Support for Instructional Leadership

Supervision, Mentoring, and Professional Development for U.S. School Leaders: Findings from the American School Leader Panel

William R. Johnston, Julia H. Kaufman, and Lindsey E. Thompson

Key findings

- A large percentage of principals are offered some type of on-the-job supports in their district, and most receive at least some mentoring and/or professional development.
- School leaders value their supervision and mentoring more when supervision and mentoring places a higher emphasis on principals' roles as instructional leaders.
- Principals in large districts appear to have some distinct advantages over principals in small districts in terms of the support they receive and its focus on instructional leadership.

■ **SUMMARY** An abundance of research suggests that effective school leaders are vital to promoting student outcomes in schools across the United States. Recognizing this, many state and local education agencies are motivated to develop a strong corps of highly qualified principals and assistant principals. Although a lot of emphasis is placed on recruitment and preservice training for new principals, many school districts are also working to support administrators once they are placed in schools. However, relatively little is known about the types of on-the-job supports currently available to school leaders, particularly on a national scale. In this report, we present findings from a Wallace Foundation–funded survey of RAND's American School Leader Panel, a nationally representative sample of principals, regarding the quantity, content, and perceived quality of on-the-job support offered to them by their school districts. We focus on three particular types of support—supervision, mentoring, and professional development—and we investigate not only the prevalence of support for school leaders but also how this support relates to their roles as instructional leaders. In addition, we compare responses of principals from small, midsize, and large school districts to consider whether school-leader support may look different depending on district size.

According to our findings, almost all principals reported receiving some kind of district-provided, on-the-job supports, although less than a third indicated that their district provided a combination of regular supervisory communication, mentoring for principals at varying experience levels and at least a day of school leader professional development. School leaders also placed a higher value on supervision and mentoring support when it emphasized their role as instructional leaders. Lastly, principals from larger school districts generally reported more on-the-job supports for principals than their peers in smaller districts. These findings imply that although most principals receive some level of on-the-job support from their school districts, the value that principals derive from that support is related to whether they feel supported to be instructional leaders. In addition, the findings related to district size underscore the unique challenges that principals in smaller, often rural, districts—and their supervisors—face in leading schools. Given these challenges, policymakers and practitioners should consider ways to bolster the capacity of smaller districts to support principals, perhaps by leveraging online network platforms and fostering the work of interdistrict consortia that provide key network support for these smaller districts.

INTRODUCTION

In the current era of high-stakes education reform, the performance of principals is often under intense scrutiny from policymakers, school districts, and the general public. Schools are often evaluated based on student achievement and growth indicators, and there is extensive research showing that principals can play a key role in support of student success, primarily through their impact on teachers' instruction (Alvoid and Black, 2014; Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin, 2012; Grissom, Kalogrides, and Loeb, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Supovitz, Sirinides, and May, 2010). Leithwood et al.'s research (2009), for example, points to school leadership as second only to classroom instruction in terms of school-level factors commonly associated with student outcomes.

It should come as no surprise, then, that many school districts and state education agencies seek to develop stronger corps of school leaders. Such efforts often focus on recruitment and preservice training programs for principals, with some attention also being paid to in-service programs that support principals after they have been placed in schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Doyle and Locke, 2014; Peterson, 2002). However, only a handful of studies have directly examined the quantity and quality of supports that principals receive once they are on the job, and results of those studies are mixed. For example, in their nationally representative analysis of principal professional development (PD), Grissom and Harrington (2010) found that not all PD resulted in increases in principal effectiveness. They specifically provided clear evidence of a negative relationship between university-based courses and principal effectiveness. In addition, Spillane et al. (2009) found that principals in one medium-size urban district received at least six days of district-provided PD a year, with 90 percent of principals agreeing or strongly agreeing that the PD in the past year provided them with useful knowledge and presented opportunities to improve their work. However, most of those principals also noted that the PD covered too many topics and lacked attention to their roles as instructional leaders.

These findings by Spillane et al. (2009) underscore an important concern of the current study—how well U.S. principals are supported as instructional leaders. There is little doubt that an important part of principals' work is ensuring quality teaching (e.g., Honig, 2012; Supovitz, Sirinides, and May, 2010), and district-provided, on-the-job supports for principals may be key in developing their capacity in this area. For example, New York City's Community School District 2 developed an apprenticeship model of principal support that thoughtfully integrated evaluation and mentoring with district-provided PD, which helped establish a culture of support with shared accountability for student success (Fink and Resnick, 2001). In addition, a study by Augustine et al. (2009) of 17 mostly urban school districts in ten states found that district-provided PD was positively associated with principals' time spent on instruction-oriented work such as classroom observations.

The purpose of this report is to provide a more clear and comprehensive understanding of the supports that school leaders actually receive while they are on the job.[1] The Wallace Foundation, the underwriter of this report, has supported improvements in educational leadership for the past 15 years (e.g., Augustine et al., 2009; Bottoms and O'Neill, 2001; Fry et al., 2004; Turnbull, Riley, and MacFarlane, 2013; Turnbull, Riley, and MacFarlane, 2015). This report aims to complement the Foundation's work by describing the prevalence of support for principals across the United States and support for principals' roles as instructional leaders. Furthermore, by leveraging data from the nationally representative American School Leader Panel (ASLP), we can compare supports for school leaders across districts of different size. We ask three specific research questions:

1. What on-the-job supports for principals are available across American school districts?
2. To what extent do these supports emphasize principals' role in teachers' instruction, and how does that influence principals' perception of the quality of support they are receiving?
3. How does the quantity, quality, and format of on-the-job supports vary for principals in districts of different sizes?

To this point, research has not provided conclusive answers to these questions. While some research has investigated principal supports across a variety of school districts, minimal attention has been paid to how district context—and, particularly, district size—may play in the quantity, quality, and instructional focus of on-the-job supports for principals. Variation in district size across the country is enormous, with nearly one-fifth of districts having fewer than 250 students and several of the largest districts serving hundreds of thousands of students (Aritomi, Coopersmith, and Gruber, 2009). Some evidence suggests that large, predominantly urban districts can be laboratories for innovative models of school-leader training (Fink and Resnick, 2001; Mitgang, Gill and Cummins, 2013). An exemplar case can be found in the Wallace-funded Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI), which is taking place in several large school districts across the country. The PPI involves a compre-

Many school districts and state education agencies seek to develop stronger corps of school leaders.

hensive strategy, including establishment of clear standards of effective school leadership and further development of three additional components intended to improve school leaders' capacity to facilitate effective instruction: preservice preparation, selective hiring and placement, and on-the-job supervision and support (Turnbull, Riley, and MacFarlane, 2013).

Furthermore, research suggests an acute lack of on-the-job support for principals in smaller and rural districts, which may be particularly important given that it is harder to recruit school leaders who are already highly qualified within such districts (Canales, Tejada-Delgado, and Slate, 2008; Salazar, 2007). For example, Duncan and Stock (2010) found that only 13 percent of new principals in the predominantly rural state of Wyoming received formalized mentoring from their districts. This finding is striking, as mentoring is required for new principals in school districts in more than half of the nation's states (Spiro, Mattis, and Mitgang, 2007). Furthermore, school leaders in rural districts can lack a peer support network given distances between districts and fewer school leaders working within smaller districts themselves (Hill, 1993; Salazar, 2007). Finally, smaller districts may only have one district administrator—the superintendent—who is solely responsible for supervising principals yet often has little time or resources to focus on principal growth opportunities.

Despite all this research suggesting likely differences in supports for school leaders between larger and smaller school districts, we are not aware of any clear empirical evidence on these differences. We are thus particularly interested in comparing the experiences of school leaders from districts of different sizes. We hypothesize that school leaders from larger districts will have more on-the-job supports available to them than their peers in smaller districts, despite the likely commensurate needs for support among all school leaders across the United States.

