
NEWS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: MAY 14, 2020

Contact: Barbara McKenna, 202-798-5595, bmckenna@learningpolicyinstitute.org

Bob Farrace, NASSP, 703-860-7252, farraceb@nassp.org

WITH NEARLY HALF OF PRINCIPALS CONSIDERING LEAVING, RESEARCH URGES ATTENTION TO WORKING CONDITIONS, COMPENSATION, AND SUPPORTS

Multi-phase research project concludes with recommendations for district, state, and federal policy solutions

While teacher shortages continue to be a critical issue in the United States, a lesser known but equally important shortage is also hampering the country's efforts to provide quality educational opportunities for students — principal shortages. Nationally, nearly one in five principals leave their schools each year and the average tenure of a principal is about four years. These numbers are higher in the under-resourced schools that tend to serve the highest populations of students of color and students from low-income families.

While teachers have the highest in-school impact on student success, principals are a close second. Their importance of the principal's role, reasons they leave, and policy implications for principal retention and effectiveness are explained in the new report, [*Supporting a Strong, Stable Principal Workforce: Why it Matters and What Can Be Done*](#). The report is the third in a series conducted by the Learning Policy Institute and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

The first publication, which presents findings from a literature review, covers the known scope of the principal turnover problem and provides a basis for understanding its mechanisms. The second report offers insights from focus groups of school leaders who shared their experiences and expertise on the challenges of the principalship, as well as strategies to address these challenges. The third and fourth publication (a report and associated brief) summarize results from LPI and NASSP's national principal survey and focus groups, which delve deeply into the five focus areas that emerged from the initial research and suggests policy strategies to increase principal retention.

“Principals play a critical role in defining school vision and culture, staffing, and strategic planning for student success. When principals leave, it can disrupt school progress, increase

teacher turnover, and stall student achievement,” said NASSP Executive Director JoAnn Bartoletti. “In addition to the costs to students and teachers if effective principals leave, schools and districts must devote time and resources to replace the outgoing principals. The financial implications are significant and, often, covered by redirecting funds that had been slated for the classroom.”

Key Findings

Concerns about principal turnover are widespread and national in scope: 42 percent of surveyed principals indicated they were considering leaving their position. The percentage of principals planning to move to a different school was higher for those in high-poverty schools and rural communities. Among the factors impacting turnover:

1. **Working Conditions:** Principals who reported that they were planning to leave their school expressed concerns with a heavy workload more than twice as often as those planning to stay. Those planning to leave also reported that their districts did not provide adequate student services personnel to support students’ emotional well-being at higher rates than those indicating that they would stay.
2. **Compensation and Financial Obligations:** A larger percentage of principals planning to leave their schools than those planning to stay said that they were not fairly compensated for their efforts, with principals in high-poverty schools most likely to find their salaries inadequate. Salary concerns were often exacerbated by carrying student debt from their preparation programs, especially for principals working in high-poverty schools and rural communities.
3. **High-Stakes Accountability Systems and Evaluation Practices:** Principals want timely feedback that they can use to improve their performance and support student learning. Among principals who planned to leave, more than half reported that their district’s principal evaluation system was not useful.
4. **Lack of Decision-Making Authority:** This was a concern for smaller percentages of principals, but still a notable factor. Among those planning to leave, one-third reported that they lacked decision-making authority over their schools’ curriculum. The percentage was higher for principals serving in high-poverty schools and cities compared to principals in other schools. Principals planning on leaving more frequently reported not having the authority to dismiss poorly performing staff.
5. **Inadequate Access to Professional Learning Opportunities:** Many principals reported facing obstacles to professional learning opportunities, especially for in-service professional development. Among all principals, 75 percent cited lack of time, and 36 percent cited lack of money. The most commonly cited obstacle to preservice professional preparation was the cost, with almost 25 percent of all principals and almost 27 percent of those planning to leave identifying preparation program costs as a

hurdle. Nearly all indicated a desire for additional professional development to meet their students' needs.

Implications for Policy and Practice: Local Level

Attend to working conditions and school needs. District leaders should be alert to principals' workloads and seek to ensure that school administrative teams are appropriately staffed. Central office policies should be responsive to principals' needs and concerns, which may require increasing information gathered from principals and principal input on district decisions that impact schools. This responsiveness should include strategies to keep effective principals, such as providing recognition, needed school resources, or more fiscal flexibility for successful principals.

Support adequate and equitable principal compensation. Given the prevalence of concerns around compensation, district leaders should review the competitiveness of salaries and consider other forms of compensation (such as student loan repayment or housing supports) that may be important to attracting and retaining principals.

Create or sustain helpful mechanisms for principal feedback, evaluation, and mentoring. Districts that support, develop, and mentor principals can reduce the likelihood of principal attrition. District leaders can examine the usefulness of their principal support and evaluation systems, gathering input from principals as well as others in the district and community, with an eye toward sustaining practices that are helpful and creating new mechanisms and supports as needed.

