Assistant Principals

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K-12
Workforce: Administrators/Other

Introduction

Assistant principals help principals oversee the day-to-day operations of their schools and maintain safe and supportive learning environments for staff and students. Working under the supervision of principals, assistant principals can perform a range of school leadership tasks, receiving on-the-job preparation for the principalship. Most public schools in the U.S. have assistant principals: nearly 60% of elementary schools and 75% of secondary schools have at least one, and 14% of elementary schools and 47% of secondary schools have multiple. Assistant principals disproportionately serve schools in urban areas and students of color, even accounting for differences in student enrollments. Eighty percent of principals previously served as assistant principals, highlighting the importance of the role for preparing future principals.

State and district policies can influence the allocation of assistant principals to schools and their preparation and roles. Some states develop funding formulas that allocate funding for the assistant principal position, while other states leave these decisions to districts. Some districts also use local funding for assistant principal positions. Typically, states and districts allocate more assistant principals to schools with larger student enrollments as well as middle and high schools. In most states, assistant principals go through the same licensure process and leadership preparation programs, and they are evaluated on the same criteria as principals, raising questions about the extent to which these approaches align with the roles of assistant principals. Districts typically provide principals with substantial discretion to define these roles, and they vary in the professional support and learning opportunities that they provide to assistant principals.

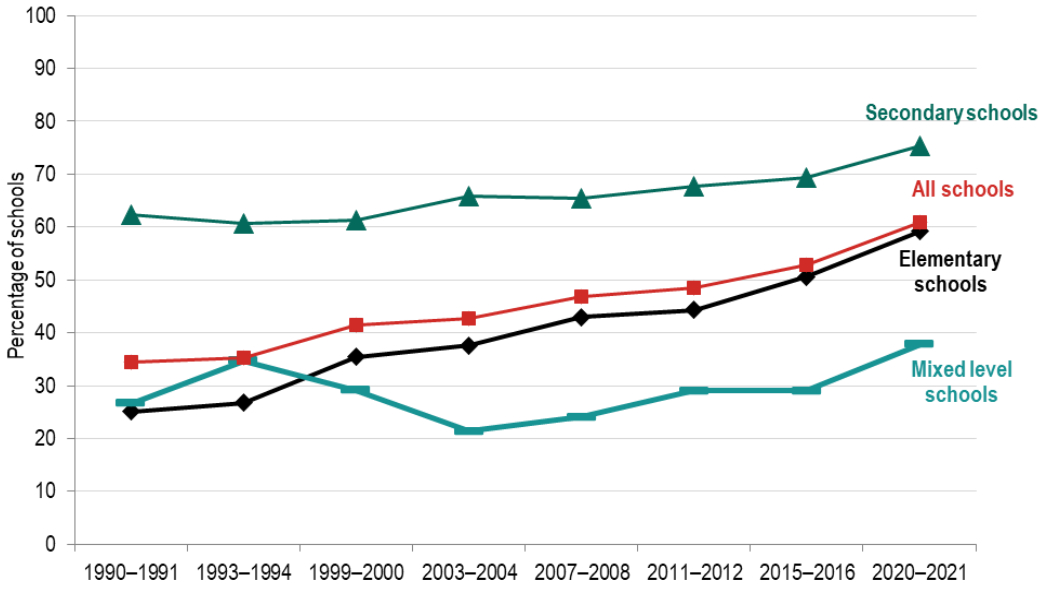
Despite its importance and prevalence, the assistant principal role remains ill-defined and overlooked, limiting the ability of states and districts to effectively leverage the role to improve school outcomes and prepare future principals. Because assistant principals disproportionately serve schools with students of color and represent the pool of future principals, the role can also help advance educational equity and diversify the principalship. To understand how to effectively leverage the role, it is critical to understand the trends in the prevalence of assistant principals, what the role entails, and how to best prepare and support assistant principals. It is also important to understand the trends in assistant principals' experience, how this experience can prepare effective principals, and the barriers to advancing to the assistant principal role and into the principalship that educators of color and women face.

