

RAND Education

# Who Is Leading Our Schools?

*An Overview of School Administrators  
and Their Careers*

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Prepared for the  
Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds

The research described in this report was supported by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Gates, Susan M., 1968–

Who is leading our schools? : an overview of school administrators and their careers / Susan M. Gates, Jeanne Ringel, Lucrecia Santibanez, with Catherine Chung and Karen Ross.

p. cm.

“MR-1679.”

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8330-3353-0 (alk. paper)

1. School administrators—United States. 2. Educational leadership—United States. I. Ringel, Jeanne S. II. Santibanez, Lucrecia. III. Title.

LB2831.82.G39 2003

371.2'011—dc21

2003002130

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Published 2003 by RAND

1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138

1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050

201 North Craig Street, Suite 202, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-1516

RAND URL: <http://www.rand.org/>

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Some policymakers are concerned that just as state and federal governments are increasing school accountability requirements and relying on school administrators to promote improvement, schools and districts are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and retain people to fill school administrative positions and to do the job well. Several remedies for this perceived problem have been proposed, most of them grounded on little concrete information on the nature of the labor market for school administrators.

As part of the Wallace-Readers Digest Funds LEADERS Count initiative, RAND undertook a study to examine what the existing research and empirical data can reveal about the careers of school administrators. This was seen as a way to begin building a solid understanding of school administrative career paths and the challenges facing schools that employ these administrators.

This report develops a conceptual structure for understanding the careers of school administrators. Focusing on school principalships and superintendencies as important and readily identifiable positions, it emphasizes the fact that a career in school administration involves many steps and that it is important to consider the different paths people take to these high-visibility positions. The authors describe what is known about the individuals who hold administrative positions and how their characteristics have changed over time. They also describe what is known about the factors expected to influence individuals' decisions to seek particular administrative positions, focusing particularly on wages, working conditions, and barriers. The report should be of interest to education policymakers at the national, state, and local levels, as well as to educational researchers and practitioners.

Future RAND research will build on this base, examining the careers of school administrators in several states in greater detail.

This research was funded by the Wallace Funds and was conducted within RAND Education. This effort reflects RAND Education's mission to bring accurate data and careful, objective analysis to the national debate on education policy.

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The recently passed No Child Left Behind legislation reflects the increasing visibility and importance of school administration in the larger education reform effort. But just when the role of school administrators is being emphasized, policymakers and the public are becoming increasingly concerned that there is or soon will be a shortage of qualified individuals to fill formal school and district management positions. This concern stems primarily from the perception that a large number of people are leaving school administrative positions, that districts are having a hard time replacing those who leave, and that replacements often lack the skills necessary to succeed in school administration.

To know whether the United States is indeed facing a crisis in the recruitment and retention of school administrators, the Wallace-Readers Digest Funds asked RAND to conduct a systematic analysis of the career patterns of school administrators, including the moves they make into and out of the profession and the factors that might be expected to influence those moves.

### **WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT THE CAREERS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS**

Our study provides descriptive information about school administrators and their careers. We examined

- The characteristics of school administrators.
- Movement into, out of, and within the school administrative career field.
- Incentives for movement into, out of, and between school administrative positions.

We looked at current conditions as well as changes over time. We also examined how the observable characteristics of schools relate to the careers of school administrators. Our study does not constitute a complete analysis of the potential shortage of capable school administrators, however, since it focuses solely on supply, and a complete analysis must consider supply, demand, and the relationship between the two. A related report, also sponsored by the Wallace Funds (Roza et al., 2002), links supply and demand in an analysis of principal shortages in specific districts.

In this report, we present the conceptual framework we developed to describe the careers of school administrators. We then use this framework as a structure for discussing both the research that has been conducted on the subject and our original analyses of existing national data.

Although the existing data provide a useful starting point for developing an understanding of school administrative careers, they do not provide a long-run look at the careers of individual administrators. Better, longitudinal data are needed to conduct a more robust and complete assessment of these careers.

### **THE NUMBER OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS IS STABLE BUT THE PROFESSION IS AGING**

Our examination of the characteristics of school administrators revealed a professional area experiencing neither tremendous growth nor tremendous decline. This finding is evident in the trends among principals, who represent nearly half of all school administrators. According to the most recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), the number of principals grew by over 7 percent for public schools and by over 3 percent for private schools between the 1987–1988 and 1999–2000 school years. The national trends obscure some important regional variations, however; and high rates of growth in the numbers of schools and administrative positions in the West may be putting pressure on labor markets in some states.<sup>1</sup> The 1990s also saw dramatic progress in the representation of women in the principalship, as well as somewhat less dramatic progress in the representation of racial/ethnic minorities.

