
OVERVIEW OF CURRENT SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The first step in understanding the careers of school administrators is to describe the numbers and characteristics of those currently filling these positions. We looked at the numbers and, in particular, at salary, age, experience, gender, and race/ethnicity. Our overview is based on a literature review and data analyses; it indicates whether the characteristics of administrators have changed in ways that might raise concern about the labor market for school administrators.

This chapter begins with a discussion of how many school administrators there are in the United States. We then discuss the earning and demographic characteristics of school administrators and how these have changed over time.

NUMBER OF ADMINISTRATORS

National data provide comprehensive information on principals and, to a lesser extent, superintendents. National-level information on other administrative positions¹ is, however, not available. Figure 3.1 summarizes what we know about the number of people within the administrative career field in both the private and the public sectors.² Our counts for principals are accurate, but our counts for superintendents and other administrators are not, because there is no comprehensive national survey similar to the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) for these positions. To facilitate discussion, the figure also shows the number of teachers in both sectors.

Figure 3.1 clearly shows that school administrators are a small group compared to teachers. The number of principals is only 2.5 percent of the number of teachers in public schools and 6 percent of the number of teachers in private schools. The number of all administrators (principals, superintendents, and other administrators) is

¹This category includes assistant principals and assistant superintendents, district administrators, regional office staff, deans, and other central office staff such as business managers. It does not include subject area coordinators and other certified school staff such as counselors and nurses.

²The italicized numbers reflect rounded estimates. The estimate for superintendents is based on information from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) (Glass, Bjork, and Brunner, 2000). For other administrators, the estimates are much rougher and represent an extrapolation based on the SASS-reported number of teachers and principals in which relationships between the numbers of teachers, principals, and other administrators observed in the state of Illinois were used. The percentages are also consistent with education workforce data from the state of New York when we impose similar definitions of administrative positions.

		Administrative Career Field	
		Principals	
		Public	Private
		83,909	26,231
		Superintendents	
		Public	Private
		<i>14,000</i>	<i>n/a</i>
		Other Administrators	
		Public	Private
		<i>111,000</i>	<i>27,000</i>
Teachers			
Public	Private		
3,004,611	449,057		

NOTE: Numbers for principals and teachers are from 1999–2000 SASS; other numbers (italicized) are rounded estimates.

Figure 3.1—Number of School Administrators, 1999–2000

6.5 percent of the number of teachers in public schools and 12 percent in private schools.

OVERVIEW OF PRINCIPALS

Table 3.1 describes all principals.³ In 1999–2000, there were about 110,000 principals, 76 percent of whom worked in public schools.⁴ School administration was not a rapidly growing career field in the late 1980s and 1990s. Between 1987–1988 and 1999–2000, the number of principals grew by over 7 percent for public schools and by over 3 percent for private schools. However, these national averages obscure substantial regional and sectoral differences. As Table 3.2 shows, the public sector saw growth in each region, but the growth was substantially higher in the West. The private sector saw declines in the number of principals in the Northeast and Midwest, and increases in the South and West.

Elementary school principals made up a majority (58 percent) of public school principals but only 32 percent of private school principals (see Appendix A, Tables A.4

³When we speak of “public school principals,” we are including principals of charter and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools.

⁴The SASS contains rich information on our nation’s principals, including information linked to data on the school and district in which principals serve. Detailed information on the survey, sources of information, and our data analysis are in Appendix A.

Table 3.1
Description of All School Principals, 1999–2000

	Public	Private
Number of principals	83,909	26,231
Average age	49.3	49.9
Average annual salary ^a	\$66,487	\$41,656
Average years of experience as principal	9.0	10.2
Average years of teaching experience	14.0	14.5
Percent women	43.7	54.6
Percent minority	17.8	11.1

SOURCE: SASS.

^aIn real 2000 dollars.

Table 3.2
Growth in Number of Principals by Census Region, 1988–2000

Census Region	Public (%)	Private (%)
Northeast	1.0	-2.7
Midwest	5.6	-7.6
South	6.9	13.9
West	18.0	13.8
Total	7.7	3.3

SOURCE: SASS.

and A.5). A majority (57 percent) of private school principals worked in combined schools (i.e., K–8 and K–12 schools) compared with only 8 percent of public school principals. Middle school principals represented 14 percent of public school principals but only 1 percent of private school principals; and high school principals made up 20 and 10 percent of public and private school principals, respectively.

