

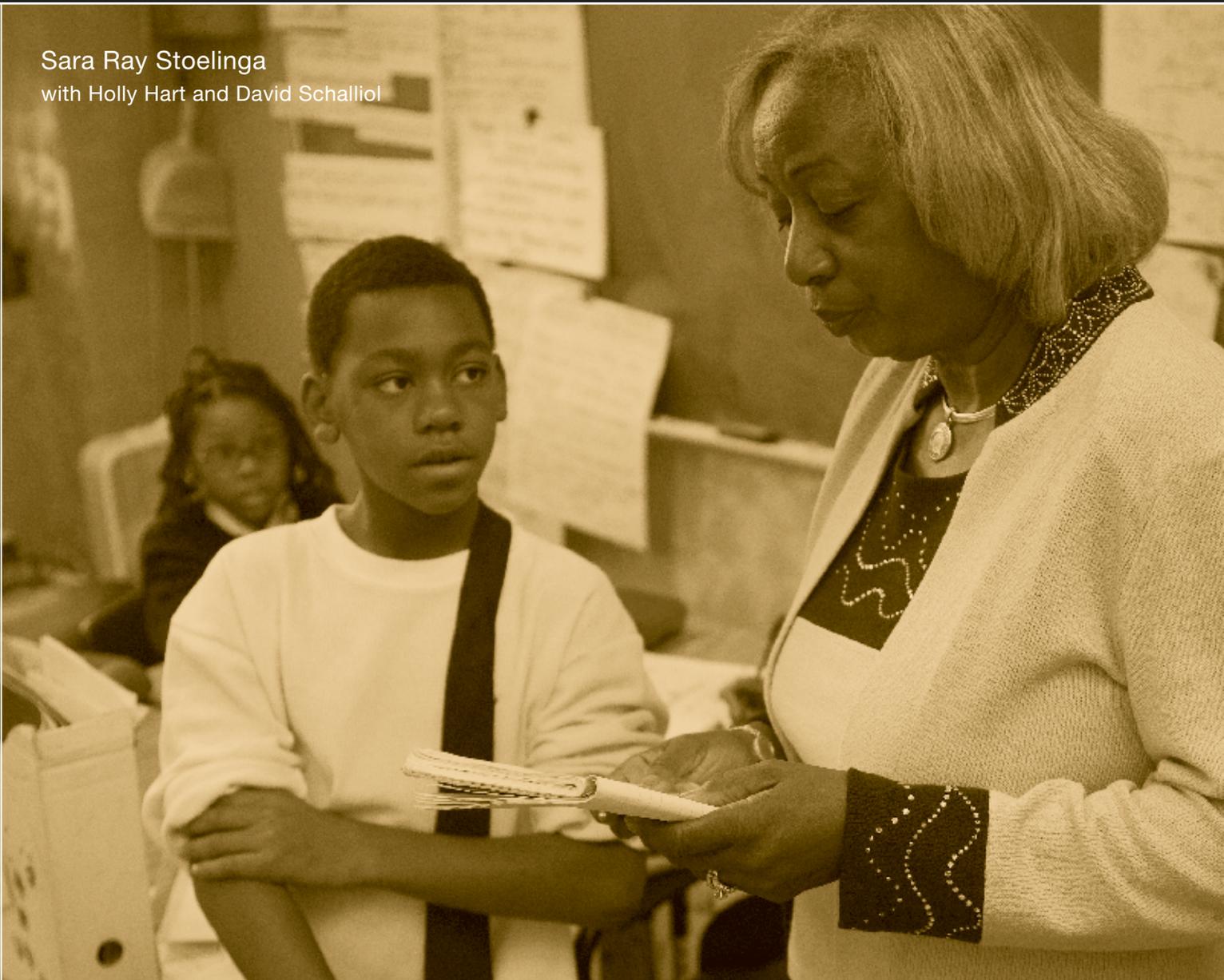


CONSORTIUM ON  
CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
URBAN EDUCATION INSTITUTE

# The Work of Chicago Public Schools' Principals

## Leading in a Complex Context with High Stakes

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# Executive Summary

This report is a chapter in the story of Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) principals. It describes the challenging, yet rewarding, work of urban school leaders. The story is far from simple or conclusive.

CPS principals report that they are highly satisfied with their work; and yet the numbers are surprisingly low when they are asked how many more years they will work as principal. Principal turnover and the resulting influx of new and inexperienced principals into the school system every year are a critical finding in this report. At any given point in time in CPS, nearly half of principals are in their first four-year contract. Principal satisfaction and future plans are also analyzed as possible contributors to principal turnover. We investigate pushes and pulls that may influence principal recruitment, retention, and departure, including principal training programs, early retirement policies, the passage of reform legislation, and the existence of career paths in education beyond the principalship.

