policies, many educators are outspoken in their criticism of standardized testing, saying it narrows curricula and often does not accurately measure students' academic abilities.

IERC's principal survey results indicate that many Illinois principals fundamentally disagree with what they see as current state and federal policy's over-emphasis on student test scores and gains as central measures of school and teacher success (see Figure 7). Illinois principals surveyed said student growth on standardized tests plays only a small role in their evaluation of teachers—a view sharply different from that of PERA. On average, student achievement gains in the teacher's class only accounted for about 7 percent of a teacher's evaluation. Currently, principals weigh other factors much more heavily: the quality of instruction as measured by observation, teachers' classroom management skills, and their planning and preparation.

Figure 7
Principals evaluate teachers by observation, not student test scores/gains

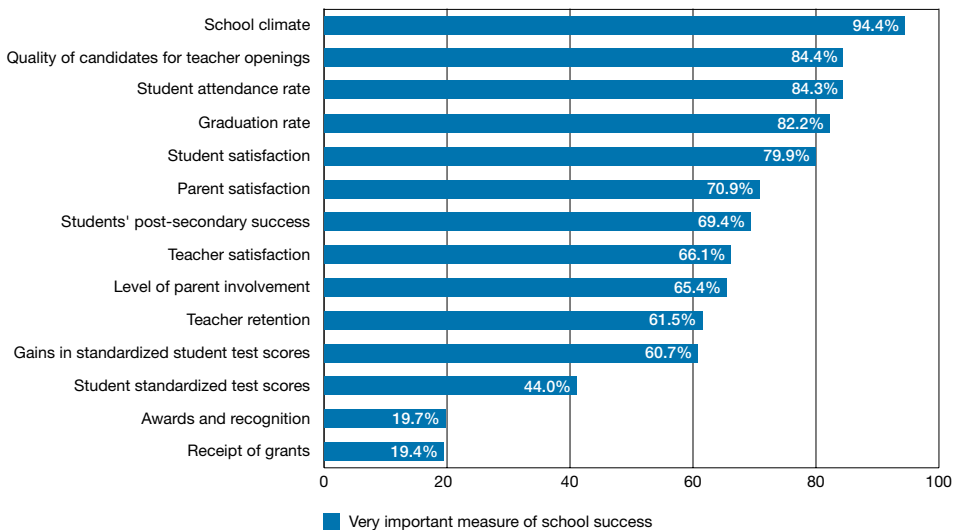


Principals surveyed also tended not to take full advantage of research findings when hiring teachers. While research suggests that a teacher’s own academic history and track record of raising student achievement are good measures of teachers’ potential, principals surveyed tended not to hire based on those measures. Instead, they preferred to use interviews and recommendations to assess teachers’ qualifications and determine whether their skills met specific school needs, despite little evidence of the effectiveness of this approach.

Notably, Chicago principals, many of whom have been exposed to pilot training or preparation programs that stressed the importance of hiring teachers based on their own academic histories and evaluating them based on their ability to help students’ increase test scores, were much more likely to rate those research-based indicators of teacher quality as high priorities in their hiring process than other principals across the state.

Furthermore, principals surveyed were also more likely to cite factors like school climate, student attendance, and quality of teacher applicants than student growth on test scores as important measures of school success (see Figure 8). Even fewer principals said absolute student test scores were a very important measure of school success. This view sharply differs from that of current federal school accountability policy as outlined in No Child Left Behind, which judges schools as making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) largely on the basis of the numbers of students in a school that meet test score benchmarks.

Figure 8
Student test scores and gains not high among principals’ signs of school success





Many principals may feel less effective in or undervalue the leadership roles that some recent research suggests is most important to foster student achievement.

IERC asked principals to rank both the importance of and their own effectiveness in accomplishing five kinds of tasks:

Management tasks that involve overseeing the organization and functioning of the school in pursuit of longer-term goals, such as budgets and hiring teachers

Administration routine duties executed to comply with state or federal regulations, such as maintaining and reporting student records or administering standardized tests.

Instruction activities that support or improve the implementation of curricular programs in the classroom, such as planning staff development or informally coaching teachers

Internal Relations tasks related to building strong interpersonal relationships within the school, such as working with staff, students, and parents to resolve conflicts.

External Relations activities that involve working with external stakeholders, such as fundraising or building relationships with the district office or community organizations.

Survey results show that while more than half of principals ranked instruction-related tasks like coaching teachers as their most important work, less than a third of them felt very effective at doing it (see Figure 9). A majority of principals felt effective at facilitating internal relations, but only 13 percent ranked it as very important. However, new research indicates that neither of these task areas may be as important to principal effectiveness in raising student achievement as management tasks like hiring teachers or setting budgets.⁶ Survey findings showed that less than half of principals felt effective in this arena and only 12 percent felt it was very important.

