Characteristics of Elementary School Principals

Today’s principals are more experienced, older, and better-educated than ever.

New information on the characteristics of elementary school principals is included in the most recent Schools and Staffing Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. The results show that the number of public elementary school principals grew from 54,000 in 1993–1994 to 61,000 in 2003–2004. This roughly corresponds to the increase of about 6,000 public elementary schools during this time period, although some principals manage more than one school. About 31,000 of these public elementary school principals worked in schools in suburban areas, 17,000 in urban areas, and 14,000 in rural areas.

Figure 1. Number of public elementary school principals, by sex and race/ethnicity: 1993–1994, 1999–2000, and 2003–2004

Number in thousands

Experience

Public elementary school principals generally had extensive school experience. In 2003–2004, principals had spent an average of 14 years as a teacher and eight years as a principal. Compared with 1993–1994, principals in 2003–2004 had three more years of teaching experience but one less year of experience as a principal.

Gender

Another significant change in the characteristics of elementary school principals during the 1990s was that the majority were men in 1993–1994, but by 1999–2000 the majority were women (Figure 1). Between 1993–1994 and 1999–2000, the proportion of elementary school principals who were women rose from 41 percent to 52 percent, and this percentage increased to 56 percent in 2003–2004.

Minorities

The number of minority principals—principally black and Hispanic—in public schools increased between 1993–1994 and 2003–2004 from 9,000 to 12,000 (Figure 1). However, because the number of white principals increased as well, there was no substantial change in the proportion of principals from minority groups, which constituted about 19 percent in 2003–2004. About 11 percent were black and 6 percent were Hispanic, with 2 percent American Indian, Alaska Native, or Asian/Pacific Islander.

Age Groups

The proportion of elementary school principals 55 or older increased from 19 percent in 1993–1994 to 22 percent in 1999–2000, and then to 28 percent in 2003–2004. The proportion of those 50 to 54 was also higher in 2003–2004 than in 1993–1994 (Figure 2). During the same time period, the proportion of principals who were 45 to 49 declined from 31 percent to 18 percent, and the proportion of those 40 to 44 declined from 19 percent to 10 percent. However, there was some increase in the proportion of younger principals (under 40) from 7 percent to 15 percent between 1993–1994 and 2003–2004.

Education and Professional Development

Almost all surveyed public elementary school principals have advanced degrees. About 60 percent had a master’s degree, 30 percent had an education specialist degree, and 8 percent had a doctorate. In addition, most public elementary school principals engage in professional development programs over the course of a year. In 2003–2004, nearly all reported that they had participated in workshops and conferences during the past year (Figure 3). Most principals also reported that they had conducted individual or collaborative research, visited other schools, and participated in networking activities.

A smaller, though still notable, proportion of principals (45 percent) reported that they had made presentations at workshops or conferences, or participated (43 percent) in formal mentoring or peer observation programs sponsored by their districts. Another 34 percent reported they had taken university courses related to their role as principal.


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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 40</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>40 to 44</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>45 to 49</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>50 to 54</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 or over</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
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</table>

Figure 3. Percentage of public elementary school principals participating in selected professional development activities over the past 12 months: 2003–2004

Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attended workshops or conferences</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual collaborative research</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited other schools</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in networking activities</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presented at workshops or conferences</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal mentoring/peer observation</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took university courses</td>
<td>34</td>
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Figure 4. Percentage of public elementary school principals who rated three of eight goals as most important for their school: 1999–2000 and 2003–2004

Educational Goal

<table>
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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy skills</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic excellence</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good work habits</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human relations skills</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific moral values</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural awareness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational/vocational skills</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Policy Influence

Public elementary school principals generally believed that they had a major influence on many important school policies in 2003–2004. The areas most frequently cited included teacher evaluations (92 percent), teacher hires (87 percent), and setting discipline policies (87 percent). School budgets and content of teacher professional development were two other areas where about two-thirds or more of principals felt they had a major influence. Only about half of the principals felt that they had a major influence on student performance standards or establishing school curricula.

School Goals

Principals were asked to rate from a list of eight goals the three they believed were most important for their schools in 1999–2000 and in 2003–2004. The most frequently cited goal in both years was developing student literacy skills (Figure 4). The other two goals cited by the majority of principals in both years were academic excellence and good work habits. However, there have been some shifts among the priorities of elementary principals, with increases in the proportion citing academic excellence and personal growth as critical goals, and decreases in the proportion citing multicultural awareness, human relations skills, and specific moral values.

Salaries

Public elementary school principals earned an average of $75,000 in 1999–2000. This amounts to an increase of about $6,000, or 9 percent after adjusting for inflation, from 1993–1994. As would be expected, principals with more years of experience or higher levels of education received higher salaries than those with less experience or education.

Principals with a master’s degree had an average salary of $74,000 compared with $78,000 for those with an educational specialist degree and $83,000 for those with a doctorate (Figure 5). Principals over the age of 50 had higher average salaries than those in the younger age groups.

Challenges

While public elementary school principals generally reported lower levels of crime and misbehavior in their schools than secondary school principals, significant percentages reported some types of problems. For example, 26 percent of principals reported physical conflicts among students at least once a week in their schools and 21 percent reported incidents of student bullying at least once a week. About 12 percent of principals reported frequent student acts of disrespect for teachers and 6 percent reported student verbal abuse of teachers. However, incidence of widespread classroom disorder, robbery, theft, and vandalism were relatively rare.

Substantial proportions of elementary school principals felt that student and family issues were moderate or...
major problems in their schools. About half (51 percent) felt that student poverty was a moderate or serious problem and nearly the same percentage (46 percent) indicated that students coming to school unprepared to learn was a moderate or serious problem. About one-third of the principals reported that student tardiness and lack of parent involvement were also moderate or serious problems.

For More Information

More detailed statistics on education are available from The Condition of Education, Digest of Education Statistics, and other reports prepared by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and available from ED Pubs, P.O. Box 1398, Jessup, MD 20794-1398, or through the Internet at http://oerid.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html. Further information on education statistics may be obtained from NCES at http://nces.ed.gov.

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