

California's Principal Workforce

Trends in Supply and Turnover



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Summary

A growing body of research demonstrates that principals affect virtually every aspect of school outcomes. This brief examines trends in the California principalship following major changes in school resources and systems, beginning in 2013. We find that the California principalship has become more diverse and more experienced over the last decade but still has higher turnover rates than the national average. Wages have been stagnant in real dollar terms. Despite higher-quality professional learning opportunities, principals are bypassing traditional preparation programs by entering through a test-only route at small but increasing rates. Rural schools, charter schools, alternative schools of choice, special education schools, and virtual schools have, on average, less experienced and less prepared principals than mainstream and non-rural schools. Turnover—which is associated with declines in teacher retention and student outcomes—is higher for principals with lower salaries; those entering through the test-only route; those in rural settings; and those in schools with higher teacher turnover, higher suspension rates, and higher student-to-teacher ratios.

The report on which this brief is based can be found [here](#).

Introduction

According to a recent review of principals' influences on school outcomes, supporting the effectiveness of principals may be "the most efficient [school-based] way to affect student achievement."¹ A growing body of research demonstrates that principals have strong impacts on a wide variety of school outcomes, ranging from student test score gains to graduation rates, student attendance, teacher retention, and parent satisfaction. Principals' impacts on student outcomes largely function through their roles in supporting strong instruction, recruiting and retaining teachers, and creating a positive school climate.² Despite their critical leadership role, principals are frequently armed with inadequate preparation or professional development, difficult working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of autonomy, and ineffective accountability policies—the very factors most likely to undermine effectiveness and lead to principal turnover.

For many years, California's school leaders have faced a challenging environment. Following the enactment of Proposition 13, which led to declining revenues and repeated budget cuts from the 1980s through the early 2000s, California became one of the most poorly funded states in the nation. By 2010, the state had the largest ratios of students to teachers and administrators in the nation, lagging salaries, and deteriorating working conditions. In addition, the state eliminated almost all the professional learning supports for educators that had once been offered between 2000 and 2010. In that era, many principals entered their jobs without preparation and stayed only a short time. California principal turnover rates were much higher than the national average and were particularly high in rural and urban schools serving low-income students.

Beginning in 2013—with the passage of the Local Control Funding Formula and the Local Control and Accountability Plan, the creation of a new accountability system, and the adoption of new standards for students and educators (including the 2013–14 Administrative Services Credential Program Standards)—California made substantial changes to statewide resources for schools, school finance and accountability, principal credentialing requirements, and professional learning for school leaders. In this brief, we examine the conditions of the principalship in California in recent years, including trends in labor market participation, preparation, and pay; the distribution of principals across school types; and the extent and sources of turnover. We conclude with a discussion of the policy considerations relevant to achieving a well-prepared, diverse, and stable principal workforce for the future.