Key findings

Key finding #1: *Over the past three decades, the number of assistant principals has steadily increased, outpacing increases in the numbers of schools and students.*

Between the 1990–1991 and 2020–2021 school years, the percentage of U.S. public schools with assistant principals grew from 34% to 61%, driven by a dramatic rise in the percentage of elementary schools with assistant principals (Figure 1). The percentages of schools with multiple assistant principals also grew over this period as did assistant principal-to-student ratios. By 2020–2021, there was one assistant principal for every 589 elementary school students and one for every 486 secondary school students. The reasons for these increases are unknown. However, research in progress suggests that districts and schools may have hired assistant principals to help address the increasing demands on school leadership to add support for the overall management of schools, including school safety, discipline, student assessment, and instruction.

Figure 1. Nationally, the percentage of schools with assistant principals has increased over the past 30 years

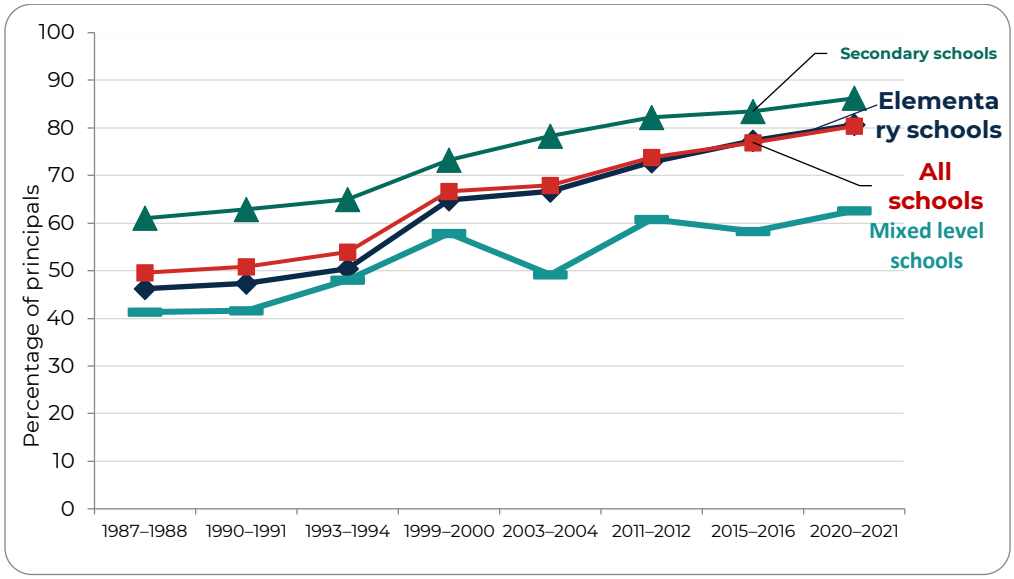


Source: Schools and Staffing Survey/National Teacher and Principal Survey, 1990–1991, 1993–1994, 1999–2000, 2003–2004, 2007–2008, 2011–2012, 2015–2016, and 2020–2021

Key finding #2: *The percentage of principals who have experience as an assistant principal has also increased over the last three decades.*

From the 1987–1988 to 2020–2021 school years, the percentage of principals in U.S. public schools with experience as an assistant principal grew from 50% to 80% (Figure 2). Experience as an assistant principal is most common among principals who work in the types of schools where assistant principals are most common: schools in cities, suburbs, and the South; larger schools; and schools with higher percentages of students of color. Research from various states indicates that assistant principals typically have three to five years in the role before promotion to the principalship.

Figure 2. The percentage of principals with experience as an assistant principal has increased over the past 30 years



Source: Schools and Staffing Survey/National Teacher and Principal Survey, 1987–1988, 1990–1991, 1993–1994, 1999–2000, 2003–2004, 2007–2008, 2011–2012, 2015–2016, and 2020–2021

Key finding #3: *People of color are more likely to be assistant principals than to be principals, while women are more likely to be teachers than to be assistant principals or principals.*

People of color constitute higher percentages of assistant principals than principals or teachers. Educators of color are also less likely to become principals than white educators are, and they spend more time as assistant principals before advancing to the principalship. Women are less likely to become principals than men are, and compared with the teacher workforce, they are underrepresented in the assistant principal role. These racial and gender differences could be due to differences in access to mentoring, discrimination in hiring, the time demands of school leadership, and other reasons.

