Formal leadership positions in K–12 education are assumed by people with experience—usually in the education system, but sometimes in other settings as well. It is impossible to consider concerns about the ability of schools to hire school administrators without recognizing the paths people take to those positions. Teaching is considered to be a valuable experience for school administrators, which is why most school administrators are teachers before beginning their administrative careers. Only a minority of school administrators enter the field directly, without working as teachers first.

This chapter discusses the careers of school administrators, starting with a framework and then turning to entries into and exits out of the field. Movement within the field itself is discussed in Chapter Five.

**ADMINISTRATIVE CAREER FLOW FRAMEWORK**

Figure 2.1 describes our conceptualization of the overall career flow for school administrators. As shown in the diagram, the flow is not unidirectional—people move into and out of different positions for different reasons at different stages of their career. Also shown is that the administrative career field includes not only the principalship and superintendency, but other administrative positions at both the school and the district level (such as assistant principal, business manager, and public affairs specialist). We use this figure to structure our discussion of what we found about the careers of school administrators.

We found no published research that considers the career flow of school administrators in its entirety. Instead, the literature focuses on specific pieces of the whole. For example, there is a large body of literature on the careers of teachers that tries to understand entry into, progression within, and exit from the teacher labor force. This research demonstrates that compensation is an important component of teachers’ entry and exit decisions (see, e.g., Murnane and Olsen, 1989; Murnane et al., 1991). However, this literature treats all exits from teaching positions in the same way, ignoring the fact that it would be quite natural for successful teachers to move into the administrative career field at some point. Moreover, while the data on teachers are good, as are those on principals and, to some extent, superintendents, the data on other school administrators are extremely limited.
Entries into and exits from the administrative career field reflect individuals’ decisions to enter or leave, respectively, any position within that field. The career field boundary draws a line between positions in that career field and other activities—e.g., teaching, retirement, unemployment, or employment in any position outside the career field.

When examining career flow, it is important to consider the scope of the career field. For example, if one studies career flow at the national level and considers only movements into and out of the administrative career field at that level, one may overlook important differences across states or districts. If one focuses on the district level only, one may find a very high level of exit or turnover when people are, in fact, not leaving the school administrative field but, rather, just moving across districts. We chose to use existing literature and data to say as much as possible about administrative career paths from a national, state, and local perspective.

Public policymakers may want to determine whether public school administrators are leaving their jobs for similar positions in private schools. To do so, they would have to define the career field in terms of public school administration only and treat moves from the public to the private sector as movement out of the career field. Similarly, policymakers interested in the extent to which individuals are crossing state or district lines would have to think of the career field in terms of the state or district.
USING THE FRAMEWORK TO SYNTHESIZE INFORMATION ON THE CAREERS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

We use our administrative career flow framework (see Figure 2.1) to summarize what we currently know about school administrators and their careers. Our discussion of the moves administrators make is divided into three parts: moves into and out of the school administrative career field, moves within the administrative career field, and, finally, moves within one of the positions, the principalship. Each type of move sheds light on different elements of the recruiting and retention issue, as follows:

- **Movement into and out of the school administrative career field** may be influenced by how attractive school administration is relative to teaching, positions outside of education, and leisure/retirement. Examination of this topic helps inform the question of whether school administrators are being lured away from careers in education by more-attractive alternatives, and whether there is an incentive for teachers to move into administration.

- **Movement within the administrative career field** may be influenced by the incentives individuals are offered to move into different positions.

- **Movement within the principalship** may be influenced by the relative attractiveness of different jobs. Examination of this topic allows us to consider whether some schools are at an advantage or disadvantage in attracting and retaining principals and whether there may a “crisis” for particular types of schools even if there is no nationwide crisis.

We examine two types of evidence related to the moves individuals make: straightforward information on the moves themselves—i.e., the number of people moving into and out of particular positions and trends over time—and the factors that would be expected to influence these moves based on a simple labor market perspective that assumes individuals choose whether or not to accept positions.

The three key factors that would be expected to influence individual choices about different jobs are monetary compensation, working conditions, and entry barriers (both formal and informal). Monetary compensation is an obvious factor to consider in evaluating a job’s relative attractiveness. All other things being equal, we would expect people to gravitate toward jobs that pay more. But all other things usually are not equal, and different jobs are often associated with different amenities and dis-amenities.

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1 One may be concerned that reality does not correspond with this “choice” model of administrative labor markets, corresponding to a queuing/assignment model instead. In the latter, administrative jobs are attractive, there are more people seeking them than there are positions available, and the hiring entity (in this case, the district) is able to assign individuals to jobs. While we acknowledge that some districts do adopt an assignment approach, such districts still face competition from other districts in the sense that an administrator can choose to move to a neighboring district rather than accept an unwanted assignment. In that sense, then, an individual administrator can exercise employment choice even in a queuing/assignment model, except when there is a general oversupply of those who want to be administrators at current salaries across all districts in an area.
The theory of compensating differentials argues that individuals consider both monetary and non-monetary benefits and costs associated with different jobs when choosing whether and where to work (Rosen, 1986). In other words, people think of their “real wage” as a combination of what they are paid and the working conditions (both positive and negative) they experience in performing their job. They attribute a positive value to a job’s desirable characteristics and a negative value to its undesirable characteristics and then essentially add the positives to and subtract the negatives from what they are paid when comparing different job opportunities. The more other options individuals have, the more they need to be paid to accept undesirable work characteristics, such as on-the-job stress, health and safety risks, an unpleasant work location, an inflexible or unattractive work schedule (such as night-shift work), a lack of autonomy, and a lack of job security.