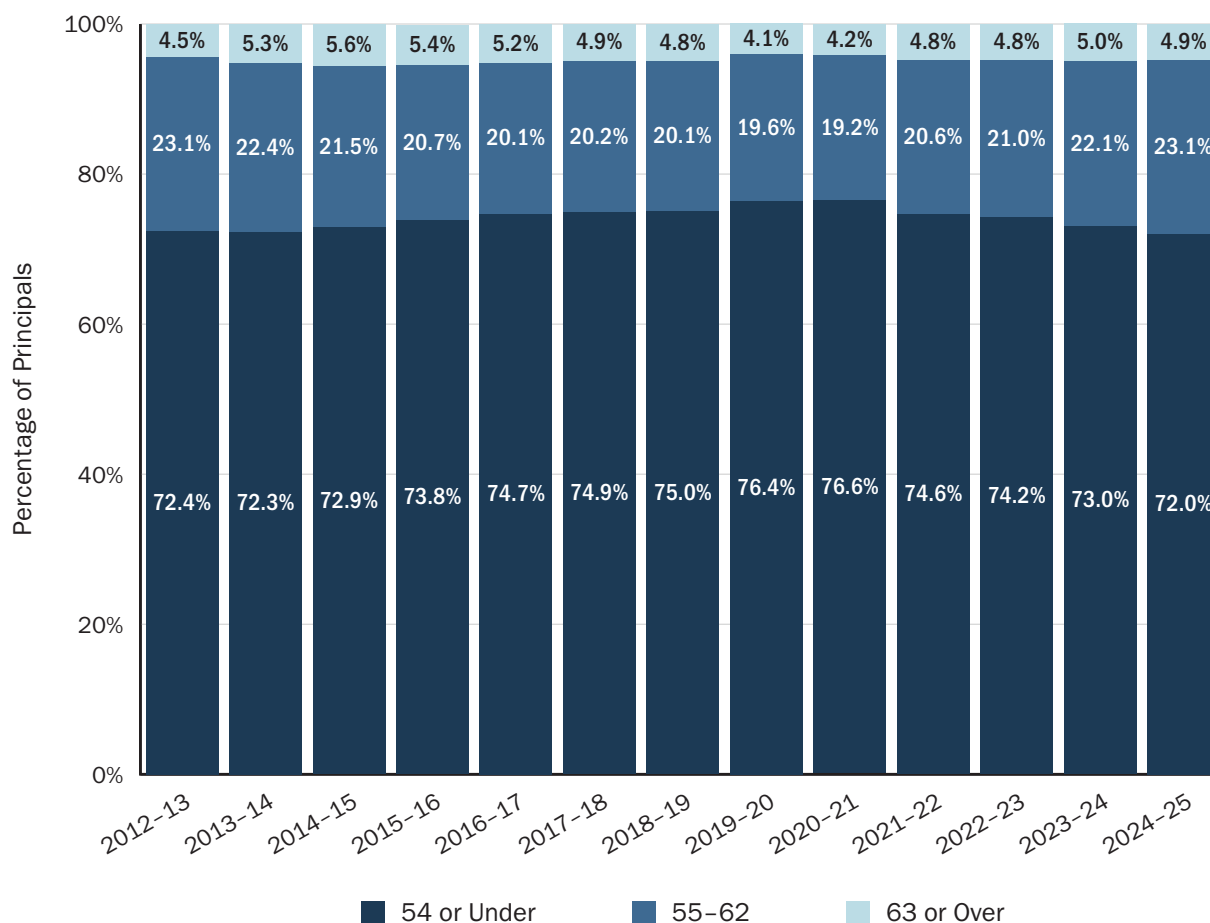
Recent Trends in the California Principalship

Demographic Trends

California principals have been staying longer in the workforce as conditions improved after 2013. As a result, a larger share of principals (28%) is age 55 or over than at any other time in the past 13 years, signaling pending retirements. (See [Figure 1](#).)

Over the last decade, the principalship also has grown more diverse by race and gender: Between 2012–13 and 2024–25, the proportion of principals of color increased from 35% to 42%, with large increases for Latino/a principals and smaller gains for African American and Asian principals. The proportion of women principals also grew at each level of the system, to 47% of high school principals, 55% of middle school principals, and 74% of elementary school principals.

Figure 1. Principal Age, 2012–13 to 2024–25



Note: N = 116,707.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of California Department of Education restricted-use data. (2026).