SAMPLE AND DATA

The data presented in this report come from a web-based survey administered by RAND to the American School Leader Panel (ASLP) from June through October 2015. The ASLP is a randomly selected, nationally representative panel of U.S. public school principals for kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12).[2] The ASLP members respond to periodic surveys about policies, practices, and the profession, allowing us to gain both detailed accounts of various topics and extensive longitudinal data. At the time of this survey, the ASLP had approximately 550 school leaders and 175 responded, resulting in a response rate of 32 percent. This low response rate may be attributable to a variety of factors. First, of course, principals are busy and may not be able to set aside adequate time for noncritical commitments. Second, the timing of the survey overlapped both the end of one school year around May/June and the beginning of the next one in August/September. Third, response rates for large, national surveys have been in decline in general. For example, a metastudy of 68 surveys in 49 studies by Cook, Heath, and Thompson (2000) found an average 39.6-percent response rate among national survey studies. Similarly, Jacob and Jacob (2012) found that average response rates of school principals in Michigan to web-based surveys ranged from about 15 to 45 percent, with highest response rates among principals who received a small monetary incentive to complete the survey. Although our response rate is consistent with these trends, our use of weights attempts to account for much of this bias due to non-selection into the panel and nonresponse for this particular survey.[3]

To facilitate the comparison of respondents from school districts of different sizes, the sample was split into three subgroups. We identified districts with less than 5,000 students as "small" districts, and those above 25,000 students as "large" districts, which resulted in a midsize group of districts with between 5,000 and 25,000 students. This imprecise distinction is not ideal, given that district size varies widely in the United States, as well as in our sample (we have respondents working in districts with fewer than 50 students and others in the hundreds of thousands), and these subgroups will not allow for finer-grained distinctions among some districts. Nonetheless, these demarcation points in district size represent our best effort at making comparisons given the information and sample size available.[4]

Table 1. Principal Demographics

	Full Sample (n=175)	Small Districts (n=87)	Midsize Districts (n=56)	Large Districts (n=32)
Years of experience	8.4 *(6.7)*	9.1 *(7.5)*	7.5 *(5.0)*	8.4 *(7.0)*
Number of students in school***	530.3 *(346.2)*	483.3 *(288.7)*	611.0 *(429.6)*	618.7 *(252.5)*
Number of students in district***	28,887.9 *(79,587.5)*	1,972.0 *(1,458.1)*	11,887.4 *(5,083.4)*	126,448.8 *(148,173.7)*
Grade level				
Elementary (K–5)	69%	68%	69%	72%
Secondary (6–12)	31%	32%	31%	28%
School composition**				
Greater than 75% FRL	23%	26%	21%	36%
25% to 75% FRL	61%	66%	66%	37%
Up to 25% FRL	16%	8%	13%	25%
Urbanicity**				
City	31%	15%	46%	46%
Suburb	30%	26%	22%	34%
Town	12%	22%	26%	0%
Rural	27%	37%	6%	20%

NOTE: Standard deviations in parentheses and italics. Asterisks indicate significant differences among respondents from different-sized districts, according to t-test or chi-square test *** $p<.0001$; **$p<.01$.

As Table 1 indicates, our sample of principals worked in a variety of settings, with some important differences to note between our subsamples of school leaders from large, midsize, and small districts. For example, school leaders from larger districts were more likely to be from urban and suburban settings and work in larger schools than their peers from smaller districts (mean enrollment=618 in large districts compared with 611 and 483 in midsize and small districts, respectively). Furthermore, school leaders in small and midsize districts were more likely to work in schools with moderate poverty levels (of 25 to 75 percent free and reduced priced lunch students) than principals from large districts. Finally, as expected, principals from large and midsize districts were more likely to work in urban environments than their counterparts in small districts.[5] Thus, even though we present some differences in responses of principals from districts of different sizes, we acknowledge that at least some of these differences may be attributable to factors that are intertwined with district size, such as the size and structure of district central offices.

Our findings are summarized in the next section, divided into three subsections. The first subsection discusses the quantity and perceived quality of principal supervision, mentoring, and PD for our sample as a whole. The second subsection presents results on supports related to principals' roles as instructional leaders, particularly the value that principals place on supervision and mentoring that focuses on helping school leaders improve teachers' instruction. In the third subsection, we discuss variation in principal supports, including the frequency of supervision, mentoring, and PD opportunities. We conclude with a section discussing the findings' implications for policymakers and practitioners.

RESULTS

Our results highlight three key takeaways regarding support for school leaders across the United States:

- A large percentage of principals are offered some type of on-the-job supports in their district, and most receive at least some mentoring and/or PD.
- School leaders value their supervision and mentoring more when that supervision and mentoring places a higher emphasis on principals' roles as instructional leaders.
- Principals in large districts appear to have some distinct advantages over principals in small districts in terms of the support they receive and its focus on instructional leadership.

We describe these findings in more detail in the following section.

Prevalence of Supports for School Leaders

Here, we summarize principals' reports about the district-provided supports that are available to them and their assistant principals (APs), including descriptive information regarding who supervises school leaders and supervisory communication with school leaders, the prevalence of ongoing mentoring or coaching for principals and APs, and the frequency of district-provided PD that specifically targets school leaders.

Almost all principals reported spending time with their supervisors during a typical month, regardless of who their supervisor was.

We asked principals, "Is your direct supervisor the district superintendent or another person?" A little more than half of all principals in our sample (57 percent) reported being supervised by their district superintendent, whereas the rest reported being supervised by someone else. Principals listed various titles for the person who supervised them if it was not their superintendent. Many noted their supervisor was someone with "superintendent" in his or her title, including, for example, "area superintendent," "assistant superintendent," and "associate superintendent." A fair number of respondents also provided a title for their supervisor indicating that he or she focused on "elementary" or "secondary" education (e.g., "director of elementary education" or "assistant superintendent for secondary schools"). A handful of others indicated being supervised by a director or supervisor of curriculum or instruction (e.g., "instructional superintendent" or "director of curriculum").

Regardless of the title of the principals' supervisors, almost all of our respondents (99 percent) indicated spending at least some time each month in meetings or communicating with their respective supervisors. More than half of principals (56 percent) reported spending three or more hours per month with their supervisors, with 21 percent reporting that they spent six or more hours in communication with their supervisors per month. On the other side of the distribution, 18 percent reported spending less than one hour per month in meetings or communication with their supervisors. The difference in the distribution of communication time for those who were overseen by their district superintendent compared with those overseen by someone else was not statistically significant, and these data suggest that almost all principals have at least some supervisory contact during a typical month of the school year.

Mentoring was generally available for new and struggling principals and assistant principals, but fewer respondents indicated it was a districtwide requirement.

Survey respondents were asked a series of questions about whether their district provided mentoring or coaching (hereafter referred to as mentoring) for first-year principals, second-year principals, principals beyond their second year and—lastly—for struggling principals. The same questions were asked about mentoring and coaching for APs. We also asked whether mentoring was required or just available for all or some school leaders in each group. Respondents' answers to these questions varied depending on the level of experience of the principals in question (see Figure 1). For example, 80 percent of respondents said their district made mentoring available to first-year principals, 61 percent said the same for second-year principals, and 69 percent of respondents said that "struggling" principals had access to mentoring. However, only 43 percent of respondents said mentoring was available for principals with three or more years of experience.

Although mentoring was available in most principals' school districts, far fewer indicated it to be a systematic requirement. Only 49 percent of principals indicated their districts required mentoring for first-year principals, and requirements for mentoring dropped steeply when considering second-year principals (20 percent), principals in their third year and beyond (6 percent), and principals considered to be struggling (21 percent).

We observed similar patterns regarding the availability and requirements of AP mentoring, compared with principal mentoring. Specifically, higher percentages of survey respondents reported available mentoring for new and struggling APs, and low percentages indicated that such mentoring was a requirement in their school districts.

Most principals reported school leader–specific professional development opportunities were provided by their district, both during the school year and over the summer.

When asked about the frequency of district-provided PD activities specifically for principals, only 11 percent of respondents indicated this type of support was not available at all. More than 40 percent reported that PD for principals was available on a monthly or more frequent basis, with 33 percent also indicating PD for APs was available monthly or more frequently.

