

SUPPORTING A STRONG, STABLE PRINCIPAL WORKFORCE

WHAT MATTERS AND WHAT CAN BE DONE

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ABOUT THE NASSP-LPI PRINCIPAL TURNOVER RESEARCH SERIES

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) are currently collaborating on an intensive research project to identify the causes and consequences of principal turnover nationwide. The purpose is to increase awareness of this issue, and to identify and share evidence-based responses that can guide solutions. This report is the third publication in a series. The first, which presents findings from a literature review, covers the known scope of the principal turnover problem and provides a basis for understanding its mechanisms. The second report offers insights from focus groups of school leaders who shared their experiences and expertise on the challenges of the principalship, as well as strategies to address these challenges. This third publication summarizes results from LPI and NASSP's national principal survey and focus groups, which delve deeply into the five focus areas that emerged from the initial research, and suggests policy strategies to increase principal retention. All the publications in this series are available at www.nassp.org/turnover and www.learningpolicyinstitute.org/principal-turnover-nassp.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strong and stable school leadership is critical for success in schools across the nation. The duties of the principal are many and varied. Principals, for example, can oversee instruction, purchase curricular materials and supplies, and provide professional learning and supports for teachers. Carrying out these duties effectively makes a difference for student achievement and graduation. Principal leadership also impacts teacher satisfaction and teacher turnover.

Unfortunately, many schools do not have stable principal leadership. Nationally, the average tenure of a principal is about four years, and nearly one in five principals, approximately 18 percent, turn over annually. Often the schools that need the most capable principals, those serving students from low-income families, have even greater principal turnover.

To better understand the phenomenon of principal turnover, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) collaborated on a study. In cooperation with WestEd, LPI conducted a national survey of 424 secondary school principals. LPI also conducted six focus groups with 33 school leaders from 26 states. The NASSP-LPI survey and focus groups asked principals about their intentions to stay in the principalship, as well as the extent to which they experience conditions that research has shown to be related to principal retention and turnover. These conditions, summarized from the research literature, fall into five categories: working conditions, compensation, accountability systems and evaluation, decision-making authority, and professional learning.

Principals varied in the degree to which they reported the conditions related to principal turnover and their intentions to leave their positions. In general, larger percentages of principals planning to leave reported adverse conditions. The report discusses these conditions in the order in which principals' overall survey and focus group responses indicated that they were a concern. However, the conditions are, in fact, highly

interrelated. Importantly, while a smaller percentage of principals cited lack of professional learning as a reason for leaving their positions, research suggests that professional learning improves principals' capacity and longevity in the job.

KEY FINDINGS

Survey and focus group responses reflected national concerns about principal turnover. In the NASSP-LPI survey, 42 percent of principals indicated they were considering leaving their position. The percentage of principals planning to move to a different school was higher for those in high-poverty schools and rural communities. Our focus group participants also acknowledged challenges to the principalship that they believed could lead to turnover.

Working conditions and district supports related to working conditions emerged as major concerns. Among principals planning to leave, many reported facing a heavy workload, more than twice the percentage of those planning to stay. Over half of principals planning to leave noted that their district did not have effective strategies for retaining strong leaders, compared to just over one-quarter of those planning to stay. In addition, those planning to leave reported that their districts did not provide adequate student services personnel to support students' emotional well-being at higher rates than those indicating that they would stay. Similarly, higher percentages of principals planning to leave reported that their district's central office did not meet their needs; principals indicating that they would stay were less likely to make this claim.

Principals' compensation and financial obligations were related to their mobility plans. A larger percentage of principals planning to leave their schools than those planning to stay said that they were not fairly compensated for their efforts. Relatedly, principals planning to leave were more likely to report student loan debt from principal preparation.

High-stakes accountability systems and evaluation practices can discourage some principals from remaining in their school or position.

About a third of principals planning to leave their schools reported that state accountability measures could influence their mobility decision, compared to a fifth of principals who plan to stay. Principal evaluations may also influence principals to leave their positions. More than half of principals planning to leave reported having unconstructive evaluations, while the percentage was lower among those planning to stay. Further, approximately two in five principals planning to leave reported that they do not trust the results of the evaluation system, compared to one in five likely to stay in their positions.

A lack of decision-making authority was a concern for some principals.

Decision-making authority in most areas was a concern for smaller percentages of principals. Among those planning to leave, one-third reported that they lacked decision-making authority over their schools' curriculum. The percentage was higher for principals serving in high-poverty schools and cities compared to principals in other schools. In addition, almost three-quarters of principals planning to leave their schools reported that they lacked the authority to dismiss poorly performing staff, compared to 64 percent of principals intent on staying.

Many principals reported facing obstacles to professional learning opportunities.

This was particularly true of opportunities for in-service professional development. Among all principals, 75 percent cited lack of time, and 36 percent cited lack of money. The most commonly cited obstacle to preservice professional preparation was the cost. Almost a quarter of all principals and almost a third of those planning to leave identified preparation program costs as a hurdle to accessing principal preparation. Across all principals, nearly all indicated a desire for additional professional development to meet their students' needs. The most frequent requests were for professional development to support students' social-emotional development and physical and mental health, leading schools to improve student achievement, using school and student data to inform continuous improvement, and focusing on students' higher-order thinking skills.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

To be responsive to these findings and to better prepare, develop, support, and retain effective school principals, policymakers at the **local level** should develop plans to support principals and retain effective leaders. These plans could include advancing policies that:

1. **Support and retain effective principals by attending to their working conditions and school needs.** Working conditions and district supports emerged as key concerns for principals in our study, especially those considering leaving. While each school and district has a different context, our study suggests that district leaders should be alert to principals' workloads and seek to ensure, to the extent possible, that school administrative teams are appropriately staffed and supported to meet students' needs as well as staff needs. Further, central office policies should be responsive to principals, which may require increasing the information gathered from principals and collecting more principal input on district decisions that impact schools. This responsiveness should include strategies to keep effective principals, such as providing recognition, needed school resources, or more fiscal flexibility for successful principals.
2. **Support adequate and equitable principal compensation.** Our study showed that many principals found principal compensation inadequate and that those planning to leave were most likely to report this problem, often exacerbated by the problem of student debt from their preparation programs. In addition, our focus groups noted that principal salaries have not always kept pace with teacher salaries, especially when accounting for principals' greater workload. Given the prevalence of these concerns, district leaders should review the competitiveness of salaries and consider other forms of compensation (such as student loan repayment or housing supports) that may be important to attracting and retaining principals.

3. **Create or sustain helpful mechanisms for principal feedback, evaluation, and mentoring.** Among surveyed principals who planned to leave, more than half reported that their district's evaluation system was not useful. As explained by our focus group participants, principals want timely feedback that they can use to improve their performance and support student learning. Other research suggests that districts that support, develop, and mentor principals can reduce the likelihood that principals will leave their schools or the profession. District leaders can examine the usefulness of their principal support and evaluation systems, gathering input from principals as well as others in the district and community, with an eye toward sustaining practices that are helpful and creating new mechanisms and supports as needed.
4. **Provide principals with appropriate agency and support in decision making.** Some principals who planned to leave indicated that lack of autonomy in making decisions was related to their decision to leave. While most principals reported adequate authority over budget and hiring, more than two-thirds of principals expressed that it is difficult to dismiss poor-performing or incompetent teachers. The percentage was even higher for principals considering leaving the principalship (74 percent). To help address this, districts can, for example, support principals with Peer Assistance and Review programs that provide mentors for struggling teachers to help improve their practice and provide due process that can support personnel decisions when they are needed. Further, principal training for teacher support and evaluation should be provided, and their input in these types of critical decisions should be sought out and valued by district leaders.
5. **Remove barriers to principal professional development.** Many principals, not just those planning to leave, reported obstacles to in-service professional development, especially lack of time. As districts review principal workload, they should consider time for professional development as essential. District leaders who find that their principals do not have enough time to participate in professional development can consider remedies such as providing district staff support that frees up

principals' time, offering professional development at times and locations that are more convenient for principals, and working professional learning into the district feedback, evaluation, and mentoring systems. Districts and schools can use both local funds and federal funds under ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act), Title II, Part A to address a number of obstacles, including the provision of timely, relevant content, and coverage, if needed, so principals can participate in professional development. Relevant content, according to the principals surveyed, includes professional development in supporting students' social and emotional development and physical and mental health, and leading school efforts to improve student achievement.

To support these local efforts, policymakers at the **state and federal levels** can:

6. **Assess and help improve working conditions for principals.** Working conditions are a top concern for principals considering leaving. **States** can support district efforts to assess working conditions and make needed changes. For example, many states gather data about working conditions for teachers, through working conditions surveys, district and school report cards, and school improvement plans. Gathering this information for principals as well as teachers and other staff and aggregating it to the state level could help local leaders place their districts within a broader context, correctly identify areas that need improvement, and then make needed adjustments. States could also use the data to determine needs statewide and then target special efforts at the neediest districts and regions. **Federal** data collection can also assist with these efforts. For example, the National Center on Education Statistics' principal surveys could expand the type of data collected on principal working conditions. State leaders could then use these data to understand their state's principal working conditions within a national context and to focus attention on their state's most pressing needs.
7. **Support local efforts to improve student supports.** As previously described, school principals cite the lack of adequate student support personnel to address the social-emotional and mental health

needs of students as a challenge to their work, especially in high-poverty schools. **States** can make investments in these supports and leverage federal funding under ESSA Title IV, the Student Success and Academic Enrichment Grant program, to address these needs and to enhance resources for students and staff. At the **federal** level, this program should be fully and consistently funded at its authorized level of \$1.65 billion, substantially more than its current funding.

8. **Enable adequate and equitable principal compensation.** In our survey, larger percentages of principals who planned to leave their positions reported that compensation was a factor in their future plans. Notably, principals in high-poverty schools are most likely to find their salaries inadequate. Depending on the extent of local control, **state** leaders can establish or incentivize more competitive principal salaries across and within districts, or strengthen compensation through other vehicles, such as loan forgiveness or housing supports. **States** can also revamp their funding formulas to ensure that overall school funding is adequate and equitable, targeting additional funds to the most needy districts and schools, which will help districts provide more adequate compensation, especially in the communities where it is most needed.
9. **Create or expand programs that help underwrite the cost of high-quality principal preparation.** A number of principals surveyed described the challenge of carrying a high student debt load from their teacher and principal preparation programs, which exacerbated the problems of inadequate compensation. This is especially true for principals working in high-poverty schools and rural communities. To address this challenge, **states** can provide funding to cover the cost of high-quality preparation programs, as North Carolina does with its Principal Fellows program that supports a master's degree and yearlong internship under the wing of a veteran principal. Such investments are typically paid back in service and may be offered in exchange for a commitment to serve in a high-poverty or rural school. These kinds of programs have been shown to be effective at recruiting

doctors, nurses, and teachers, especially when they underwrite a significant portion of educational costs and are bureaucratically manageable for candidates, districts, and higher education institutions. To support and scale up state efforts, **federal** funding under Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant program, which supports teacher preparation programs, could be expanded to include school principals. To further support principals' access to high-quality preparation, the TEACH Grant Program, under Title IV of the HEA, could be expanded to include principals in addition to teachers, covering their costs of preparation in exchange for service.

10. **Support local efforts to develop effective school leaders by increasing state and federal investments in high-quality professional development.** As the importance of strong principals has become increasingly clear, more states are increasing their commitments to funding principal professional learning opportunities through coaching, mentoring, and networks, as well as through professional development courses, workshops, and conferences. Many states are also seizing the opportunity under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Title II, Part A to allocate funding to evidence-based professional development, with nearly half of states taking advantage of the optional 3 percent set-aside to invest in principal learning. Further, ESSA, the most recent version of ESEA, is due for reauthorization in 2020, and its funding to support school principals could be expanded. Increasing overall funding and the set-aside for principals under this title would allow more principals to receive the high-quality preparation and professional development they need to be effective.

INTRODUCTION

They're not just like a name on a piece of paper. Those are our kids, and so you love them, and you connect with them, and you take on an emotional weight.

