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# WHY PRINCIPALS MATTER

Exploring The Research On School Leadership

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# Introduction

Principals' jobs are changing. In the past, they were largely building managers, making sure their school was staffed and running efficiently while teachers took care of the teaching. But in recent years, principals have taken on new and diverse responsibilities. They now serve as instructional leaders, develop teachers, and create a strong, student-focused culture.<sup>1</sup> Principals have become second only to teachers in their school-level impact on student achievement.<sup>2</sup>

Tennessee hires approximately 180 first-year principals each year, and many of those principals start their careers in Tennessee's highest-need schools.<sup>3</sup> Tennessee has options for policies that could better ensure novice principals are prepared to tackle the complex responsibilities of leadership.

This brief provides an overview of national and Tennessee-specific research around principal preparation. This research includes the unique ways that principals



improve student achievement, the current state of principal preparation, where principals are hired and placed, and promising practices that some principal preparation programs are incorporating to better prepare future school leaders.



## HIGHLIGHTS

1. **Strong principal leadership is instrumental to improving and maintaining effective schools.**
2. **Many principals do not feel well prepared for the diverse responsibilities of school leadership.**
3. **Inexperienced principals often are placed in Tennessee's highest-need schools.**
4. **High-quality principal preparation programs use research-based strategies for candidate selection and program design to ensure candidates are ready to make meaningful improvements in student achievement.**



# 1. Strong Principal Leadership Is Instrumental To Improving And Maintaining Effective Schools.

**Principals are second only to teachers in their school-level impact on student achievement, but their impact is indirect.**

Teachers instruct their students every day and have a very direct impact on student achievement. Although principals play a different role, they have a strong effect on students and their teachers. The most effective principals create a strong school culture, set a mission, and hire and retain effective teachers, all of which are associated with improvements in student achievement.<sup>4</sup> This effect is even stronger in high-poverty schools, which are most in need of highly effective principals.<sup>5</sup> In a recent survey, Tennessee principals were asked what activities they spend their time on during an average week.

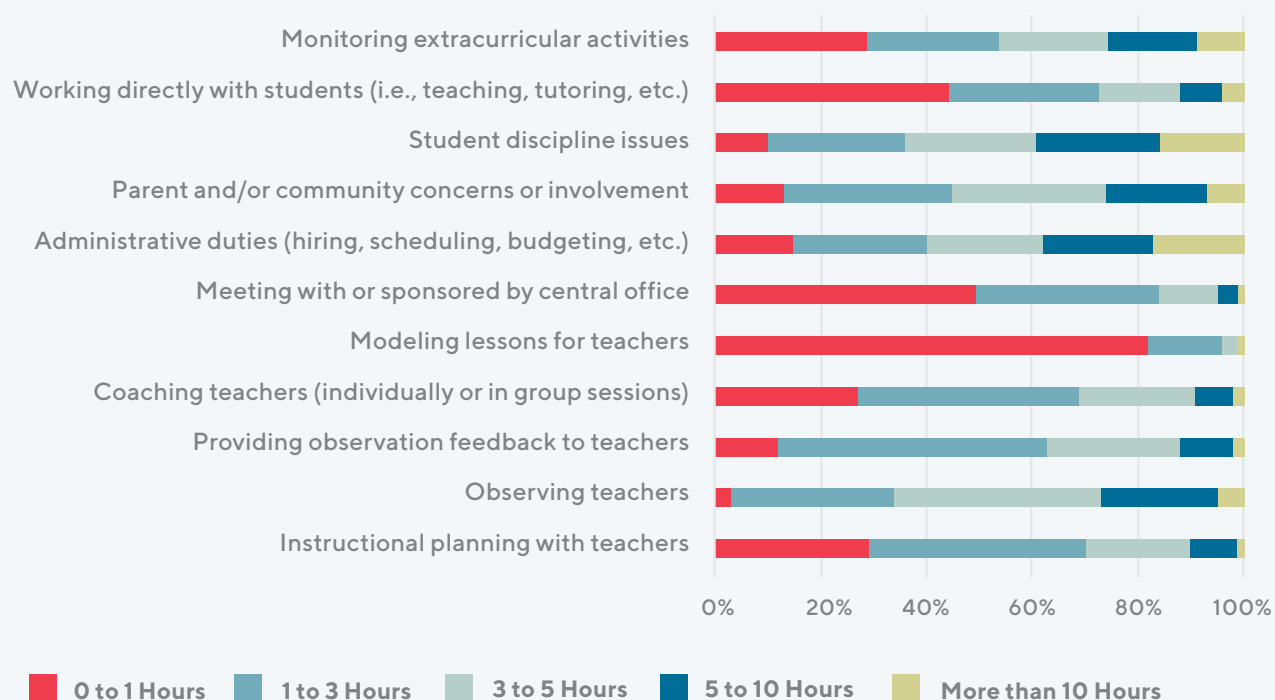
Figure 1 shows Tennessee principals spend their days on a wide range of activities, including observing, coaching, and planning with teachers, creating student schedules, connecting with parents and the community, and addressing student discipline. On average, most Tennessee principals spend about 3 hours per week coaching teachers.<sup>6</sup>