Figure 1. District-Provided Mentoring for Principals with Different Levels of Experience
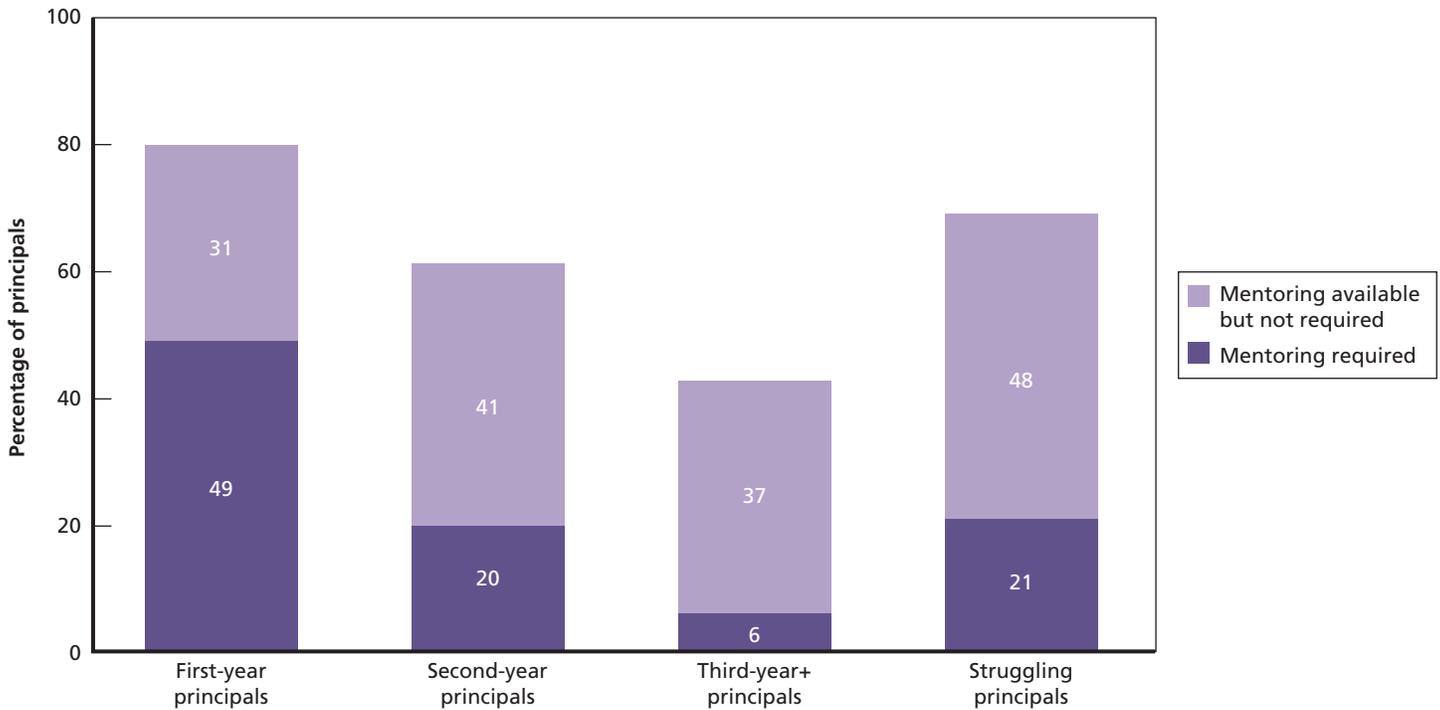
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Similarly, 84 percent of respondents indicated at least one day of PD was offered by their district during the summer months and 39 percent reported four or more PD days for principals being offered in the summer.

Most principals appeared to take advantage of this PD. We also asked principals whether they participated in the PD available in their district. Seventy-nine percent of respondents indicated participating in both summer and school-year PD for principals, with only 3 percent indicating they did not partici-pate at all during either time period.

Less than a third of principals indicated working in districts that offer a combination of all three types of on-the-job support: supervision, mentoring, and professional development.

We created an indicator of "high support" and "low sup-port" for principals based on their reports of their districts offering regular supervision, mentoring, and PD during the school year and over the summer. Specifically, principals were considered to be working in "high support" districts if they reported more than an hour of supervisory contact in a typical month, if their district had mentoring available for

principals of all experience levels, and if their district provided at least one day of PD for principals both during the school year and over the summer. On the other hand, principals were labeled as working in "low support" districts if none of those conditions were true. We found that only 1 percent of respondents worked in "low support" districts that provided none of these services to principals, which was encouraging. However, less than a third (32 percent) of principals indicated working in districts that provided all of these forms of sup-port. In other words, around two-thirds of principals reported the availability of some but not all three forms of support, suggesting there is a great deal of variation in the menu of supports available from district to district.

Support for Principals' Roles as Instructional Leaders

Here, we summarize findings related to district supports for instructional leadership. Specifically, we consider the extent to which principals reported that their communication with their supervisor and principal mentoring focused on teachers' instruc-tion, as well as the value that respondents placed on that instruc-tional focus.

Those principals overseen by someone other than their superintendent reported spending more time on teachers' instruction than those overseen by their superintendent.

When asked about the extent to which their communication and meetings with their supervisor "emphasize ways to improve teachers' instruction," only 10 percent of principals indicated "not at all," with 34 percent saying yes "to a limited extent," 35 percent indicating "somewhat" and the remaining 21 percent saying the interaction was focused on instruction "to a great extent." When comparing the responses for principals overseen by someone other than the superintendent with those who were supervised by their superintendent, noticeable differences emerge. As indicated in Figure 2, principals' reports of the focus on instruction in supervisory meetings being either "somewhat" or to a "great extent" were 11 percentage points higher among principals supervised by someone other than their superintendent. These findings suggest principals are more likely to get support for their roles as instructional leaders in districts that provide principal supervision by someone other than the school district

Figure 2. Focus on Instruction in Principals' Communications and Meetings with Their Supervisors
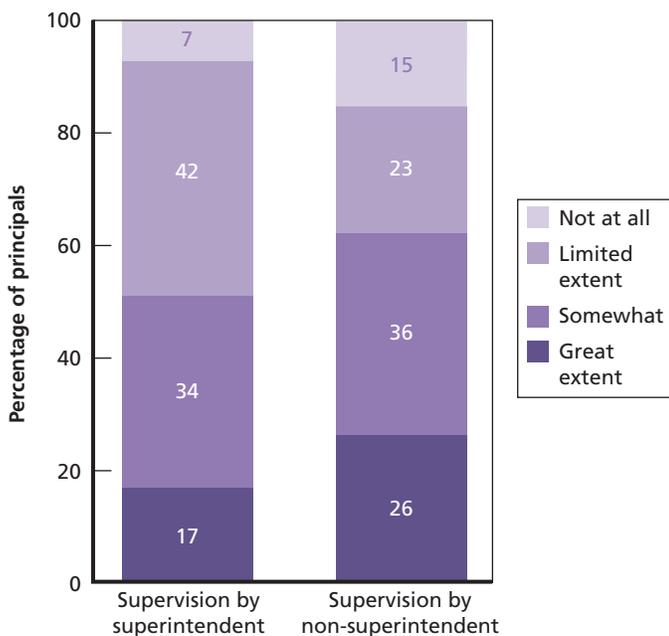
NOTE: The difference in the distribution of principals' reports of extent of focus on instruction was significant among principals overseen by their superintendent versus another person (p<0.05).
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superintendent. These findings may reflect that superintendents who supervise principals may also have multiple other roles within their districts and may have less time to focus on principals' role in teachers' instruction.

Principals who reported a high instructional focus in communications with their supervisors also placed a high priority on increasing supervisory time.

Principals were also asked, "If you had the opportunity to increase the amount of time you spend with your supervisor, how would you prioritize that opportunity in relation to your other work?" Overall, 50 percent of principals placed a minor priority or no priority on the opportunity to increase the time spent with their supervisor, whereas the other half of principals placed a moderate or major priority on increasing that time. However, as noted in Figure 3, among those principals who had reported that their communication with their supervisor focused to a great extent on instruction, the percentage placing a moderate or major priority on increasing time spent with their supervisor was 78 percent, compared with only 39 percent among those who report that no time with their supervisor is focused on instruction. Principals thus appeared to find their supervisory experiences more valuable and worth increasing if the time with their supervisor focused more on teachers' instructional improvement.

Principals placed a higher value on mentoring that was focused more on teachers' instruction.