—Middle level principal from Maryland

The role of the principal is uniquely important in the improvement of education. Principals typically define a school's vision and culture, hire and manage teachers, and create long-term strategies to ensure students' persistence in their studies. As school leaders, principals impact many students, and their influence can be substantial. They play an essential role in teacher retention,¹ student achievement,² and graduation.³

Despite their importance, researchers tracking the profession have found that many principals leave their positions each year.⁴ In the 2016–17 school year, the national principal turnover rate was 18 percent, with higher percentages among principals in high-poverty schools (21 percent) and cities (20 percent). The consequences can be quite negative. Studies have found that principal turnover can lead to higher teacher turnover,⁵ which, in turn, is related to lower student achievement.⁶

To examine the extent of conditions that often contribute to principal turnover, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) collaborated to develop this national principal study, administered by WestEd. In 2019, LPI surveyed a stratified random sample of 424 secondary school principals selected to represent U.S. secondary schools by community type, size, percentage of students of color, and percentage of students eligible for the federal lunch program. These principals were also affiliated with NASSP as members, or as leaders of schools with an active chapter of the National Honor Society or National Junior Honor Society, student leadership programs administered by NASSP.

The NASSP-LPI survey asked these principals about their intentions to stay in the principalship, as well as the extent to which they experience conditions that other research has shown to be related to principal retention and turnover. These conditions, from the research literature, fell into five categories: working conditions, compensation, accountability systems and evaluation, decision-making authority, and professional learning.⁷

LPI analyzed survey data descriptively for all principals and also disaggregated by principals' reported plans to leave their schools. When statistically significant, differences by school poverty levels and by the type of school community (i.e., rural, suburban, and urban) are also reported. LPI supplemented the perceptions of survey respondents with those of 33 principals who participated in six focus groups. (See the Appendix for study methodology.)

Overall, our research findings corroborate the literature on principal turnover. More than two out of five principals reported that they are considering leaving their job, and they identified a range of factors that would influence their mobility decisions. This report adds to what is known about the extent of principal turnover and the conditions that influence this turnover. In this report, we:

- Explain why stable school leadership matters
- Describe the scope of principal turnover
- Investigate the extent to which principals face circumstances related to principal turnover
- Present implications for policy and practice

WHY STABLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP MATTERS

Research suggests that principals are the second most important school-level factor associated with student achievement—right after teachers.⁸ Numerous studies that associate increased principal quality with gains in high school graduation rates⁹ and student achievement¹⁰ bolster this claim. Further, turnover in school leadership can result in a decrease in student achievement.¹¹ Studies in Texas,¹² North Carolina,¹³ and multiple urban districts¹⁴ have found a clear relationship between principal turnover and lower gains in student test scores across grade levels and subjects.¹⁵ This relationship is stronger in high-poverty, low-achieving schools—the schools in which students most rely on education for their future success¹⁶ and, unfortunately, the schools in which there is often the highest turnover.¹⁷

Principals affect student learning through their influence over schools, support of staff, and work to maintain a positive culture and climate.¹⁸ When principals leave, teachers' views about their school and classroom conditions, as well as their curriculum and instruction, are less favorable.¹⁹ This instability can result in a loss of shared purpose and trust.²⁰ And where principal turnover is frequent in a school, teachers and the community are less likely to support a new leader.²¹ Thus, a shift in leadership can derail school improvement initiatives, making it difficult to build a school's capacity to achieve institutional change.²²

Furthermore, principals' ability to create positive working conditions and collaborative and supportive learning environments plays a critical role in attracting and retaining qualified teachers.²³ Teachers cite principal support as one of the most important factors in their decisions to stay in a school or in the profession.²⁴ Conversely, principal turnover results in higher teacher turnover,²⁵ which, in turn, is related to lower student achievement.²⁶ For example, evidence from studies using employment data in Miami²⁷ and North Carolina²⁸ found principal turnover to be associated with increases in teacher turnover.

At a time when many schools are struggling to find and keep teachers, the leadership of a strong principal takes on added importance for student success. This is particularly true for principals serving large numbers of students from low-income families and students of color. Importantly, high-need schools benefit most from effective principals who can find and keep talented teachers.²⁹ Multiple studies of teacher attrition in high-poverty schools have found that teachers' perceptions about their school leaders are dominant factors in their decision to remain at the school.³⁰

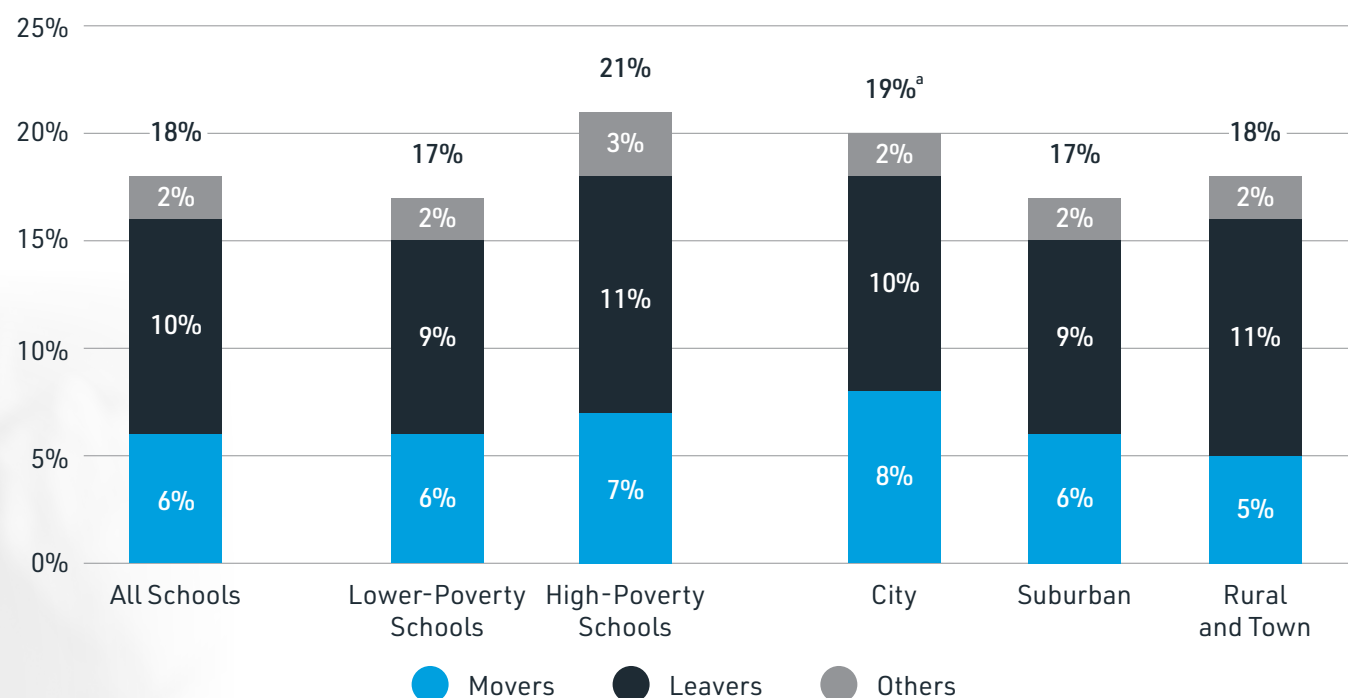
In addition to the burden of principal turnover on students and teachers, the financial implications are significant.³¹ Schools and districts must devote time and resources (e.g., for recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and professional development) to replace outgoing principals. The expense is substantial and, often, covered by redirecting funds that had been slated for the classroom. More research is needed to provide better information about the financial implications of principal turnover, but the available data suggest it is significant.



THE SCOPE OF PRINCIPAL TURNOVER

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average tenure of principals in a given school across the United States was four years as of 2016–17.³² This number masks considerable variation, with 35 percent of principals staying at their schools for less than two years and only 11 percent of principals staying at their schools for 10 years or more.³³ The most recent national study of public school principals, which included follow-up data from 86,180 schools, found that between the 2015–16 and 2016–17 school years, nearly one in five principals left their schools: Approximately 82 percent of principals remained at the same school, 6 percent moved to a different school (“movers”), 10 percent left the principalship (“leavers”), and 2 percent were no longer at the school, but their destinations were unknown (“others”).³⁴ (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1: U.S. PRINCIPAL TURNOVER, 2016–17



Note: “Lower-poverty schools” are schools in which between 0 percent and 74 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. “High-poverty schools” are schools in which 75 percent or more of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. “Movers” are principals who were still principals in the current school year but had moved to a different school after the base year. “Leavers” are principals who were no longer principals after the base year. “Others” includes principals who had left their base-year school, but for whom it was not possible to determine a mover or leaver status in the current school year. The base year for 2016–17 was 2015–16.

^a Value for this bar does not equal the component parts due to rounding.

Source: Goldring, R., & Taie, S. (2018). *Principal attrition and mobility: Results from the 2016–2017 principal follow-up survey first look*. (NCES 2018-066). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

While the national average rate of principal turnover is approximately 18 percent, there is a considerable discrepancy between the rate of turnover in high-poverty schools (schools in which 75 percent or more of students receive free or reduced-price lunch) and lower-poverty schools (schools in which between 0 percent and 74 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch). Notably, turnover is about 25 percent higher in schools with high concentrations of students in poverty than in all other schools. The mix of movers and leavers is similar (Figure 1). Similar discrepancies are seen at the local level. For example, a study of principal turnover in Miami-Dade County found that 28 percent of principals in the highest-poverty schools left each year, compared to 18 percent of principals in the lowest-poverty schools.³⁵ Similarly, in Philadelphia, on average, 33 percent of principals in the highest-poverty schools left each year between 2008 and 2016, compared to 24 percent of principals in the lowest-poverty schools in the district.³⁶

Nationally, we also see a higher turnover rate in cities (20 percent) compared to suburban (17 percent) or rural (18 percent) communities. However, this pattern varies by region. For example, an examination of turnover across and within three Midwest states, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, found urbanicity to be predictive of principal movement in Wisconsin, but not in Iowa or Minnesota.³⁷ In a study investigating principal turnover in Texas, new principals in urban areas left their roles sooner than those in rural areas, but those new principals who stayed in their schools were more likely than rural principals to remain in their schools after five years.³⁸ On the other hand, a study of principal mobility in Illinois found lower turnover rates in urban areas than in suburban or rural areas, with principals serving in Chicago being the least likely to leave their schools.³⁹ Other research suggests that these differences may be related to the funding for and nature of preparation.⁴⁰



NASSP-LPI STUDY RESULTS RELATED TO TURNOVER

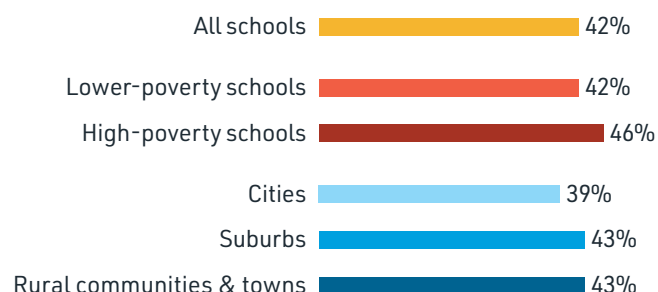
The 2019 NASSP-LPI principal survey results reflect national concerns about principal turnover. Our survey asked principals whether they planned to move to another school or to leave the principalship altogether. When we combined responses from principals planning to move to a different school and those planning to leave the principalship, we found that more than two in five principals (42 percent) were considering leaving their position (Figure 2). Some of these principals were considering retirement in the future as well, but because they also were considering leaving, we included them in the “leavers” group.⁴¹ Among principals in this leavers group, percentages were slightly higher (46 percent) for principals in high-poverty schools (i.e., schools with 75 percent or more students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) and for principals in suburban and rural communities (43 percent).⁴²

A subset of this overall potential turnover is the portion of principals planning to move to another school: almost one-third of principals surveyed (32 percent). Similar to what the literature has shown, the percentage of principals planning to move to a different school is higher (38 percent) in high-poverty schools. The percentage of principals planning to move is also higher for those serving in rural communities (38 percent).

