Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers and the public are becoming increasingly concerned that there is or soon will be a shortage of qualified individuals to fill formal management positions in our nation’s school districts (Colvin, 2000). This concern has several important and distinct dimensions:

• A large number of people are leaving school administrative positions.¹
• Districts have a hard time finding people to replace those who leave.
• The replacements often lack the skills required to succeed in school administrative positions.

Press reports paint a picture of an exodus of principals, highlighting annual turnover rates as high as 20 percent among principals in several states, including Vermont, Washington, Kentucky, and Texas (Steinberg, 2000). Although school administrators leave their positions for many reasons (including retirement), schools and districts are particularly worried by testimonials from former principals who decided to return to teaching because the modest pay increase accompanying their administrative role did not offset the increased time requirements, stress, and other demands of the job (Steinberg, 2000).

Not only do administrators seem to be leaving at alarming rates, but schools appear to be having a hard time replacing them. In Vermont, several retired principals agreed to return on an interim basis until a permanent principal could be found. In New York City schools, where the turnover rate can exceed 25 percent over a two-year period, the 2000–2001 school year began with 163 temporary principals (Steinberg, 2000), and over half of the city’s principals had three or fewer years of experience (Archer, 2002a). In Los Angeles, a threatened shortage of principals led the Los Angeles Unified School District to call on retired principals to temporarily fill the gaps (Sahagun, 2000). State certification requirements might be posing a barrier for teachers who would like to become administrators, but the evidence shows that teachers who already have administrative credentials sometimes choose to remain in

¹School administrators are those filling a variety of school-, district-, and state-level management positions in the K–12 school system. Principals and district superintendents are the most visible administrators, but there are many others as well, such as assistant principals, district business managers, and regional superintendents.
the classroom rather than assume the burden of an administrative position. Teachers reportedly are deterred by the comparatively longer hours and administrative activities involved in the job (Steinberg, 2000).

The third concern is that schools, faced with a shrinking pool of qualified people from which to select administrators for increasing numbers of vacancies, will end up filling positions with people of lesser quality, thus jeopardizing quality (Houston, 2000).

Policymakers at the national, state, and local levels have been working on ways to address the perceived recruiting and retention challenges in various ways. Nationally, the Council of Chief State School Officers has emphasized quality and preparation issues. It has been pushing for adoption of a set of professional standards to link attributes of school administrators to improved student outcomes (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996), and the Education Testing Service has developed two assessments—one for principals and one for superintendents. Nine states and the District of Columbia require the first test as part of the licensure process for principals. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is spearheading an effort to create a system of advanced certification for school administrators based on the existing national teacher certification effort (Archer, 2002b).

At the state level, there are calls to change administrative certification requirements in hopes of attracting new people into the field (e.g., by offering an "alternative route to certification" for those with non-educational career backgrounds). Some states are also trying to improve the quality of training that principals receive or to make it easier for people to acquire the training. For example, in 1984 the North Carolina General Assembly established the Principals’ Executive Program (PEP), a professional development program for principals, assistant principals, and other administrative personnel in North Carolina’s public schools. Nearly all of the program costs are covered by state funds; in the 2001–2002 fiscal year, PEP received a state appropriation of $1.6 million (Principals’ Executive Program, 2002).

At the local level, many districts—particularly large urban districts—are trying to facilitate recruiting by increasing the supply of people interested in and qualified for school administrative positions through mentoring programs (Colvin, 2000). Some districts, such as New York City, have principal institutes that identify excellent teachers and encourage and prepare them to become successful administrators (Crow, Mecklowitz, and Weekes, 1992). Grow-your-own programs (Johnson and Douglas, 1990) allow districts to develop a pool of potential administrators over time from the pool of current teachers. In addition, some districts have increased their administrative salaries, often in targeted ways.

While efforts at all levels appear to be reasonable, each makes a different claim with regard to the underlying causes of the challenges schools and districts face in trying to recruit and retain school administrators. Some responses suggest that low pay is a  

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2Available at http://www.ets.org/sls/index.html.
key issue, others that working conditions are problematic, and others that certification is a barrier to recruitment.