Among principals who reported receiving mentoring in the past year (approximately 45 percent of the total sample), more than 70 percent reported it to be moderately or very valuable. However, importantly, school leaders were also more likely to value the mentoring they received when they thought the mentoring focused more on instructional improvement. Specifically, we asked school leaders about the extent to which their mentoring during the past year emphasized ways to improve teachers' instruction and the value of that mentoring. Fifty-six percent of respondents who indicated their mentoring focused on improving teachers' instruction "to a great extent" also said the mentoring was highly valuable, with the remaining 44 percent saying it was moderately valuable (see Figure 4). On the other hand, most school leaders whose

Figure 3. Priority Placed on Spending More Time with Supervisor, by Extent to Which Supervision Focused on Instruction
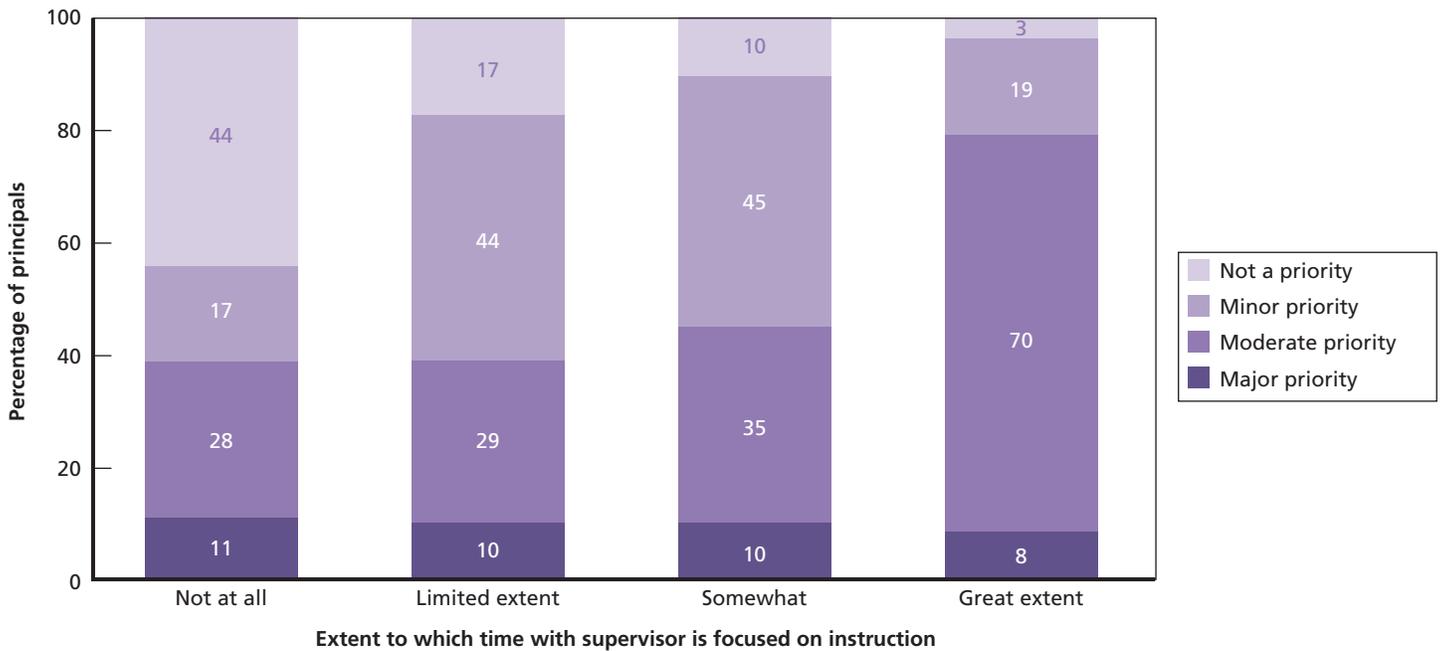
NOTE: The difference in the distribution of principals' reports of time spent with their supervisor was significant depending on the extent to which principals reported a focus on instruction in supervisory communication (p<0.001).

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Figure 4. Principal-Reported Value of Mentoring, by Extent of Focus on Teachers' Instruction During Mentoring
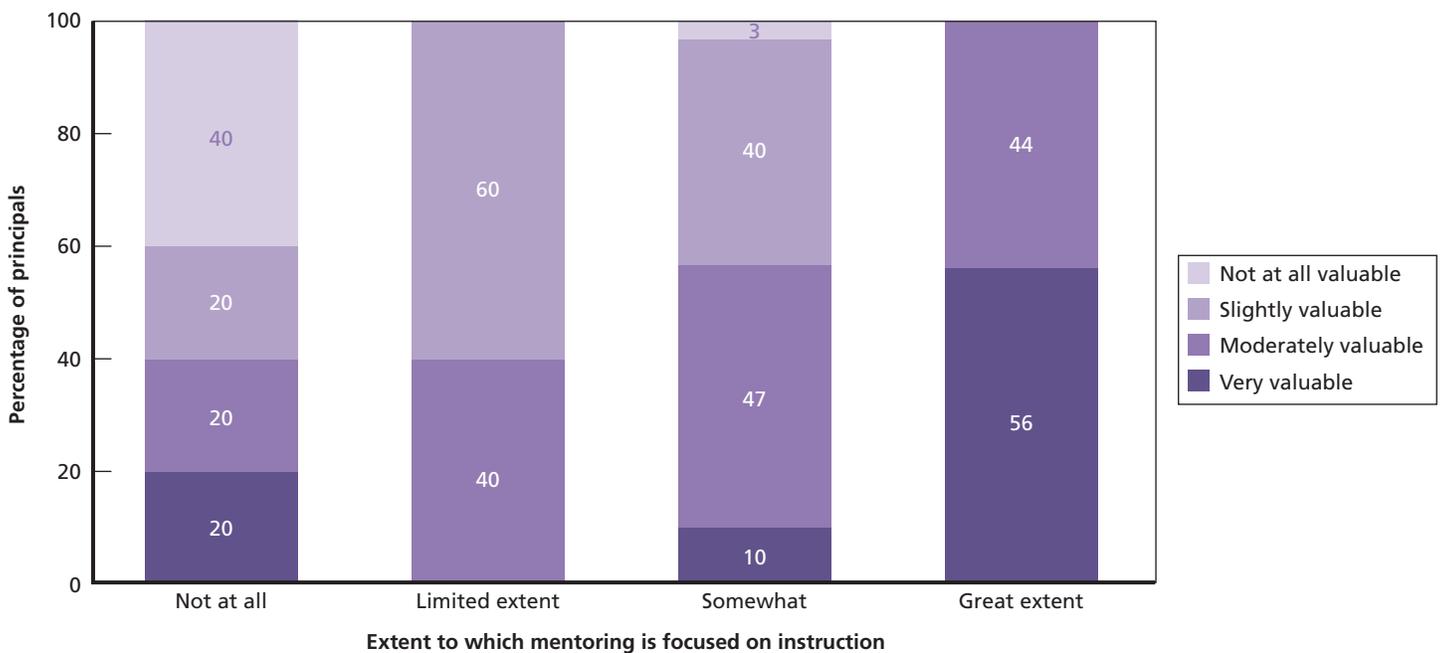
NOTE: The difference in the distribution of reports of mentoring value and extent of focus on instruction was statistically significant (p<0.001).

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mentoring had limited or no focus on instruction reported their mentoring experience as being slightly valuable or not valuable at all.

Differences in School-Leader Support in Small, Midsize, and Large School Districts

Here, we summarize findings related to differences in the prevalence and instructional focus of supports for principals from districts of three different sizes: those with 5,000 or fewer students, those with between 5,000 and 25,000 students, and those with more than 25,000 students.

Supervisors from larger school districts were more likely to be someone other than the superintendent and to emphasize instruction in their communication with principals.

Although the amount of time that principals indicated they spent with their supervisors did not vary by district size, we did find that principals in smaller districts were more likely to have the superintendent serve as their supervisor. Specifically, 83 percent of principals in small districts were supervised by their superintendents, compared with 42 percent in midsize districts and only 21 percent in large districts. This suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that larger districts are likely to have larger central offices that might allow for job specialization of supervisory roles.

Perhaps it logically follows from these differences in supervisor roles in larger districts that supervisory communication in larger districts was also more likely to emphasize ways to improve teachers' instruction. Seventy percent of principals from large districts reported at least "somewhat" of an emphasis on teachers' instruction in their communication with their supervisors, compared with 58 percent in midsize districts and 48 percent in small school districts. At the other end of the distribution, we found that 51 percent of principals from small districts reported supervisory contact with little or no emphasis on instructional improvement, compared with 42 percent in midsize districts and only 30 percent in large districts.

