NAESP’s 10-Year Study of the K-8 Principal: A Historical Perspective

Nancy Protheroe

Although some things have remained the same during the past 40 years, others have markedly changed.

Artilces in the Research Report series published in each issue of Principal typically focus on things principals can do to develop effective schools and classrooms. Recent topics have included math instruction, ways to support new teachers, and the role a child’s sense of emotional well-being can play in enhancing learning opportunities. This article takes a different perspective. It takes a historical look at characteristics of K-8 principals, their attitudes about schools and the principalship, and their assessments of problems facing schools.

Thanks to NAESP, there is a rich database available for such information. Beginning in 1928, NAESP has periodically conducted a 10-year study of the K-8 principal. This year some of you are being asked to respond to a survey for the 2008 study, and highlights from the updated profile will be available in the fall. For now, though, our retrospective will look at ways in which principals’ responses to previous surveys have changed or—in some cases—remained the same over the years until the most recent study was conducted in 1998.

To provide some context, it is interesting to note that NAESP was a department of the National Education Association (NEA) in 1928. This relationship continued until increased NEA support for teacher collective bargaining caused administrator groups, often viewed as sitting on the opposite side of the bargaining table, to form independent associations such as NAESP, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American Association of School Administrators.

The retrospective will begin in 1958. The discussion of “the children we teach” that introduced that year’s 10-year study included some observations that could just have easily been made by a principal today. For example: “Frequent moving, often from state to state, is a way of life for thousands of families. ... It is not uncommon to find that many of the sixth-grade children at a given school began their kindergarten education elsewhere and have attended several schools since” (Howard, 1958).

The ideal elementary school program described in 1958 would also resonate with principals today, although some of them might say the current emphasis on testing makes some aspects difficult to achieve:

[The program] will be well organized, but it will have great flexibility, allowing for many kinds of individual...
Behavior Guide

Effective teaching requires considerable skill in managing the multitude of tasks and situations that occur daily in a classroom. The Behavior Guide is an easy-to-use resource that provides K-8 educators techniques and strategies for creating the disciplined environment needed for effective learning.

Similarities and Differences over Time

Every 10 years, the survey instrument used for the previous study is carefully reviewed and updated. Two guidelines drive development of the content for the new version. First, some questions are repeated in each of the surveys, with the responses yielding valuable trend data about K-8 principals, the principalship, and schools. Second, each survey intentionally includes items that focus on factors with a significant impact on schools at that time. For example, this year’s survey includes questions about principals’ assessment of the types of impact the No Child Left Behind Act has had on their schools.

Let us turn now to some brief highlights from the 10-year study of K-8 principals over a 40-year period—from 1958 to 1998. In 1958, 17 percent of the respondents reported that they were “teaching principals” who had to split their time between administrative duties and the classroom. By 1988, only 1 percent of the respondents described their titles this way. (The item was not included in the 1998 survey.)

In 1958, 87 percent of the “supervising (nonteaching) principals” reported the lack of an assistant principal. While this number decreased over a 40-year period, 80 percent of the principals responding to the 1998 survey still reported that there was no assistant principal assigned to their school. Will more of the respondents to the 2008 survey—many of whom have been assigned a variety of additional responsi-
abilities in recent years—tell us such support is now available to them?

Another interesting comparison between the work life of elementary school principals in 1958 and 1998 deals with the time needed to do the job. In 1958, supervising principals reported an average workday of 9.2 hours, with an additional 4.9 hours devoted to the job on evenings and weekends—for an average workweek during the school year of 50.9 hours. While principals responding to the 1998 survey reported slightly shorter workdays (nine hours), their evening and weekend time had increased to eight hours, for a total workweek of 53 hours.

Compensation is obviously an important topic both for principals and the associations representing their interests. In the 1958 survey, principals were asked to report their 1956-1957 annual school salary, whether they had employment in addition to the principalship (nearly two-thirds of the male principals but only one-tenth of the women said “yes”), and the number of individuals who were “fully dependent on them for financial support” (median for men was 3.1, with women reporting a median of 0). Not surprisingly, the only question of the three included on the 1998 salary asked about school salary. The median 1956-1957 salary was $6,237, and the mean for 1996-1997 was $60,285. Adjusted for inflation, the 1956-1957 salary would be $35,624 in 1997 dollars, representing an increase in earning power of almost $25,000.