The kinds of changes principals could make to improve struggling schools are difficult to fully implement immediately upon taking the helm. In fact, research following graduates of principal preparation programs suggests that it may take a few years for a new principal's improvements to take hold and start to improve student achievement.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1

# HOW TENNESSEE PRINCIPALS SPEND THEIR TIME

In An Average Week, Principals Report Spending The Most Time On Administrative Duties And Student Discipline.



Source: Tennessee Department of Education, Tennessee Educator Survey, 2017

### **Principals have a strong effect on teacher retention.**

Excellent teachers like to work for excellent principals. By creating a strong school culture, principals can encourage their most effective teachers to keep teaching, especially in hard-to-staff schools.<sup>8</sup> That is why effective teachers cite poor school leadership as a reason for leaving a school—more often than salary or other working conditions.<sup>9</sup> In Tennessee, principals who score higher on their evaluations are also more likely to retain teachers with high observation scores in their schools and counsel out or dismiss teachers with lower observation scores.<sup>10</sup>

### **The diversity of Tennessee students is not fully reflected in the principal work force.**

Compared to Tennessee's student population, black and Hispanic principals are underrepresented. Figure 2 illustrates the differences in ethnic and racial diversity between Tennessee students and principals. In the 2016-17 school year, 82 percent of principals in Tennessee were white and nearly 18 percent of principals were black, and there were very few Hispanic principals.<sup>11</sup> As a comparison, nearly 35 percent

of Tennessee students were black or Hispanic—nearly double the share of principals.<sup>12</sup>

### **A diverse principal force is instrumental to recruiting and retaining a diverse teaching force, which can help improve the academic achievement of historically underserved students.**

Recruiting more racially and ethnically representative teachers in a school can help improve the performance of historically underserved students. In the 2013-14 school year, the most recent year with available data, approximately 15 percent of Tennessee teachers were black or Hispanic compared to 35 percent of Tennessee students.<sup>13</sup> Students from historically underrepresented populations who have same-race teachers have better rates of college attendance, higher student achievement, higher gifted identification, and fewer discipline infractions.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, schools with black principals are more likely to identify black students for gifted programs.<sup>15</sup>

Hiring a representative principal force can help districts recruit and retain more racially and ethnically representative teachers since principals of color can play

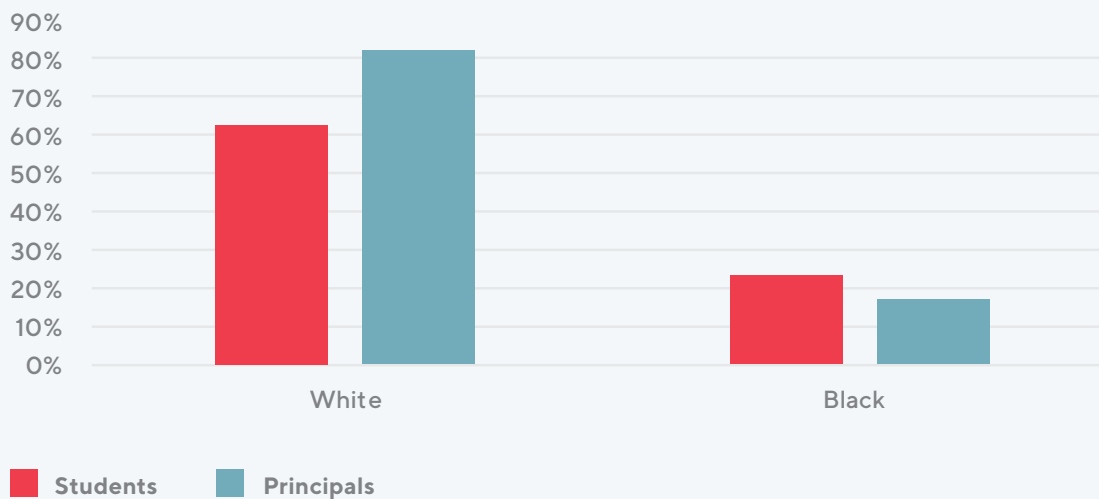
an important role in recruiting and hiring teachers of color. Researchers using data from Tennessee and Missouri have shown that principals of color tended to recruit and retain more teachers of color. In the