Principals from large school districts reported more available mentoring from their school districts throughout the course of their careers.

Those in larger districts were much more likely to report that mentoring for first-year principals was required in their district

than their peers in smaller districts. Specifically, 82 percent of school leaders in large districts reported that mentoring was required for first-year principals, compared with only 60 percent in midsize districts and 29 percent in smaller districts. Principals from large districts also indicated greater altogether levels of access to mentoring for first-year principals—94 percent in large districts reported the presence of any mentoring for school leaders compared with 84 percent in midsize districts and 71 percent in small districts.

As Figure 5 illustrates, these statistically significant disparities in principals' reports about mentoring requirements and availability carry through when being asked about support for second-year principals and those in their third year and beyond. Furthermore, as the far right set of columns demonstrate, "struggling" principals, however defined, were less likely to receive mentoring support in small districts.

Assistant principals in larger school districts received more mentoring than those in smaller districts, according to principal reports.

Among principals who work in districts with APs, we found a similar pattern of disparate mentoring resources among small, midsize, and large districts. Specifically, 78 percent of principals in large districts reported that mentoring was required for first-year APs, compared with only 44 percent in midsize districts and 41 percent in smaller districts. Principals from large districts were also more likely to report mentoring being generally available for new APs. For example, 91 percent of leaders in large districts reported that mentoring was available for first-year APs, compared with 70 percent in midsize districts and 71 percent in smaller districts (see Figure 6). Furthermore, as Figure 6 illustrates, these associations between district size and mentoring persist for APs in their second year or more of work as an administrator. That is not the case, however, when considering APs they consider to be "struggling," as there was no statistically significant association between district size and district-provided mentoring for struggling APs.

Principals from larger school districts reported more principal-specific professional development opportunities than those from smaller districts.

Although school leaders generally reported access to district-provided PD opportunities that were specifically designed for

Figure 5. Availability and Requirements for Principal Mentoring, According to Reports of Principals from Small, Midsize, and Large Districts
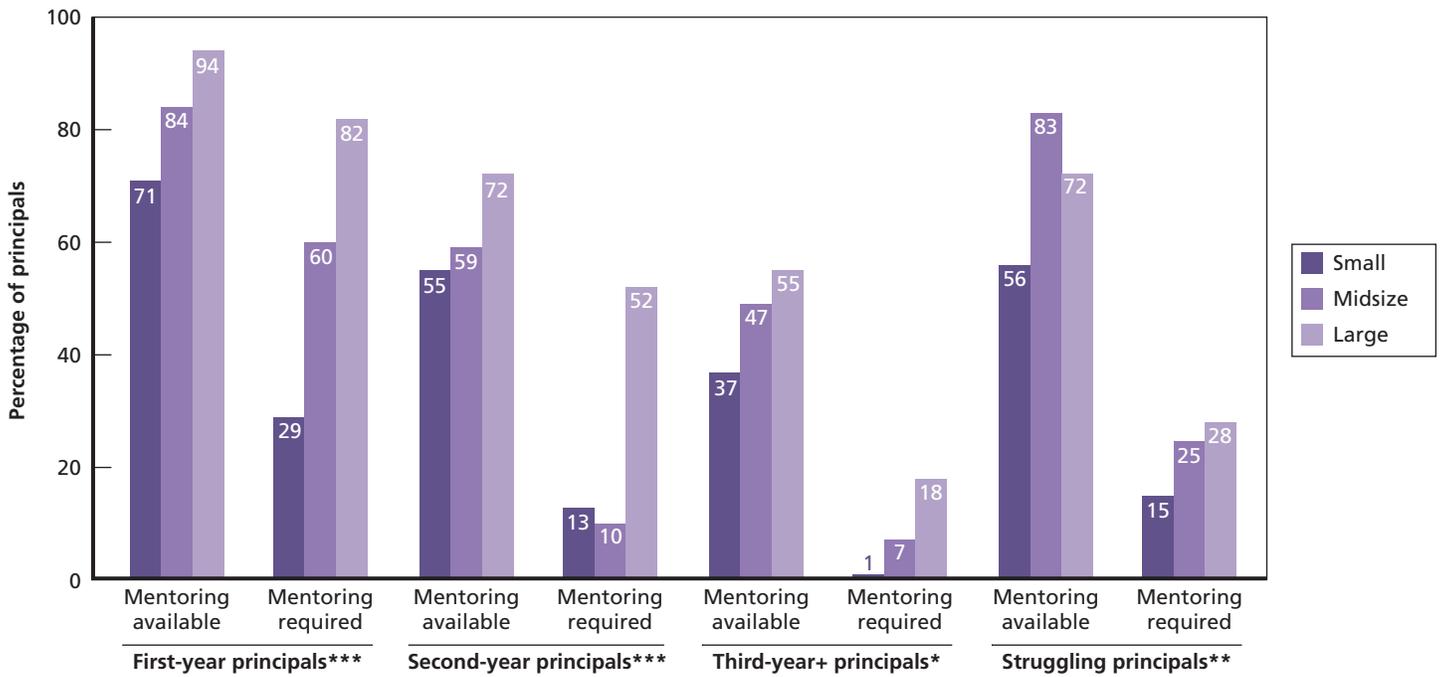
NOTE: Asterisks indicate difference in the distribution of reports from principals in districts of different sizes was statistically significant (*** = p<0.001, ** = p<0.01, * = p<0.05).

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Figure 6. Availability and Requirements for Assistant Principal Mentoring, According to Reports of Principals from Small, Midsize, and Large Districts
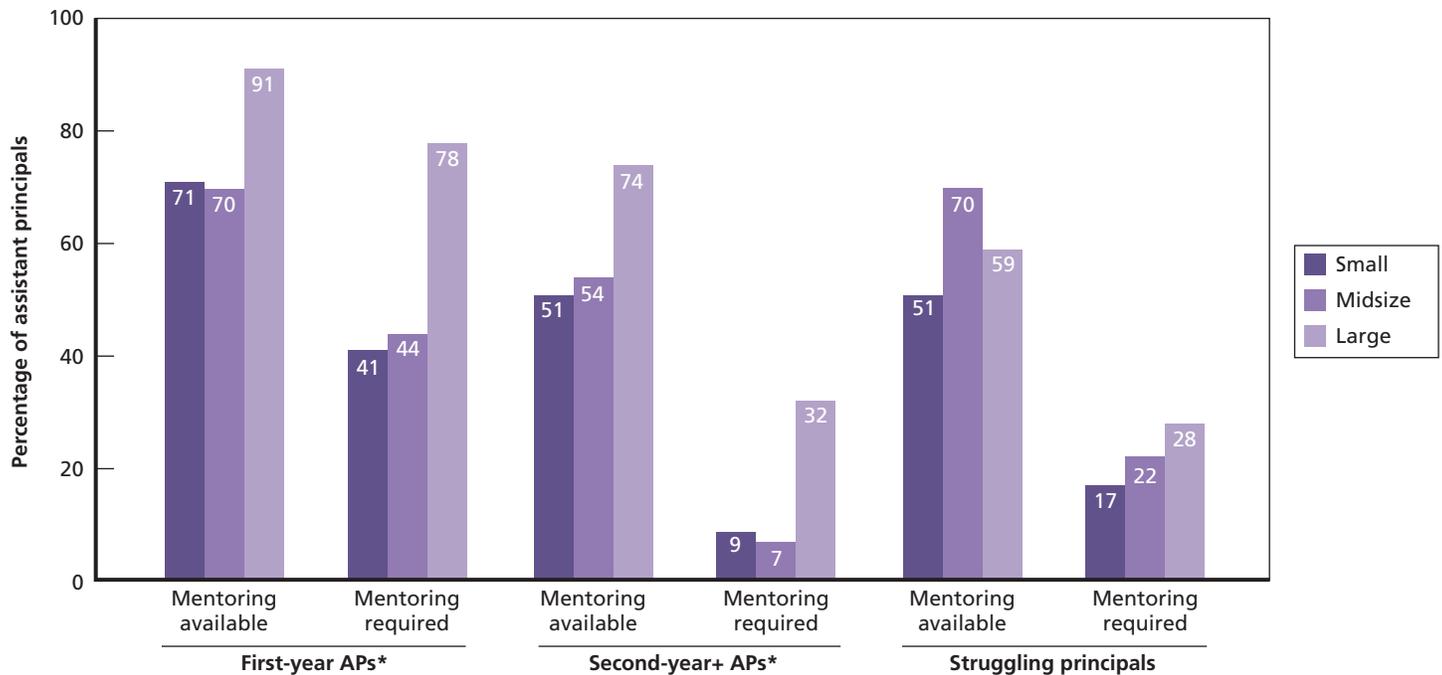
NOTE: An asterisk (*) indicates that the difference in the distribution of reports from principals in districts of different sizes was statistically significant (p<0.05).

