



The State of Leadership: Public School Principals in Illinois

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Executive Summary

With an increasing focus on school accountability and instructional leadership, the principal currently resides at the focal point of multiple reform efforts. At the national level, “Great Teachers and Leaders” is one of the major components of Race to the Top, and principal leadership features prominently in the turnaround strategies for school improvement grants. In Illinois, a five-year effort to improve school leadership recently culminated with a new law which redesigns the state’s principal preparation programs. These efforts, along with a brief overview of the changing role of the principal, recent criticisms of educational administration programs, and responses from the field are described in the first section of this paper.

Despite this recent attention, research on principals has typically lagged behind the literature on teachers. To that end, we use state administrative records and other associated data to assemble a large database of principals in Illinois public schools from 2001 through 2008. By linking these data to school records and tracking the placement and movement of building administrators over time, we analyze whether any patterns in the distribution of principals can be observed. Our findings are divided into three major sections focused on different groupings of principal characteristics—demographics, experience, and academic background.

Principal Demographics. Between 2001 and 2008, Illinois’ principal corps became slightly more racially diverse, mostly through increases in the proportion of Hispanic principals, and minorities now make up a larger proportion of principals than of teachers. The proportion of female principals doubled between 1990 and 2008, and the principalship in Illinois has been a predominantly female profession since 2005. There are larger proportions of both female principals and minority principals in elementary and middle schools than in high schools, and principals in Chicago Public Schools are much more likely to be minorities and to be women than principals in other regions of the state.

Principal Experience. The typical Illinois principal in 2008 was younger and less experienced than the typical Illinois principal eight years prior. Principals in disadvantaged schools—particularly those in Chicago—tended to be older and considerably more experienced working in Illinois public schools, but they were not any more likely than principals in other schools to have any more experience working as principals. More than 90% of Illinois principals have prior experience as teachers in Illinois public schools, and the vast majority of those taught in the core academic areas. The proportion of principals with experience as assistant principals at their current school has increased considerably, which is important because recent research suggests that principals

with such experience tend to be more effective. During the same time, the proportion of principals with previous experience teaching academic core subjects also inched up. So while overall experience is declining, it may be that the types of experience that matter the most are increasing, and principals in Chicago are most likely to have such experience.

Principal Academic Background. Overall, there was little change in the academic qualifications of Illinois principals from 2001 through 2008, and the distribution of principal academic characteristics tends to mirror that of teachers in Illinois. That is, high school principals tend to have stronger academic backgrounds than principals at elementary and middle schools, and principals in the state’s

most disadvantaged schools typically have weaker academic backgrounds than those in schools with lower concentrations of poor and minority students.

Because not enough is known about the relationship between principal quality and the observable characteristics of principals used in this report, this analysis is intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. Our findings may also serve as a baseline measure of Illinois school leaders prior to the implementation of the state’s new principal endorsement guidelines. This report is the first of a planned multi-stage study, and in subsequent analyses we intend to investigate principal effectiveness and labor markets in more depth.

Principal Characteristics	2001			2008		
	All Schools	High Poverty Schools	Low Poverty Schools	All Schools	High Poverty Schools	Low Poverty Schools
% Minority Principals	17.4	56.3	2.0	19.2	59.2	3.2
% Female Principals	45.9	60.0	45.2	52.0	65.0	48.4
Average Principal Age	48.7	50.9	48.0	46.6	48.7	45.3
Average Years of Total Experience	24.3	26.3	23.6	20.7	21.5	19.9
Average Years Experience as Principal	7.9	7.0	8.5	6.4	5.8	6.6
Average Years as Principal at Current School	4.9	4.4	5.5	4.4	4.3	4.5
% of Principals with Assistant Principal (AP) Experience	35.4	37.8	47.4	46.2	54.8	55.9
% of Principals who Served as AP at their Current School	7.8	6.7	10.0	14.0	20.2	14.4
% of Principals with Academic Core Teaching Experience	71.3	72.8	69.7	71.3	74.8	72.0
Average Principal ACT Composite Score	21.6	20.2	22.5	21.4	19.8	22.3
% of Principals from More Competitive Undergraduate Institutions	19.2	20.9	24.2	21.3	25.0	24.3

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