



## The View from the Principal's Office: Results from the IERC Principals Survey

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### Executive Summary

This report summarizes the results of the Illinois Education Research Council's (IERC) survey with Illinois principals conducted in November 2010. The purpose of the survey, and of this report, is to help researchers, policymakers, and practitioners better understand the work that Illinois principals do and their preferences and priorities regarding this work. We received responses from 877 participants who were serving as public school principals in Illinois schools during the 2010–11 school year. While not generalizable to the state as a whole, the findings presented in this report are representative of approximately one fifth of the state's public school principals, and provide a glimpse into their work and preferences.

#### Summary of Findings

##### *Job Satisfaction & Work Preferences*

**We found a strong correlation between job satisfaction and principals' perceptions of their ability to influence school change.** We found quite high levels of job satisfaction amongst principals overall, but respondents who said they had a lot of influence over school change were much more likely to be satisfied with being the principal at their current school compared to those who reported having only some influence or a little to no influence at all. In fact, the ability to influence change was among the most appealing aspects of the principalship, behind only instructional leadership and internal relations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the least appealing aspects of the principalship were stress and work hours.

**Principals in our study preferred to work in schools with the most advantaged student populations, and they tended to sort themselves into the types of schools that they most prefer.** As with most workers,

principals tend to prefer employment environments that provide supportive management and the resources needed to complete one's job successfully, such as safe schools with good facilities and supportive parents. While our survey respondents in general indicated they would least prefer to work in schools with low test scores and high proportions of at-risk students, principals who were working in high poverty and high minority schools tended to prefer such settings. Thus, it seems that principals prefer to work where they feel there is the best match between their skills and experiences and the needs of the school community.

**A combination of factors influenced respondents' decisions to leave their previous principalship, which suggests that the turnover issue cannot be addressed simply by tackling a single problem.**

Many of the job aspects that draw principals to specific positions—school culture, salary, central office support, the ability to influence change—also have the potential to drive principals away if they are unsatisfactory. Moreover, our respondents report that almost a third of their most recent attrition decisions were made for reasons other than their own personal choice—either they were asked to take over another school, their contract was not renewed, or their school was closed or consolidated. This indicates that principal reassignment practices are quite widespread throughout Illinois, and we anticipate this to increase as a result of new state and federal reforms placing more emphasis on principal performance.

##### *Priorities & Professional Practices*

**There is an apparent disconnect between principals and policymakers regarding the importance of students' scores on standardized tests in measuring**

**schools' success.** Despite the current emphasis on test-based accountability policies, principals did not rate standardized test scores or gains in student test scores among the most important measures of school success. This suggests a need for educators, policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders to work together to reach agreement on how to best define school success. On the other hand, one area where principals and policymakers appear to be in agreement is on school climate—survey respondents indicated that this was the most important measure of their schools' success, and the Illinois' Performance Counts initiative (<http://performancecounts.org>) recommends the implementation of statewide teacher and student surveys that would capture information on the learning environment in schools.

**There is some tension between how principals use their time and their perceptions of the value of their efforts, and this tension may be the crux of the problem in today's principalship.** Principals value internal relations and feel they are effective at these tasks, but they spend more time on administration and management. They spend the most time on instruction and value it the most, but do not feel very confident in their effectiveness in this area and are most likely to distribute these tasks to other school leaders. Meanwhile, recent research (Grissom & Loeb, 2009; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2009) has identified organization management as most important for improving student achievement, and our respondents ranked these tasks second in terms of time use and efficacy, but in the middle in terms of perceived importance. One set of job tasks these principals seem to agree on, though, is external relations, which ranked last in terms of time spent, importance, and effectiveness.

**Principals feel most confident in their abilities to perform the tasks they typically encounter through their education programs and previous work experiences—but performance in some key areas could be improved by strengthening principal preparation, mentoring, and evaluation.** Principals see themselves as most effective in handling internal relations and least effective in external relations. This is not particularly surprising given that preparation programs and principals' own prior work experiences tend to be much heavier on the former than the latter. Despite

the recent emphasis on instructional leadership and evidence-based practice, less than half of the principals saw themselves as very effective in conducting teacher evaluations or using data; and despite stagnating budgets and an increasing need for entrepreneurial leadership, few principals see themselves as very effective at fundraising and external relations. Principals felt least confident in their abilities to plan and execute professional development for prospective principals. Given the aging of the principal population and increasing numbers of young, less experienced principals in Illinois (Brown & White, 2010), succession planning and the sustainability of reform efforts may be an emerging concern in the state.

### *Human Resource Management*

**Relationships, soft skills, and first-hand experience are more valued during the teacher hiring process than data from screening instruments or information about prospective teachers' academic backgrounds or past teaching performance.** When deciding whether to hire a prospective teacher, respondents tended to focus on personality traits and skills specific to the needs of the school, such as a prospective teachers' ability to work well with others, general pedagogical skills, work ethic, teaching philosophy, and caring and compassion. In contrast, the principals responding to this survey placed a lower priority on a prospective teacher's own academic history and track record of success with improving student achievement, which research suggests might be better indicators of teacher quality. Similarly, interviews and recommendations were viewed as the most useful teacher hiring tools, while screening instruments, college grades, and advanced degrees were considered the least useful. It is worth noting, however, that principals in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) rated the research-based indicators substantially higher than other principals in the state.