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school leaders, the frequency of that PD varied based on the size of the district in which they were working. For example, 73 percent of principals from large districts reported principal PD opportunities that occurred at least monthly, compared with only 53 percent of those from midsize districts and 32 percent of principals in small districts. Furthermore, a very small percentage of school leaders from large districts (just 3 percent) and no school leaders in midsize districts reported not having any available principal-specific PD, compared with almost one-quarter of respondents from small districts (see Figure 7).

School leaders in larger districts also reported more district-provided PD opportunities during the summer compared with those in smaller districts. Although 94 percent of school leaders from large districts, and 90 percent of those from midsize districts, reported being offered at least one day of PD in the summer by their district, somewhat lower percentages of school leaders from small districts (76 percent) reported at least one day of PD available for school leaders. Furthermore, 60 percent of principals in larger districts indicated their districts offered at least four days of summer PD for principals, compared with only 39 percent and 29 percent

of school leaders from midsize and small districts, respectively (see Figure 8).

These differences between larger and smaller districts—in terms of available principal-specific PD—carried over into actual participation in summer PD as well. For example, 97 percent of respondents in large districts, and 95 percent in midsize districts, reported attending summer PD hosted by their school district in the past year, compared with 77 percent in small districts (see Figure 9). We did not observe differences between larger and smaller districts in terms of participation in principal-specific PD offered during the school year, even though principals in smaller districts reported having less PD available to them during the school year. In other words, principals from districts of all sizes reported similar levels of participation in district-provided PD during a typical school year.

To briefly summarize across all the findings in this report: school leaders across the country generally received some level of support from their school districts and particularly valued support focused on instruction. However, the reported level of availability varied across districts of different sizes. We provide further conclusions and implications in the next section.

Figure 7. Availability of Professional Development for Principals, According to Principal Responses from Small, Midsize, and Large Districts
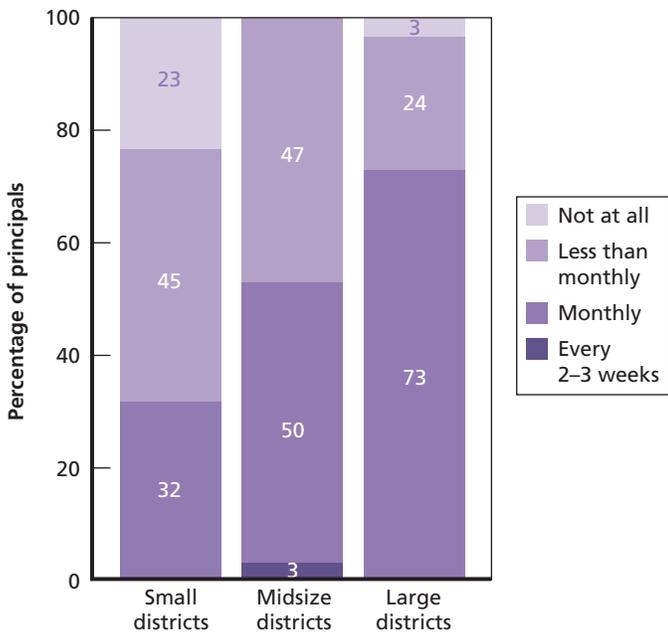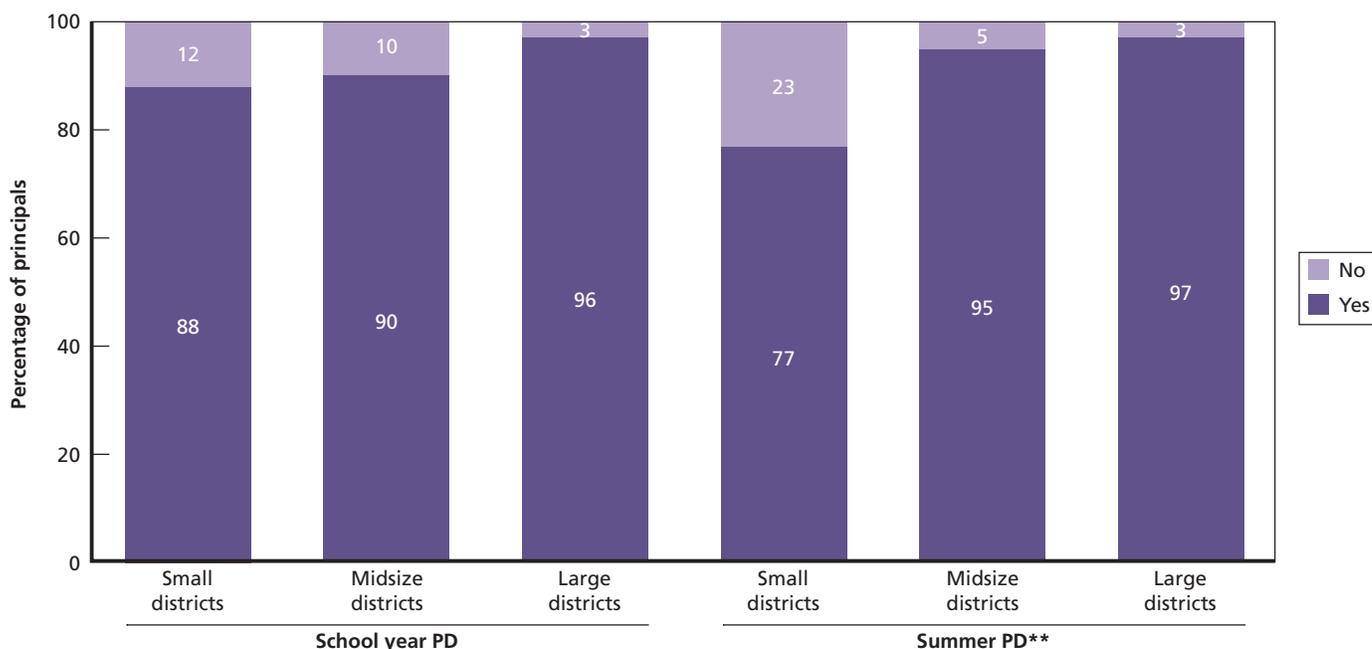

NOTE: The difference in the distribution of reports from principals in districts of different sizes was statistically significant (p<0.001).

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Figure 8. Availability of Summer Professional Development for Principals, According to Reports of Principals from Small, Midsize, and Large Districts
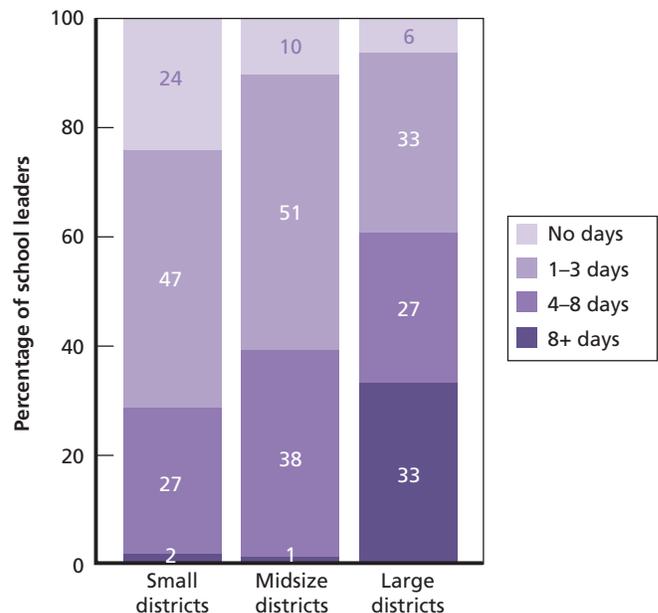
NOTE: The difference in the distribution of reports from principals in districts of different sizes was statistically significant (p<0.001). Some numbers do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

RAND RR1580-8

Figure 9. Participation in Principal-Specific Professional Development During the School Year and Summer, According to Reports from Principals from Small, Midsize, and Large Districts

NOTE: Asterisks (**) indicate the difference in the distribution of reports from principals in districts of different sizes was statistically significant (p<0.01). Some numbers do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

RAND *RR1580-9*

CONCLUSION

As the work of school administrators is increasingly seen as vital to student academic success, the importance of robust and multifaceted on-the-job supports for school leaders is unquestionable. Support for school leaders is often the domain of the school district (Mitgang, Gill, and Cummins, 2013), so it is useful to query the extent to which support structures vary in quantity and quality across districts.