We learn that CPS principals have consistently reported the same pressing roadblocks to school improvement over a period of ten years. In this report, we dig deeper into understanding these findings by interviewing principals to shed light on these pressing challenges and the creative ways they manage difficult problems, such as pressures to get test scores up quickly, social problems in the school's community, difficulty removing ineffective teachers, and working with parents. Given the salience of issues surrounding teacher hiring, we focus on the ways in which principals in different contexts manage this process.

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The understanding of such complex issues is dependent upon developing a deeper understanding of the “who” and “how.” To better understand *who* CPS principals are, we trace the increase in the numbers of principals of color and female principals from the late 1980s forward, and the resulting increase in the match between the race of principals and the majority of students in their schools. The findings demonstrate the enduring effects of the increasing number of principals of color in CPS, which began after the creation of Local School Councils (LSC) and continued over time. To better understand *how* principals enact their work, we analyze the manner in which principals spend their time, revealing a significant increase in the time spent focused on instructional issues and the variation in time allocation due to school context. We also analyze principals’ reflections on their time usage,

highlighting areas where they wish they spent more or less of their time.

In short, this is a study of the roles and perceptions of Chicago Public Schools’ principals, drawing upon Consortium surveys and principal interviews. The report focuses on critical aspects of principal background and work: trends in the gender and race of Chicago principals, principal turnover, principal time usage, the issues that principals find most problematic, and potential solutions to those challenges. We close with a look to the future, highlighting directions for research and policy. In the process, this report presents important aspects of CPS principals’ stories, through their own eyes and in their own words as they enact “. . . leadership in an incredibly complex context with impossibly high stakes.”

# Introduction

The daily lives of Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) principals are filled to the brim: "I find that I seldom have time to sit down throughout the day, I am in constant motion." Chicago principals encounter a variety of activities that require a range of skills: "My position demands leadership in many areas: budgetary, instructional, public relations, and personnel evaluation." Chicago principals face roadblocks that significantly impede progress toward school improvement: "There are challenges, students have emotional needs, teachers need professional development, and the community is strangled by poverty." And yet, despite the constant activity, professional demands, and roadblocks, CPS principals find satisfaction in their work: "I would not choose any other career. Here, I feel like I have the ability to make a difference in the lives of children and better a community."

The Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 (PA 85-1418) fundamentally changed the principal's role by eliminating tenure and increasing responsibility for budgeting and personnel selection.<sup>1</sup> In the recentralization that followed with the passage of the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act of 1995 (PL 89-0015), principals faced additional pressures as the first accountability systems based on standardized tests were initiated.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the principal position has evolved, demanding diverse skills.<sup>3</sup> The increasing complexity of principal work and the pressures for instructional improvement shifted the concept of principal as a single "heroic" leader to one who must find creative ways to undertake complex work through allocation of tasks, outstanding problem solving, and ongoing professional growth.<sup>4</sup>

This report explores the roles and perceptions of Chicago Public Schools' principals and identifies areas of future inquiry. We focused on critical aspects of principal background and work: the trends in the gender and race of Chicago principals, principal turnover, the way principals spend their

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time, the issues that principals find most problematic, and potential solutions to those challenges.

This report relies upon three data sources: the Consortium on Chicago School Research survey of principals, personnel data files from CPS, and interviews conducted with CPS principals. The Consortium has administered five surveys to CPS principals: in 1992, 1997, 2003, 2005, and 2007. Survey analyses primarily highlight 2007 results, while also including some trend data from previous survey years. Consortium surveys are the primary data source for the sections on principal experience, principal time allocation and role, roadblocks to school improvement, and principals' satisfaction and future plans. CPS personnel data files from 1992 to 2007 are the primary data source for the discussion on trends in principal gender and race/ethnicity. Interviews with 20 principals were conducted in the late fall of 2007 and the early winter of 2008. These interviews are the primary data source for the section on possible solutions to roadblocks to school improvement. Throughout the report, principal interviews also provide corroborating and illustrative evidence to support personnel and survey data analyses.<sup>5</sup>

We consider principals as a group and by making comparisons between principal subgroups for whom the principal experience is arguably very different. As a result, the sections that follow include analyses that look for differences in perception or experience between the following subgroups:

- New (four years or less) versus experienced principals
- Elementary versus high school principals
- Principals in high achieving elementary schools versus those in low achieving elementary schools
- Principals in high achieving high schools versus those in low achieving high schools