**Most teacher evaluation systems in Illinois do not include any measures of student achievement and, where they are included, they do not count for much. Instead, classroom observations and other measures of teaching practice are viewed as considerably more useful in teacher evaluations than student achievement results or input from other stakeholders.** The state's new Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) will require that student academic

growth be “a significant factor” in all teacher evaluations by the 2016-17 school year. Current teacher evaluation systems, in contrast, tend to emphasize the quality of classroom instruction, classroom climate, planning and preparation, and teacher professionalism, and principals reported that classroom observations and teaching artifacts such as portfolios and lesson plans were the most useful tools for teacher evaluation. Gains in student achievement in the teacher’s classroom account for less than 7% of the teacher evaluation rating on average and are not used at all in 51.5% of respondents’ schools, indicating that PERA will demand much greater emphasis on student achievement growth than is reflected in current practice.

**Despite frequent criticisms, there are some promising features of the teacher evaluation systems currently used by Illinois principals.** Almost half of principals report performing formal teacher observations using highly-detailed evaluation rubrics. The vast majority of principals report using a system that distinguishes more than two teacher performance categories. Almost all principals evaluate their veteran teachers at least once every two to three years. Our respondents report making frequent use of teacher evaluation results, for both summative and formative purposes. And, while our respondents admit that they rarely rate teachers in the lowest performance category, they report making much more distinction between high and average performance than suggested in the popular media.

## Conclusions & Implications

Our findings on principals’ job preferences and turnover decisions are important to consider as states and districts struggle with recruiting and retaining the most talented principals in the most challenging schools. Due to constrained budgets, strategies for attracting principals and reducing turnover may need to focus on systemic issues—such as stronger central office support, increased principal autonomy, and positive school culture—which influence principals’ decisions to stay in or leave their position. We find that nearly one-third of the most recent school changes amongst our respondents was due not to their personal choice, but to reassignment. Principals,

like other professionals, tend to sort themselves into the types of work environments they most prefer and where they feel they are most likely to be successful, and mismatches via reassignment may serve to exacerbate turnover issues.

Our data on Illinois principals’ priorities, time use, and efficacy revealed important findings about the complexity of the profession. Distributed leadership, instructional leadership, improved time management, organizational leadership, and strategic human resources management are each proffered as potential solutions to this dilemma, but there is little consensus amongst pre-service and in-service program providers, researchers, professional organizations, and policymakers about where the principal’s efforts should be focused. Principals in our survey seem to have a desire to prioritize instructional leadership, but some of our findings raise questions as to whether they have the time and preparation they need to do so effectively. Further, it is not even clear that this alone is the right priority—since recent research suggests that instructional leadership must be coupled with increased competency in and prioritization of organizational management to lead to school improvement (Grissom & Loeb, 2009)

With reforms to the state’s principal preparation programs and teacher evaluation systems looming, our survey can provide some timely baseline data to guide the impact of these initiatives. The recent enactment of these reforms will affect the principalship in ways we cannot predict, and our findings on principals’ job satisfaction, teacher evaluation practices, self-efficacy, and reasons for leaving should be regularly revisited to help determine the impact of the recent policy changes and to inform future policy changes. We highlight potential areas for improvement—evaluating and coaching teachers, using data to improve instruction, external relations, and utilizing distributed leadership—that have implications for targeting ongoing improvements in preparation programs, as well as with professional development, mentorship initiatives, and principal evaluation.

While some of our findings on principals’ teacher hiring and evaluation practices counter common misperceptions,

in general, they point to a dire need for improved human resource management practices. Chicago Public Schools' experiences have shown that, with extensive training and institutional investment, demonstrable changes are feasible, and these findings have important implications for work of the Performance Evaluation Advisory Committee (PEAC) in determining model evaluation and training systems for Illinois.

Our survey revealed an apparent disconnect between principals and policymakers with regard to the importance of student test scores in judging the success of schools and teachers. With the increased emphasis on using student assessment results and value-added models to measure success, a major paradigm shift will need to occur among either principals or policymakers to reconcile this misalignment. If policymakers and other stakeholders want principals to embrace and succeed in this era of test-based accountability, they can begin to address this through the redesigned preparation and

evaluation programs, but they may also need to continue development of more precise and sensitive assessment systems that could increase principals' confidence that these instruments can offer richer, timelier, and more diagnostic information to improve teaching and learning.

Finally, this study has shed light on the real challenges that they face on the job. Principals are asked to juggle multiple roles—instructional leadership, organizational management, internal and external relations—all on top of day-to-day administrative demands, leading to high stress and long work hours. Yet, as a whole, they are overwhelmingly satisfied with their jobs, especially in situations where they have strong opportunities to influence school change. It is our hope that these findings will provide policymakers and the public with a better understanding of the important role principals play in leading teaching and learning and to identify strategies to support their continuous improvement.

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The full report is available at <http://ierc.siue.edu/iercpublication.asp>

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