According to our survey, school districts provided principals with a variety of on-the-job supports, including supervision, mentoring, and PD during the school year and over the summer. The finding that almost all principals received at least some form of on-the-job support, with many receiving a full suite of assistance from their school districts (regular contact with supervisors and district-provided mentoring and PD specifically for principals), should come as good news, given the increasing challenge and complexity of school leaders' work. Additionally, many school leaders generally perceived the supports they received to be valuable, particularly when these supports focused on improving teacher instruction. This finding aligns with prior empirical work showing that formal, district-provided, principal-specific PD was particularly useful for principals' development (Grissom and Harrington, 2010). Furthermore, almost all respondents reported the availability

of at least some form of support for school leaders, regardless of school size, poverty level, and grade level.

However, the prevalence of support was uneven across school districts of different sizes. Specifically, principals from larger districts indicated greater supervisory communication in general, as well as a greater focus on instruction during the time they spent with their supervisor, compared with their peers from smaller districts. This greater focus on instruction in larger school districts may be explained somewhat by the differences in central office structure and the level of instructional focus of specialized supervisory staff (Honig, 2012), especially considering the high percentages of principals in larger districts reporting that their supervisor was someone other than their superintendent. In addition, school leaders from larger districts reported greater availability of formal, district-provided mentoring and principal-focused PD for themselves and their APs.

Our findings align with previous research showing that large school districts are more likely to offer on-the-job supports, including performance evaluations, mentoring, and PD (Mitgang, Gill, and Cummins, 2013). These on-the-job supports are likely to complement recruitment and preservice supports for school leaders. In contrast, recruitment of highly qualified school leaders is particularly challenging in small, often rural districts, which may be forced to hire individuals with little or no experience in school administration (Pijanowski, Hewitt, and

Brady, 2009). This reality makes on-the-job support all the more imperative in smaller districts (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, and Slate, 2008; Salazar, 2007).

We should highlight two key limitations of this report. First, we do not know the extent to which school leaders may receive alternative sources of support and PD apart from what their district provides because our survey items only focused on district-provided supports. For example, school leaders may use their summer months to develop their expertise by taking leadership courses sponsored by universities or professional associations, and principals may be involved in formal or informal peer networks that do not fall under the umbrella of official, district-provided "opportunities to learn," as described by Spillane et al. (2009). Second, the findings are based on a relatively small sample of principals. This limitation not only inhibits us from being able to conduct complex multivariate analyses to account for potential confounders and idiosyncrasies of the respondents, it also threatens our ability to generalize the findings to the larger population of principals across the country. Nonetheless, we believe these findings represent a reasonable demonstration of patterns of school-leader support that are likely to inform further inquiry among educational researchers and practitioners.

Implications

Although almost all school districts appear to be providing some sort of on-the-job support for principals, the results of our survey suggest that districts could do more to consistently support principals' roles as instructional leaders, particularly considering the value that principals place upon such support. In addition, smaller school districts may need more support to mitigate capacity limitations related to central office staffing, budget, and geography that may curb their ability to provide comprehensive support for principals and vice principals

(Duncan and Stock, 2010). For example, districts could be provided with support to utilize online platforms for supervisory contact in remote areas where in-person supervision, mentoring, or PD may be costly or difficult. Also, policymakers and state and district leaders could place more priority on developing or expanding support available through multidistrict consortia and cooperatives through efforts like the federally-funded Appalachian Renaissance Initiative in Kentucky and the work of numerous multidistrict consortia in rural New York state that utilizes regional ties to support school leaders through peer support and joint PD opportunities. This type of inter-district collaboration might be particularly important in areas with limited central office staff so that the superintendent is not expected to carry the full burden of school-leader supervision.

In addition, these findings underscore the importance of principal supports that are focused on instructional leadership. Maintaining an instructional focus may be difficult for principal supervisors in smaller districts because they are often superintendents with many other responsibilities, whereas supervisors in larger districts—who are often not superintendents—may be able to focus more fully on supporting principals. State and district policymakers, as well as researchers, should investigate new and innovative ways for school leaders in small districts to receive the strong, instruction-focused supports of their peers in larger districts through both differentiated support within districts and—potentially—networks of peer support.

Moving forward, it will be important for policymakers and researchers to query not only the presence and quantity of school-leader supports, but also the topics covered and the perceived quality of those supports. By investing in the development and maintenance of longitudinal, nationally representative data sources such as the ASLP, we hope to continue to track these important questions with increasingly large samples over time and across a variety of contexts.

NOTES

[1] Our survey (see the Appendix) specifically asked principals about three types of support that are commonly mentioned in the research literature—supervision, mentoring/coaching (hereafter referred to as mentoring), and PD. The survey did not provide a definition of these terms for the respondents, so we acknowledge there may be some variation in principals' understanding of what constitutes each particular form of support.

[2] Panelists were selected based on the random selection of schools from a nationally representative sampling pool that was stratified based on grade span, school size, free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) rate, local population density, and geographic region. Principals from selected schools were then recruited to join the panel via multiple modes of communication. For more information, see RAND Education (undated).

[3] Weighting, which accounts for differential sampling and nonresponse, was used to produce results that are representative of the larger population of U.S. school leaders and those in each state sample. Weighting for ASLP involved modeling selection probabilities (i.e., what is the chance that this individual was contacted for inclusion into the panel?) and response probabilities (given that they were selected, what is the probability that they responded?). Since the ASLP is still is only one year old, we do not yet have panel attrition to account for, so we focused on nonresponse in our weighting strategy. To calculate the weights, a model was used that incorporates characteristics such as school level, region, size, and eligibility rate of FRL. Analyses were conducted in R (R Core Team, 2015), and all estimates and standard errors were adjusted for weighting using the R packages *weights* (Pasek, 2014), *questionr* (Barnier, Briatte, and Larmarange, 2015), and *descr* (Aquino, 2015).

[4] Several different strategies were tested, including splitting the sample into two groups based on the median value of district enrollment (approximately 5,000), as well as several other cutpoints near the median. Analyses based on these alternative cutpoints had similar results to those presented here, both in terms of the direction and magnitude of the associations.

[5] It is important to note that these subgroup differences may contribute to observed variation in principal responses that we present in this report, but concerns about clarity and sample size led us to limit our analyses to bivariate comparisons without including multiple control variables. This is an acknowledged methodological limitation of the study.

APPENDIX: ASLP SURVEY INSTRUMENT

All survey questions in this and subsequent sections refer to the *past school year (2014–2015)* unless otherwise noted. Questions that refer to "your district" are meant to take into account school districts, as well as charter management organizations.

1. What grades are included at the school where you serve as principal? Check all that apply. If you serve as principal in more than one school, please consider all the schools you lead when responding to this item and the remaining questions of the survey.
   - Prekindergarten
   - Kindergarten
   - 1st
   - 2nd
   - 3rd
   - 4th
   - 5th
   - 6th
   - 7th
   - 8th
   - 9th
   - 10th
   - 11th
   - 12th
   - Ungraded

2. Did your district provide mentoring or coaching for principals during the past school year (2014–2015)? Check one response per row.

	Yes, mentoring or coaching required for **all** principals in this group	Yes, mentoring or coaching required for **some** principals in this group	Yes, mentoring or coaching available if requested or suggested but not required	No mentoring available or required
a. First-year principals				
b. Second-year principals				
c. Principals beyond their second year				
d. Struggling principals				

3. How frequently did mentors or coaches meet with principals in your district over the course of the school year?
   - Less than monthly
   - Monthly
   - Every 2–3 weeks
   - Weekly or more than weekly
   - Frequency of meetings varies a great deal

4. To what extent did principal mentoring or coaching within your district during the past school year emphasize ways to improve teachers' instruction?