Research indicates that principals relatively new to the profession may have different experiences than those who have been principals for a longer time. New principals, while armed with knowledge about instructional practice through their previous roles and theoretical knowledge from their administrator prepara-

tion program, often lack a complete understanding of the complexity of the school organization, the roadblocks they can expect to encounter, or the multiplicity of demands that characterize the principalship.<sup>6</sup> New principals require mentoring, coaching, and hands-on professional development to ease the transition to their new role.<sup>7</sup>

Studies indicate that principals in elementary schools and those in high schools have different experiences. In particular, scholars have argued that environmental factors (e.g., school size, grade levels served, and number of staff members) influence principal role and actions.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a recent study of influences on principal practice found that elementary school principals were more likely to be "eclectic" principals who distribute their time across a wide range of activities, while high school principals were more likely to focus on instruction.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, studies that have documented the influence of school context on principal role enactment also conclude that principals in low achieving schools have different perceptions and experiences from those in high achieving schools. Student socioeconomic status and urbanization influence principal role because they are factors related to the achievement level of students.<sup>10</sup>

Understanding that principal experience varies based on these contextual differences, analyses were conducted to look for variation between the subgroups. In cases where subgroup perceptions are different, we highlight and discuss these variations.

The primary findings focus on five major issues: (a) the increasing number of principals of color and female principals in Chicago from the late 1980s forward; (b) principal time allocation and the increasing proportion of time focused on instructional issues; (c) the issues principals perceive to be the most significant roadblocks to school improvement and their strategies to manage those challenges; (d) principal turnover and the constant influx of new and inexperienced principals into the school system; and (e) pushes and pulls that may influence principal recruitment, retention, and departure. Through analysis of survey, interview, and personnel data, this report describes the role of principals in Chicago and uses these findings to define new areas of inquiry.

# Chapter 1

## Principal Race and Gender

Research demonstrates gender and race have an influence on the work of principals. Early studies of women in the principalship suggest that women “more readily exchange information. . . , work more hours, are more inclined to be innovative, are more likely to be democratic leaders, and are more preferred by teachers and superiors than men.”<sup>11</sup> In more recent studies, female principals have been found to spend more time observing instructional practice and to be more focused on celebrating student successes.<sup>12</sup> While gender is not the only important contributing factor to how principals enact their work, research demonstrates that gender “does play a role in how a school leader negotiates the process of providing continuity and creating changes that affect individual children, teachers, and schools.”<sup>13</sup> The gender of the principal influences his or her interactions with teachers of the opposite sex, influencing perceptions of power.<sup>14</sup>

Race is also influential. Linda Tillman, summarizing work by Kofi Lomotey, notes that “same-race affiliation and membership in a distinct cultural group (e.g., African American) are significant factors affecting how principals interact with parents and students.”<sup>15</sup> Research demonstrates that principals, teachers, and students of the same cultural group relate to one another more easily, influencing school climate.<sup>16</sup>

The variable enactment of the principal role based on race and gender certainly provides one important reason to document demographic trends in the CPS principalship. There is a second reason that is equally as compelling. CPS researchers documented an influx of female principals and principals of color into the system in the time period following the passing of the Chicago

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> “I became principal in the early 1980s, before reform. Then, it was much less common for a woman, much less a black woman, to be a principal.”

School Reform Act of 1988. In particular, researchers argue that the creation of LSC, with the power to select and remove principals, led to the hiring of more female principals and principals of color.<sup>17</sup> Has this trend in CPS continued since the 1988 reform?