Key finding #4: *Preservice principal preparation programs do not specifically focus on training assistant principals, but most graduates initially serve as assistant principals before moving into the principalship.*

Participants in preservice principal preparation programs typically come from the ranks of teachers as they consider a pathway into leadership. Most states use the same certification, standards, and evaluation systems for assistant principals and principals. Most graduates of preparation programs initially serve as assistant principals, with aspirations of becoming principals in the future. There is limited evidence about the effectiveness of preservice preparation for assistant principals.

Key finding #5: *The leadership roles of assistant principals vary considerably but typically involve a mix of student affairs and discipline, instructional leadership, and administrative management.*

Some assistant principals undertake a broad range of leadership tasks, whereas others are more specialized in their role or grade level, such as an assistant principal for athletics, for academics or as dean of students, or for 9th grade. Rather than focusing solely on student discipline, most assistant principals split their time between a range of tasks, including discipline, instructional leadership (centering on formal teacher observations and evaluation), and administrative duties. Principals often have broad discretion

to assign tasks to assistant principals, but no research examines how or why principals assign specific tasks to their assistant principals.

Key finding #6: *Assistant principals engage in various types of on-the-job training and development, but these supports are not available to all assistant principals.*

Assistant principals in rural areas and smaller districts are less likely than other assistant principals to have access to mentoring, professional development, and networking activities. Although assistant principals report that they value these experiences, there is very little evidence about the effectiveness of mentoring, professional development, or networking for success as an assistant principal or advancement to the principalship.

Key finding #7: *There is limited research about whether and how assistant principals contribute to improved student and school outcomes.*

Principals and assistant principals believe that having assistant principals in schools supports effective school leadership, and principals believe that their time as an assistant principal is important preparation for the principalship. However, a few studies find that the quality of principals' experience as an assistant principal, such as serving in a more effective school or being more effective as an assistant principal, matters more for principals' effectiveness than simply having experience as an assistant principal.

Policy considerations

State and district policies influence the allocation, development, and roles of assistant principals. These policies can vary in the following ways:

- Allocation of assistant principals to schools. Some states develop formulas that allocate funding for assistant principal positions to schools, while other states leave these decisions to districts. Typically, states and districts allocate more assistant principals to schools with larger student enrollments as well as middle and high schools, and some districts use local resources to supplement state allocations.
- Professional standards and evaluation. Instead of separate standards and criteria, most states and districts use the same professional standards and evaluation criteria for both principals and assistant principals. A few districts use different evaluation criteria for assistant principals to try to better align assistant principal evaluations with the roles of assistant principals and to support their development.
- Licensure. Most states have the same licensure process for both principals and assistant principals. A few states have a separate assistant principal certification that candidates can earn by completing a subset of the requirements for principal certification, such as the minimum degree requirement, teaching experience or related professional certification, and leadership coursework or program completion. Candidates can then obtain principal certification by completing additional requirements, such as a licensure exam, performance-based certification, and additional coursework. In two states, students in leadership preparation programs can receive three-year assistant principal certification to help address principal shortages.
- Roles. Federal and state education policies can also influence the roles of assistant principals since assistant principals help ensure that schools comply with federal and state policies and requirements. Most notably, many states have mandated teacher observations. Hence, assistant principals now spend time observing and scoring teacher evaluation rubrics and participating in feedback conferences.

Evidence

This review provides an overview of the small amount of evidence available on assistant principals, drawing on a comprehensive synthesis of two decades of research[1] and updating statistics from the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) to include the 2020–2021 school year, the most recent year for which data are available. Evidence on assistant principals is limited and varies in quality. Hence, we highlight these issues throughout the review. The evidence base is largely descriptive and often includes self-reports from assistant principals themselves. The qualitative studies are oftentimes case studies.[2] The quantitative studies on assistant principals include larger samples than those in the qualitative research base; some analyze assistant principals in one district or state. Most of these studies use descriptive or correlational research designs.