In 1999–2000, there were 988 charter school principals, and their characteristics as a group differed markedly from those of all public school principals, as reflected in Table 3.3 and discussed below.⁵

Table 3.3
Description of Charter School Principals, 1999–2000

	Charter
Number of principals	988
Average age	48.3
Average annual salary ^a	\$53,920
Average years of experience as principal	6.9
Average years of teaching experience	12.0
Percent women	54.0
Percent minority	29.4

SOURCE: SASS.

^aIn real 2000 dollars.

⁵Highlighted differences between all public school principals and charter school principals are significant at the 5 percent level.

SALARY

Principals

Compensation has more than kept pace with inflation since 1987–1988. After we adjusted for changes in the consumer price index (CPI),⁶ the average salary of public school principals was seen to have increased by 9 percent and the average salary of private school principals by nearly 40 percent. Despite the higher rate of salary growth in the private sector, public school principals still earned substantially more than private school principals did (on average, just over \$65,000 per year, versus \$40,000 for private school principals). The average salary of charter school principals (see Table 3.3) was just under \$54,000 and was substantially lower than the average public school salary of over \$66,000.⁷

Assistant principals earned slightly less than principals did. A survey by the Educational Research Service revealed that the average annual salaries for assistant principals were \$56,306 in elementary schools, \$59,238 in middle schools, and \$62,691 in high schools in 1999–2000. These are 15 to 19 percent lower than the average salaries reported for principals by grade level (Educational Research Service, 2002). The survey found that the rates of salary growth for assistant principals were similar to those for principals over the past 10 years.

Superintendents

The estimated average salary for all superintendents for 2000–2001 was \$118,811, and that increased to \$121,794 in 2001–2002. Adjusted for inflation, the average superintendent salary has increased by 14 percent since 1991–1992 (Educational Research Service, 2002). Salaries offered to superintendents of major urban school districts in 2000–2001 ranged from \$113,000 to \$298,000, with an average of \$165,144. In addition, most principals of major urban districts earned bonuses, pay-for-performance supplements, and other benefits, with an average value of \$44,954 per year (Council of the Great City Schools, 2001).

Other district-level administrators earned less than superintendents did but typically more than principals did. The average salary in 2001–2002 for deputy or associate superintendents was \$104,048; for assistant superintendents, it was \$94,137. Average salaries for other administrators (e.g., finance and business, public relations, and staff services) ranged from \$65,505 to \$82,725.

⁶To adjust the salary figures for different years, we used the CPI inflation adjustment calculator available at <http://www.bls.gov/cpi/#overview>.

⁷For information on average principal salary by grade level, see Table A.4 in Appendix A.

AGE AND EXPERIENCE

Principals

As indicated in Table 3.1, the average principal is in his or her late 40s, and between 1988 and 2000, that average age increased slightly—from 47.8 to 49.3 in the public sector and from 46 to 49.9 in the private sector (see Appendix A, Table A.2). Except in the case of private middle schools (a small group, for which the average age of principals is very high), there appears to be little difference in the average age of principals in schools serving different grade levels (see Appendix A, Tables A.4 and A.5) or in charter versus other public schools (see Appendix A, Table A.2).

These averages conceal the fact that the age distribution of principals in the public sector differs in interesting ways from that in the private sector.⁸ Figures 3.2 and 3.3 illustrate this point. Whereas private school principals appear to be distributed fairly evenly across a wide age range, from 35 to 65, a majority (53 percent) of public school principals fall in the 10-year window from 46 to 55. Another striking difference is that only 17 percent (a small proportion) of public school principals are over age 55, compared with 27 percent of private school principals.

These differences in age distribution between the public and private sectors suggest some potentially important differences in principal careers for the two sectors that are worth exploring in greater detail. For example, private school principals may be more likely than their public school counterparts to enter the principalship at earlier ages and to retire or leave the principalship later in life. Such differences would not be surprising, given differences in the retirement incentives of public relative to private school principals, as well as differences in the recruitment strategies of the two types of schools. It may also be that public principals are “retiring” into the private sector. Further exploration of these issues at the state and local levels can provide insights useful to policymakers.