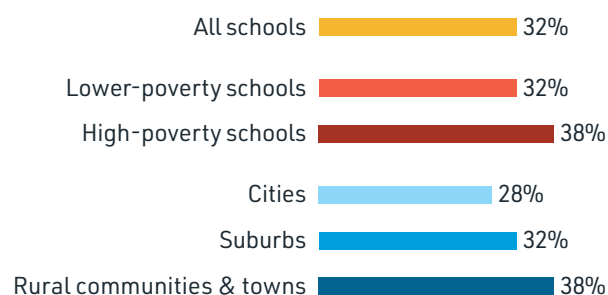
The opposite pattern was found for principals intending to leave the role altogether. One in five (19 percent) planned to leave the principalship as soon as possible. Principals from higher-poverty schools (14 percent) were less likely to plan to leave the principalship and instead indicated that they may move to another school. Also, a smaller percentage of principals serving in rural communities (12 percent) indicated their intention to give up the position of principal altogether compared to the percentage in cities and suburbs. This may be because principals in cities and suburbs may have more opportunities for other types of employment.

FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS PLANNING TO LEAVE THEIR SCHOOL BY MOVING TO A DIFFERENT SCHOOL OR LEAVING THE PRINCIPALSHIP

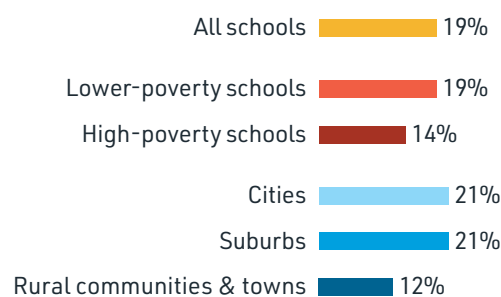
Principals planning to leave their schools from...



Principals planning to move to a different school from...



Principals planning to leave the principalship from...



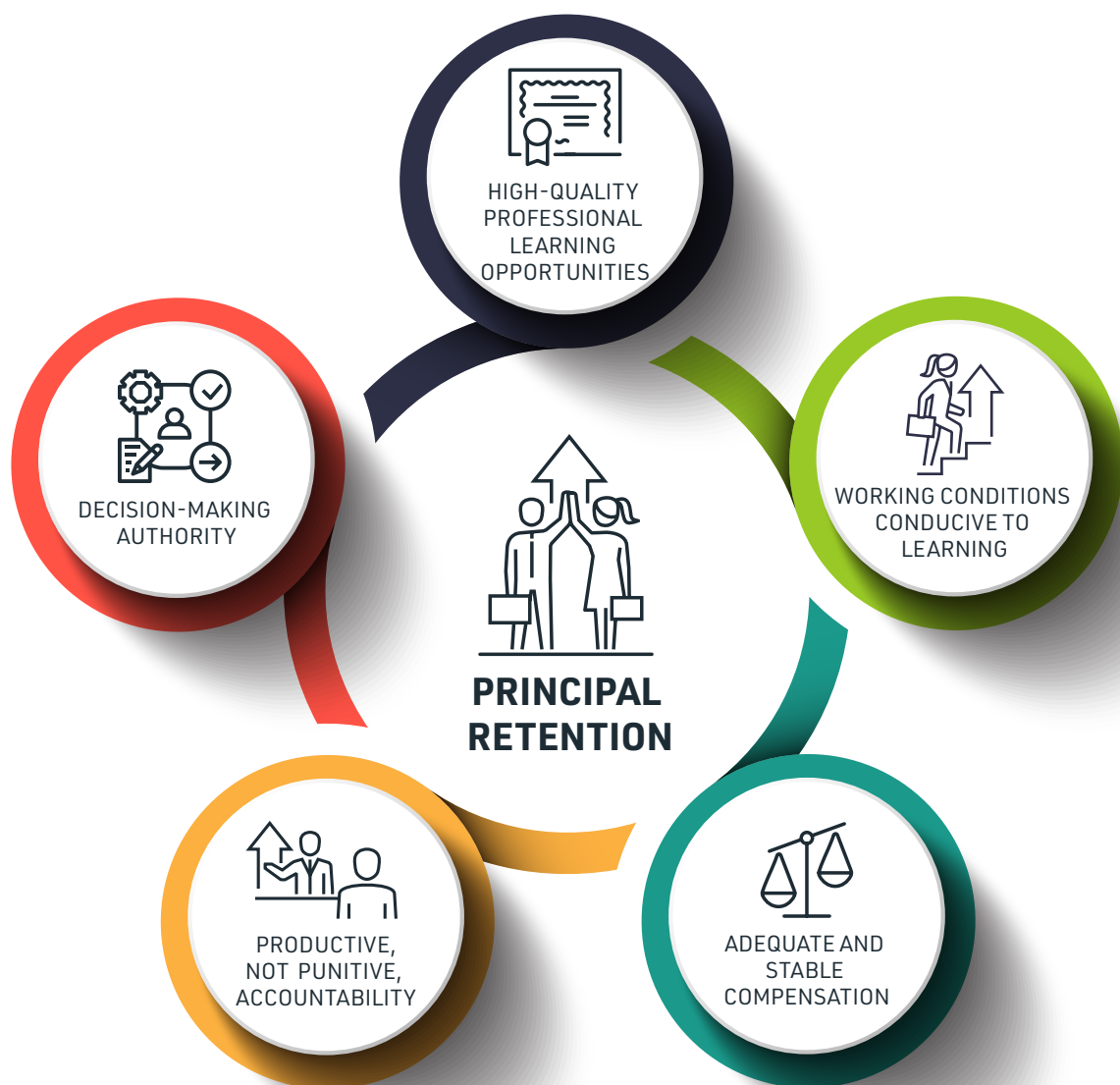
Note: “Lower-poverty schools” are schools in which between 0 percent and 74 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. “High-poverty schools” are schools in which 75 percent or more of students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

PRINCIPALS' CONDITIONS

The NASSP-LPI survey asked principals to identify a variety of issues that might influence them to leave their roles within the next three years. Each fell into one of the five areas that the NASSP-LPI previous review of the research literature indicated were related to principal retention: working conditions, compensation, high-stakes accountability, decision-making authority, and professional learning (Figure 3).⁴³

FIGURE 3: CONDITIONS RELATED TO PRINCIPAL RETENTION



Source: Learning Policy Institute.

Figure 4 presents the challenges identified by principals as most likely to cause them to leave their schools within the next three years. A variety of working conditions were identified as important challenges. For those saying they were considering leaving their schools, the highest percentage (63 percent) identified heavy workload as a challenge that could influence their plans to leave the principalship or move to a new school. In comparison, just 31 percent of other principals identified heavy workload as a concern.

The second most frequently identified challenge was unresponsiveness from the district or other support teams. Among potential leavers, 51 percent reported that this unresponsiveness was a reason for their departure. This percentage was lower among principals who were not considering leaving (32 percent). The contrast between leavers and stayers was also large for compensation, with leavers twice as likely to identify compensation as a reason for dissatisfaction (40 percent versus 20 percent). Elements of accountability systems, decision-making authority, and professional learning were also identified as challenges that can influence principal mobility, though these were named by fewer than one-third of principals planning to leave.

In general, principals planning to leave are more likely to identify each challenge listed in Figure 4 as a cause for leaving than principals planning to stay. In fact, for the top seven challenges, those principals planning to leave were approximately 1.5 to 2 times more likely to report the challenge as a reason for leaving than those planning to stay.

In the text that follows, we look more closely at the various conditions that the literature and our research tell us can influence principal retention. We present these conditions in the order in which principals' overall survey and focus group responses indicated that they were a concern; however, the conditions are, in fact, highly interrelated. Therefore, the conditions should be considered as a whole in any efforts to create a stronger and more stable principal workforce. Research suggests that such a strong and stable principal workforce can, in turn, increase teacher retention and effectiveness, which, in combination with effective school leadership practices, can increase a range of student outcomes.

FIGURE 4: PRINCIPALS' REPORTS OF FACTORS MOST LIKELY TO CAUSE THEM TO LEAVE THEIR SCHOOLS WITHIN THE NEXT 3 YEARS



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.



WORKING CONDITIONS

Working conditions experienced by principals in their schools and districts influence their mobility decisions.⁴⁴ Researchers have defined working conditions in a variety of ways. Some have focused on workload (the number of school-related work hours inside and outside of the school),⁴⁵ job complexity (having multiple roles and responsibilities),⁴⁶ and school climate or environment (student behavior, and student and teacher absenteeism).⁴⁷ Other researchers have investigated the availability of school resources, including money and staff,⁴⁸ and relationships with students, families, teachers, and district administrators.⁴⁹ Researchers have also considered the availability of personnel to support students with social-emotional concerns⁵⁰ and the amount of support provided by the central office.⁵¹ All of these factors have been associated with principal turnover. Importantly, one study found that including school climate measures in its analysis eliminated the significant relationships between student demographics and principal turnover, indicating that efforts to improve school climate can be a constructive approach to reducing principal turnover in schools with high-need students.⁵²

WORKING CONDITIONS AND INTENTIONS TO LEAVE

The top three factors most likely to influence principals' mobility decisions are related to working conditions. (See Figure 4.) Just under two-thirds of principals who plan to leave their schools (63 percent) reported that their heavy workload could influence their mobility decisions.

Members of our study's six focus groups recognized and voiced concerns about heavy workloads. A principal from a midsize suburban high school said:

When you go into the principalship, or even the assistant principalship, you know that it's not a 7 to 3 or whatever job. It's all the time, really. And there are a lot of commitments that are on the weekends or in the evening and things like that. And that is the job. Those aren't extras.... And if you don't understand that, then it's probably not the right job for you.

Another principal from a large suburban high school in Oklahoma spoke of the many hours that principals must work.

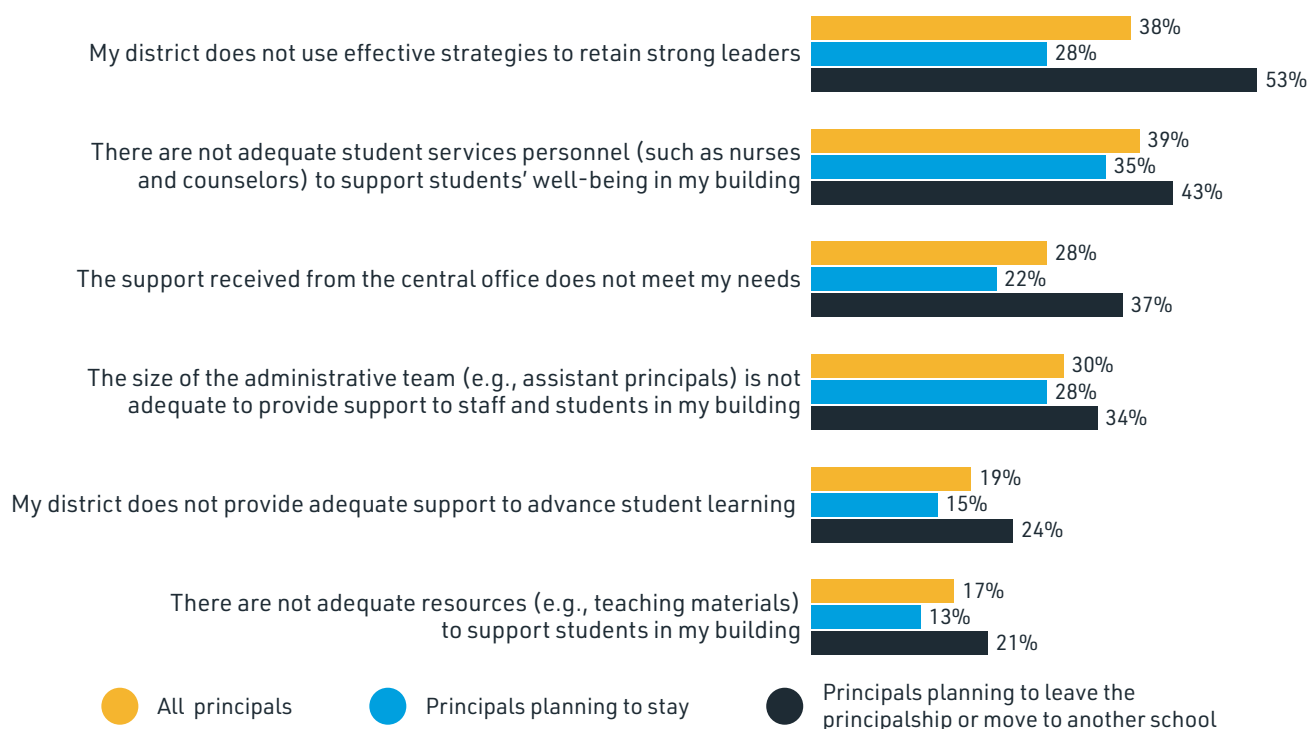
It's about the number of contracted days that we're expected to [work]. ... We're not the Energizer Bunny; we just can't keep going and going and going.