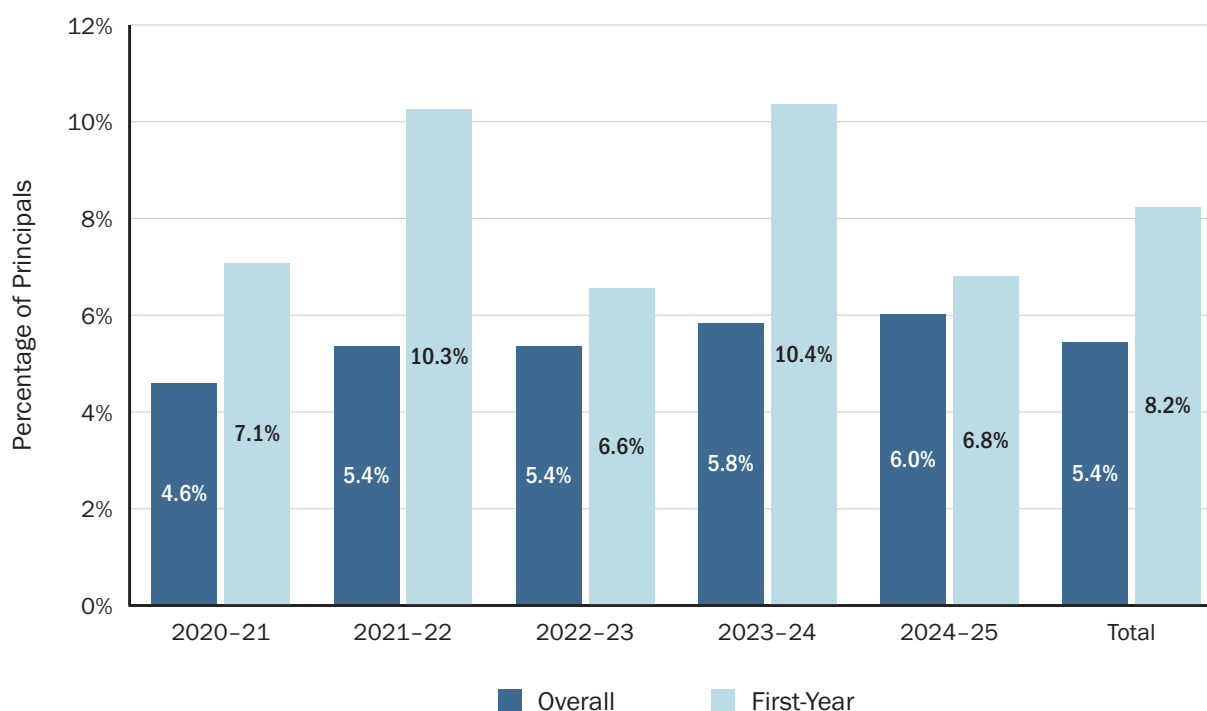
Access to Professional Learning

Major changes for California principal preparation took place as funding and student standards were being overhauled beginning in 2013. The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing adopted a new framework for administrator preparation and performance, along with a set of reforms that are aligned with the new framework. These reforms include revised standards for administrator preparation and performance; a greater emphasis on performance assessment in preparation, requiring passage of a performance assessment starting in 2019; and a revised induction requirement for administrators to clear their credentials, featuring mentoring and support around the newly revised standards. In 2019, the California legislature also authorized the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) to provide accessible, high-quality professional learning to California's PreK–12 educational leaders, including school principals. Available supports include communities of practice, local professional learning, and individualized coaching, all aligned with the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders.

California principals appreciate these improvements in preparation, induction, and professional development, and they appear to affect principals' effectiveness. Studies of principals' experiences of preparation and induction following the adoption of new licensure and accreditation standards find stronger perceptions of preparedness across the domains covered by the new standards.³ Those who have experienced coaching and professional learning communities through 21CSLA also acknowledge the value of those experiences. Other California studies have found that principals' access to high-quality preparation and professional development associated with these reforms has been associated with their ability to enable greater teacher retention and student achievement gains.⁴

Despite greater access to higher-quality professional learning, a small but growing share of principals are entering through the state's "test-only" certification route. In 2024–25, 6.0% of principals entered by passing the California Preliminary Administrative Credential Examination rather than through a preparation program, up from 4.6% in 2020–21. (See [Figure 2](#).)

Figure 2. Percentage of California Public School Principals Prepared Through a Test-Only Route to Administrator Certification, Overall and for First-Year Principals, 2020–21 to 2024–25



