

School Principal - The Role of Elementary and Secondary School Principals, Principal Duties and Responsibilities, Principal Qualifications

The school principal is the highest-ranking administrator in an elementary, middle, or high school. Principals typically report directly to the school superintendent, but may report to the superintendent's designee, usually an associate superintendent, in larger school districts. The highest-ranking school level administrator in some private schools is called the head master. Head masters have many of the same responsibilities as principals, but they may engage in additional activities such as fund-raising. In some school districts, a single person functions as superintendent and principal. Principals, head masters, and others who are responsible for the overall operation of a school are often called school leaders. In an era of shared decision-making and site-based management, the term *school leader* may also be used in reference to other school administrators and leaders within the school such as assistant principals, lead teachers, and others who participate in school leadership activities.

Schools have not always had principals. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, as schools grew from one-room schoolhouses into schools with multiple grades and classrooms, the need arose for someone to manage these more complex organizations. This need was filled initially by teachers, who continued to teach while also dealing with their school's management needs. These teachers were called principal teachers. As schools continued to grow, principal teachers became full-time administrators in most schools. Most principals soon stopped teaching because of the many demands their management responsibilities placed on their time. As managers, principals were responsible for financial operations, building maintenance, student scheduling, personnel, public relations, school policy regarding discipline, coordination of the instructional program, and other overall school matters. The management role included some curriculum and instruction supervision, but overall school management was the primary role principals played until the early 1980s. As the accountability movement gained momentum, the role of the principal changed from school manager to school instructional leader and then to the school reform leader. With this shift in role focus, principals retained their management roles. Principals currently play multiple roles: school manager, instructional leader, and the leader of school reform.

Principals are responsible for the overall operation of their schools. Some of their duties and responsibilities are delineated in state statutes. States and school districts have also set expectations for principals through their principal evaluation criteria and procedures. During the latter part of the twentieth century, as schools began to be held more accountable for the performance of their students

on national and state assessments, the duties and responsibilities of principals changed. Principals became more responsible for teaching and learning in their schools. In particular, their duty to monitor instruction increased along with their responsibility to help teachers improve their teaching. With this change in responsibilities, principals discovered the need to more effectively evaluate instruction and assist teachers as they worked to improve their instructional techniques. The principal's duty to improve the school instructional program is mandated by legislation in some states. Some state legislation requires the removal of principals when schools are classified as low performing (students do not meet achievement expectations) for a specified period of time.

Principal Duties and Responsibilities

With schools facing increased pressure to improve teaching and learning, the duties and responsibilities of principals expanded further to include the responsibility for leading school reform that would raise student achievement. Success in leading reforms to increase student achievement often hinged upon a principal's ability to create a shared vision within the school community and success in implementing new organizational structures that engage teachers in shared decision-making. Principals have discovered that engaging the entire school staff in making decisions results in more commitment to school reform initiatives.

Principals are also responsible for facilitating their school's interactions with parents and others in the school community. This responsibility includes working with parents when disciplinary issues arise, when students are not succeeding academically, and when parents have concerns. Principals also interact with parents who serve on school advisory boards, parent/teacher organizations, and booster clubs. Principals report that they spent a significant part of their time working with parents of students who have been identified as needing special services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA).

Principals continue to be responsible for the management of their schools even though their primary responsibility has shifted. One major management responsibility is school safety. This responsibility includes ensuring that facilities and equipment are safe and in good working order, the development of overall school discipline policies and the enforcement of those policies, and the assignment of supervisory responsibilities among school personnel. At the elementary level, principals are cognizant of their responsibility to ensure constant supervision of the very young children in the school. As students advance into the higher grades, the need for supervision changes as students mature. The responsibility for supervision remains high for older students who are handicapped; who are in areas

where the potential for injury is greater such as labs, shops, and athletic facilities; and who are in situations (field trips, athletic events, etc.) where additional caution is required.

Principal Qualifications

A license is required for those who seek employment as principals in most states. Licensure requirements vary from state to state, but the requirements generally include experience as a teacher, graduation from a state accredited principal preparation program, and a passing score on a nationally validated licensure exam. Principal qualifications have been the subject of considerable debate during the 1980s and 1990s as pressure increased to make schools more accountable for student achievement.

The national organizations representing principals and other school administrators have actively engaged in the debate over appropriate qualifications for principals. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) took an active role in identifying principal qualifications in the 1980s through the creation of an assessment process. This process focused on the leadership skills that were determined to most significantly impact their ability to effectively lead their schools, and the procedure was based on a task analysis conducted in cooperation with the American Psychological Association (APA). The skills assessed through the NASSP Assessment Center included leadership, sensitivity, organizational ability, judgment, problem analysis, range of interest, motivation, decisiveness, educational values, oral and written communication, and stress tolerance. Later the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) created an assessment process that assessed similar skills.