Key finding #1: *Over the past three decades, the number of assistant principals has steadily increased, outpacing increases in the numbers of schools and students.*

Between the 1990–1991 and 2020–2021 school years, the percentage of U.S. public schools with assistant principals grew from 34% to 61% based on nationally representative data from the Schools and Staffing/NTPS. This growth was driven by a dramatic increase in the percentage of elementary schools with assistant principals, although there was also growth in the percentage of secondary schools with assistant principals over this time period. The reasons for these increases are not well known. Emerging research suggests that districts and schools may have hired assistant principals to help address the increasing demands on school leadership to add support for the overall management of schools, including school safety, discipline, student assessment, and instruction.[3]

Most schools have only one assistant principal, but there has also been growth in the percentage of schools with multiple assistant principals over the past three decades. In the 2020–2021 school year, 14% of elementary schools had two or more assistant principals, while among secondary schools, 18% had two assistant principals, and 29% had three or more.

The number of assistant principals has also grown faster than the numbers of schools and students. There are no studies or data that provide the exact numbers of assistant principals in the U.S. However, based on data from the Schools and Staffing/NTPS, we estimate that between the 1990–1991 and 2020–2021 school years, the number of assistant principals in the United States more than doubled, increasing from 43,960 to 92,910. These estimates suggest that the number of assistant principals in public schools grew five to six times faster than the number of schools and students.[4]

As a result, assistant principal-to-student ratios have increased over time. By the 2020–2021 school year, there was one assistant principal for every 589 elementary school students and one for every 486 secondary school students.

Growth in assistant principals has been relatively equal in cities, suburbs and towns, but it has declined in rural areas. Schools with assistant principals are also larger and have more students of color than schools without assistant principals.[5]

Key finding #2: *The percentage of principals who have experience as an assistant principal has also increased over the last three decades.*

Principals are increasingly likely to have experience as an assistant principal. From the 1987–1988 to

2020–2021 school years, the percentage of principals in U.S. public schools with experience as an assistant principal grew from 50% to 80%.[6]

Principals in large urban districts are more likely than those in more rural contexts to have assistant principal experience.[7] It is not clear whether principals are more likely to have assistant principal experience at the same school level. Members of the National Association for Elementary School Principals who work in elementary schools were approximately twice as likely to report having assistant principal experience in elementary schools than in middle schools or high schools.[8] However, a study in Oregon found that educators with professional experience in higher grade-levels (especially high school) more frequently moved into leadership roles at lower grade levels than those with experience in lower grade levels moved into higher-grade level leadership roles.[9]

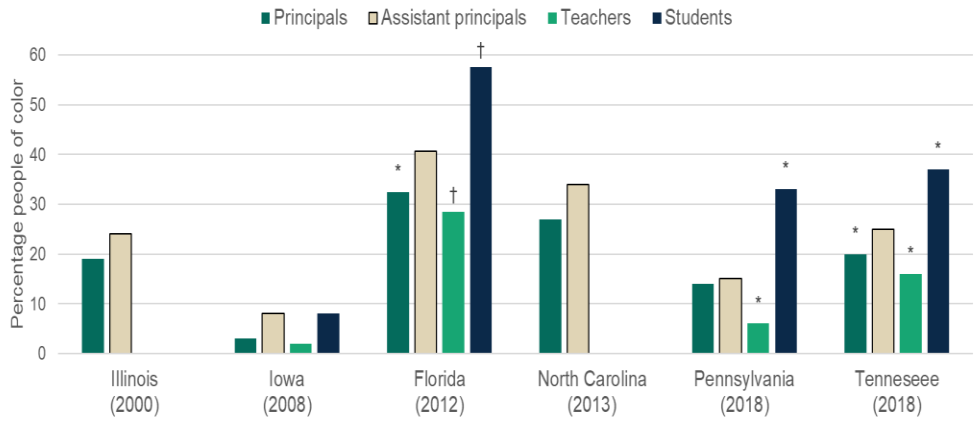
Experience as an assistant principal is most common among principals who work in the types of schools where assistant principals are most common: schools in cities, suburbs, and the South; larger schools; and schools with higher percentages of students of color. Assistant principals typically have three to five years in the role before moving into the principalship.[10]

Key finding #3: *People of color are more likely to be assistant principals than to be principals, while women are more likely to be teachers than to be assistant principals or principals.*

Assistant principals are more racially diverse than the teacher and principal workforces, but they remain less diverse than student enrollment.[11] The greater racial diversity in the assistant principal role suggests the potential to develop leaders who diversify the principal workforce and advance educational equity for students and educators. Women are underrepresented among assistant principals and principals relative to the teacher workforce, suggesting that reducing gender barriers to career advancement could start at the assistant principal role.