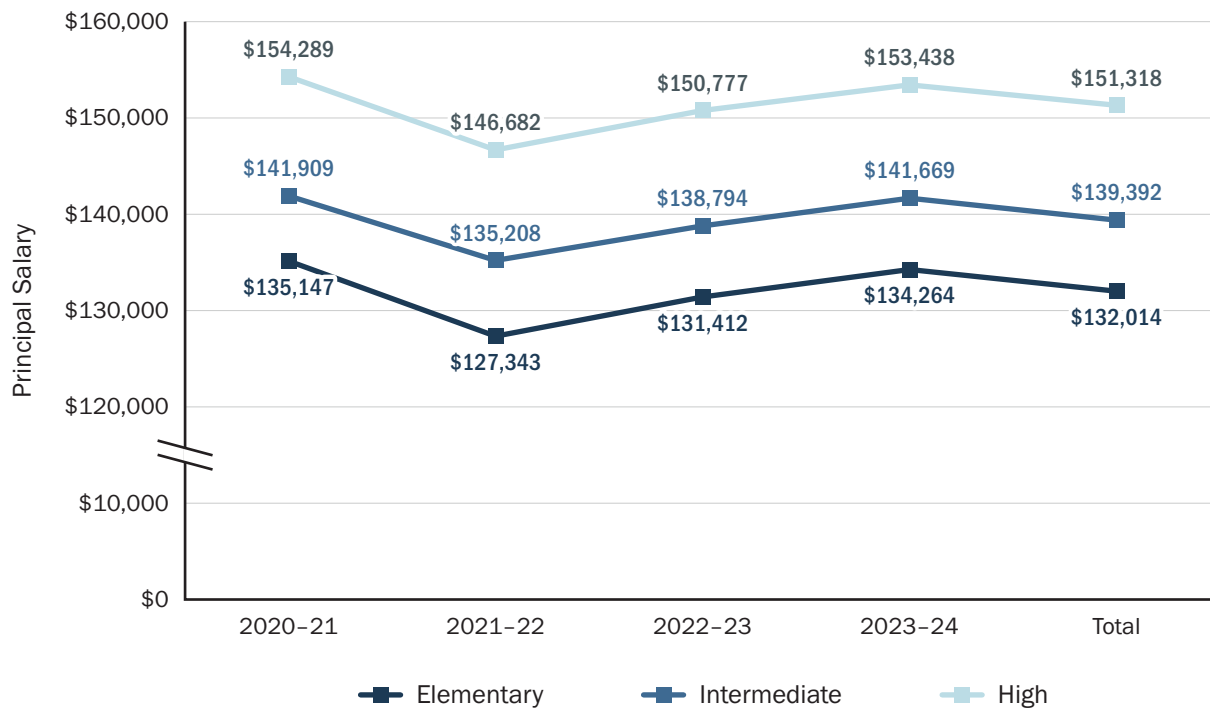
Notes: $N_{\text{Overall}} = 48,474$; $N_{\text{First-Year}} = 6,324$.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of California Commission on Teacher Credentialing restricted-use data. (2026).

Compensation

Despite having, on average, more experience and training than principals did before recent reforms, principals' wages are largely stagnant. After a brief increase in wages following the initial implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula, average wages for principals declined in real dollar terms. (See [Figure 3](#).) Over the last 3 years, salaries have increased again, but they remain lower than they were at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21.

Figure 3. California Public School Principal Average Salaries by School Level, in 2024 Dollars for Reporting Districts, 2020–21 to 2023–24



Notes: Data on principal salaries are provided from 2020–21 through 2023–24 from the J-90 file. The J-90 provides district-average principal salaries by school level; schools will frequently adjust salaries for the size and complexity of the school being led, meaning that high schools tend to have systematically higher salaries than elementary schools. Salaries have been adjusted to 2024 dollars. $N = 32,439$.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of Bruno, P. (2025). *Adjusted J-90 public-use salary data (inflation-adjusted to 2024 dollars)* [Unpublished dataset]. Provided by personal communication.

Distribution of Principals Across California Schools

Rural schools, charter schools, alternative schools of choice, special education schools, and virtual schools are less likely to have experienced and prepared principals than the overall state average. (See [Table 1.](#)) Inequities are not generally associated with student body composition aside from those associated with these school types. However, alternative schools and special education schools do serve more students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities than traditional schools in California.