study, a black principal was also more likely than a white principal to hire a black teacher. Additionally, having a same-race principal decreased the chances that a teacher left the school.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 2

## DIFFERENCES IN RACIAL DIVERSITY BETWEEN TENNESSEE STUDENTS AND PRINCIPALS

**Black Principals Are Under-Represented In Tennessee.**



Source: Principal data from Grissom and Bartanen, "School Principal Race and The Hiring and Retention of Racially Diverse Teachers." Hispanic principals not reported due to low number of responses. Student data from 2016-17, Tennessee Report Card.

## 2.

# Many Principals Do Not Feel Well Prepared For The Diverse Responsibilities Of School Leadership.

**National surveys show that principals have not felt like their training prepared them for leadership.**

Many principals felt like they entered leadership without the necessary tools to succeed. A national survey of principals found that 96 percent said their on-the-job experiences trained them better than their preparation program.<sup>17</sup> Another survey showed that two-thirds of principals believed that their preparation programs were “out-of-touch” with the realities of school leadership. Surveyed superintendents also agreed with these

principals; 41 percent reported principal candidates were not well prepared for the job and over two-thirds said principal preparation programs needed to improve.<sup>18</sup>

These surveys suggest that successful leadership programs need to consider the diverse responsibilities of principalship when designing their programs.

**Early-career principals leave the job at high rates, suggesting they are not prepared for the realities of school leadership.**



In Tennessee, nearly a third of principals leave their schools by the end of their third year, and seven percent of principals leave the profession altogether each year.<sup>19</sup> Nationally, as many as one-fifth of new principals leave the job after one or two years. Many of those principals who left were working in schools where student achievement declined after their first year on the job.<sup>20</sup> Other principals left due to stress, high time demands, or feelings of isolation.<sup>21</sup>

These findings suggest that new principals are placed in leadership positions they are not prepared to take on or are not given appropriate support to be successful in their first years on the job. This kind of turnover can often be harmful to both students and teachers. Principal turnover is associated with declines in student achievement, low teacher morale, and interruption in the implementation of school reforms.<sup>22</sup>



**3.**

## **Inexperienced Principals Often Are Placed In Tennessee's Highest-Need Schools.**



**In Tennessee, principals with less experience and lower evaluation scores are more likely to work in lower-performing and higher-poverty schools.**

Thirty-eight percent of principals working in schools with the lowest student achievement have three or fewer years of experience, compared to about a quarter of principals in schools with the highest student achievement. Figure 3 shows

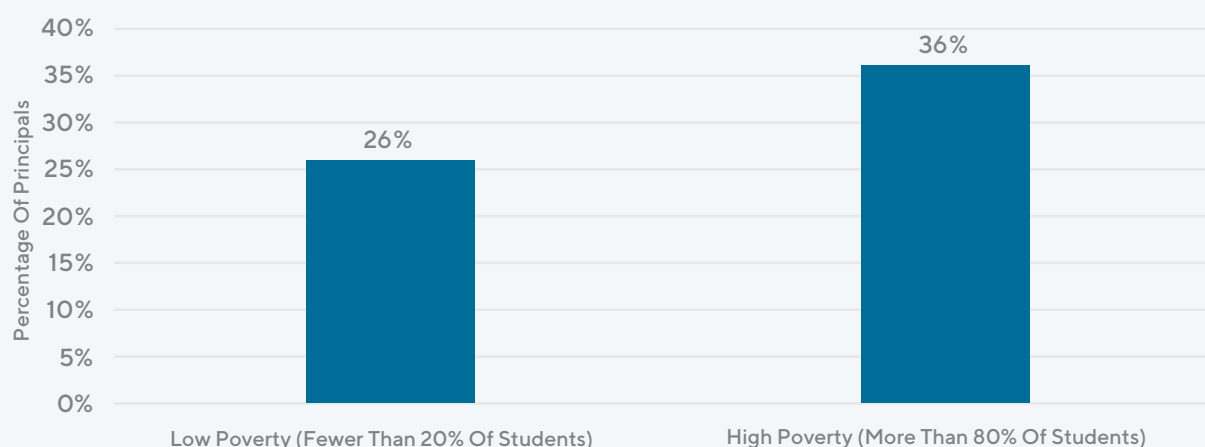
principals with three or fewer years of experience are more likely to be working in schools with high student poverty.

