
**MOVEMENT WITHIN THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE
CAREER FIELD**

Movement between the different school administrative positions—from assistant principal to principal, from principal to superintendent, from superintendent to district administrator, etc.—can be a natural part of a career in education. Such within-field movement exposes people to a wide variety of the activities in which school systems engage and provides insight into the complexity of the different jobs.

This chapter examines these types of moves within the career field, as depicted in Figure 5.1. We first look at turnover, then proceeding to the moves that are made and the factors that influence them.

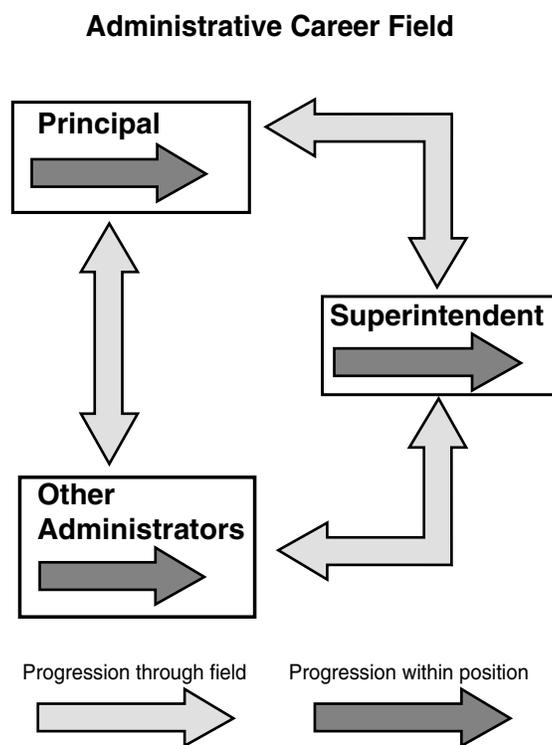


Figure 5.1—Movement of School Administrators Within Administrative Career Field

TURNOVER

Cross-sectional data on the experience of principals (discussed in Chapter Four) suggest that there may be a high exit rate among new principals who decide that the job is not a “good fit” for them, followed by a long period of commitment to the position for those who stay. In 1999–2000, public school principals had an average of nine years of experience as a principal, and private school principals had an average of 10.2 years (see Chapter Three, Table 3.1). However, the experience levels were not evenly distributed around these averages. Thirty percent of both public school principals and private school principals had 12 or more years of experience. Just under 30 percent of both (and nearly half of charter school principals) had three or fewer years of experience (see Appendix A). If this were solely a recent phenomenon, we might attribute a high proportion of new principals to a recent increase in the number of retirements. However, the same patterns are evident in previous survey waves as well. The high fraction of principals with three or fewer years of experience suggests that many individuals entering the principalship do not stay very long. Conversely, the data also indicate that a substantial fraction of people stay in the principalship—even a single principalship—for a very long time. Moreover, we observed no systematic patterns indicating that urbanicity or student demographic characteristics influence the likelihood that a principal stays in place.

Similarly, data from the state of Illinois show high attrition (18.8 percent) among principals with one year of experience or less, and low attrition (typically between 1 and 5 percent) among principals with two to 31 years of experience (Illinois State Board of Education, 2000). Joy (1998) suggests that “poor fit” is a particular problem for female principals, who often leave after a short tenure.

Papa, Lankford, and Wyckoff (2002) examined the positions held in the subsequent six years by individuals who had assumed their first principalship in the New York state education system in 1992. Their analysis suggests that turnover is high and that only a small proportion of it stems from people leaving the principalship to return to teaching. They found that fewer than 2 percent of the exiting principals returned to teaching in the next year (for their study, 1993). More commonly, the individuals moved into some other administrative position or left the public school sector entirely. The fact that many principals moved to another administrative position emphasizes the dynamic nature of the administrative career path and cautions policymakers against considering departures from the principalship as a “loss” to public schools. The study found that although a small proportion, 2.3 percent, of the exiting principals had left the career field within one year of assuming the principalship, 15 percent had left it after four years, and over 22 percent had left the New York state education system entirely by 1998.