Table 1. Distribution of Principal Characteristics by School Type

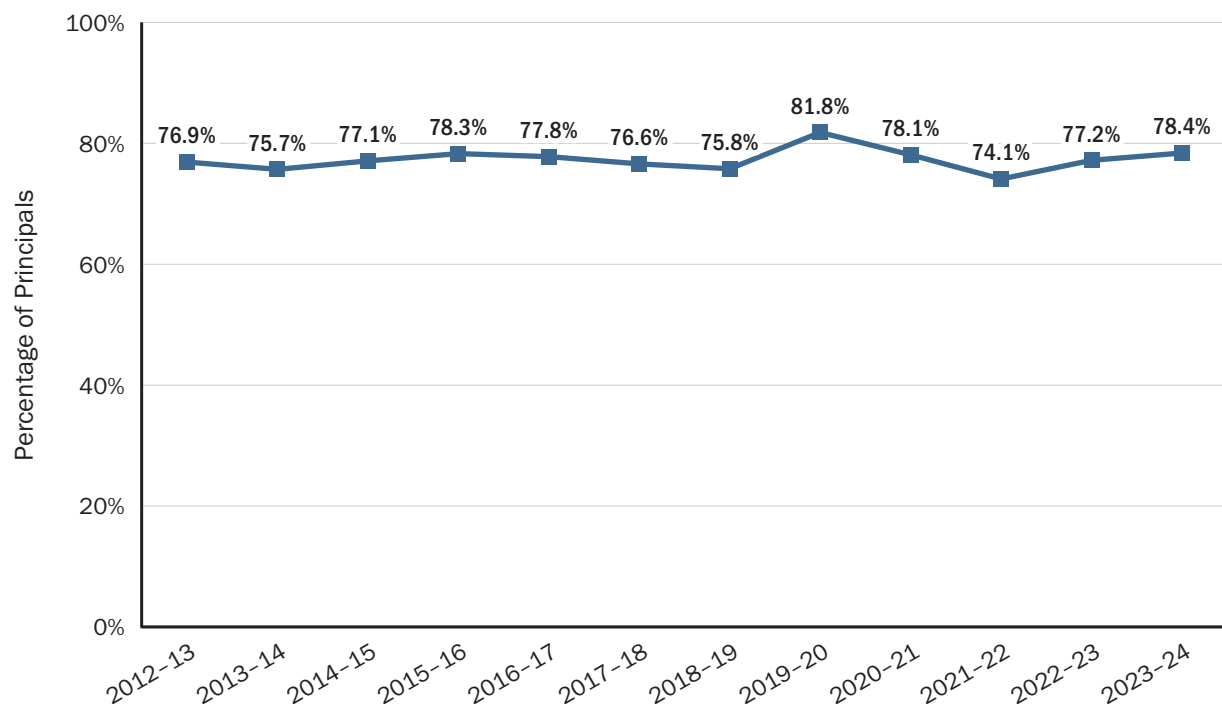
School type	Percentage test-only	Percentage age 60+	Percentage 3 or fewer years as principal	Percentage 3 or fewer years as principal at this school	<i>n</i>
Urban	5.0	11.4	36.2	40.6	22,072
Suburban	5.5	8.6	36.1	40.4	19,870
Rural	6.7	9.9	42.1	46.4	6,050
Charter school	8.1	6.5	46.4	46.0	8,460
Alternative school of choice	3.9	14.9	32.1	47.1	1,313
Special education school	8.0	19.3	43.7	45.3	689
Virtual school	9.0	6.9	54.5	56.3	1,575
Mainstream, non-charter school	4.8	10.4	34.7	39.8	37,398
Overall	5.4	10.0	36.9	41.2	47,992

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of California Department of Education restricted-use data and California Commission on Teacher Credentialing restricted-use data for principals in California from 2021–22 through 2024–25. (2026).

Principal Turnover

Prior research shows that principals' experience as school leaders and their retention in their schools are associated with improved teacher retention and student outcomes.⁵ Thus, it is concerning that California principals were less likely to stay in their schools than principals nationally, with about 78% remaining in their schools in 2020–21 compared to 80% nationally.⁶ (See [Figure 4](#).) As of 2024–25, California principal retention in the same school was 78.4%.