DISTRICT SUPPORTS RELATED TO WORKING CONDITIONS

Principals also reported on specific district supports, including availability of student services personnel, district strategies for retaining principals, the size of the administrative team, and support from the central office (Figure 5). Among principals considering leaving, over half (53 percent) reported that their district does not use effective strategies to retain strong leaders, such as providing additional school resources or more fiscal flexibility for successful principals. Those indicating that they will stay in their schools (28 percent) were far less likely to report this concern.

Additionally, approximately three in seven principals planning to leave (43 percent) reported lacking adequate student services personnel (such as nurses and counselors) to support their students' well-being. This compares to 35 percent of principals indicating that they would stay in their schools. Also notable is that just under two in five principals (37 percent) reported that the support they receive from their central office does not meet their needs. Again, the percentage was considerably lower among those planning to stay in their schools (22 percent). These survey results demonstrate that district-level support is strongly associated with principals' mobility decisions.

FIGURE 5: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS LACKING ADEQUATE DISTRICT SUPPORTS



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

Conversations among focus group members addressed the importance of the central office, for good or for ill. A high school principal who had recently changed positions explained, “I couldn’t bear the thought of working for the central office administration for another day. ... I just got out.”

Focus group members also discussed their need for additional support personnel in their buildings. A high school principal serving in a large urban school shared his experience addressing students’ mental health issues.

There are a few challenges, ... one [of] which is mental health, which is very scary, because I don’t have a psychologist or a counselor. The kid comes in and I’m expected to make a whole lot of decisions about something this kid just told me and respond, [and there aren’t] resources, financial resources. And I don’t necessarily know what I’m doing.

At the same time as these focus groups revealed principals’ frustrations with their districts, the focus group members expressed deep concern for their students and a desire to continue to serve them well. In combination, data from these focus groups and the survey point to the importance of district-level actions to keep effective principals in their positions.

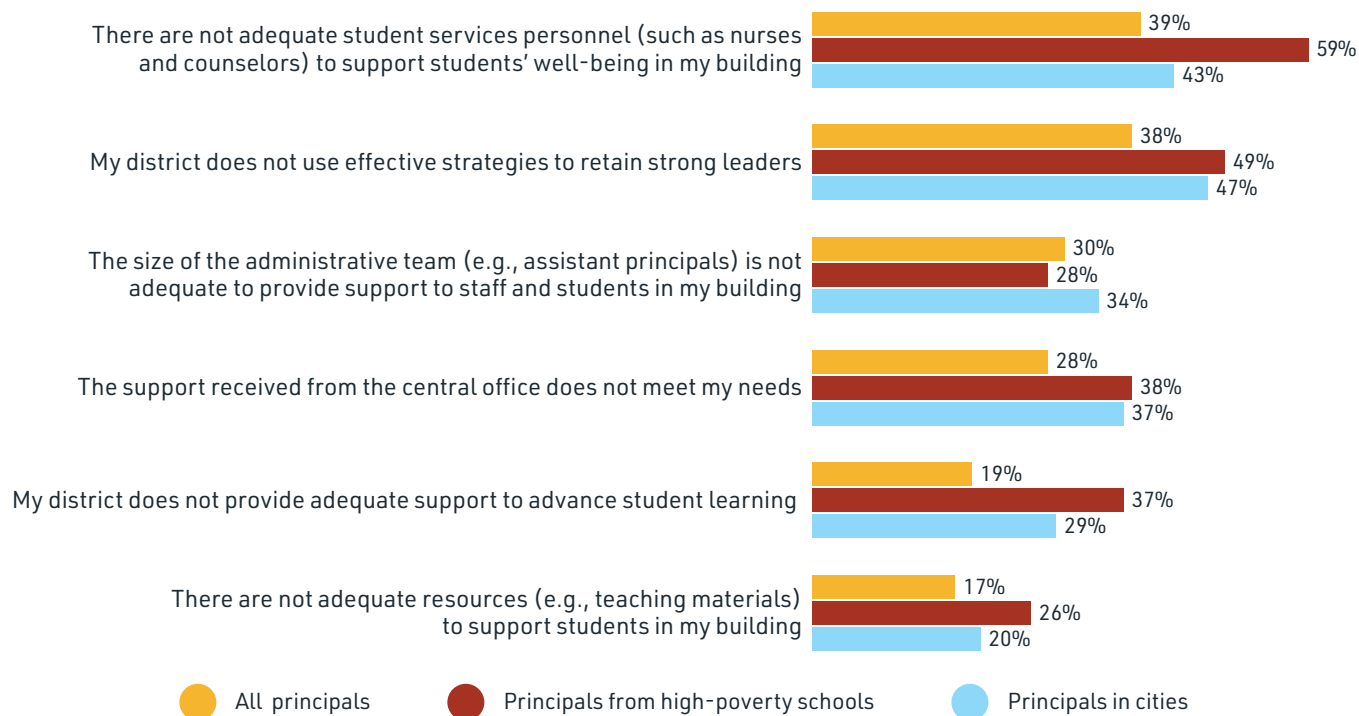
DISTRICT SUPPORTS BY POVERTY LEVEL AND COMMUNITY TYPE

We further investigated principal responses by school poverty level and the type of community in which the principal serves (Figure 6). Importantly, principals from high-poverty schools and those in cities were more likely to report a lack of student services personnel to support students’ well-being (59 percent and 43 percent, respectively).

Other concerns for principals of high-poverty schools were lack of support from the central office (38 percent), lack of support from their school district to advance student learning (37 percent), and inadequate resources (e.g., teacher materials, supplies) to support students (26 percent).

In addition, principals from cities were more likely to report that their district does not use effective strategies to retain principals (47 percent), that the support they receive from their central office does not meet their needs (37 percent), and that the school district does not provide adequate support to advance student learning (29 percent).

FIGURE 6: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS LACKING ADEQUATE DISTRICT SUPPORTS



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.





COMPENSATION

Salaries matter to principals in choosing new positions and in deciding whether to stay.⁵³ Multiple studies examining the relationship between principal turnover and compensation have observed principals moving to positions with higher salaries.⁵⁴ Researchers have found that higher salary can sometimes, but not always, offset the effect of poor working conditions⁵⁵ or poor school outcomes.⁵⁶

Dissatisfaction with salary is further exacerbated by the fact that, in some contexts, principals' salaries compare poorly with salaries of experienced teachers, despite principals' additional responsibilities and time commitments.⁵⁷ This serves as a disincentive for qualified educators to move to a leadership position.⁵⁸

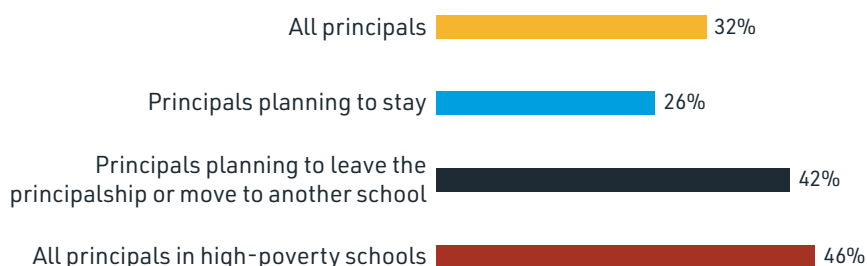
COMPENSATION AND INTENTIONS TO LEAVE

Our research provides additional evidence that compensation can be related to principals' plans to leave their schools. Our survey and focus group findings reveal some principals' frustrations with their compensation. In fact, 40 percent of those planning to leave their schools identified compensation as a reason for leaving (Figure 4). Our findings explore compensation further, addressing principals' sacrifices, such as spending money on their students and carrying debt from preparation programs.

FRUSTRATION WITH COMPENSATION

Approximately one in every three principals (32 percent) believes his or her salary is unfair (Figure 7). This percentage is larger for those planning to leave (42 percent) than for those planning to stay (26 percent). Notably, nearly one in two principals in high-poverty schools finds his or her salary inadequate or unfair (46 percent).

FIGURE 7: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS WHO BELIEVE THEIR SALARIES AND BENEFITS ARE NOT FAIR COMPENSATION



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

All focus groups had multiple members who said that principal salaries are not adequate given the heavy responsibilities and high expectations for the role. One middle-level principal explained, “You have to be like a CEO of a small company.” She described being “responsible for a thousand people’s children” while “multiple people who don’t have the responsibility make more money than you do.”

Other principals pointed out that, although the salary may seem reasonable, if you break it down as an hourly payment, the compensation is actually quite low. A high school principal from Ohio explained: “No one wants to do the math. If you do the [math], the highest-paid teachers in my building make more each day than I do.”

Another focus group member, a middle school principal from Washington, explained:

So why would I stay to make \$5,000 more than a teacher? I mean like, really? My contract is this much longer, and I’m at work this many more hours and have this much more responsibility. Why [would I do that] when I [could] go back to the classroom to hang out with kids? That’s what I love. I love the kids. The adults ... whew.

Focus group members also spoke of the impact of salaries on principal mobility. A middle school principal from Georgia spoke of the constant movement that resulted from competition among districts regarding salaries.

My district is competitive with the districts around [it]—and that’s constantly churning people, where they’ll go get the same job down the street. They’ll say it’s for a shorter commute, but it’s really much more financial.

PRINCIPALS’ SACRIFICES

For those frustrated by unfair salaries, the additional costs required to be a principal may be especially problematic. Our research reveals that principals make financial sacrifices both to obtain the needed professional preparation and certification and, once they become principals, to support the students in their schools.

Almost half of all respondents (44 percent) reported at least some student loan debt, and over half of these principals (56 percent) have debt from both teacher and principal preparation programs (Figure 8). Among all principals, approximately three in 10 (29 percent) reported moderate or excessive student debt from their principal