Figures 3.2 and 3.3 also suggest that the age profiles of both public and private school principals shifted between 1987–1988 and 1999–2000. In the public sector, the shift increased the concentration of principals in the 46 to 55 range and diminished the representation of younger individuals, particularly those between 40 and 45. In the private sector, similar shifts diminished the representation of younger individuals.

Such a shift in age distribution could be caused by a spike in hiring during a certain period in the past and the aging of that cohort of principals. However, examination of the age distribution of new principals—which we define as those with three or fewer years of experience—revealed that the age increases were not simply due to the aging of a particular cohort. In 1987–1988, the average age of new principals was 43 for public schools and 42.5 for private schools. By 1999–2000, it had increased to over 45 in public schools and to over 44 in private schools (see Appendix A, Table A.6).

⁸See Appendix A for a detailed discussion of the differences in the age distribution.

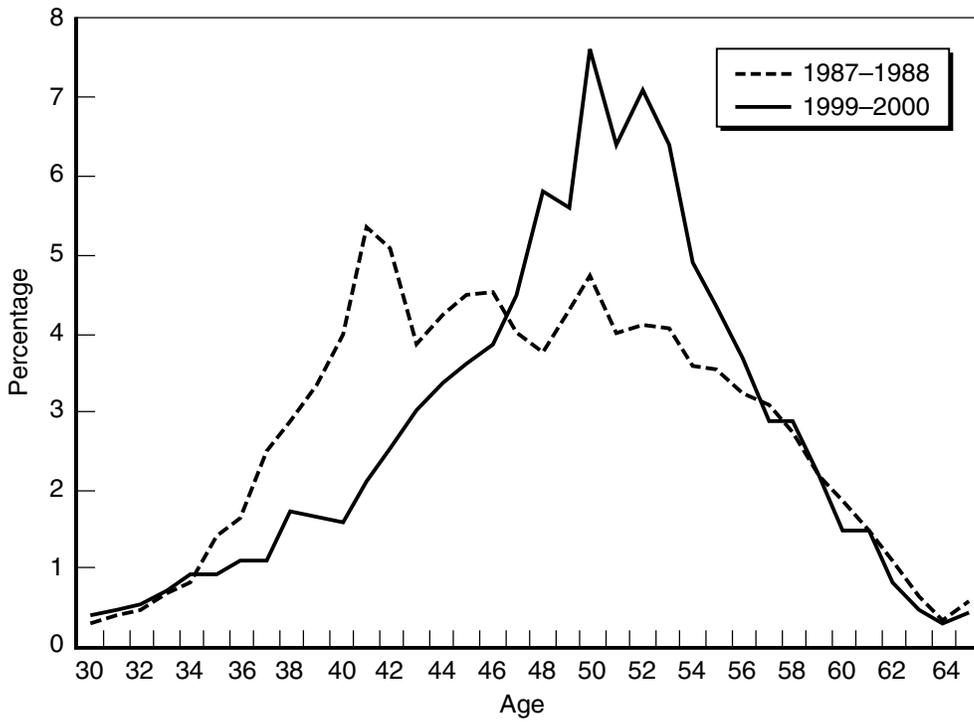


Figure 3.2—Age Distribution of Public School Principals

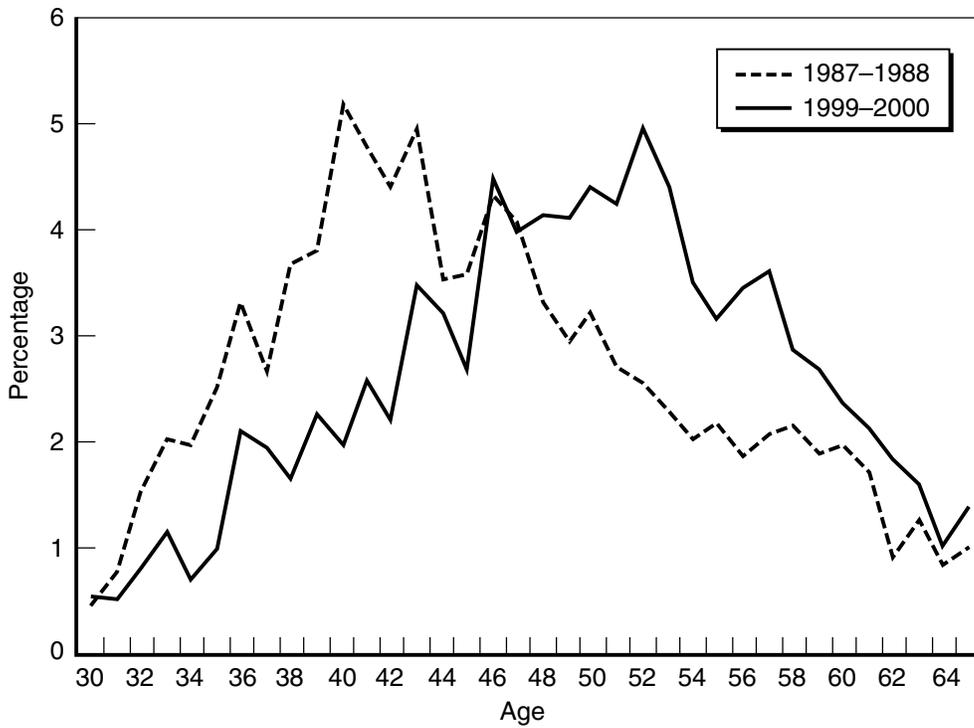


Figure 3.3—Age Distribution of Private School Principals

Between 1987–1988 and 1999–2000, the proportion of new principals under 40, 45, and even 50 years of age decreased markedly in the public sector. Whereas 38 percent of new public school principals were 40 or younger in 1987–1988, by 1999–2000, only 12 percent were. A similar but less dramatic shift in age distribution occurred for new private school principals as well.

Information on the distribution of principals' experience as a principal suggests that the increase in age among private but not public school principals stems from a tendency to stay on the job longer. Figures 3.4 and 3.5 illustrate that private school principals were more experienced in 1999–2000 than in 1987–1988, and that public school principals were less experienced. To put it another way, the increase in age witnessed in the 1990s brought with it an increase in experience among private but not public school principals (see Appendix A for more details).

Overall, the data suggest that principals are an aging population. But although the age increase shows up in both the public and the private sector, it appears to take a different form in each sector. We found that both types of schools were hiring increasingly older new principals. In the public sector, principals tended not to remain in the principalship much beyond age 55, suggesting that those who enter the position later in life have shorter administrative careers. In the private sector, however, it was far more common for principals to stay on the job to age 60 or 65.