MOVEMENT WITHIN FIELD

Very little is known about the moves school administrators make within their field. We do know that individuals are likely to hold another administrative position before assuming a principalship. According to the 1999–2000 SASS, 66.8 percent of public school principals and 44.2 percent of private school principals had held an assistant

principalship or program director position before becoming principals. Thirty-six percent of both public and private school principals had served as department heads, and 25 percent of public and 29 percent of private school principals had served as curriculum specialists (Gruber et al., 2002).

For both private and public schools, these percentages varied substantially by state, community type, and student enrollment, with principals in rural areas, midwestern states, and small schools being less likely to have served in such positions prior to becoming principals.

In tracking the subsequent six years of the group of first-time principals in 1992 in the state of New York, Papa, Lankford, and Wyckoff (2002) found that a majority of the principals had spent time as assistant principals. Surprisingly, 36 percent of them were no longer principals in the same school by the next school year. Twenty-two percent had moved into another administrative position in the same district, many becoming assistant principals, which suggests they may have been serving as principal on an interim or temporary basis. After six years, only 34 percent of the original group were still serving as principal in the same school. Over 12 percent had left for another school in the same district, over 8 percent had moved to another district, and over 20 percent were in another administrative position in either their original or another district.

The 2000 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) survey provides clues about the paths taken to the superintendency (Glass, Bjork, and Brunner, 2000). The vast majority (80 percent) of superintendents who responded to the survey had taken one of two common paths after first being a teacher. Forty-nine percent had taken the first path—i.e., had held both a principalship and another administrative position in a district central office before assuming a superintendency. This path was very common in the largest districts (those with over 25,000 students), where 68 percent of superintendents had taken it. Thirty-one percent had taken the second common path—i.e., had held a principalship and then gone directly into a superintendency with no district central office experience. This path was more common among superintendents in the smallest districts (those with fewer than 300 students), where 48 percent had taken it. The difference between the two paths likely reflects the fact that small districts lack the central office positions that exist in large districts.

Thirty-five percent of the responding superintendents reported that their first administrative position was that of assistant principal; 41 percent reported principal. Not surprisingly, only 18 percent of those in the smaller districts reported assistant principal as their first position. The smaller districts are likely to have smaller schools, and smaller schools are less likely to have assistant principals.

In spite of the conventional wisdom that the superintendency has a revolving door (there is high turnover in the position) (Gewertz, 2002), the average tenure in current positions among respondents to a national survey of school superintendents was 7.25 years (Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella, 2000). This had not changed much since previous surveys. However, another survey conducted in summer 2001 indicates

that the average tenure of superintendents of major urban school districts is under three years (Council of the Great City Schools, 2001).

OTHER INFLUENCING FACTORS

The 2001–2002 salary survey for public school personnel (Educational Research Service, 2002) indicates that public school superintendents were the most highly paid administrators, earning \$121,794 on average, in the year of the survey. Average salaries for associate and assistant superintendents were slightly lower, at \$107,458 and \$96,627, respectively. Average salaries for other district-level administrators (such as director of instructional services and director of public affairs) ranged from \$66,351 to \$83,035 depending on the position. The average salary for school principals ranged from \$73,114 for elementary principals to \$83,944 for high school principals. Assistant principals earned about 20 percent less; their average salaries ranged from \$60,672 to \$67,822 depending on school grade level.

Pounder and Merrill (2001) surveyed assistant principals in high schools and principals in junior high schools in one western state on their attitudes toward the desirability of being a high school principal and their perspectives on a variety of other factors. The researchers then analyzed the relationship between the attitudes and perspectives.

The strongest positive relationship they found was between the desire to achieve and to improve education and the view that being a high school principal is desirable. The second strongest relationship had to do with the position's time demands, with higher perceived time demands reducing desirability. Salary and benefits "had the third strongest significant relationship to job desirability, reflecting the perceived pecuniary advantages of the high school principalship over many other educator positions" (Pounder and Merrill, 2001, p. 47). The authors suggest that potential high school principals see the primary tradeoff associated with the position as one of more-rewarding work and higher pay in exchange for less free time.

SUMMARY

Despite recent attention to non-traditional principals and superintendents (e.g., those hired from outside the education career field), it is still the case that most public school principals have served as assistant principals and that most superintendents have held other school- and district-level administrative positions.

In general, there appear to be moderate financial incentives for individuals to move "up the career ladder" within school administration. The average salary of assistant principals falls between the average salary of teachers and that of principals; central office administrators earn more than principals do but less than superintendents.