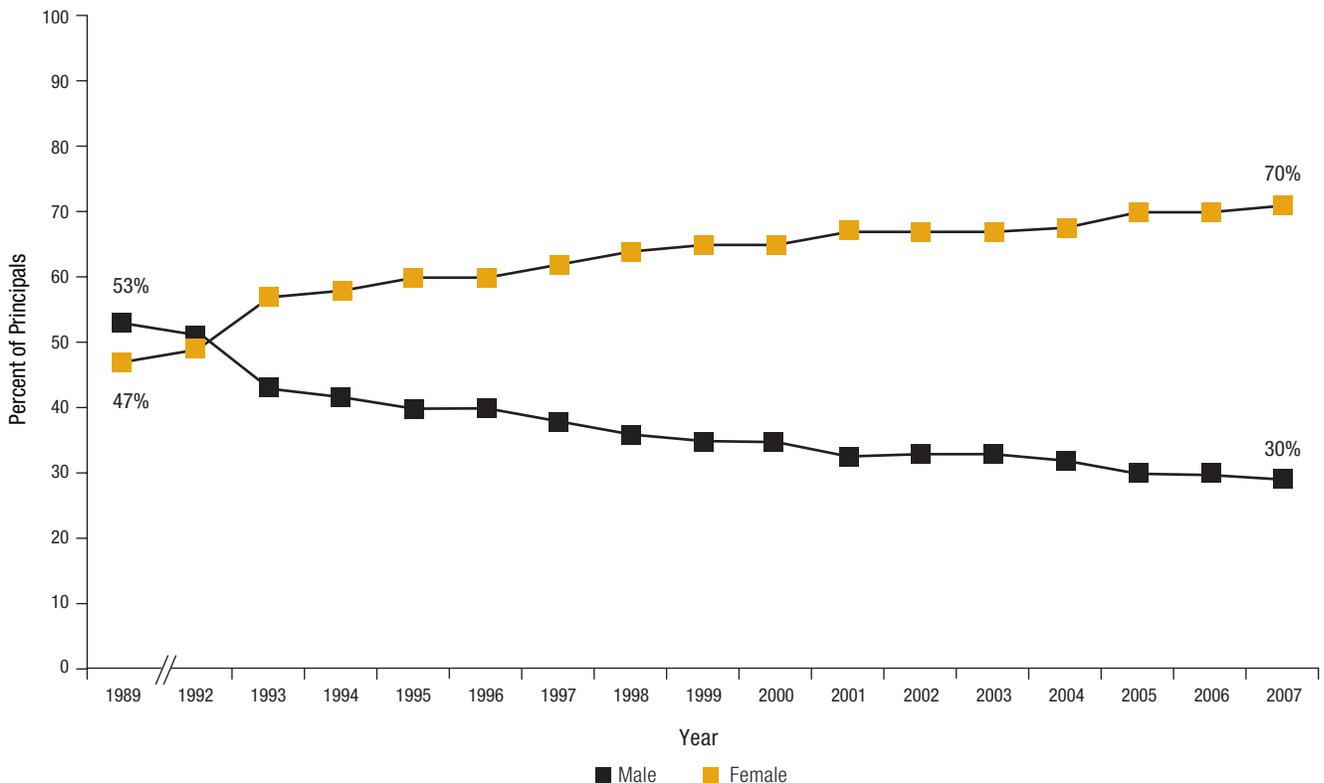
Figures 1 and 2 summarize the trends in principal gender in CPS from 1989 to 2007. The initial jump in the proportion of female principals documented by CPS researchers in 1996 is evident in the elementary school trend line. Between 1996 and 2007, the steady increase in the proportion of female elementary school principals continued. The graph as a whole demonstrates that the proportion of female elementary schools principals increased from a little less than half in 1989 to more than 70 percent in 2007. Figure 2 shows a similar pattern for high schools from 1989 to 1996 when the proportion of female high school principals increased from 35 to 53 percent. From 1996 to 2007, however, high schools showed a different trend than elementary schools, with the proportion of female and male principals hovering around 50

percent each, with some years a slightly greater proportion of female principals and other years having slightly more males.

In examining the race of principals in Figures 3 and 4, it is clear that the proportion of principals of color in CPS has increased over time. The greatest change occurred after the 1988 reform, from 1989 to 1996, when the proportion of principals of color in Chicago increased from 44 to 66 percent in elementary schools and from 60 to 70 percent in high schools. From 1997 to 2007, the proportion of principals of color held steady at approximately 65 to 70 percent in both elementary schools and high schools.

While the trends in elementary schools and high schools for the proportion of principals of color is similar, looking more carefully at the trends for African American and Hispanic<sup>18</sup> principals reveals a slightly different pattern in elementary schools versus high schools. In elementary schools, the increase in principals of color was primarily due to an increase in the proportion of African American principals. The most

**FIGURE 1**  
CPS elementary schools increasingly led by female principals



dramatic increase occurred between 1989 and 1994, when the proportion of African American elementary school principals rose from 36 to 50 percent.

High schools demonstrated a different pattern. In 1989, 56 percent of high school principals were already African American. In Chicago high schools, the increase in the number of principals of color was primarily due to an increase in the proportion of Hispanic principals, which rose from 4 percent in 1989 to 17 percent in 1997. While differences in these initial growth patterns are striking from 1989 to 1997, from 1997 to 2007 the proportions look very similar between high school and elementary schools.