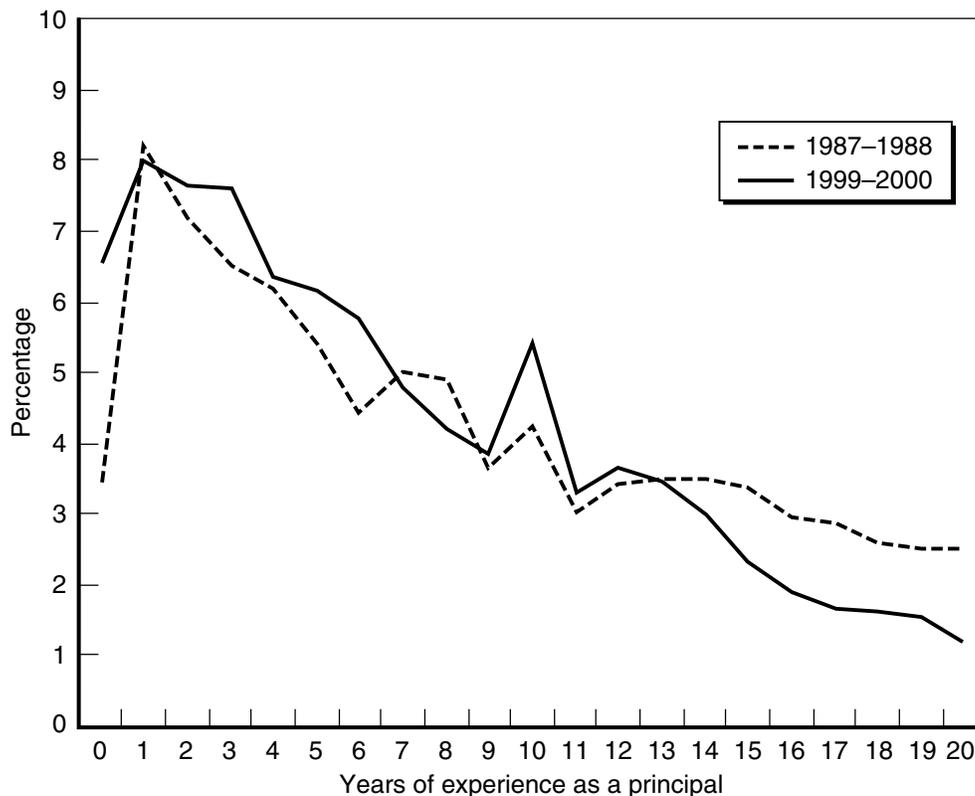


Figure 3.4—Experience Distribution of Public School Principals

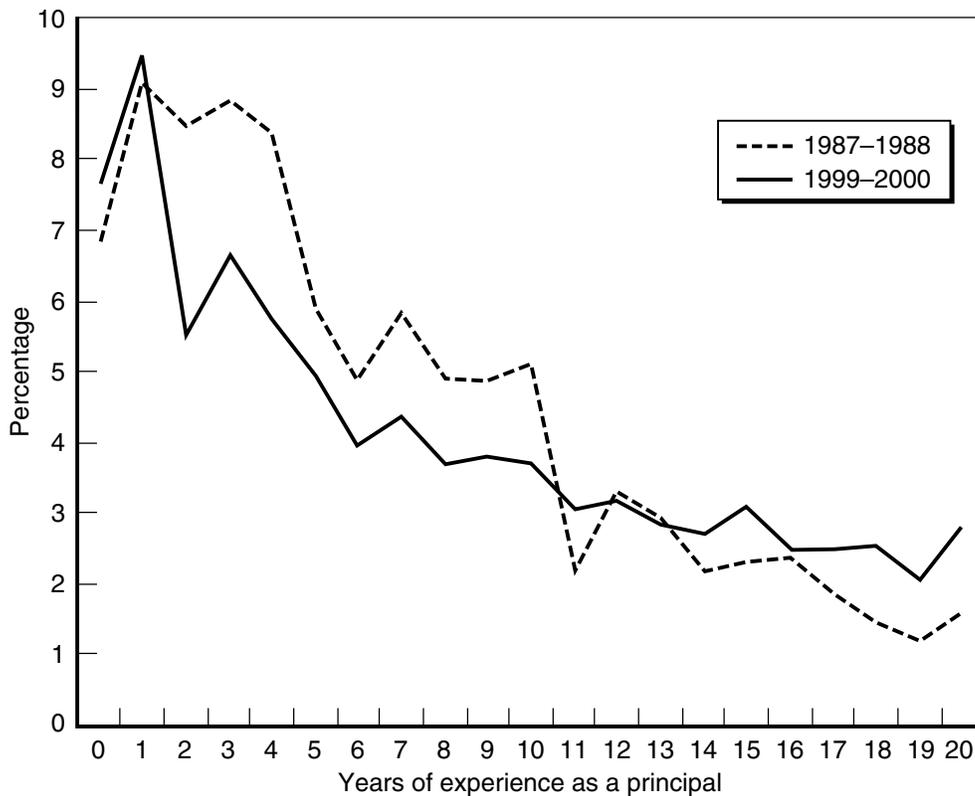


Figure 3.5—Experience Distribution of Private School Principals

It is also worth noting that the average charter school principal had two fewer years of both teaching experience and experience as a principal compared with public school principals generally. Moreover, nearly 50 percent of charter school principals were new by our definition (having three or fewer years of experience), whereas only 30 percent of all public school principals were.

Superintendents

The 1999–2000 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) survey of superintendents confirms that the school administrative workforce is aging in this position as well. The median age of superintendents responding to the survey was 52.5—the oldest median age ever recorded in the survey, which is conducted approximately every 10 years. This increase in age was particularly striking in the smallest districts.⁹

⁹The survey report divides districts into categories based on student enrollment. Group A comprises districts with enrollments over 25,000; group B, districts with enrollments between 3,000 and 24,999; group C, districts with enrollments between 300 and 2,999; and group D, districts with enrollments under 300.