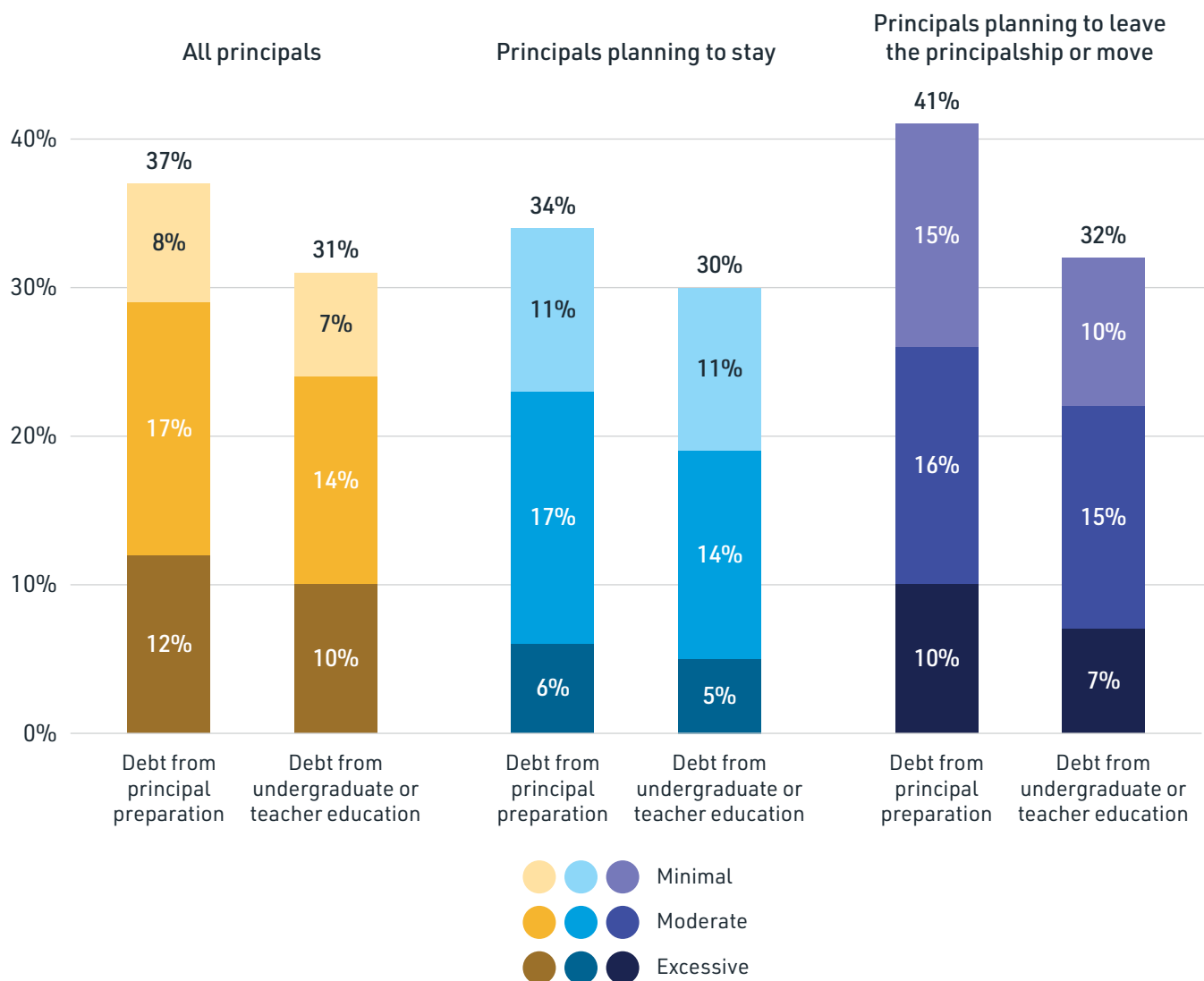


preparation and approximately one in four (24 percent) from their undergraduate or teacher education programs. Among those with moderate to excessive levels of debt from either teacher or principal preparation programs, the higher percentage of principals with student loan debt from their principal preparation may be due to the fact that their principal preparation expenses are more recent and that there may be less financial aid available for postgraduate programs than for undergraduate programs.

The level of debt intersects with compensation adequacy: Among those with minimal to excessive levels of debt from either teacher or principal preparation, 42 percent also viewed their compensation as unfair, as compared to 27 percent of respondents with no or minimal debt.

Principals planning to leave are more likely to report student loan debt from principal preparation (41 percent versus 34 percent) and undergraduate or teacher education (32 percent versus 30 percent) than those planning to stay.

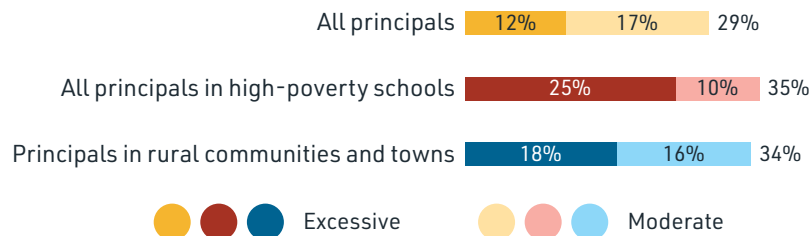
FIGURE 8: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS WITH STUDENT LOAN DEBT



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

There is some variation in the occurrence and severity of student loan debt among principals based on their schools' poverty level and community type. Those serving in high-poverty schools (35 percent) and in rural communities (34 percent) are most likely to have excessive or moderate student loan debt from their principal preparation (Figure 9).

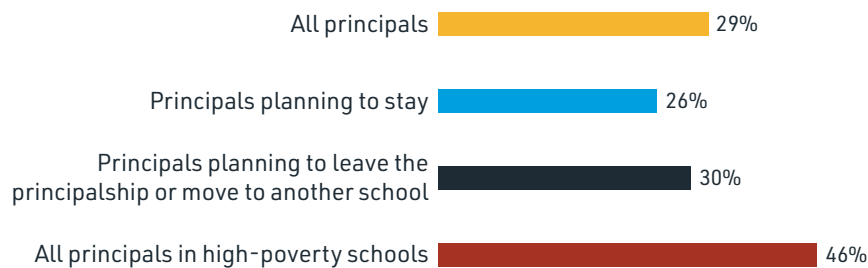
FIGURE 9: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS WITH STUDENT LOAN DEBT FROM PRINCIPAL PREPARATION



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

Principals reported additional financial sacrifices. In addition to reports of student loan debt, nearly three in 10 principals (29 percent) report spending too much of their own money on materials and supplies for their students (Figure 10). The percentage was similar for principals considering leaving, but slightly lower for those reporting that they intend to stay. In high-poverty schools, fully 46 percent reported this concern. These schools may be under-resourced overall, and students may have greater unmet needs for food, clothing, school supplies, and equipment, resulting in a greater need for this type of personal spending.

FIGURE 10: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS WHO REPORT SPENDING TOO MUCH MONEY FOR STUDENT MATERIALS AND SUPPLIES



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.



HIGH-STAKES ACCOUNTABILITY AND EVALUATION

High-stakes accountability policies employed by some states and districts have often held principals responsible for school outcomes, regardless of investments in their schools or supports for their students. These policies can create disincentives for principals to remain in high-need, low-performing schools, thereby influencing their mobility decisions. Several studies have confirmed a relationship between principal turnover and accountability policies.⁵⁹ Research on the impact of federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, which called for increasingly severe sanctions for poor student outcomes, found implementation of NCLB to be associated with a higher level of principals' job stress and a higher turnover rate, and these findings appear to be consistent across principal, school, or student characteristics.⁶⁰ NCLB has been reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which is designed to allow more flexibility; however, states differ in how they implement the law, and in terms of how they—and districts—support schools serving different kinds of students.⁶¹

HIGH-STAKES ACCOUNTABILITY, EVALUATION, AND INTENTIONS TO LEAVE

The NASSP-LPI principal survey findings provide additional evidence to support existing research about state accountability systems. Many principals expressed frustration with these systems. As noted previously in Figure 4, almost a third of principals planning to leave (31 percent) indicated that their state accountability system influences their mobility decisions. The frequency of mandated assessments was also an impetus for departure among 20 percent of principals planning to leave their schools.

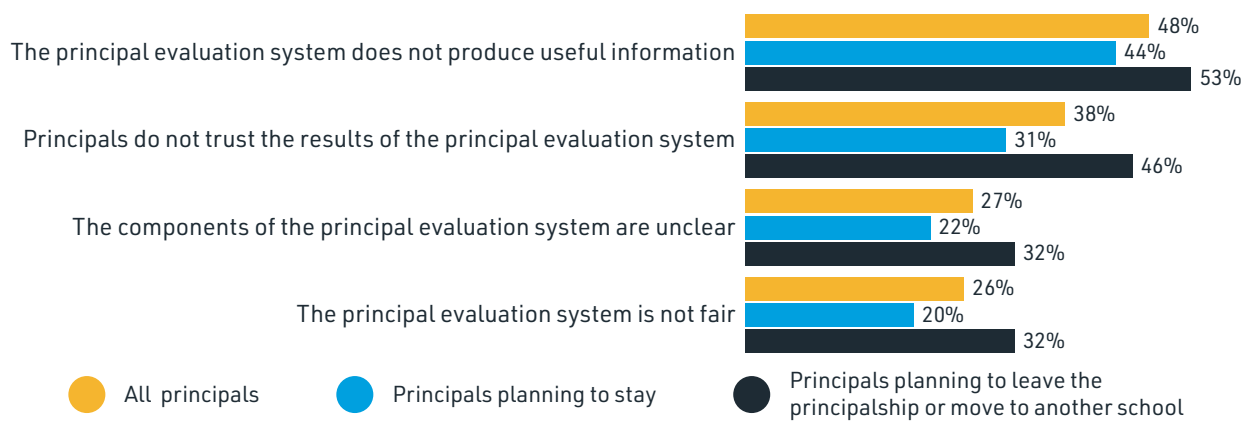
Focus group discussions addressed issues of accountability as well. A number of focus group participants expressed their frustration with accountability systems that penalize schools that have more students with low test scores rather than acknowledging schools for their students' growth. One middle school principal from Florida explained:

I'm at a school that is underperforming for various reasons. As a Title I school,⁶² it is much more difficult to lift, versus the affluent school that's two miles away, but the principals are held [to] the same standard. ... I'm fighting my tail off every day just to keep [my school] above a failing grade.

VIEWS ON PRINCIPAL EVALUATION SYSTEMS

The NASSP-LPI principal survey and focus group findings also reveal that many principals have concerns about how they are evaluated as school leaders. Nearly half of all survey respondents (48 percent) reported that their own evaluation system does not produce useful information, and the percentage was higher for those planning to leave (53 percent). Further, well over one-third of principals (38 percent) reported that principals do not trust the results of the evaluation system (Figure 11). Across all survey items on principal evaluation, higher percentages of principals planning to leave reported concerns about their evaluations.

FIGURE 11: PRINCIPALS' CONCERNS ABOUT THEIR EVALUATION SYSTEMS



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

Consistent with NASSP-LPI principal survey results, a number of focus group members shared their disappointing evaluation experiences. For example, a middle school principal from Arkansas explained, "It's about compliance here." She went on to say,

This year, [the superintendent] wasn't in our building but maybe once to see what we were doing. So she gave us all blanket [scores of] 3, and just told us that "I'm going to do better next year." I wonder what would happen if I did that?

Another principal from a suburban high school in Massachusetts described her desire for meaningful feedback:

I'm not sure I've ever gotten, in a formal evaluation, any meaningful feedback. ... I wish I had somebody around me that would push my thinking more and challenge me to get to the next level. ... I know I don't do everything right. I know I'm not perfect, and I know there are places that I can improve, and I think that I would prefer to have that as part of a conversation or the evaluation.



DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY

Decision-making authority makes a difference in principal retention. Other research shows that principals who believe they have greater control of their work environment and the ability to make decisions across a range of issues such as spending, teacher hiring and evaluation, and discipline are less likely to leave their positions or to intend to do so.⁶³

DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY AND INTENTIONS TO LEAVE

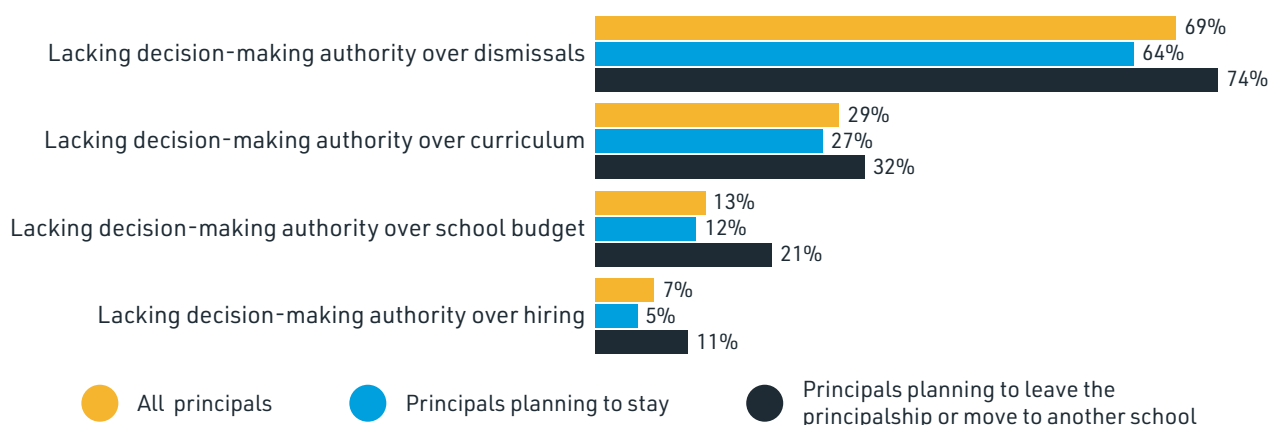
The NASSP-LPI survey and focus group findings point to particular types of decision-making authority as concerns for many school leaders. A substantial percentage of all principals (69 percent) agreed that it is difficult to dismiss poorly performing or incompetent teachers (Figure 12). The percentage was even higher for principals considering leaving the principalship (74 percent).