Additionally, more principals with lower evaluation scores are working in high-need schools than those with higher evaluation scores. On average, principals at high-poverty or low-achieving schools have evaluation ratings about a half rating point lower than principals at low-poverty or high-achieving schools.<sup>23</sup>

Figure 3

## PRINCIPAL PLACEMENT

**A Greater Share Of Principals With Three Or Fewer Years Of Experience Are Leading High-Poverty Schools.**



Source: Jason A. Grissom, "School Leadership and School Improvement in Tennessee" (presentation, Tennessee Education Research Alliance, Nashville, TN, December 2017). Poverty is measured as percentage of students in a school enrolled in free or reduced lunch program.

**There is limited evidence that district leaders strategically place principals in schools where they have the most impact.**

Different schools need different kinds of leaders. However, there is very little research about whether districts strategically place principals in schools where they could be the most effective. One study of Miami-Dade school district found that teachers were often informally “tapped” by principals and encouraged to become school leaders. While the “tapped” principals were more effective

than those who were not, they were also disproportionately white and male.<sup>24</sup>

A Fordham Institute report surveying eight large urban districts found that exemplary districts created rubrics aligned with district and state leadership standards, as well as specific school needs.<sup>25</sup> These strategies ensured that districts were as thoughtful as possible in considering the diverse needs of schools, making sure principals were placed in environments where they would have the greatest impact on students.



# 4.

## High-Quality Principal Preparation Programs Use Research-Based Strategies For Candidate Selection And Program Design To Ensure Candidates Are Ready To Make Meaningful Improvements In Student Achievement.

**High-quality principal preparation programs have rigorous selection processes to identify promising principal candidates.**

There is anecdotal evidence that some principal preparation programs take in nearly all candidates who apply. Additionally, only about 20 to 30 percent of graduates from traditional principal

preparation programs go on to serve as principals.<sup>26</sup> Some teachers decide to enroll in principal preparation programs to get a pay increase since many districts give teachers with advanced degrees higher salaries. This practice has resulted in an increase in easy-to-complete preparation programs that do not appropriately prepare candidates for leadership roles.<sup>27</sup>



Conversely, high-quality preparation programs have rigorous selection processes to ensure that candidates are ready and planning to become administrators. For example, in Illinois, principal preparation program candidates are required to have an in-person interview with at least two full-time faculty members and create an extensive portfolio of teaching achievements.<sup>28</sup> High-quality programs also partner with districts to identify potential leadership candidates.<sup>29</sup> The New York City Aspiring Principals program at the New York City Leadership Academy identified emerging teacher leaders to participate in their program, leading to meaningful improvements in student achievement at schools where program graduates were hired.<sup>30</sup>

**Residencies, mentorships, and cohort models that provide meaningful school-based experiences are components of effective preparation programs.**

Much like in the medical profession, prospective principals need meaningful on-the-job experiences throughout their training to ensure they are prepared for the diverse demands of the job. High-quality principal preparation programs not only require candidates to observe

existing principals but also engage with those principals in a wide range of meaningful activities. Some programs even provide full-time paid residencies for principal candidates so they can be fully immersed in the job for an entire year before graduating the program.<sup>31</sup>

Having meaningful on-the-job experiences for candidates requires partnerships with districts and the selection of high-performing principal mentors who can provide support for candidates during their preparation and first years on the job.<sup>32</sup> A strong cohort model can also provide principal candidates with support. Program cohorts participate in classes and start their principalship with the same group of candidates. Novice principals can then consult this built-in network of fellow principals for support throughout their careers.<sup>33</sup>

**While there is little data about the effectiveness of principal preparation programs, a few programs have track records of training better principals and filling shortages in hard-to-staff areas.**