These individuals bring with them a good deal of experience in the superintendency—an average of 8.75 years (Glass, Bjork, and Brunner, 2000), which is similar to the average tenure in 2000 of chief executive officers (CEOs)—seven years (Neff and Ogden, 2001). The corporate world appears to differ from the school administrative field in terms of senior managers' age, however: the average age of corporate CEOs declined from 59 in 1980 to 56 in 2000 (Neff and Ogden, 2001).

GENDER AND RACE/ETHNICITY

Principals

The education literature has paid substantial attention to the gender composition of principals because of concerns that the proportion of female principals is low relative to that of female teachers (Hammer and Rohr, 1994; Bell and Chase, 1993; Biklen and Brannigan, 1980; Joy, 1998; Riehl and Byrd, 1997). In 1999–2000, 44 percent of all public school principals were women (see Table 3.1), up from 35 percent in 1993–1994 and from 25 percent in 1987–1988 (see Appendix A, Table A.2). At 54 percent, women were well represented among charter school principals in 1999–2000 (see Table 3.3), but men still made up a majority of the secondary school principals in both the public and the private sector (see Appendix A, Tables A.4 and A.5). As noted earlier, high school principals are the most highly paid. In 1999–2000, women made up 55 percent of public elementary school principals but just 21 percent of public high school principals (Appendix A, Table A.4). In private schools, women made up a majority of all elementary and combined school principals and were 38 percent of high school principals (Appendix A, Table A.5).

Given that women have been making up an increasingly greater portion of the teaching force,¹⁰ researchers have been emphasizing the fact that the average male teacher is still much more likely than the average female teacher to become a principal (Riehl and Byrd, 1997). The representation of women in 1999–2000 was substantially higher among new principals (those with three or fewer years of principal experience). When only public schools were considered, 54 percent of new principals were found to be women; for private schools, well over half (60 percent) were (Appendix A, Table A.6).

Compared to changes in the gender composition of school principals, changes in the racial/ethnic mix were more limited. We found that only a small proportion of principals were members of an ethnic/racial minority, particularly compared to the proportion of minorities in the student population. Minority representation was higher in the public than in the private sector. Nearly 18 percent of public school principals were members of a racial/ethnic minority, compared with 11 percent of private school principals (see Table 3.1). However, in charter schools, 29 percent were members of racial/ethnic minority groups (see Table 3.3).

¹⁰According to the 1999–2000 SASS, 74.9 percent of teachers in public schools are female (standard error of 0.3 percent), and 76.1 percent of teachers in private schools are female (standard error of 0.5 percent).

We analyzed data to determine whether there was salary discrimination based on gender or race/ethnicity in school administration (see Appendix B). The analysis entailed examining the relationship between salary, school characteristics, and individual characteristics of principals. We found that gender was not related to salary in the public sector after we controlled for other factors, which suggests that females receive comparable pay for comparable work in the public sector. However, our private sector regression revealed that female principals earned nearly \$6,000 per year less than their male counterparts in that sector (after accounting for other factors). We found that race was not related to salary in either sector, except in the case of Native American principals, who, in public schools, earned nearly \$3,000 per year less than white principals did.¹¹

Superintendents

During the 1990s, female and minority representation increased among superintendents as well. The 2000 AASA survey (Glass, Bjork, and Brunner, 2000) indicates that women made up 13 percent of superintendents in 2000, double their proportion in the 1992 survey. According to the 2000 survey, 5.1 percent of superintendents were members of a racial/ethnic minority, and the number of minority superintendents had increased by over 30 percent since 1992. Minority superintendents were found to be much better represented in the largest districts (those with enrollments over 25,000), where they accounted for 23 percent of all superintendents. Overall, the survey suggests that most minority superintendents serve in either large urban districts or rural districts.¹² Another survey, of the superintendents of districts that are part of the Council of the Great City Schools, revealed that as of 2000, a majority of these superintendents were members of a racial/ethnic minority (37.5 percent African American and 14.3 percent Hispanic) and over 30 percent were female (Council of the Great City Schools, 2001).