Perhaps the most striking finding of our analysis is that the nation's principals are growing older as a group. From 1987–1988 to 1999–2000, the average age of principals increased from 47.8 to 49.3 in the public sector and from 46.0 to 49.9 in the private sector. Moreover, not only are principals aging overall, but those entering the principalship for the first time are getting older. In 1987–1988, 38 percent of new public school principals were 40 or younger; by 1999–2000, only 12 percent were in this age group. A similar though less dramatic shift in age distribution occurred for new private school principals.

Our analysis also suggests that school and district hiring decisions with regard to new principals and the retirement programs that are in place may be contributing to this aging trend. Schools, particularly public schools, are now less likely to hire people under 40 into a principalship than they were a decade ago. These new principals thus will spend fewer years in the labor force before reaching retirement age. This finding is of particular concern in the public sector, where principals appear to be much less likely to remain on the job after 55.

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<sup>1</sup>The number of principals alone has increased by 18 percent in public schools and 13.8 percent in private schools in this area of the country.

## **THERE IS LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ARE BEING LURED INTO OTHER CAREER FIELDS**

A review of the rates at which school administrators leave their professional field provided no evidence of a recent exodus. Over the sample period (1983–1999), exit rates ranged from 15 to 33 percent per year, with no evident time trend. A similarly large fraction of individuals, 19 to 29 percent, entered school administration each year. Nor was there evidence that administrators left to take jobs in other sectors of the economy. On average, those leaving school administration experienced a decrease in the average number of hours worked per week and in average wage. These trends do not support the contention that people are being lured away from school administration into other careers.

There also appears to have been no major shift in the factors one would expect to influence entry into and exit from the school administration field. For example, we found that the compensation of school administrators kept pace with that of other managerial professions in the public and private sectors.

Moreover, we found that while private school administrators, and principals in particular, still earn less than their public school counterparts, the earnings gap has decreased. In addition, the average experience of private school principals has increased by over two years since 1987–1988, while that of public school principals has declined. It is thus possible that in the future, traditional public schools may face greater competition from private schools for school administrators.

### **Possible Administrative Career Barriers and Incentives**

Some policymakers have wondered whether state-level certification requirements deter people, particularly those without teaching backgrounds, from entering the field of school administration. This issue becomes particularly salient if there are not enough people to fill school administrative positions, but it may also be of general interest. Most states have detailed education and experience requirements for public school administrators, but many states are contemplating changes to their requirements and/or alternative certification routes because they are concerned about a shortage of people qualified to assume administrative positions. Certification requirements can indeed pose a barrier that inhibits movement into the field, but we found that the number of people *certified* for, and thus officially qualified to fill, existing school administrative positions appears to be adequate.

Overall, individuals appear to have financial incentives to move into and through the school administrative field. Teaching is the most common gateway into most administrative positions: Over 99 percent of public school principals and nearly 90 percent of public school superintendents and private school principals have some teaching experience. In general, the financial incentives for individuals to move from teaching to administration appear to be moderate. And although the financial rewards of school administration relative to those of teaching have varied over time and declined slightly through the 1990s, we found (after controlling for the number

of months worked per year) that public school principals earned on average about 33 percent more per year than experienced teachers in the same school did. Private school principals earned 44 percent more. Moreover, our literature review showed that the average salary of principals was greater than that of assistant principals, and that superintendents and senior district administrators earned more than principals did.

### **Salary Variations Across Schools and States**

Nothing we have said denies that an individual teacher might have to take a pay cut to move into the principalship. The average salary differential between principals and experienced teachers obscures some important variations across schools and states. We found schools where principals earned less than experienced teachers did, and we found schools where principals earned twice as much or more. However, overall, principals seemed to earn more than experienced teachers in the same school did, and we found no *systematic* patterns suggesting that certain types of schools offer principals more than they offer teachers.

### **PRINCIPALS ARE NOT FLEEING SCHOOLS SERVING DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS**

We found no evidence that the more-experienced principals were systematically choosing not to work in urban schools serving larger populations of disadvantaged students—i.e., minority, low-income,<sup>2</sup> or limited English proficient (LEP) students. On average, principals at schools with observable characteristics typically assumed to pose greater challenges were found to have the same level of experience as principals at other schools did.

This lack of variation in principals' experience by school characteristics, or sorting, is particularly interesting in view of another one of our findings: Principals' perceptions of school problems varied in systematic ways according to a school's observable characteristics. Principals reported more school problems when they worked in public schools, in schools with a higher proportion of low-income students, in high schools, and in schools with larger enrollments.