In 2010, Illinois began requiring programs that train principals to incorporate many of the characteristics of high-quality

programs. A survey of practitioners, participants, and policymakers involved in Illinois' principal preparation reform indicated that their policies resulted in more rigorous programs and selection of candidates, more authentic and practical principal preparation, and deeper collaboration between programs and districts.<sup>34</sup> An in-depth study of the University of Illinois–Chicago principal preparation program found that schools led by their graduates were outperforming comparison

schools in student growth, average daily attendance, and high school freshmen on track for graduation.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, programs developed in partnership with districts, like the New York City Aspiring Principals Program, can help recruit and train candidates to fill positions in hard-to-staff schools. Graduates of the New York City Aspiring Principals Program improved student achievement in high-needs schools within three to five years.<sup>36</sup>

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# The Challenges Ahead

This brief demonstrates researchers are learning more about how to improve the principal pipeline. However, ensuring programs are graduating candidates who are ready for the job is a daunting task. The role of the principal has changed, and many principals across the country feel unprepared for the job.<sup>37</sup> New principals

also end up leaving their jobs at high rates. Those principals who stay in the job are not always placed in schools where they will have the most impact.

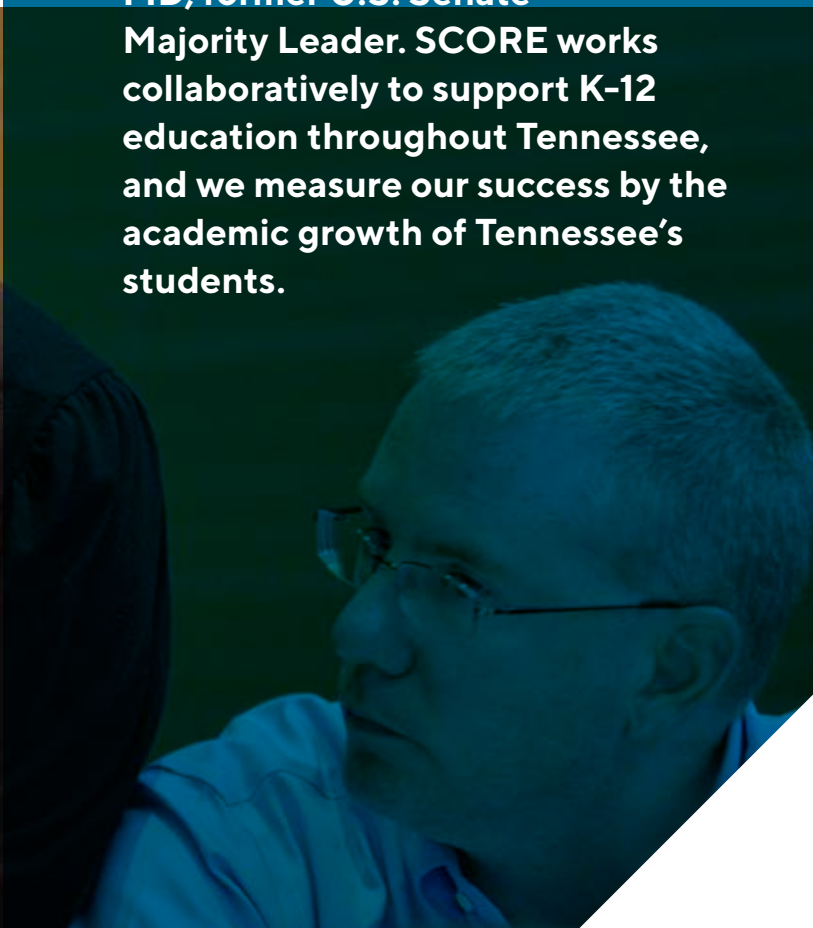
Research findings indicate that recruiting and developing strong leaders could help Tennessee meet its ambitious student



achievement goals. Tennessee has been forward-thinking in using research-based strategies to improve all levels of education, and there is an opportunity for Tennessee to keep expanding that work and become a national model for exemplary school leadership.

## ABOUT SCORE

**The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) drives collaboration on policy and practice to ensure student success across Tennessee. We are an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan advocacy and research institution, founded in 2009 by Senator Bill Frist, MD, former U.S. Senate Majority Leader. SCORE works collaboratively to support K-12 education throughout Tennessee, and we measure our success by the academic growth of Tennessee's students.**



# Notes

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