Figure 4. Share of California Public School Principals Retained in School and Role, 2012–13 to 2024–25

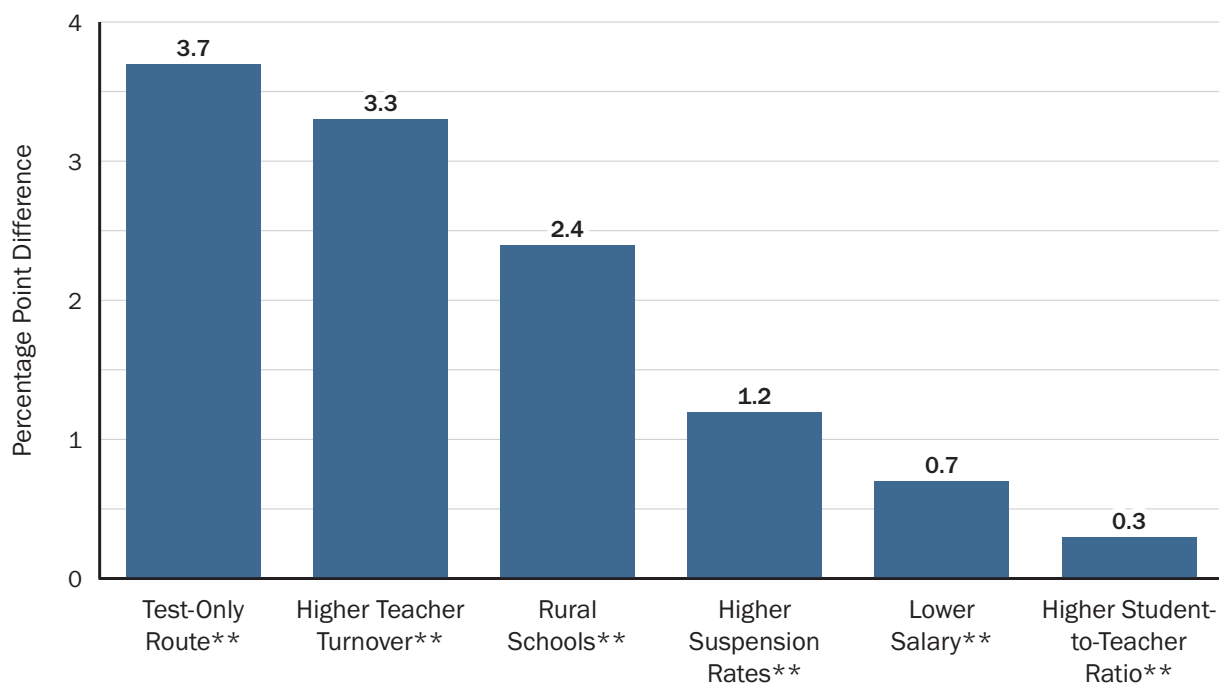


Notes: California data from 2012–13 to 2018–19 are not directly comparable to data from 2019–20 to 2023–24 due to changes in data collection systems between the 2018–19 and 2019–20 school years. Turnover outcomes for principals in the 2018–19 school followed into the 2019–20 school should be interpreted with caution. $N = 117,681$.

Source: Learning Policy Institute analysis of California Department of Education restricted-use data. (2026).

Controlling for school and principal characteristics, turnover is higher for principals who have lower salaries; those who have entered through the test-only route; and those in rural settings or schools that have higher teacher turnover, higher suspension rates, and higher ratios of students to teachers—indicators that suggest more stressful working conditions for principals. (See [Figure 5](#).)

Figure 5. Differences in Predicted Principal Turnover



Notes: Statistical controls include principal (age, experience, preparation), school (type, locale, school per pupil spending, student-to-teacher and staff ratios, student demographics, teacher turnover, suspension rate, and chronic absence rate), and district (average principal salary) characteristics, as well as year fixed effects. Differences in turnover rates for test-only and rural schools use regression model coefficients for these binary variables. Differences in turnover rates for higher teacher turnover, higher suspension rates, lower compensation, and higher student-to-teacher ratio are calculated by multiplying the regression model coefficient by the difference between the 50th and 75th percentile schools in the sample. $N = 26,610$.

** $p < .01$.

Source: LPI analysis of California Department of Education restricted-use data and California Commission on Teacher Credentialing restricted-use data for principals in California from 2021–22 through 2023–24. (2026).

Implications for California

The literature on principal effectiveness and retention points to the importance of high-quality principal preparation and professional development, sustainable working conditions, adequate compensation, and productive accountability systems to retain principals and support their success.⁷ In making recommendations, we draw both on our own findings and the broader literature on principal turnover.