There are no national data on the demographic characteristics of assistant principals, but there is information from state-level administrative data. Across six states, on average, 24% of assistant principals are people of color, compared with 13% of teachers, 19% of principals, and 34% of students.[12] The patterns of findings on the racial and ethnic diversity of students, teachers, and principals in these six states are fairly consistent with those nationally, bolstering confidence in these findings for assistant principals.[13] Multiple studies of state administrative data have found that the percentages of assistant principals who are people of color have increased over time.[14]

Figure 3. People of color constitute higher percentages of assistant principals than of principals or teachers



Source: Data from Illinois from Ringel et al. (2004); data from Iowa from Hollingworth and Dude (2009); data from North Carolina from Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017); data from Florida from Folsom et al. (2015); and administrative data from Pennsylvania and Tennessee, 2018
*Difference, relative to assistant principals, is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.
† Difference, relative to assistant principals and principals combined, is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

The reasons for the racial differences in advancement to the assistant principal position or onto the principalship are unknown, but some research suggests that differences in access to mentoring and discrimination in hiring could drive these patterns.[15]

Nationally, principals of color are more likely than white principals to have experience as an assistant principal.[16] According to the 2020–2021 NTPS, approximately 90% of Latino or Black principals had experience as an assistant principal compared with 77% of white principals and 88% of principals of other races and ethnicities. These differences are not entirely explained by principals' years of experience or differences in urbanicity or school size. These findings are consistent with Texas results from approximately 1990 to 2010 showing that graduates of color are more likely to become assistant principals than to become principals.[17]

Women represent lower percentages of assistant principals and principals than of teachers.[18] Nationally, similar percentages of female and male principals (80%) have assistant principal experience, according to the 2020–2021 NTPS.

After graduating from principal preparation programs, women are less likely than men to advance to the assistant principal or principal position.[19] The reasons for these differences are complex and could include differences in mentoring by educators' race, ethnicity, and gender; discrimination; the time demands of school leadership; and differences in educators' aspirations, family contexts, or self-confidence.[20]

Key finding #4: *Preservice preparation programs do not specifically focus on training assistant principals, but most graduates initially serve as assistant principals before moving into the principalship*.

Most assistant principals begin in a teaching position and then move into an assistant principal role after participating in a preservice principal preparation certification program and, sometimes, on-the-job professional development.[21] For teachers, the idea of leaving the classroom for a leadership position generally involves self-initiation, recruitment, or encouragement from others, often called "tapping."[22]

Teachers who are tapped to consider leadership are urged by their principals to enroll in preservice principal preparation programs.[23] Movement into the principalship may be associated with effectiveness in the classroom. One study suggests that teachers who became assistant principals were more effective than other teachers in raising the achievement of the students in their classrooms.[24]

Preservice principal certification programs serve as the typical preparation for assistant principals, and assistant principals are, on average, highly satisfied with these programs.[25] Preservice programs usually include formal coursework and mentoring. In a study of 69 assistant principals in South Texas, many participants reported that their preservice mentoring was the most powerful form of support that they received—both preservice and once on the job.[26] These assistant principals stated that mentors provided the most helpful advice in three areas: (1) skill development, such as building strong relationships with people, honing their decision-making strategies, and developing strong communication skills; (2) professional and personal development by means of seeking continued formal and informal professional growth opportunities and hearing mentors' advice on important personal qualities, such as persistence, hard work, and patience; and (3) values clarification, which involved having a clear vision and achievable goals while being realistic about what could be accomplished while maintaining work–life balance.

Most graduates from preservice principal preparation and leadership certification programs initially serve as assistant principals rather than as principals. Multiple studies of principal preparation programs have found that more than 50% of graduates were first placed in assistant principal positions and that less than 25% of graduates were first placed as principals, although placement percentages varied across programs.[27]

Most assistant principals aspire to be principals.[28] Typically, assistant principals serve approximately four to five years as an assistant principal before moving into the principalship.[29] Approximately half of assistant principals eventually move into the principalship.[30] There is limited evidence on the extent to which assistant principals remain in the role due to their preferences for the role or a lack of opportunities for advancement.