Figure 9
Many principals feel less effective leading instruction

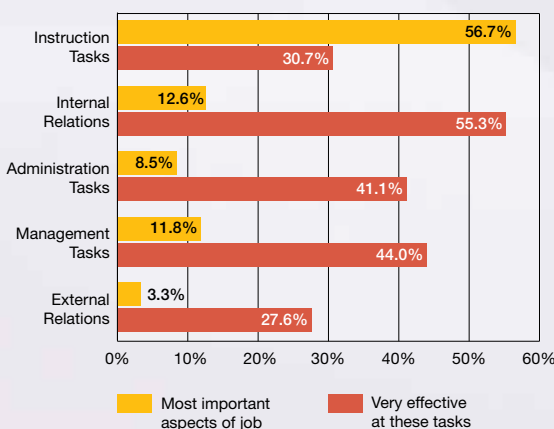
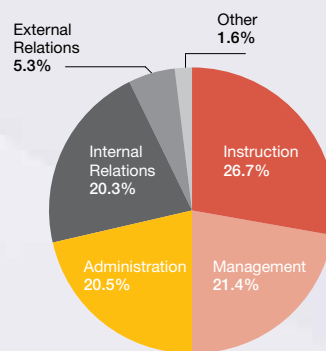


Figure 10
Principals struggle to prioritize their time



These discrepancies also carried over into principals' self-reports of how they spent their time. Principals report they actually spent less than 25 percent of their time on tasks like setting budgets and hiring teachers (see Figure 10).

Implications for Policy, Practice and Preparation

This study shows Illinois principals need support to improve their schools' human resource management systems. Principals' current teacher evaluation practices will have to change substantially not only to meet PERA requirements, but also to maximize their effectiveness in improving schools and raising student achievement. Current evaluation systems rely on classroom observations to measure teachers' ability to create classroom culture and execute lesson plans; they rarely include measures of student academic growth based on standardized test performance. Yet Chicago Public Schools' early experiences piloting new teacher evaluation systems show that significant progress is possible, if reforms are accompanied by sustained training and institutional investment. Principal preparation programs will also need to ensure that aspiring principals have a strong grasp of best practices in teacher hiring and evaluation from the beginning of their careers.

As veteran Illinois principals continue to retire, district administrators will need to find—and keep—new leaders. Although there does not appear to be a shortage of certified principal candidates in Illinois, higher rates of turnover may negatively impact student achievement, since research shows that principal experience and school tenure matter in terms of student growth on tests. The research presented here on Illinois principals' job preferences and career paths suggests that strategies for attracting and retaining talented principals will need to focus on systemic issues such as stronger central office support, increased principal autonomy and positive school culture—all of which can influence principals' decisions to stay in or leave their schools.

Since reassignments play a role in nearly one-quarter of job changes, district policymakers must also ensure those decisions are made wisely. Principal reassignment can set up both principals and their schools for success, but only if each principal's competencies and preferences are well aligned with the needs and characteristics of the receiving school. For example, bilingual principals may be well-suited to lead schools with growing Hispanic populations and principals with a track record of turning around low-performing schools could be reassigned to struggling campuses.

Finally, the changing face of the principalship in Illinois may require new kinds of supports for new leaders. Mentorship may prove to be an increasingly important tool in supporting new principals in the early stages of their role. However, IERC survey data shows that the single task at which current principals feel least effective is in training prospective principals. The increasing use of the assistant principal position as a training ground for aspiring principals holds promise as an opportunity for mentorship. Although rural and small-town schools are likely to struggle to make assistant principalships available, building capacity for such programs or expanding pre-service residencies and internships that help new principals hit the ground running may be particularly important in these locales to moderate the potential negative effects of principal turnover.

Recommendations

Support to help principals implement the new teacher evaluation standards mandated by PERA, including training on how to incorporate student achievement data into measures of teacher effectiveness.

Train both veteran and entering principals in research-based practices for teacher hiring. Chicago principals are ahead of the rest of the state in this area, so there may be opportunities here to facilitate training for principals in other locales.

Help new principals hit the ground running. Continue to expand the use of the assistant principalship as a training ground for new principals. In small-town and rural areas where assistant principal positions may not be feasible, develop other opportunities: pre-service internships or residences, mentorships, etc.

Develop district-level strategies to minimize the negative impact of principal turnover. Focus district work with principals on ways to help them build positive school cultures while simultaneously giving them the autonomy and authority to run their schools. Principal assignment decisions must examine the candidate's strengths and weaknesses and match them carefully with a school environment. Without this kind of strategic thinking, reassignment policies could exacerbate turnover.

Provide principals with professional development in their self-reported areas of improvement: data analysis, coaching teachers, making use of distributed leadership, and managing external relations.

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