The CPS principal turnover report released in 1996 noted that with the increase in the principals of color came a higher degree of match between the race/ethnicity of the principal and the racial composition of students in the school from 1989 to 1994.<sup>19</sup> Here, we again extend this trend through 2007. Figure 5 shows that the proportion of predominantly African American schools with an African American principal rose nearly 20 percent between 1989 and 1992. This proportion rose another 7 percent in 1997 and remained flat until 2005 at 93 percent. In 2006, there was a slight increase again—to 95 percent in 2007. A similar pattern can be seen in predominantly Hispanic schools. The proportion of such schools with a Hispanic principal grew from 31 to 59 percent by 1998. In 2000, there was a dip to about 50 percent. But by 2007, however, 56 percent of predominantly Hispanic schools had a Hispanic principal.

In examining the trends, it is clear that the effects of the 1988 reform on the demographic shift in the principalship in Chicago have endured. It is no longer accurate to describe principals of color as “minorities,” when indeed they are the majority of principals in both elementary and high schools. Interviewed principals, both those relatively new to the profession and those who had been in the school system for a long period of time, talked about the increase in the number of CPS principals of color as one of the district’s positive characteristics. One African American principal of more than 20 years stated:

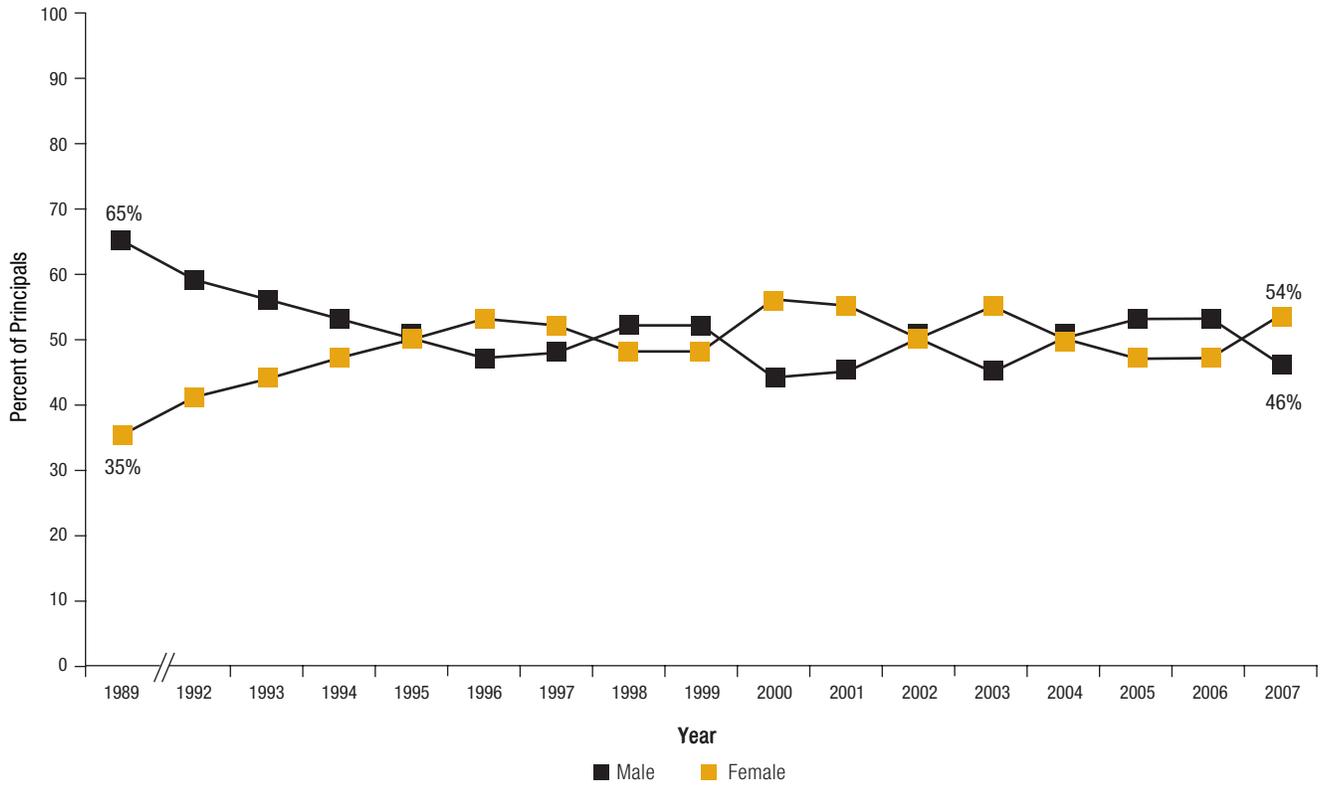
“I became principal in the early 1980s, before reform. Then, it was much less common for a woman, much less a black woman, to be a principal. One of the biggest changes I see, in both principals and [central office staff] is that now there are more people like me. And given that such a large number of CPS students are [African American], I see that as a very positive change.”