Additionally, there is limited evidence about the characteristics of preservice preparation programs that could improve graduates' placement outcomes or their effectiveness as assistant principals and principals.[31] One study found that few characteristics of preservice preparation programs related to placement as an assistant principal or principal.[32] A study of preservice programs in Tennessee also found no definite patterns to suggest that some preservice programs were "consistently exemplary or low performing," limiting the ability to assess what program characteristics are consistently associated with improved outcomes.[33]

Key finding #5: *The leadership roles of assistant principals vary considerably but typically involve a mix of student affairs and discipline, instructional leadership, and administrative management.*

While people often believe that assistant principals spend most of their time on student discipline, the role is much more complex and nuanced. Assistant principals engage in multiple roles around student affairs, including student support and discipline; school administration and management; and instructional leadership.[34] For example, in Tennessee, assistant principals spend 28% of their work week on instructional leadership tasks, 46% on student affairs (with approximately half being student discipline and the other half being supervisory roles and student-related meetings), and 25% on school management. Of the 42% of assistant principals who spend more than half their time on a specific role,

the vast majority (81%) spend at least half their week on student affairs.[35] The roles of assistant principals and principals overlap, although studies typically find that assistant principals spend more time on student discipline and less time on instructional leadership than principals do.

Differences across studies in the amount of time that assistant principals spend on different tasks could reflect methodological differences in how researchers define tasks as well as variation in assistant principals' responsibilities across years and states.[36] The recent emphasis on instructional leadership might have led assistant principals to spend more time on instructional leadership activities, especially in states such as Tennessee that have strong focuses on teacher observations and evaluation.[37]

The specific roles of assistant principals are influenced by the leadership tasks that their principals distribute or assign to them.[38] Principals vary substantially in how they allocate their time across tasks, which likely influences the tasks that they assign to their assistant principals.[39] One study showed that distributed leadership—that is, shared and collective leadership interactions and practices[40]—shifted assistant principals toward more managerial tasks so that principals could be more involved in the work of instruction.[41] However, in another study, distributed leadership engaged assistant principals in instructional leadership work.[42] One study in Georgia found that assistant principals prioritized good working relationships with their principals so that their principals would assign them leadership tasks that would prepare them for the principalship.[43]

Some studies document relationships between assistant principals' race and gender and their leadership tasks. A study in Tennessee found that Black and female assistant principals were more likely than their white or male counterparts to spend time on instructional leadership tasks.[44] These findings are consistent with the expectation that men are more likely to work in school discipline, but they contrast with the expectation that Black assistant principals might focus more on school discipline than white assistant principals do.

Two qualitative studies suggest that assistant principals of color are often called upon to address diversity in their schools. One study found that Black female assistant principals reported being tasked with addressing discipline, especially when incidents included Black students. These assistant principals also worked on diversity issues schoolwide, such as helping teachers understand differences in social class or diversify advanced math classes, while maintaining interactions with all students to avoid the stereotype of working with only Black students.[45] In another study, one Latino assistant principal described feeling isolated in his work addressing issues of diversity with the staff.[46]

Assistant principals consistently report being satisfied in their roles and school administration as a career.[47] However, challenging aspects of the position include excessive workloads, the handling of difficult student issues, and confrontations with disgruntled teachers and parents.[48] Assistant principals may most prefer instructional leadership roles and working in higher-achieving schools.[49] Assistant principals who intend to seek career advancement in educational leadership report higher job satisfaction than those who intend to stay in the assistant principal position.[50]

Key finding #6: *Assistant principals engage in various types of on-the-job training and professional development, but these supports are not available to all assistant principals.*

Assistant principals seek on-the-job professional development on a wide array of topics, including finance and budgeting, instructional leadership, time management, and stress management.[51] Assistant principals believe that the supports help them develop as assistant principals, understand the role of

the principalship, and enhance their future performance as a principal.[52] For example, in one case study, 24 assistant principals reported that participating in a district-based professional development program strengthened their instructional leadership capabilities, institutional perspective, and collaborative practice.[53] Only one study examines the causal effects of professional development for assistant principals, finding that a professional development program focused on instructional leadership had positive effects on achievement in English language arts but not math.[54]