Provide principals with appropriate agency and support in decision making. While most principals reported adequate authority over budget and hiring, more than two thirds of all principals said it is difficult to dismiss poor-performing or incompetent teachers. An even higher percentage of those planning to leave (74 percent) reporting this challenge. Districts can, among other things, support principals with Peer Assistance and Review programs that provide mentors for struggling teachers to help improve their practice and provide due process to support personnel decisions. Principal training for teacher support and evaluation should also be provided and their input in these types of critical decisions should be sought out by district leaders.

Remove barriers to principal professional development. As districts review principal workload, they should consider time for professional development as essential. District leaders can consider providing district staff support to free up principals' time, offering professional development at times and locations more convenient for principals, and working professional learning into the district feedback, evaluation, and mentoring systems. Districts and schools can use both local funds and federal funds under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Title II, Part A, to address such obstacles as the provision of timely, relevant content, and coverage, if needed, so that principals can participate in professional development. Professional learning

should be relevant and include a focus on supporting students' social and emotional development and physical and mental health as well as improving student achievement.

Implications for Policy and Practice: State and Federal Levels

Assess and help improve working conditions for principals. Many states gather data about working conditions for teachers through working conditions surveys, district and school report cards, and school improvement plans. Gathering this information for principals as well and aggregating it to the state level could help local leaders inform policy decisions. States could also use the data to determine needs statewide and then target special efforts at the neediest districts and regions. Federal data collection, such as the National Center on Education Statistics' principal surveys, could be used to help expand the type of data collected on principal working conditions and help inform state policy.

Support local efforts to improve student supports. States can invest in staffing student support personnel and resources that address students' social-emotional and mental health needs by leveraging federal funding under ESSA Title IV, the Student Success and Academic Enrichment Grant program. At the federal level, this program should be fully and consistently funded at its authorized level of \$1.65 billion, substantially more than its current funding.

Enable adequate and equitable principal compensation. Depending on the extent of local control, state leaders can establish or incentivize more competitive principal salaries across and within districts, or strengthen compensation through other vehicles, such as loan forgiveness or housing supports. States can also revamp their funding formulas to ensure that overall school funding is adequate and equitable, targeting additional funds to the neediest districts and schools, which will help districts provide more adequate compensation, especially in the communities where it is most needed.

Create or expand programs that help underwrite the cost of high-quality principal preparation. To address this challenge, states can provide funding to cover the cost of high-quality preparation programs, as North Carolina does with its Principal Fellows program that supports a master's degree and yearlong internship under the wing of a veteran principal. Such investments are typically paid back in service and may be offered in exchange for a commitment to serve in a high-poverty or rural school. These kinds of programs have been shown to be effective at recruiting doctors, nurses, and teachers, especially when they underwrite a significant portion of educational costs and are bureaucratically manageable for candidates, districts, and higher education institutions. To support and scale up state efforts, federal funding under Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA), the Teacher Quality Partnership Grant program, which supports teacher preparation programs, could be expanded to include school principals. To further support principals' access to high-quality preparation, the TEACH Grant Program, under Title IV of the HEA, could be expanded to include principals in addition to teachers, covering their costs of preparation in exchange for service.

Increase state and federal investments in high-quality professional development. More states are increasing commitments to funding principal professional learning opportunities through coaching, mentoring, and networks, as well as professional development courses, workshops, and conferences. Many states are also seizing the opportunity under ESSA, Title II, Part A, to allocate funding to evidence-based professional development, with nearly half of states taking advantage of the optional 3 percent set-aside to invest in principal learning. ESSA is due for reauthorization in 2020 and its funding to support school principals could be expanded.

#####

About the NASSP–LPI Principal Turnover Research Series

This intensive, multi-phase research project was conducted to identify the causes and consequences of principal turnover nationwide. The purpose is to increase awareness of this issue, and to identify and share evidence-based responses to help mitigate excessive turnover in the principal profession. The project was conducted in three phases that provide:

1. Findings from a literature review to covers the known scope of the principal turnover problem and research on effective strategies for district and school leaders and federal and state policymakers.
2. Insights from focus groups of school leaders who shared their experiences and expertise on the challenges of the principalship, as well as strategies to address these challenges.
3. An analysis of both the U.S. Department of Education National Teacher and Principal Survey and a national principal survey on principal turnover and recommendations for policymakers at all levels of government to advance policies for states, districts, and schools to support and retain high-quality school leaders.

Previous reports are [*Understanding and Addressing Principal Turnover: A Review of the Research*](#) and [*Principal Turnover: Insights from Current Principals*](#).

All the briefs in this series are available at <https://www.nassp.org/policy-advocacy-center/lpi-and-nassp-research-agenda/> and <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/nassp-principal-turnover-research-series>.

About the Learning Policy Institute

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.

<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org>

@LPI_learning

About National Association of Secondary School Principals

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and voice for principals and other school leaders across the United States. NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student's potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the [National Honor Society](#), [National Junior Honor Society](#), [National Elementary Honor Society](#), and [National Student Council](#).

www.nassp.org

@NASSP