A Hispanic principal in her first contract observed the shift in demographics of CPS principals as a student turned staff member in the system.

“I just think, when I was a student at [a predominantly Hispanic CPS elementary school] there really didn’t seem to be Latino or Latina principals. I am so proud to be a part of bringing that change to [CPS].”

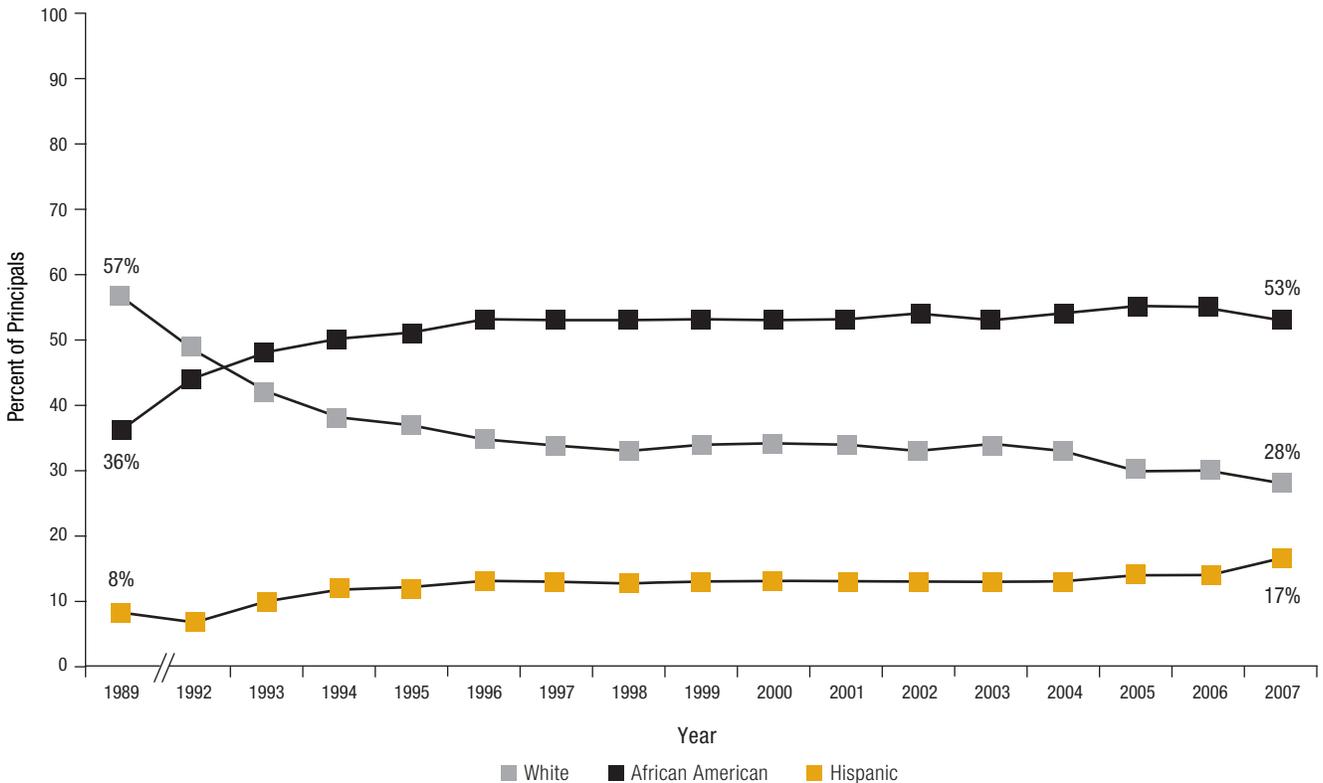
**FIGURE 2**

**CPS high school principals now evenly split between women and men**



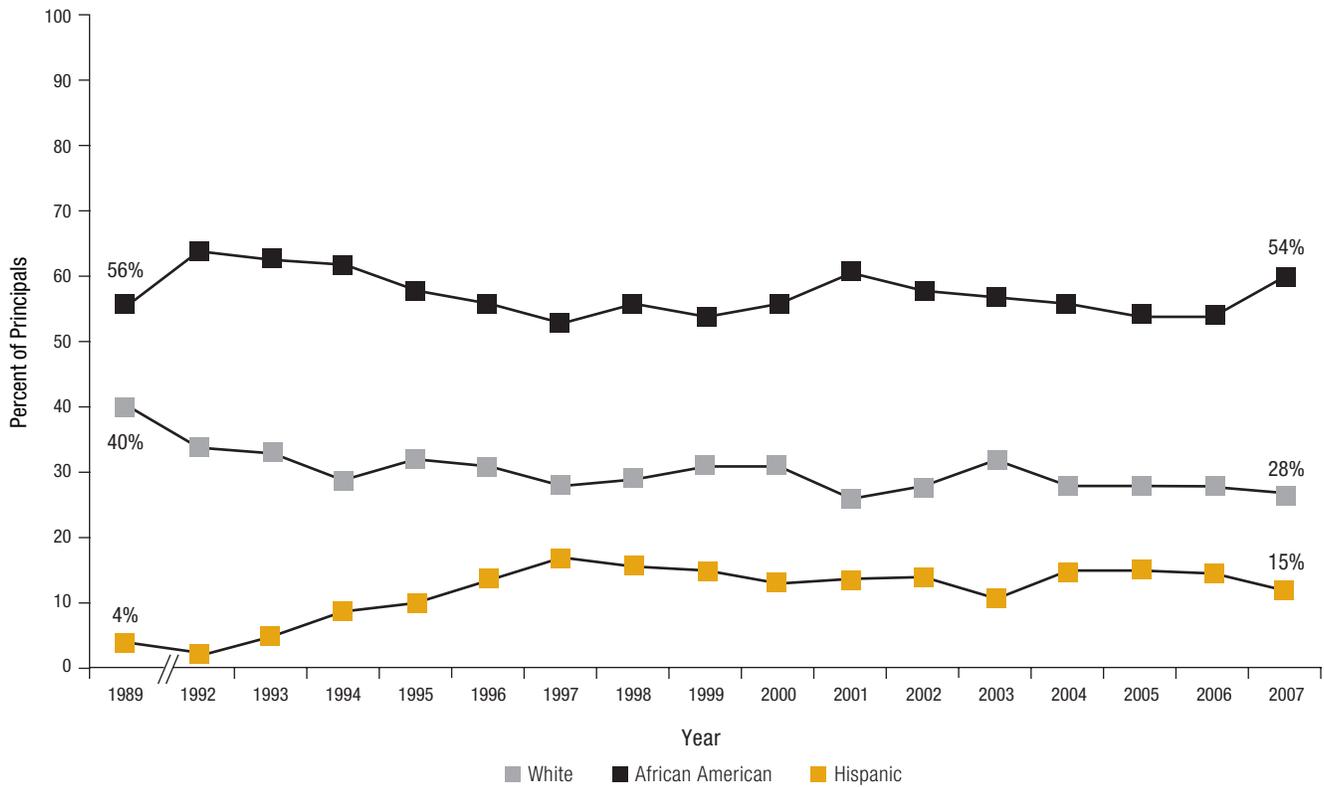
**FIGURE 3**

**CPS elementary schools increasingly led by principals of color**



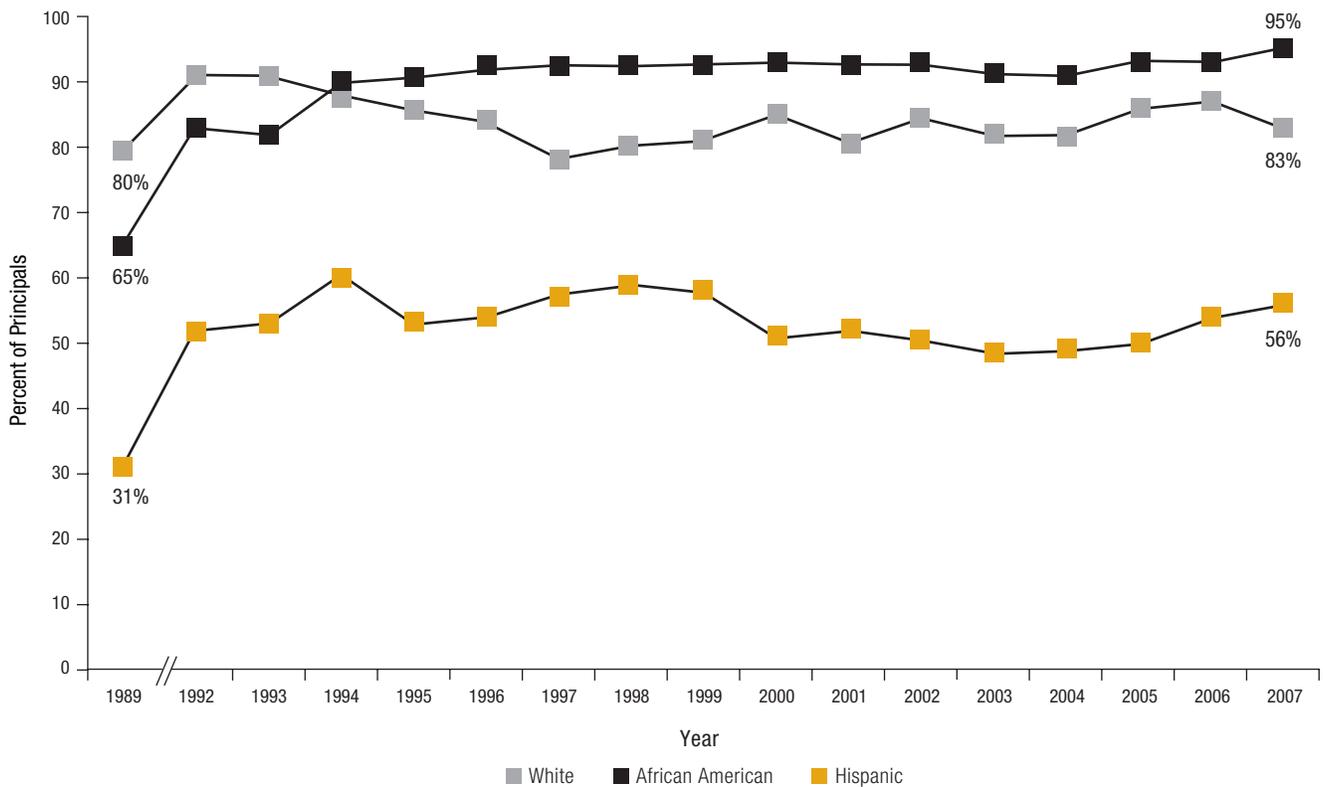
**FIGURE 4**

**CPS high schools increasingly led by principals of color**



**FIGURE 5**

**Principals increasingly of same race/ethnicity as majority of students in school**





# Chapter 2

## Principal Use of Time

Principals play a wide variety of roles requiring a broad range of skills. Studies describe principals as agents of change, managers, personnel directors, disciplinarians, policy-makers, and instructional leaders.<sup>20</sup> However, the appropriate role of the principal in school functioning and school improvement efforts has evoked much speculation and study. Particularly contentious in the literature on principals is the appropriate balance of the many roles they play, and the extent to which principals have the time, expertise, and skills to function as instructional leaders.