In the mid-1990s the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) decided to review principal qualifications. The NPBEA included most of the major national organizations that represent education administrators from state superintendents to principals. The NPBEA also included organizations that represent professors who prepare school administrators. One of the members, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), took on the major role of developing a set of standards for school leaders. Working with the member associations and representatives from thirty-seven states, the CCSSO led the effort to identify a new set of standards for principals. This group was known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC).

The six standards that were created by ISLLC were designed to influence the preparation of principals, guide states in the development of their own state principal standards, and serve as a tool

for licensure or evaluation. The six standards address a principal's need to promote the success of all students through the following:

- The creation and implementation of a shared school vision
- The nurturing and sustaining of a culture and instructional program conducive to learning and staff development
- The ensuring of the management of school operations to produce a safe and effective learning environment
- The collaboration with families and the diverse communities schools serve
- The promotion of integrity, fairness, and ethical behavior
- The interaction with larger political, social, legal, and cultural contexts of schooling

The ISLLC Standards became the basis upon which the Educational Testing Service (ETS) developed a licensure assessment for use by ISLLC member states. A number of states use this ETS-developed School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA) along with other criteria to license principals.

Research on School Leadership

Research has consistently shown that principals play a significant role in school reform efforts. As the accountability movement gained momentum during the 1980s and 1990s, research on school effectiveness, generally referred to as effective schools research, focused on principals and their role. These studies consistently found that the principal was the key to an effective school. Research found that the unique position principals hold, as the one person in a school who is responsible for and empowered to oversee the entire school, places them in a powerful position to coordinate the entire school operation and move it forward. The research further revealed that the most effective principals had a clear vision of how the school could serve its students; had aligned resources and priorities with the vision; and could engage other key players, within and outside the school, in achieving the goals embedded in the vision.

Other studies have supported the key roles principals play in their school's success and point to other leader characteristics as critical to the principal's success. These characteristics include high energy, initiative, tolerance for ambiguity, sense of humor, analytical ability, and common sense. As society grows more diverse, researchers are beginning to look into the principal's role in leading schools that are increasingly diverse.

Research on the principalship is focused on the changing role of school leaders in a changing society. Thus far, research has shown the principal to be a key to a school's successful transition into an institution that will adequately prepare students. This research was based upon an existing system of public and private education. As society continues to change and technological advances change the tools available for teaching, the role of the principal will likely change. Vouchers, charter schools, and technology have the potential to change schooling in fundamental ways. As these changes take place, the role of the principal will also change. The principal of an online school will function in very different ways than the principal of a traditional school.

Demographic Profile of School Principals

Demographics on the principalship are collected and reported by the United States Department of Education. The National Center for Education Statistics collected data on the public and private school principal population in 1987 through 1988, 1990 through 1991, and 1993 through 1994. These data show a 2.2 percent growth in the number of public school principals from 1987 through 1988 to 1993 through 1994. There was no significant change in the number of private school principals over the same period. In 1993 through 1994 the number of public elementary school principals was almost triple the number of secondary school principals (71.9% to 24.4%).

The majority of principals at all three levels of public schooling (elementary, middle, and high school) are males; however, the percentage of female principals increased from 24.5 percent to 34.5 percent from the 1987 through 1988 survey to the 1993 through 1994 survey. The most significant increase in the number of female principals occurred at the elementary level during this period. In 1993 through 1994, 41 percent of public elementary school principals were female. The number of female public school principals will continue to increase in the future based on data showing that 48.1 percent of the new public school principals hired in 1993 through 1994 were female.

Data on the principalship at the private school level shows that the majority of principals are female and the percentage of female principals is increasing. Female elementary principals of private schools outnumber their male colleagues three to one; however, this ratio is reversed at the secondary level. The number of private school female principals has increased from 1987 through 1988 to 1993 through 1994.

Public and private school principals are predominately white non-Hispanics. The 1993 through 1994 survey revealed that 84 percent of public school principals and 92 percent of private school principals were white non-Hispanics. The percentage of minority principals in public schools increased between

1987 and 1988 and 1993 through 1994 from 13 percent to 16 percent. Most minority public school principals (35%) were in central city schools in the 1993 through 1994 survey. There are few minority principals in school districts with less than 1,000 students. The number of minority principals increases as school district size increases. The percentage of private school principals has remained consistent at around 8 percent, and the number of new minority private school principals indicates the percentage is not going to change significantly in the future.

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