An empirically based understanding of the career patterns of school administrators, the moves they make, and the factors that might be expected to influence those moves can provide some understanding of the supply side of the labor market for school administrators. This can be a first step toward ascertaining whether the nation is truly facing a crisis in recruitment and retention and, if it is, what the potential causes of the crisis are. It can also contribute to the overall policy debate. Our study establishes an empirical baseline both for considering the claims about causes underlying the challenges in recruiting and retaining school administrators and for evaluating potential solutions for those challenges.

STUDY OBJECTIVE AND APPROACH

Our study’s goal was to answer four key questions about the careers of school administrators:

- What are the characteristics of school administrators, and how have they changed over time?
- What kinds of movement into and out of the school administrative career field are occurring, and what factors are likely to affect these movements?
- What kinds of movement between the different types of positions within the administrative career path are occurring?
- What kinds of movement are occurring within the principalship, and what do they reveal about the relationship between position turnover and observable school characteristics?

We began our study by developing a conceptual framework for understanding the careers of school administrators. We then used the framework to summarize what is currently known about school administrators and their careers and to address the four key questions listed above. Our summary draws on a broad review of the existing literature as well as our analyses of such career-related issues as salary, career paths, and attitudes using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) data from the U.S. Department of Education and the Current Population Survey (CPS) from the U.S. Census Bureau.

SCOPE OF STUDY

The Wallace-Readers Digest Funds LEADERS Count initiative focuses on promoting the improvement of school leadership, broadly defined. Our study focused more narrowly, on understanding the careers of those who currently hold traditionally defined positions of responsibility and authority in primary and secondary schools (mainly principals and superintendents). While such individuals are an important aspect of school leadership, current discussions on ways to improve school leadership focus on the roles played by people throughout the school system (Resnick and
Glennan, 2002) and on redefining the role of the principal and/or superintendent (Portin et al., 2003).

Our research was directed at understanding what existing data and research can tell us about the individuals who hold formal positions of responsibility and authority, as currently defined, in schools. Thus, this study should be viewed as a complement to current research on the role of principals and the role of school leadership in education reform.

In press reports and policy debates, there is much discussion about the “shortage” of principals and school administrators. Our study is related to and can inform a discussion of this shortage, but a complete analysis of a shortage must consider supply, demand, and the relationship between the two. By focusing on the careers of school administrators, we have analyzed the supply but not the demand. 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.

REPORT OVERVIEW

Chapter Two presents a conceptual framework of the career flow of school administrators that can aid in understanding the key factors that may contribute to the perception that there is or will be a crisis in recruiting and retaining school administrators. Chapter Three provides a descriptive overview of current school administrators based on empirical data; it also points out major national trends and differences between the public and private sectors. Chapters Four, Five, and Six focus on the moves administrators make over the course of their careers and the factors likely to influence those moves. Chapter Four describes what is known about movement into and out of the school administrative career field; Chapter Five addresses how school administrators progress through positions within the career field; Chapter Six looks specifically at the moves school principals make. Chapter Seven then presents our conclusions and provides suggestions for future research.

The main body of this report highlights the key results of our analyses without delving into technical detail. This information should be of interest to a wide audience, including policymakers concerned about school leadership issues, school administrators at various levels, and education researchers. Readers interested in more detail—researchers and those concerned with specific issues—are directed to Appendices A through D, where they will find a full description of the research methodology, including a description of the databases and a full set of regression results. Appendix A gives an overview of the SASS, summarizing the information related to administrative careers that is available from the survey’s different waves. Appendix B presents regression analyses using the SASS database. Appendix C contains an analysis of the relationship between observable school characteristics and principals’ reports of school problems, using principals’ responses to questions about school problems contained in the SASS. Appendix D covers an analysis we did using the CPS to examine salary trends of school administrators relative to those of other, similar professionals.