- Not at all
- To a limited extent
- Somewhat
- To a great extent
- I don't know

5. Did your district provide **you** with mentoring or coaching?

- No
- Yes—Less than monthly
- Yes—Monthly
- Yes—Every 2–3 weeks
- Yes—Weekly or more than weekly

6. How valuable was the mentoring or coaching provided to you by your district?

- Not at all valuable
- Slightly valuable
- Moderately valuable
- Very valuable

7. During the past school year (2014–2015), how frequently did your district provide professional development activities specifically for principals and distinct from those provided for teachers, other than mentoring or coaching?

- Not at all
- Less than monthly
- Monthly
- Every 2–3 weeks
- Weekly or more than weekly

8. During the past school year (2014–2015), did **you** participate in professional development activities specifically for principals and distinct from those provided for teachers, other than mentoring or coaching?

- No
- Yes—Less than monthly
- Yes—Monthly
- Yes—Every 2-3 weeks
- Yes—Weekly or more than weekly

9. How valuable was the professional development your district provided for principals this past school year (2014–2015), other than mentoring or coaching?

- Not at all valuable
- Slightly valuable
- Moderately valuable
- Very valuable
- Its value varies a great deal

10. If you had the opportunity to increase the time you spend in your district's professional development activities for principals, how would you prioritize that opportunity in relation to your other work?
- Not a priority
- Minor priority
- Moderate priority
- Major priority

11. During the previous summer (2014), how many days did your district provide professional development activities for principals distinct from those provided for teachers other than mentoring or coaching?
- No days
- Between 1 and 3 days
- Between 4 and 8 days
- More than 8 days

12. During the previous summer (2014), did **you** participate in district-provided professional development activities for principals distinct from those provided for teachers, other than mentoring or coaching?
- No
- Yes

13. How valuable was the professional development your district provided for principals during the previous summer (2014)?
- Not at all valuable
- Slightly valuable
- Moderately valuable
- Very valuable

14. Is your direct supervisor the district superintendent, or another person?
- Superintendent
- Another person (If selected, please provide that person's title.)

15. On average, how much time during the past school year (2014–2015) did you spend with your supervisor during a month, including meetings and communication with him or her?
- Less than one hour per month
- 1–2 hours
- 3–5 hours
- 6 or more hours

16. If you had the opportunity to increase the amount of time you spend with your supervisor, how would you prioritize that opportunity in relation to your other work?
- Not a priority
- Minor priority
- Moderate priority
- Major priority

17. To what extent has the time you spent with your supervisor emphasized ways to improve teachers' instruction?
- Not at all
- To a limited extent
- Somewhat
- To a great extent

18. Last year (2014–2015), how many assistant principal positions were there in your school?
- 0
- A fraction of a position
- 1
- 2
- 3
- More than 3

19. In your school, what proportion of the assistant principals' time—on average—was spent on improving instruction during the past year (2014–2015), excluding time spent on discipline-related activities?
- None
- Up to 10%
- 11–25%
- 26–50%
- 51–75%
- 76–100%

20. During the past school year (2014–2015), did your district provide mentoring or coaching for assistant principals (APs)? Check one response per row.

	Yes, mentoring or coaching required for **all** APs in this group	Yes, mentoring or coaching required for **some** APs in this group	Yes, mentoring or coaching available if requested or suggested but not required	No mentoring available or required	NA—there were no APs in my district last year
a. First-year APs					
b. APs beyond their first year					
d. Struggling APs					

21. How frequently did mentors or coaches meet with first-year assistant principals in your district during the past school year (2014–2015)?
- Less than monthly
- Monthly
- Every 2–3 weeks
- Weekly or more than weekly
- Frequency of meetings varies a great deal
- NA—we don't have mentors or coaches for first-year assistant principals

22. Was the mentor or coach for an assistant principal typically the principal of the assistant principal's school?
- No
- Sometimes
- Yes

23. To what extent do assistant principal mentors or coaches typically have the skills to provide high-quality mentoring/coaching?
- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes yes and sometimes no
- Almost always
- Always
- I don't know

24. To what extent did assistant principal mentoring or coaching within your district during the past school year (2014–2015) emphasize ways to improve teachers' instruction?
- Not at all
- To a limited extent
- Somewhat
- To a great extent
- I don't know

25. During the past school year (2014–2015), how frequently did your district provide professional development activities specifically for first-year assistant principals, other than mentoring or coaching?
- Not at all
- Less than monthly
- Monthly
- Every 2–3 weeks
- Weekly or more than weekly

26. Some schools have a "teacher leader" position (for example, an "instructional coach," "learning coach," "master teacher," or another title), defined as working with classroom teachers to improve their instructional and classroom practice, with reduced or no time assigned to classroom teaching. Last year (2014–2015), how many teacher leader positions were there at your school?
- 0
- A fraction of a position
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- More than 8

27. Did your district or school provide mentoring or coaching for first-year teacher leaders during the past school year (2014–2015)?
- No
- Sometimes
- Yes

28. How frequently did mentors or coaches meet with first-year teacher leaders in your district during the past school year (2014–2015)?
- Less than monthly
- Monthly
- Every 2–3 weeks
- Weekly or more than weekly
- Frequency of meetings varies a great deal

29. Is the mentor or coach for a teacher leader typically the principal or assistant principal of the teacher leader's school?
- No
- Sometimes
- Yes

30. During the past school year (2014–2015), how frequently did your district or school provide professional development activities specifically for first-year teacher leaders, other than mentoring or coaching?
- Not at all
- Less than monthly
- Monthly
- Every 2–3 weeks
- Weekly or more than weekly

31. In your school, did you meet with a "leadership team" or other designated group of school staff members during the past school year (2014–2015) to discuss school improvement and related administrative topics?
- No
- Yes

32. Did the assistant principal(s) participate in this group?
- All assistant principals participated
- Some but not all assistant principals participated
- No assistant principals participated
- Not applicable—There are no assistant principals at my school.

33. Did the teacher leader(s) participate in this group?
- All teacher leader(s) participated
- Some but not all teacher leaders participated
- No teacher leaders participated
- Not applicable—There are no teacher leaders at my school.

34. How frequently did the "leadership team" meet during the past year?
- Less than monthly
- Monthly
- Every 2–3 weeks
- Weekly or more than weekly
- Frequency of meetings varies a great deal

35. During the past school year (2014–2015), how frequently did your district allocate or provide time for **teachers'** professional development activities other than regular faculty meetings within your school, as in a regularly scheduled schoolwide professional development meeting and/or meetings within their grade level or a formal Professional Learning Community within your school?
- Not at all
- Less than monthly
- Monthly
- Every 2–3 weeks
- Weekly or more than weekly
- Frequency of meetings varies a great deal

36. In your opinion, how valuable were these meetings for improving teachers' instruction?
- Not at all valuable
- Slightly valuable
- Moderately valuable
- Very valuable
- Their value varies a great deal

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About This Report

We need to better understand the on-the-job supports available to school leaders across the United States, as the work of school principals has become increasingly complex and important in shaping schools' ability to support student success. RAND Education, with the support of The Wallace Foundation, surveyed a nationally representative sample of principals regarding the quantity and quality of district-provided supports available to them, including how they are supervised and mentored as well as the professional development they receive. This report summarizes those findings with the goal of providing evidence to policymakers and practitioners about the prevalence of on-the-job supports for principals and assistant principals, the extent to which these supports emphasize principals' role as instructional leaders, and variation in support to school leaders across small, midsize, and large school districts.

About the Authors

William R. Johnston is an associate policy researcher at the RAND Corporation and a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University. His research explores how local, state, and national political and social contexts relate to educational opportunities and outcomes for youth.

Julia H. Kaufman is a policy researcher at the RAND Corporation. Her research examines how policies, programs, and curricula can support teachers' instruction and students' academic and socioemotional growth.

Lindsey E. Thompson is a research assistant who works in the field of K-12 education policy. She is particularly interested in school reform, equity, curriculum, teacher preparation, and education technology.

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