Challenges Facing Principals

More than most other items, questions addressing concerns or challenges typically need to change over time. Priorities for schools shift, and the composition of the student body changes. Thus, less trend data is available in regard to this topic. In 1958, challenges discussed included lack of clerical help—which impacted principals’ ability to provide instructional support—a concern that an increasing number of principals would be expected to take responsibility for more than one school, and dissatisfaction with preparation programs provided by colleges and universities.

A topic receiving particular attention on the 1978 survey was collective bargaining by teachers. While mixed opinions were reported, 43 percent of the responding principals felt teacher collective bargaining was having a “bad effect” on the quality of education, and an even higher percentage (62 percent) said it was having a “bad effect” on public opinion. About half of the principals who had experienced a teachers’ strike in their building felt that relations between them and the teachers had worsened.

In 1998, responding principals were asked to classify each of 56 areas as being a “major,” “minor,” or “little or no” concern. Fragmentation of the principal’s time headed the list (72 percent identified it as a major concern), followed by inadequate financial resources (55.8 percent), student assessment issues (53.5 percent), and students not performing up to potential (52.9 percent). These principals were also asked to make an assessment of factors that affected their own job security. Respondents were more positive in regard to this question. The most worrisome item—unsatisfactory student performance—was designated as a major concern by fewer than one in three. The next items in the ranking (conflicts with teachers, conflicts with superintendents, and conflicts with parents) were described as major concerns by about 14 percent.

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Characteristics of Principals

Trend data on the percentages of men and women holding the position of K-8 principal demonstrate the importance of repeating some questions in every administration of the survey. For example, authors of the 1968 report state that the 1958 report expressed “concern that the proportion of men supervising principals was continuing to increase with a corresponding decline in the proportion of women principals.” They go on to ask what factors might have contributed to this. In their words, the 1968 authors then entered the “realm of speculation.” They went on to say:

Undoubtedly, school systems and the Department of Elementary School Principals (NEA) have done much to magnify the principalship as a position worthy of the talents of the most capable young men. This picture was not commonly presented in the 1920s and 1930s when men student teachers often were advised to seek the alleged status and the better salaries of secondary school teaching (Department of Elementary School Principals-NEA, 1968).

The authors of both the 1958 and 1968 reports might have been pleased to find that data reported in the 1998 study signaled a movement back toward a more even gender distribution (see Table 1).

In contrast, the median age of the reporting principals has remained fairly stable over time: 48 years old in 1968 compared with 50 years old in 1998. Principals have become more highly educated, with less than 1 percent of the respondents in 1998 reporting they hold only a bachelor’s degree as contrasted with 16 percent in 1958. An interesting finding is that 21 percent of the 1958 respondents said they had “no education related to elementary school administration” before becoming an elementary school principal. (The item was not included in the 1998 survey.)

Finally, in both 1968 and 1998, principals were asked: “Suppose you were starting out all over again, would you want to become an elementary school principal?” More than four of every five responding principals answered “yes.”

WEB RESOURCES

In this report by Public Agenda, superintendents and principals talk about their jobs and the challenges they face. www.publicagenda.org/specials/rollingup/rollingup.htm

This Principal article discusses some responsibilities, skills, and behaviors identified as critical to a principal’s ability to effectively provide school leadership. www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1508

In Making Sense of Leading Schools, the authors report on the results of in-depth interviews with educators in 21 schools, both public and private. www.crpe.org/pubs/pdf/MakingSense_PORTINWEB.pdf

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Table 1. Gender Breakdown of K-8 Principals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage Male</th>
<th>Percentage Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NAESP’s understanding of the importance of both current and trend data on the K-8 principal and the people serving in this position—and the Association’s commitment to collecting this information—provides us with a valuable resource. Soon to be updated with 2008 data, this resource can help support efforts to highlight the importance of the K-8 principal in providing a high-quality education for all students, provide information for groups and institutions of higher education developing preparation programs, and assist NAESP with planning future initiatives and services.

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References


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