Most assistant principals believe that their growth as leaders occurs as a result of learning from role models and mentors—particularly their principals—once they are on the job.[55] Much of this learning seems to come from informal meetings with their principal or other assistant principals. In one study, assistant principals reported that support from other administrators, especially their principals, provided them with a "safety net" that emboldened them to take on new experiences and to "take chances."[56] A case study of "franchise models"—where assistant principals run school campuses under the supervision of a "flagship principal"—suggested that these models provided assistant principals with opportunities for mentoring and on-the job learning and enabled collaboration with assistant principals across multiple campuses.[57] Less experienced assistant principals report greater needs for mentoring. One study in Alabama found that only assistant principals with one to four years of experience reported needing mentoring, especially around improving instruction.[58] Most studies do not include clear conceptions of mentoring or clearly differentiate between formal and informal mentoring, which makes it challenging to understand what types of mentoring assistant principals find most useful.

Despite the value that assistant principals place on professional development and mentoring, access to these opportunities varies based on the characteristics of districts, schools, and assistant principals.[59] A nationally representative survey in 2015 found that 36% of U.S. public-school principals reported that their districts provided professional development (other than mentoring or coaching) for assistant principals at least monthly.[60] Large districts (with more than 25,000 students) were more likely than mid-sized and smaller districts to require mentoring for first-year assistant principals or to have mentoring available for new or struggling assistant principals. Assistant principals of middle and high schools might also have greater access to mentoring than their elementary-school counterparts.[61]

In recent years, an approach called "principal pipelines" has emerged to better integrate preservice training for assistant principals with their in-service development and support. Affiliated with districts, leadership pipeline programs typically envision leadership training as a continuum that progressively strengthens the skills of emerging and aspiring school leaders— teacher leaders, assistant principals, and principals—all within the specific district context.[62] Pipeline programs contrast with formal principal preparation programs, which typically do not provide their graduates with ongoing development and support after their placement in assistant principal positions.

Districts vary in how they implement pipeline programs, and the experiences of assistant principals in these programs are mixed. A study of district-sponsored programs in six urban districts found that novice and experienced assistant principals spoke highly of the programs. However, districts experienced challenges with balancing support for assistant principals in their current roles and preparing them for the principalship, as the work of assistant principals often differed from that of principals and some assistant principals did not want to become principals. Other studies found that district pipeline programs differed in terms of their priority participants (new or experienced assistant principals) and content, as well as whether the professional development opportunities were "one size fits all" or aligned with district needs.[63]

Key finding #7: *There is limited research about whether and how assistant principals contribute to improved student and school outcomes.*

Principals and assistant principals believe that having assistant principals in schools supports effective school leadership, but no studies examine how the number of assistant principals in a school relates to school outcomes.[64] The likely reasons for the lack of studies on the number of assistant principals are varied, ill-defined roles of assistant principals and the methodological challenges of attributing differences in school outcomes directly to assistant principals versus other school staff.

Three studies provide suggestive evidence that specific aspects of the roles of assistant principals could be positively related to improved student outcomes and school climate. One rigorous study in a large urban school district found that a program designed to improve assistant principals' instructional leadership skills had a positive effect on students' English language arts achievement but no effects on math or teacher retention.[65] Additionally, a study of one assistant principal found that increasing the assistant principal's presence in the classroom was associated with a reduction in detentions and referrals for classroom behaviors.[66] Furthermore, a study in Tennessee suggested that assistant principals' effectiveness, as measured by supervisor evaluation ratings, were positively related to teachers' perceptions of school climate.[67]

Two studies also highlight relationships between racial and gender disparities in school discipline and the race and level of experience of assistant principals. A study of a mid-sized urban school district finds schools with Black assistant principals have slightly lower rates of discipline disparities between Black and white students than do schools with white assistant principals.[68] A study in North Carolina finds that assistant principals with more years of experience in their current roles have higher rates of out-of-school suspensions for Latina students. However, those with more years of experience as a teacher have lower rates of out-of-school suspensions for Black male and Latina students.[69]

Two small qualitative studies help shed light on how assistant principals could bolster school climate and foster more equitable school environments by building positive relationships with students and staff.[70] A study of two assistant principals recounted how they used their positions as enforcers of student discipline to spend time understanding each student as an individual, bridging home and school settings, with the overall goal of improving the teaching and learning experience and students' relationships with teachers.[71] A second study of one assistant principal committed to culturally relevant leadership showed that she regularly articulated and modeled these practices, such as developing positive relationships with teachers and students and uniting home and school cultures.[72] This assistant principal was consistently visible in classrooms and hallways, conducting collaborative walkthroughs in which she and a group of teachers observed other teachers' classes and reflected on what they saw and attending specifically to how teachers worked with students of color.