Generally speaking, employers do not create unfavorable working conditions to torture employees; certain undesirable characteristics just go along with particular jobs. The theory of compensating differentials supposes that employers have some latitude to improve working conditions at a cost and that they make a financial tradeoff between paying higher wages and providing better working conditions. If labor markets are competitive, the theory predicts that wages will be higher for jobs with poorer working conditions. However, this general result can be confounded by unionization and collective bargaining (Daniel and Sofer, 1998). For example, if some companies have unions with greater bargaining strength and if a strong union is able to negotiate both better working conditions and better wages for its members, we might expect to see a positive relationship between working conditions and wages.

In sum, the theory of compensating differentials suggests that the more demanding the job in terms of time required, skills needed, job stress, etc., the higher the compensation individuals will demand to do the job. Conversely, the intrinsic rewards of a job, such as feeling that one is doing interesting work or contributing to society, or the prestige associated with leading a successful school, can reduce the required monetary compensation. The literature on compensating differentials informed our analyses of moves into and out of the administrative career field, within the field itself, and across schools.

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2This simplistic overview of the theory assumes that all workers are of the same quality or have the same skills. Extensions of the basic theory allow for variation in quality across workers and cause employers to make tradeoffs between wages, working conditions, and worker quality. For example, an employer may choose to offer both lower wages and worse working conditions and simply accept the fact that the workers he gets will be of lower quality.

3For example, teachers might be willing to trade salary increases for smaller class sizes.

4Herzberg (1987) makes a distinction between job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction, emphasizing that one is not simply the opposite of the other. Job satisfaction typically stems from factors intrinsic to the job, such as achievement, recognition of achievement, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement. Job dissatisfaction tends to be caused primarily by factors extrinsic to the job, such as company policy and administration, supervision, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, salary, status, and security. Herzberg argues that the presence of negative extrinsic factors can make a job unpleasant, but that the absence of such factors or the presence of positive extrinsic factors does not necessarily make a job pleasant. Instead, people typically find a job pleasant when positive intrinsic factors exist.
In addition to monetary compensation and working conditions, we also consider barriers, such as certification requirements that limit an individual’s ability to move into school administration from teaching or other career fields, cultural barriers that may deter teachers from moving into school administration, and structural barriers, such as the effect a move has on tenure, retirement eligibility, etc.

**DISEQUILIBRIUM IN THE LABOR MARKET**

Because we examine only the supply side of the labor market, we cannot conclude that there is or is not a shortage of school administrators. However, we can say whether the information on school administrators reveals symptoms of a labor market in crisis or disequilibrium.

First, do the data suggest that the incentives to induce people to move into school administration are adequate? Problems with incentives can be reflected in different ways: negative changes in principals’ characteristics that suggest schools are relaxing their standards (e.g., less experience), small or nonexistent compensation differentials between positions with less- and more-demanding working conditions, and an inadequate salary differential between teachers and administrators.

Second, do the data suggest that people are being lured away from administrative careers by other, more attractive job opportunities? Evidence of this would include high or increasing exit rates among school administrators and substantial reductions in the compensation of school administrators relative to that of other professionals.

Last, does the market seem to support an inequitable distribution of principal “quality” across schools of different types? If we assume that schools and districts have some flexibility to vary compensation across schools and that administrators have some flexibility to change jobs and move to different schools or districts, then, if market conditions are driving principals away from certain types of schools, we would expect to see some evidence that the more highly qualified principals are concentrated in schools with certain characteristics.

**DATA SOURCES**

The empirical overview presented here draws on existing research and the results of our analyses of existing data.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) is a nationally representative survey of current public and private school principals (see Appendix A) that generates a portrait of the national principalship at specific points in time. The survey requests career information from principals and matches it with data on the schools and districts where they work. We used the survey data to examine differences among principals by sector (public, private), state, and school characteristics. However, the survey’s usefulness in providing information on the flow of school administrative careers is limited in several respects.
First, the SASS focuses on teachers and principals, so we learned little about other administrative positions. Second, because the SASS is a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal survey, it does not purposefully survey the same people in different survey years. Thus, we could compare differences over time in the population as a whole but could not tackle questions related to turnover or hiring. Third, the survey does not focus on career issues, and, indeed, the most recent survey wave even dropped many of the career-related questions that had previously been included (see Appendix A, Table A.1, for more information).

Another useful data source is the Current Population Survey (CPS), a monthly survey of approximately 60,000 households conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This survey includes data on demographics, labor force participation, industry and occupation, and earnings. Through the occupation field in this survey, we identified elementary and secondary school administrators, and we were able to create a short-panel data set (see Appendix D for more information) that, although limited by the number of school administrators included and by the small number of observations of respondents, offered us a unique opportunity not only to examine movement into and out of school administration, but also to compare the salaries and work hours of school administrators with those of other professionals. However, because the occupational codes the survey uses to classify people’s jobs are fairly general, we were unable to focus specifically on principals and superintendents, and had to instead look at all individuals holding an administrative position in a primary or secondary school or school system. To put it in terms of our administrative career flow diagram (Figure 2.1), the CPS allowed us to look at the arrows coming out of the principal, superintendent, and other administration boxes taken together. The reader should bear in mind that when we use the term “school administrator,” we are thus referring to that general categorization rather than to principals in particular.