We also found that salaries were adjusted to pay principals more highly for working in schools with observable characteristics often associated with more problems. In addition, principals' salaries varied in systematic ways with other observable school characteristics: Public school principals earned substantially more than private school principals did, high school principals earned more than elementary school principals did, and principals of larger schools tended to earn more than principals of smaller schools did.

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<sup>2</sup>Low-income students are defined as those qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch programs.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Our analysis provides no evidence to support the idea that there is a nationwide crisis in the ability of schools to attract and retain school administrators, and thus does not argue for nationwide policies aimed at attracting more people into the field of school administration. Nevertheless, it does raise some important issues for policy-makers and education administrators to consider.

### **Public School Systems Should Look for Ways to Respond to Aging Trends in the Principalship**

The principalship is an aging profession, and many states, schools, and districts are concerned about the proportion of principals they will have to replace due to retirement in the next five years. Our analysis suggests that the aggregation of local hiring decisions that typically place a premium on experience may be contributing to the situation. The profession is aging not just because people hired into administrative positions 25 years ago are getting ready to retire, but also because many schools are hiring first-time principals who are already close to retirement age. Schools, districts, and states may benefit from thinking of how to reach out to younger people as a way to create a group of administrators whose careers can be longer. At the same time, public school systems could look at their retirement systems, which appear to create incentives for individuals to retire or leave the education system at a relatively young age.

### **Local-Level Data and Analyses of the Careers of School Administrators Are Needed**

While the data provide no evidence of a nationwide crisis, they do not dispute the notion that individual schools and districts may be having difficulty finding or retaining administrators. A comparison of schools and districts that have similar observable characteristics but differ as to whether they are struggling to attract and retain school administrators may be particularly useful. Our analysis suggests that there are important differences in the challenges faced by different states and provides support for a detailed state-level analysis of the careers of school administrators. Such an analysis is the best way to understand local variation and to continuously monitor the challenges. In our view, solutions must be devised and implemented at the local or, perhaps, the state level.

### **Policymakers Should Further Examine the Forms of Entry into the School Administrative Field**

Since teaching is the main gateway to school administration, schools and districts need to attract high-quality potential administrators into the teaching pool and to ensure that some teachers have an incentive to move into school administration. To

this end, policymakers should further examine the relationship between the labor market for teachers and that for school administrators. Given that all school administrators together are a small group relative to all teachers, only a small fraction of teachers need to make the move to school administration to ensure adequate supply. In addition, formal barriers, such as certification requirements, and informal district hiring practices all but exclude those without teaching experience from consideration for administrative positions. Therefore, if policymakers are serious about drawing people from outside education into school administration, they must address these barriers to the profession as well.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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We would like to thank the Wallace-Readers Digest Funds for supporting this research and for bringing together a community of scholars, policymakers, and practitioners committed to improving school leadership. Our research effort benefited greatly from interactions with other Wallace Funds grantees too numerous to mention here.

We thank Dominic Brewer for the guidance he provided as director of the program under which this report was produced, as well as RAND colleague Tom Glennan for his helpful guidance at several stages of the research. We benefited from conversations and collaborations with Jim Wyckoff, Frank Papa, Hamilton Lankford, Raymond Kesper, and James Kadamus, and from extensive interaction with University of Washington researchers who are also conducting research on school leadership issues.

Susan Bodilly, Eric Eide, Cassandra Guarino, and Sheila Kirby provided helpful reviews of an earlier version of this report. Our earlier versions also benefited from comments of seminar participants at RAND, the University of Washington, and the Education Commission of the States, as well as from Marguerite Roza. Donna White provided helpful secretarial support; Kristin Leuschner helped revise sections of the document to improve the presentation; Jeri O'Donnell carefully edited the final copy.

Ed Pauly, Kim Jinnett, Peter Kleinbard, Lee Mitgang, and Judith Johnson of the Wallace Funds gave us useful feedback on the research leading up to this report and on drafts of the report.

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

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AASA	American Association of School Administrators
BIA	Bureau of Indian Affairs
BLS	Bureau of Labor Statistics
BRR	Balance Repeated Replication
CEO	chief executive officer
CPI	consumer price index
CPS	Current Population Survey
DoD	Department of Defense
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
GS	General Schedule
LEP	Limited English Proficient
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
ORG	Outgoing Rotation Group
PEP	Principals' Executive Program
SASS	Schools and Staffing Survey