Most principals report that experience as an assistant principal is important preparation for the principalship, and those who served as assistant principals in the same school or district report benefits from their existing relationships and familiarity with the context.[73] However, studies indicate that novice principals with assistant principal experience do not generally achieve higher student achievement growth than do those without this experience.[74] The lack of a relationship between experience as an assistant principal and student achievement could be due to substantial variation in the roles and experiences of assistant principals, raising the question of what specific assistant principal experiences might be the most important preparation for the principalship. Some studies find positive relationships between student outcomes and serving as an assistant principal to a more effective principal or in a

more effective school. However, the findings on the benefits of previous assistant principal experience at the current school or a school with the same grade levels are inconsistent.[75]

Policy implications

The assistant principal role is increasingly common and most assistant principals aspire to become principals. Principals report that serving as an assistant principal was useful preparation for the principalship, while some assistant principals see their role as a leadership career position rather than as a stepping stone on the pathway to the principalship. However, at the same time, assistant principals are given neither sequential, skill-building opportunities nor tailored evaluations. In addition, principals are not usually trained to develop and coach assistant principals. We recognize that assistant principals exist within a broader context; their roles need to be flexible enough to adapt to the changing needs of students, teachers, and principals as well as community and local district contexts. Areas for policy consideration include the following:

- Developing standards for assistant principals.
- Articulating in job descriptions that the intent of the assistant principal role also includes preparation for the principalship when this is the expectation for the role.
- Designating leadership tasks for assistant principals, with training and ongoing support for mastery of each task.
- Providing principals with professional development on how to mentor assistant principals and delegate leadership tasks to help them grow and advance.
- Developing clearer policies and transparency for advancement along the pathway to the principalship.
- Developing systems to ensure equitable access to mentoring, sponsorship, and professional development.
- Collecting and analyzing data by race/ethnicity and gender in district data systems that can follow educators' career progressions.
- Implementing evaluation systems for assistant principals that provide valuable feedback to assistant principals about their effectiveness and areas for development.

Future research

The evidence base on assistant principals is mostly descriptive with small samples or a few states. Additional research is needed to:

- Identify and expand ways to measure the impacts of assistant principals on students and teachers. There is a need for many more studies, including studies conducted across more states and contexts, that better document assistant principals' tasks, preparation experiences, and related outcomes. Such studies could examine which aspects of the assistant principal role—if any—are most important for improving assistant principals' future performance as principals and advancing equity in the educator labor market or for students. Researchers can also expand studies to look beyond student achievement and focus on areas such as equity and the social-emotional learning needs of students and staff. They can also examine assistant principals' influence on school climate and working conditions that are related to attracting and retaining effective teachers and staff.

- Examine in greater depth the assistant principal role. No studies examine the roles of assistant principals who have different titles or labels, such as assistant principal for instruction or assistant principal for administration. Principals play a key part in determining the roles of assistant principals, but we know little about how principals decide to assign leadership tasks to assistant principals or how these decisions might be influenced by district or school contexts. There is also almost no research on how assistant principals interact with other school staff, such as teacher leaders and instructional coaches.
- Study the relationships among the roles of assistant principals; their background characteristics, including race, ethnicity, and gender; and school contexts. Because the assistant principalship is a common stepping stone to the principalship, it is important to understand how the position might limit or promote the advancement of educators of color and women along the pathway to other leadership positions.

Endnotes and references

[1] Goldring, Ellen, Mollie Rubin, and Mariesa Herrmann. 2021. The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership. The Wallace Foundation.
[2] A case is typically defined as one situation, such as a preservice preparation program or the work roles of assistant principals in one school or one district.
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