A smaller percentage of survey respondents reported a lack of autonomy in hiring staff: just 11 percent of those who indicated their plans to leave their schools. This percentage was even smaller for those planning to stay (5 percent). Similarly, inability to determine professional development plans for their staff was a concern for just 17 percent of principals planning to leave and for 9 percent of those planning to stay.

Principals also responded to survey questions on their decision-making authority over curriculum and their school budget. Lack of decision-making authority over curriculum was identified by almost three in 10 principals (29 percent). Among those considering leaving, the percentage was slightly higher—32 percent.

A smaller percentage of principals reported that they lacked decision-making authority over their school budgets (13 percent). However, the difference between those planning to leave and those planning to stay in their jobs was considerable—21 percent compared to 12 percent.

FIGURE 12: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS LACKING DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY OVER DISMISSALS, CURRICULUM, SCHOOL BUDGET, AND HIRING



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

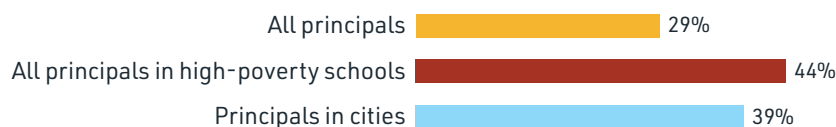
DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY BY POVERTY LEVEL AND COMMUNITY TYPE

About 29 percent of principals reported lacking decision-making authority over curriculum, but the percentages were higher for principals serving in high-poverty schools (44 percent) and in cities (39 percent). It is possible that this is due to more controlling accountability or management systems in large districts or for struggling schools. (See Figure 13.)

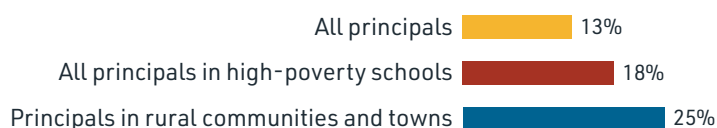
Principals' decision-making authority over budgets also varied by poverty level and locale. Overall, 13 percent of principals reported that they lacked decision-making authority over their schools' budgets, with higher percentages in high-poverty schools (18 percent) and rural communities (25 percent).

FIGURE 13: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS LACKING ADEQUATE DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY OVER CURRICULUM AND SCHOOL BUDGET

Over curriculum



Over school budget



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.



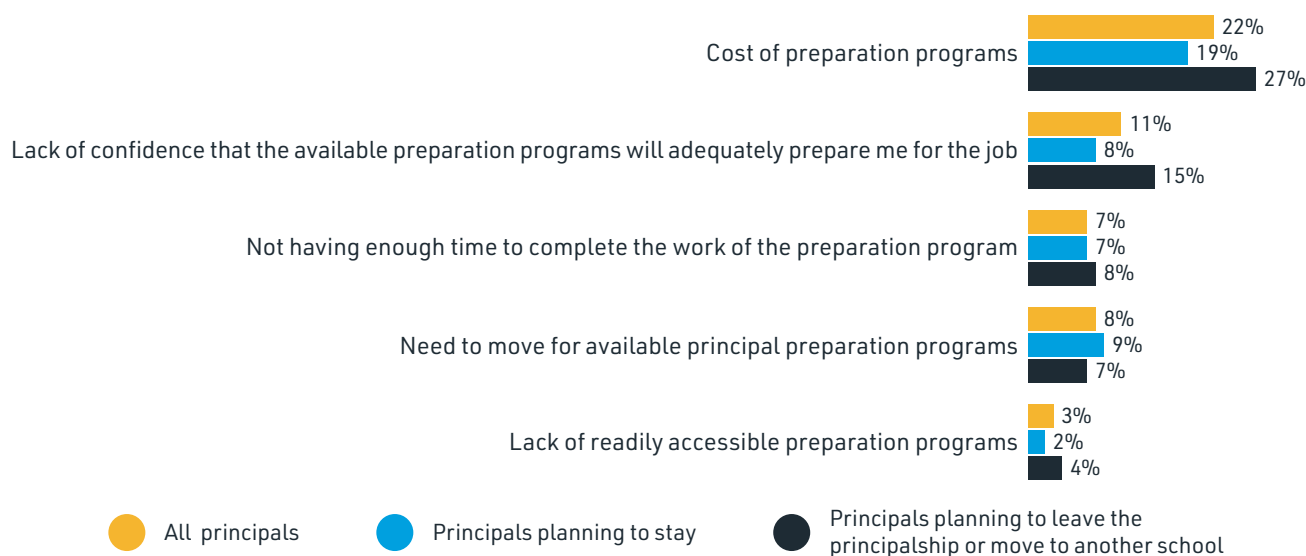
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Professional development, including preparation programs and in-service supports such as mentoring and coaching, can improve principals' sense of efficacy and satisfaction and, in turn, improve retention.⁶⁴ Studies have found that access to high-quality preparation programs and principal internships and mentoring significantly reduces the likelihood that principals will leave their schools or the profession.⁶⁵ Programs that carefully select and prepare principals for challenging schools, and that work with school districts to support and develop principals in those schools, are likely to produce principals who stay.⁶⁶

ACCESS TO PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Principals participating in the NASSP-LPI principal survey were asked about the obstacles they faced to becoming principals. Many reported that they had encountered obstacles (Figure 14). The cost of principal preparation programs was the most commonly identified obstacle, chosen by just under a quarter of all responding principals (22 percent). Notably, the percentage of principals planning to leave who reported program cost to be an obstacle to their preparation (27 percent) was higher than the percentage of those planning to stay (19 percent). Principals planning to leave were also more likely to say that they lacked confidence in the preparation programs that were available to them (15 percent versus 8 percent). A smaller number said they did not have enough time to complete the work of the preparation program (8 percent) or that they had no readily accessible preparation programs (4 percent).

FIGURE 14: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS REPORTING OBSTACLES TO PRINCIPAL PREPARATION

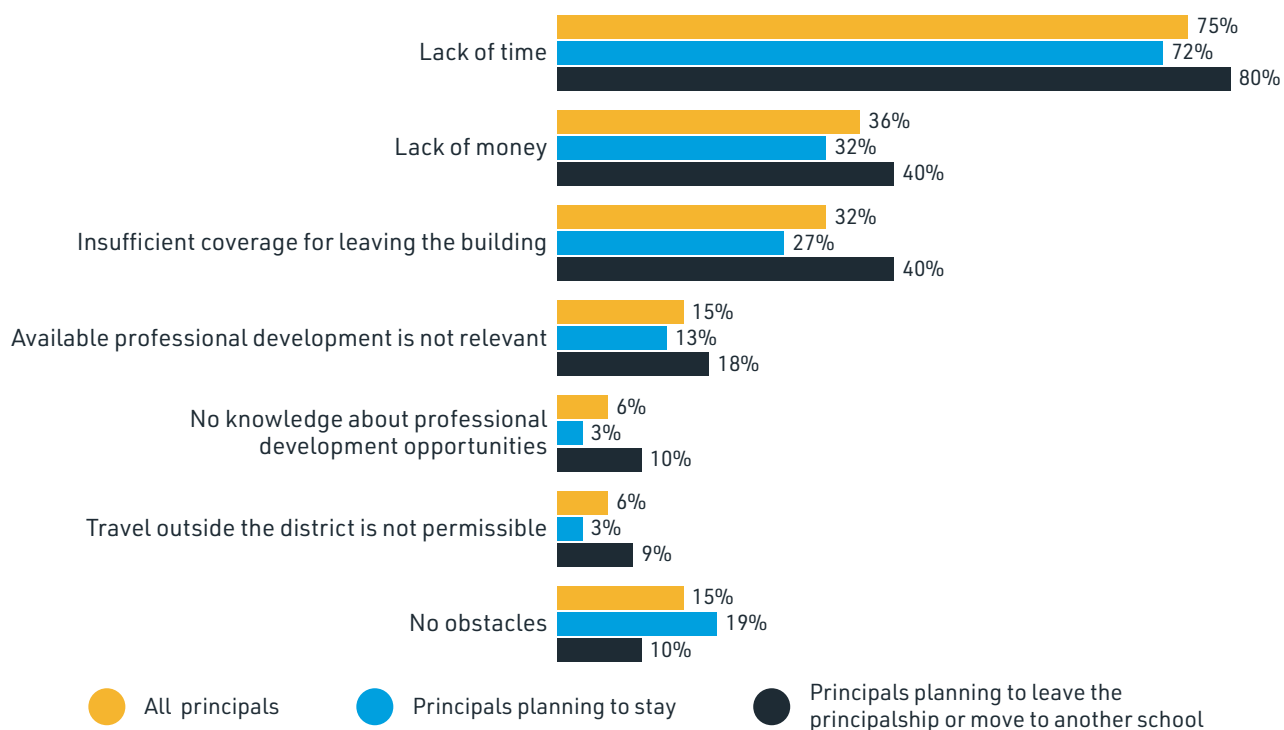


Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Principals also reported facing obstacles to accessing professional development. A majority of principals (85 percent) reported at least one obstacle in pursuing professional development. As shown in Figure 15, the top three obstacles reported were lacking time (75 percent), lacking money (36 percent), and not having sufficient coverage for leaving the building to attend professional development events (32 percent). Among principals considering leaving, higher percentages reported obstacles: 80 percent said time was an obstacle, and 40 percent said money or insufficient coverage were obstacles.

FIGURE 15: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS REPORTING OBSTACLES TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

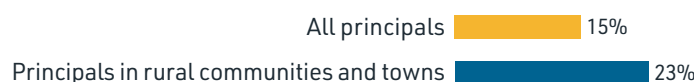
Many of these obstacles were faced by similar proportions of principals regardless of their schools' poverty level or the community type in which they worked. However, as shown in Figure 16, a lack of available relevant professional development content was more common among principals serving in rural areas (23 percent), and a lack of financial resources for professional development was more common among principals in cities (51 percent).