QUALITY

One of today's concerns is that schools are not or will not be able to find well-qualified people to assume administrative positions. Unfortunately, there is little information for evaluating the overall quality of school administrators in any systematic way. For example, there is no database of principal performance evaluations that would allow performance trends to be tracked. It might be possible to measure student test score growth and attribute that to the quality of the principal, but countless confounding factors make this approach difficult on a practical level and of questionable validity on a theoretical level. Current efforts by the Education Testing Service and the Council of Chief State School Officers to define and measure the

¹¹This is a change from 1993–1994, when, compared to white principals, black principals earned nearly \$1,800 per year more and Hispanic principals earned \$1,300 less. The difference between white and Native American principals was not significant.

¹²However, the survey sample was not nationally representative. Because it oversampled large (and therefore more-urban) districts, the proportions of women and minorities may be higher in this sample than they would be in a national average. The reported survey results were not weighted.

required competencies of school administrators may make it possible to consider the issue of quality more fully in the future.¹³

Analyses that try to address the issue of quality typically look to certification or educational attainment as a measure, or they simply rely on the perceptions of superintendents or district hiring offices. As discussed by Roza et al. (2002), certification and educational attainment are the characteristics emphasized by district hiring offices, but they are poor proxies for the political and leadership skills superintendents claim principals need.

The empirical evidence based on perceptions of quality raises some cause for concern. For example, two-thirds of respondents to a 1998 survey of 3,000 elementary and middle school principals expressed concerns about public education's ability to attract quality people to the principalship in the future (Doud and Keller, 1998). And a survey of superintendents about the hiring of principals echoes these concerns (National Association of Elementary School Principals and National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1998). The latter survey found that about half of the superintendents who had recently filled principal vacancies felt there was a shortage of qualified candidates. However, the respondents also indicated satisfaction with the individuals they hired and reported that the new principals had proved to be adequately prepared for the position.¹⁴

SUMMARY

Overall, our examination reveals remarkable stability in the characteristics of school administrators and that any changes that did occur were not consistent with a national labor market in crisis. The descriptive overview paints a picture of school administration as a career field that has experienced only modest growth overall in the past decade, with some important national variation. Whereas there was substantial growth in the West, other regions of the country, particularly the Northeast, experienced more moderate growth. The West's relatively high rates of growth, particularly in the public schools, might be expected to be burdensome as schools try to recruit and retain administrators, unless the supply of administrators is also growing.

The compensation of school administrators outpaced inflation across the board. Although the growth rate was modest for public school principals, it was substantial for private school principals.

After years of concern about the representation of women in the principalship, the 1990s saw dramatic progress. By 1999–2000, female representation in the principalship had still not reached the level of female representation in the teaching profession, but nearly half of all public school principals were women, as were over half of all new public school principals and all private school principals. Representation of members of racial/ethnic minorities had also increased, but less dramatically.

¹³Information on these efforts is available at <http://www.ets.org/sls/index.html>.

¹⁴One-third responded that the new principals' preparation was excellent, and only 8 percent reported that it was inadequate.

We saw no evidence of salary discrimination by race/ethnicity or gender in the public sector. The data do, however, suggest that female principals are underpaid relative to their male counterparts in the private sector.

Perhaps our most striking finding is that the nation's principals are growing older as a group and that people entering the principalship for the first time are doing so later in life. The differences in the age distribution of both new and all principals and in the experience distribution of principals in the public and private sectors raise interesting issues that could be explored in greater detail through a comparative study of employment practices in the two sectors. The data suggest that the retirement patterns of the two sectors may differ significantly. At a time when many people in the United States are working well into their 60s,¹⁵ a surprisingly small fraction (17 percent) of public school principals are over 55.

¹⁵Research on retirement indicates a spike in the retirement rate at ages 62 and 65. Simulations based on the nationally representative Health and Retirement Survey suggest that about 85 percent of individuals who were working at age 52 are still in the labor force at age 56, and over half work beyond age 62. Retirement eligibility under a defined benefit pension plan has a large effect on the probability that an individual will retire, increasing it by 15 percent (Hurd, Smith, and Zissimopoulos, 2002).