Principal Preparation and Professional Development

The recent growth in entry to the profession through the state's test-only route signals that affording the time and resources to complete a preparation program is an issue for many candidates. Some candidates also have to pay for their induction support, and ongoing support for the free

professional learning opportunities provided by 21CSLA is not guaranteed. California could consider the following ways to address this concern and to support strong practices that leverage greater principal effectiveness:

- Provide funding to cover the cost of high-quality preparation programs and create paid internships in the context of an assistant principalship or other clinical opportunity, as states like Illinois, Mississippi, and North Carolina have.
- Support pipeline programs in districts that create coherent pathways into the principalship using state standards as the basis for preparation, hiring, evaluation, and support; partner with preparation programs to deliver quality preservice preparation to high-potential candidates; and align on-the-job evaluation and support for novice principals with ongoing principal learning communities and coaching.
- Ensure ongoing funding for the work of 21CSLA, which has been funded by the federal Title II 3% set-aside, and expand funding to support training and coaching in schools with higher levels of inexperienced and untrained principals, such as special education and alternative schools, as well as rural schools.

Sustainable Working Conditions

Workload is an issue for principals nationally, who report working 60 hours per week.⁸ Our findings point to even higher principal turnover in California than the national average, and administrative burdens also may be higher. Interviews with California administrators conducted for Getting Down to Facts research found that they reported, on average, the equivalent of more than a full day per week (26% of their time) on managing compliance activities associated with the many programs the state has recently enacted.⁹ To address this source of administrator overload, we recommend policy solutions that streamline reporting requirements, add staffing for distributed leadership, and provide professional learning supports for school climate improvements. Specific suggestions include the following:

- Explicitly pare back unnecessary and redundant reporting requirements to reduce compliance tasks that do not contribute to effective school management and leadership.
- Relax the 5% cap on administrative spending enforced by Proposition 223 and/or the restrictions on specific program oversight funding to 1% of revenues, which prevent the addition of funded staff to assist with administrative tasks.
- Ensure that principals have support staff, such as assistant principals, counselors, and teacher leaders, to address student and school needs.¹⁰
- Offer targeted training, professional learning communities, and coaching around how to create a positive, collegial school climate that distributes leadership while enhancing engagement and belonging for both students and teachers. This is already happening as part of California's large investment in technical assistance for its community schools (about one fourth of the state's schools) and could be expanded via 21CSLA or other support.

Adequate Compensation

California principal salaries have largely stagnated in real dollar terms when inflation and cost-of-living variations across the state are considered. This trend is concerning given that higher wages predict reduced turnover, controlling for school and principal factors. Increased salaries are most consistently associated with principal stability when salaries are higher relative to those of individuals in the same labor market.¹¹ District and state leaders can consider policy solutions to address compensation, including the following:

- Strengthen compensation through vehicles such as loan forgiveness, housing supports, or tax credits for educators, potentially focused on those working in particular kinds of schools.
- Review principals' salaries to confirm they are competitive with neighboring districts and are sufficiently greater than teachers' salaries. This will ensure that promising teachers who are interested in the principalship are not financially discouraged from pursuing and remaining in school leadership, given the greater demands on school leaders.

Productive Accountability Systems

Ensuring that accountability systems support continuous improvement rather than creating additional barriers can incentivize the stability of talented principals and reduce principal turnover. Policies that threaten, publicly humiliate, and punish schools that fail to meet targeted benchmarks have been associated with increased principal mobility.¹² These policies tend to disincentivize principals from leading in schools with the greatest challenges (i.e., schools with greater student needs and lower performance) and ultimately drive even greater difficulties in those schools associated with leadership instability.

Conclusion

In sum, while implementation of the Local Control Funding Formula appears to have contributed to lower rates of principal turnover and greater principal experience than a decade ago, principal turnover remains higher than the national average and is a particular concern for rural schools, those with lower salaries, and those with more challenging working conditions. Districts that have avoided the effects of widespread teacher shortages by recruiting and retaining more experienced, fully prepared teachers appear to be the same places where principals are supported to remain in their schools and in the profession. Stronger preparation and professional learning contribute to this stability, which supports student attendance and achievement. The task for the future is to develop more of those districts by making strategic investments in principal learning and supportive conditions for doing this critically important work.

Endnotes

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