FIGURE 16: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS REPORTING OBSTACLES TO HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BY COMMUNITY TYPE

Lack of money



Available professional development is not relevant



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

Principals in our focus groups also shared their disappointment with districts that do not provide relevant professional development. A high school principal from Massachusetts explained:

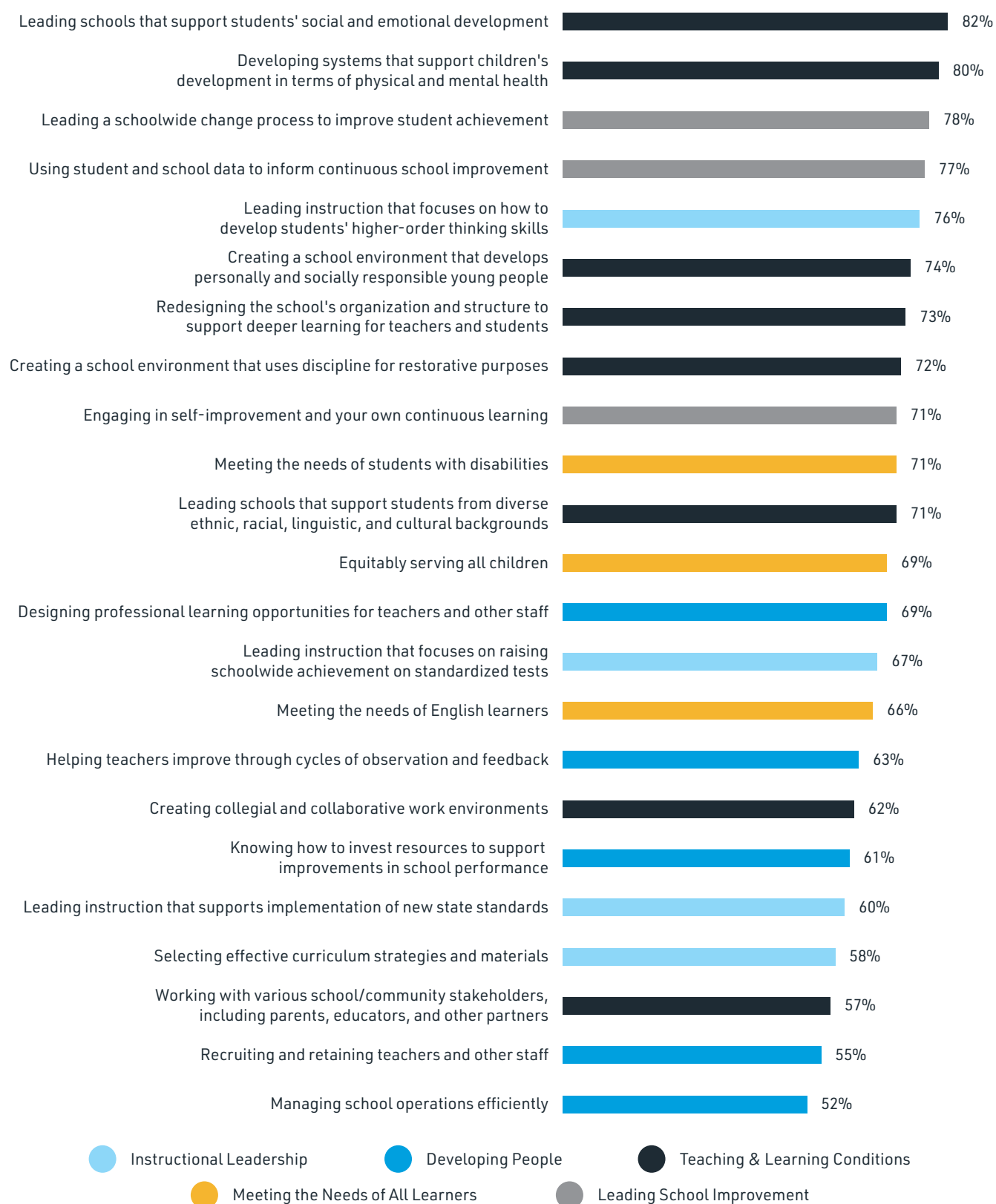
The district does supply some professional development, but it's more aimed at teachers. It's great to participate in that, because we can always continue to grow as teachers, [but it is] not directed at administrators. And often, I run much of the professional development within the district.

REQUESTS FOR FUTURE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Nearly all principals (98 percent) indicated a desire for additional professional development. They reported their interest in professional development across a variety of topics falling into five categories: instructional leadership, developing people, teaching and learning conditions, meeting the needs of all learners, and leading school improvement (Figure 17). Principals were most likely to request professional development related to teaching and learning conditions and leading school improvement. This includes professional development to support students' social-emotional development (82 percent) and physical and mental health (80 percent), leading schools to improve student achievement (78 percent), and using school and student data to inform continuous improvement (77 percent).

Principals also indicated their desire for professional development focused on improving students' higher-order thinking skills (76 percent) and on creating a school environment that develops personally and socially responsible young people (74 percent). More than two-thirds also wanted professional development to improve their ability to support all learners (e.g., meeting the needs of students with disabilities and equitably serving all students, 71 percent and 69 percent, respectively).

FIGURE 17: PERCENTAGE OF PRINCIPALS REQUESTING ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BY TOPIC AREA



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

KEY FINDINGS

Our research builds on the existing body of literature on principal turnover. Our national survey suggests that principals face a range of challenges across all five of the main circumstances that influence principals to leave their jobs. Further, many of these challenges are related to principals' intentions to leave their schools, which we know can be detrimental to students, teachers, and schools. As discussed in this report, many of the challenges and obstacles principals experienced were reported by more principals from high-poverty schools and from schools in urban or rural communities. Our key findings include:

- **Survey and focus group responses reflected national concerns about principal turnover.** In the NASSP-LPI survey, 42 percent of principals indicated that they were considering leaving their position. The percentage of principals planning to move to a different school was higher for those in high-poverty schools and rural communities.
- **Working conditions and district supports related to working conditions emerged as major concerns.** Among principals planning to leave, many reported facing a heavy workload, more than twice the percentage of those planning to stay. Over half of principals planning to leave noted that their district did not have effective strategies for retaining strong leaders, compared to just over one-quarter of those planning to stay. In addition, those planning to leave reported that their districts did not provide adequate student services personnel to support students' emotional well-being at higher rates than those indicating that they would stay. Similarly, higher percentages of principals planning to leave reported that their district's central office did not meet their needs; principals indicating that they would stay were less likely to make this claim.
- **Principals' compensation and financial obligations were related to their mobility plans.** A larger percentage of principals planning to leave their schools than those planning to stay said that they were not fairly compensated for their efforts. Relatedly, principals planning to leave were more likely to report student loan debt from principal preparation.
- **High-stakes accountability systems and evaluation practices can discourage some principals from remaining in their school or position.** About a third of principals planning to leave their schools reported that state accountability measures could influence their mobility decision, compared to a fifth of principals who plan to stay. Principal evaluations may also influence principals to leave their positions. More than half of all principals planning to leave reported having unconstructive evaluations, while the percentage was lower among those planning to stay. Further, approximately two in five principals planning to leave reported that they do not trust the results of the evaluation system, compared to one in five likely to stay in their positions.
- **A lack of decision-making authority was a concern for some principals.** Decision-making authority in most areas was a concern for smaller percentages of principals. Among those planning to leave, one-third reported that they lacked decision-making authority over their schools' curriculum. The percentage was higher for principals serving in high-poverty schools and cities compared to principals in other schools. In addition, almost three-quarters of principals planning to leave their schools reported that they lacked the authority to dismiss poorly performing staff, compared to 64 percent of principals intent on staying.
- **Many principals reported facing obstacles to professional learning opportunities.** This was particularly true of opportunities for in-service professional development. Among all principals, three-fourths cited lack of time, and about a third cited lack of money. The most commonly cited obstacle to preservice professional preparation was the cost. Almost a quarter of all principals and almost a third of those planning to leave identified preparation program costs as a hurdle to accessing principal preparation. Across all principals, nearly all indicated a desire for additional professional development to meet their students' needs. The most frequent requests were for professional development to support students' social-emotional development and physical and mental health, leading schools to improve student achievement, using school and student data to inform continuous improvement, and focusing on students' higher-order thinking skills.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

There are key strategies that can be implemented at the local level to be responsive to these findings and to better prepare, develop, support, and retain effective school principals. Likewise, there are key opportunities at the state and federal levels to support these local efforts.

At the **local level**, policymakers should develop plans to support principals and retain effective leaders by finding out what they most need to support students and manage working conditions; supporting adequate compensation; creating helpful mechanisms for feedback, evaluation, and mentoring; and providing useful professional development. These plans could include advancing policies that:

1. **Support and retain effective principals by attending to their working conditions and school needs.** Working conditions and district supports emerged as key concerns for principals in our study, especially those considering leaving. While each school and district has a different context, our study suggests that district leaders should be alert to principals' workloads and seek to ensure, to the extent possible, that school administrative teams are appropriately staffed and supported to meet students' needs as well as staff needs. Further, central office policies should be responsive to principals, which may require increasing the information gathered from principals and collecting more principal input on district decisions that impact schools. This responsiveness should include strategies to keep effective principals, such as providing recognition, needed school resources, or more fiscal flexibility for successful principals.
2. **Support adequate and equitable principal compensation.** Our study showed that many principals found principal compensation inadequate and that those planning to leave were most likely to report this problem, often exacerbated by the problem of student debt from their preparation programs. In addition, our focus groups noted that principal salaries have not always kept pace with teacher salaries, especially when accounting for

principals' greater workload. Given the prevalence of these concerns, district leaders should review the competitiveness of salaries and consider other forms of compensation (such as student loan repayment or housing supports) that may be important to attracting and retaining principals.

3. **Create or sustain helpful mechanisms for principal feedback, evaluation, and mentoring.** Among surveyed principals who planned to leave, more than half reported that their district's evaluation system was not useful. As explained by our focus group participants, principals want timely feedback that they can use to improve their performance and support student learning. Other research suggests that districts that support, develop, and mentor principals can reduce the likelihood that principals will leave their schools or the profession.⁶⁷ District leaders can examine the usefulness of their principal support and evaluation systems, gathering input from principals as well as others in the district and community, with an eye toward sustaining practices that are helpful and creating new mechanisms and supports as needed.
4. **Provide principals with appropriate agency and support in decision making.** Some principals who planned to leave indicated that lack of autonomy in making decisions was related to their decision to leave. While most principals reported adequate authority over budget and hiring, more than two-thirds of all principals and three-quarters of principals considering leaving the principalship expressed that it is difficult to dismiss poor-performing or incompetent teachers. To help address this, districts can, for example, support principals with Peer Assistance and Review programs that provide mentors for struggling teachers to help improve their practice and provide due process that can support personnel decisions when they are needed.⁶⁸ Further, principal training for teacher support and evaluation should be provided, and their input in these types of critical decisions should be sought out and valued by district leaders.

5. **Remove barriers to principal professional development.** Many principals, not just those planning to leave, reported obstacles to in-service professional development, especially lack of time. As districts review principal workload, they should consider time for professional development as essential. District leaders who find that their principals do not have enough time to participate in professional development can consider remedies such as providing district staff support that frees principals' time; offering professional development at times and locations that are more convenient for principals; and working professional learning into the district feedback, evaluation, and mentoring systems.⁶⁹ Districts and schools can use both local funds and federal funds under ESSA Title II, Part A to address a number of obstacles, including the provision of timely, relevant content, and coverage, if needed, so principals can participate in professional development. Relevant content, according to the principals surveyed, includes professional development in supporting students' social and emotional development and physical and mental health, and leading school efforts to improve student achievement.

To support these local efforts, **state and federal** policymakers can:

6. **Assess and help improve working conditions for principals.** Working conditions are a top concern for principals considering leaving. **States** can support district efforts to assess working conditions and make needed changes. For example, many states gather data about working conditions for teachers through working conditions surveys, district and school report cards, and school improvement plans. Gathering this information for principals as well as teachers and other staff and aggregating it to the state level could help local leaders place their districts within a broader context, correctly identify areas that need improvement, and then make needed adjustments. States could also use the data to determine needs statewide and then target special efforts

at the neediest districts and regions. **Federal** data collection can also assist with these efforts. For example, the National Center on Education Statistics' principal surveys could expand the type of data collected on principal working conditions. State leaders could then use these data to understand their state's principal working conditions within a national context and to focus attention on their state's most pressing needs.

7. **Support local efforts to improve student supports.** As previously described, school principals cite the lack of adequate student support personnel to address the social-emotional and mental health needs of students as a challenge to their work, especially in high-poverty schools. **States** can make investments in these supports and leverage federal funding under ESSA Title IV, the Student Success and Academic Enrichment Grant program, to address these needs and to enhance resources for students and staff. At the **federal** level, this program should be fully and consistently funded at its authorized level of \$1.65 billion, substantially more than its current funding.
8. **Enable adequate and equitable principal compensation.** In our survey, larger percentages of principals who planned to leave their positions reported that compensation was a factor in their future plans. Notably, principals in high-poverty schools are most likely to find their salaries inadequate. Depending on the extent of local control, state leaders can establish or incentivize more competitive principal salaries across and within districts, or strengthen compensation through other vehicles, such as loan forgiveness or housing supports. States can also revamp their funding formulas to ensure that overall school funding is adequate and equitable, targeting additional funds to the most needy districts and schools, which will help districts provide more adequate compensation, especially in the communities where it is most needed.⁷⁰

9. **Create or expand programs that help underwrite the cost of high-quality principal preparation.**

A number of principals surveyed described the challenges of carrying a high student debt load from their teacher and principal preparation programs, which exacerbated the problems of inadequate compensation. This is especially true for principals working in high-poverty schools and rural communities. To address this challenge, states can provide funding to cover the cost of high-quality preparation in exchange for a commitment to serve in a high-poverty or rural school. These kinds of programs have been shown to be effective at recruiting doctors, nurses, and teachers, especially when they underwrite a significant portion of educational costs and are bureaucratically manageable for candidates, districts, and higher education institutions.⁷¹

One example, the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program, provides competitive, merit-based scholarship loans to individuals seeking a master's degree in school administration and a principal position in North Carolina public schools. In their first year, fellows receive \$30,000 to assist them with tuition, books, and living expenses while they study full time.⁷² In their second year, they complete a paid internship under the wing of an expert principal while they complete their coursework. As of 2015, 1,300 fellows had completed the program, and nearly 90 percent of principal fellows graduated and completed their four-year service commitment.⁷³ These types of scholarship programs could be developed and targeted to principals who commit to working in a high-need school.

To support and scale up these state efforts, **federal** funding under Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant program, which supports teacher preparation programs, could be expanded to include school principals. To further support principals' access to high-quality preparation, the TEACH Grant Program, under Title IV of the HEA, could be expanded to include principals in addition to teachers, covering their costs of preparation in exchange for service.

10. **Support local efforts to develop effective school leaders by increasing state and federal investments in high-quality professional development.** As the importance of strong principals has become increasingly clear, more states are increasing their commitments to funding principal professional learning opportunities through coaching, mentoring, and networks as well as through professional development courses, workshops, and conferences. Many states are seizing the opportunity under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Title II, Part A to allocate funding to evidence-based professional development, with nearly half of states taking advantage of the optional 3 percent set-aside for principals to invest in principal learning.⁷⁴ Further, ESSA, the most recent version of ESEA, is due for reauthorization in 2020, and its funding to support school principals could be expanded. Increasing overall funding and the set-aside for principals under this title would allow more principals to receive the high-quality preparation and professional development they need to be effective.

For example, **North Dakota** is using ESSA as an opportunity to create multi-tiered leadership support to develop principals as effective leaders. One tier involves implementation of a leadership academy to ensure that North Dakota principals have the resources and support they need to be effective leaders. The leadership academy will provide professional support, professional development, career ladder opportunities, assistance with administrator shortages, and support to address administrator retention in an effort to raise student achievement. The academy will also serve as a resource for schools designated as in need of improvement pursuant to ESSA, in an effort to promote and build capacity in specific aspects of leadership.⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

Principals are vital for ensuring student success.⁷⁶ Their actions can influence school climate, staff motivation, and teachers' practice. In doing so, they play a major role in retaining effective teachers and ensuring their success in the classroom.⁷⁷ Consequently, principal turnover is associated with a less-hospitable working environment resulting in higher teacher turnover and, ultimately, lower gains in student achievement.⁷⁸

Despite the power of principals, some federal, state, and local systems may be contributing to conditions that do not support them, especially in communities faced with concentrated levels of student need. Our study found that principals varied in the degree to which they reported the conditions related to principal turnover and their intentions to leave their positions. In general, larger percentages of principals planning to leave reported adverse conditions. In several instances, larger percentages of principals in high-poverty, city, and rural schools also reported these challenging conditions. Further, the percentage of principals planning to leave was higher in our survey than in the national data that document principals' actual mobility.⁷⁹ These findings underscore that much could be done to stem principal turnover.

State and district leaders and policymakers could implement a number of strategies to increase principal retention: improve working conditions, provide fair, sufficient compensation, decrease counterproductive accountability practices, provide appropriate decision-making authority, and offer effective and ongoing professional development. Further, states and the federal government could play a vital role in ensuring that high-quality principal preparation and professional development is available to help principals obtain the necessary skills and competencies for strong school leadership. With more principals well-prepared and supported throughout their careers, better working conditions, fair compensation, formative, nonpunitive accountability systems, and appropriate decision-making authority, our survey and focus group data suggests, fewer principals may make plans to leave their positions. Keeping more of the nation's effective principals in schools has the potential to increase teacher quality and retention, enhance school climates, and improve student outcomes.



APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, LPI surveyed a representative sample of NASSP-affiliated principals and conducted focus groups with educational leaders.

REPRESENTATIVE SURVEY OF NASSP-AFFILIATED PRINCIPALS

In partnership with the NASSP in spring 2019, LPI contracted with WestEd to administer a survey to a sample of 1,500 principals drawn by NASSP from that organization's proprietary membership database. The database includes NASSP members (13 percent) and leaders of schools with an active chapter of the National Honor Society (NHS) or National Junior Honor Society (NJHS), student leadership programs administered by NASSP (58 percent), and principals who are both NASSP members and have an active NHS or NJHS chapter (29 percent). WestEd launched the survey in June 2019 using the Qualtrics online survey platform.

Survey content. The survey was based in part on a questionnaire administered in 2017 to a representative sample of California principals.⁸⁰ It was designed to help understand principals' learning experiences and needs for supporting classrooms, developing adults as members of an instructional team, and managing change. The survey covered both principal preparation and professional development experiences, working conditions, compensation, accountability, decision-making authority, and plans to leave or stay in the profession.

Sampling design. In an attempt to reflect the national population of school principals, the survey sample ($n = 1,500$) drawn from the NASSP membership database was stratified by school locale type, size (total enrollment), and the percentages of students of color and students eligible for the federal lunch program. Researchers requested that NASSP randomly select principals of schools within each stratum so that the sample reflected the universe of public schools as found in National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD).

Data collection. The key components of data collection included a joint prenotification email from NASSP and LPI encouraging participation, an email invitation from NASSP to participate in the survey (including a direct link to the survey), a conditional postpaid incentive in the form of a \$20 Amazon.com gift code, biweekly email reminders to nonrespondents from NASSP and/or LPI, and a reminder letter mailed to nonresponding school sites containing \$1.

After removing all bounced emails and instances where individual spot checking revealed that the name or email address of the nonresponding school's current principal did not match the information on NASSP's list, the number of potential survey respondents totaled 1,063. When the survey closed in mid-September 2019, the project had achieved a response rate of 40 percent (424 respondents). WestEd then prepared the data file for LPI that included survey response data and school-level demographics (derived from NCES CCD using the NCES school codes provided to WestEd by NASSP).

Nonresponse. As shown in Table A1, although some school characteristics were similar in the target sample and the responding sample (which was drawn to represent the universe of public schools), the distribution by school locale differed. The responding sample had comparable proportions of middle schools and high schools as the target sample, but it had a slightly larger percentage of principals serving suburban schools and rural communities and towns and a smaller percentage serving cities. Principals in our sample also served disproportionately in schools that had fewer students of color and fewer students from low-income families. It is possible that NASSP members from a more representative sample of schools would offer different responses. To capture some of these potential differences, we disaggregated survey responses by high-poverty schools (those with 75 percent or more students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) compared to all other schools and by locale (city, suburb, and rural and town combined). We report these disaggregated survey responses when they differ significantly from the aggregate responses.

Participants. Our sample was selected to represent schools in the United States rather than principal characteristics, which are not part of the NASSP database. Respondent demographics, however, are still important for creating a complete description of our surveyed principals. Table A2 shows demographic information for secondary school principals nationally compared to our survey respondents.

Analysis. The survey data were analyzed using appropriate descriptive statistics, primarily frequencies, to show the overall percentages of principals' responses to each item. For our analyses, we created three groups of principal responses: all principals who responded, principals who intended to leave their positions (either to transfer to another school or to leave the principalship altogether), and all other principals (we called this group "principals planning to stay"). This allowed us to examine differences in frequencies among these groups.

We collected information about principals who were considering retiring, but we did not ask whether they were considering retiring due to dissatisfaction with the principalship or simply due to personal reasons. Of those saying they plan to leave their schools, 24 percent also indicated that they were considering retiring in the next three years. Among principals planning to stay, 25 percent indicated that they were considering retiring in the next three years. Because we were unsure of their reasons for considering retiring, we left these principals in either the leaver or stayer group based on their indication of their plans to leave. Exploration of the data showed that percentages would not have differed substantially if we excluded these principals.

For ease of interpretation, we frequently categorized like survey items and considered frequencies within categories. For example, we considered response patterns for all items related to the category "district supports." Finally, we used inferential statistical methods, such as chi square analyses, to identify any statistically significant differences between high-poverty schools compared to all other schools and between schools by locale. We discuss results by poverty or locale only when these differences were statistically significant.

FOCUS GROUPS

We conducted six focus groups of school principals to better understand the factors influencing their workforce entry and exit decisions, their working conditions, their views about their compensation, their perceptions about accountability systems, and their decision-making authority, as well as to learn about the current preparation and support leaders receive. The 33 focus group members included 30 principals, one associate principal, and two district administrators from urban, rural, and suburban districts in 26 states. The focus groups were conducted with school leaders who attended NASSP's national professional learning and advocacy conferences in March and July 2019.

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. We used Dedoose coding software to identify emphasized topics and emergent themes. We continued to refine our analysis through an iterative process of comparing the focus group results, survey data, and the literature on principal turnover.

TABLE A1: CHARACTERISTICS OF TARGET SAMPLE AND RESPONDING SCHOOLS

School Characteristics	Percentages	
	Target Sample (n = 1,500)	Responding to NASSP-LPI Survey (n = 424)
Locale		
City	29.2	24.2
Suburban	49.1	50.6
Rural and Town	21.7	25.1
Size (total enrollment)		
Under 500	19.9	22.6
500–1,499	55.6	53.4
1,500 or more	24.5	24.0
Students of color^a		
0–24%	32.7	41.9
25–49%	25.7	24.2
50–74%	17.9	16.7
75–100%	23.7	17.2
Students eligible for federal lunch program		
0–24%	22.2	26.1
25–49%	31.9	32.7
50–74%	22.2	24.5
75–100%	23.6	16.7
School type level		
High	68.8	69.2
Middle	30.9	30.8
Other	0.3	0

^a Students of color include students who are American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Latino/a, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, two or more races, or who did not specify their ethnicity.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, file ccd_SCH_129_1718_w_1a_083118, file ccd_SCH_033_1718_l_1a_083118, 2017–18, file ccd_SCH_052_1718_l_1a_083118, 2017–18, file ccd_SCH_029_1718_w_1a_083118, 2017–18, Version Provisional 1a.

TABLE A2: CHARACTERISTICS OF NATIONAL PRINCIPAL SAMPLE AND RESPONDING PRINCIPALS

Demographic Characteristics	Percentages	
	National Teacher and Principal Survey 2015–2016*	Responding to NASSP-LPI Survey (n = 424)
Race/Ethnicity		
White, not Latino/a	78.1	82.6
Black, not Latino/a	10.4	4.9
Latino/a, of any race	7.8	4.9
Asian, not Latino/a	1.2	0.7
American Indian/ Alaska Native, not Latino/a	0.6	0.2
Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander, not Latino/a	0.3	0.2
Two or more races, not Latino/a	1.6	1.5
Gender		
Male	63.9	66.6
Female	36.1	33.4
Total years of experience as a principal		
3 years or less	20.4	19.4
4 to 6 years	31.7	23.8
7 to 9 years	13.3	21.7
More than 10 years	34.6	35.1
Age		
Less than 30 years old	0.4	0.0
30–44 years old	41.4	30.3
45–54 years old	38.0	49.1
55–64 years old	18.0	19.3
>65 years old	2.3	1.3

Note: The NTPS 2015–16 dataset contained responses from 2,360 principals from middle and high schools. The proportions presented in the table are weighted population estimates derived from these responses.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal Data File,” 2015–16 and NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and voice for principals and other school leaders across the United States. NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student's potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the National Honor Society, National Junior Honor Society, National Elementary Honor Society, and National Student Council.

The NASSP Policy & Advocacy Center is a trusted resource and online hub for legislative news, policy information, data, research, and advocacy tools related to K-12 education and additional school leaders' interests. It elevates the influence of school leaders by providing ways for them to directly communicate with policymakers at all levels of government. It is also a space to learn about important education issues affecting schools and serves as a portal through which stakeholders and constituents can take action.

ABOUT THE LEARNING POLICY INSTITUTE

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.



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