<sup>21</sup> Shifts in the mood and focus of educational improvement policy have also influenced the role of the principal. For example, early waves of reform focused on changing school governance.<sup>22</sup> In Chicago, this wave of reform manifested itself in the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988, through which principals lost their tenure and were increasingly accountable to parents and community members.<sup>23</sup> In the late 1990s, a different shift occurred as high stakes testing became the focus of reform. The principal role became more focused on management of accountability requirements, leaving instructional leadership to other administrators and teacher leaders.<sup>24</sup> Current research demonstrates a re-emergence of the emphasis on the need for principals to be instructional leaders.<sup>25</sup> This parallels the trend in school reform efforts toward instructionally focused reform.<sup>26</sup>

Recent research demonstrates that principals do prioritize instructional leadership, spending an average of about nine hours a week devoted to instruction. However, this focus on instruction is not distributed equally across all principals. Some are spending a great deal of time on instruction, while others are more accurately classified as student centered leaders or

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eclectic leaders who are spread across a wider range of tasks.<sup>27</sup> The focus of this section is on CPS principal time; the number of hours they work and the allocation of time across the many facets of their role.

## Time Allocation and Role

The section begins with a consideration of the hours principals work in Chicago, over time and in comparison to national averages for central cities in the United States. Next, the allocation of time across activities is documented both as trends across years and by looking at subgroups of principals. At the end of the section, principals reflect on their use of time.

### Hours Worked

Principals in Chicago report working an average of about 60 hours per week. This is consistent in all survey administrations from 1997 to 2007. Table 1 summarizes the average hours worked as reported by principals.

**TABLE 1**  
**CPS principal hours worked per week**

Year	Average Hours Worked per Week
1997	58.6
2003	59.2
2005	61.1
2007	59.9

According to the U.S. Department of Education Schools and Staffing Survey, the national average number of hours per week worked by principals in central cities is 60 hours, suggesting that Chicago principal hours are comparable to principals in other cities.<sup>28</sup>

An examination of hours worked across subgroups of principals reveals no significant difference in the mean hours worked per week among any of the four subgroup pairs.

## Time Allocation

Principals were asked to estimate the number of hours per week spent on a list of 17 activities. For the purpose of considering the trend in time allocation from 1997 to 2007, these activities were clustered into three broad categories:

**Instruction:** Curriculum and instructional leadership, personnel, staff development, principal professional development

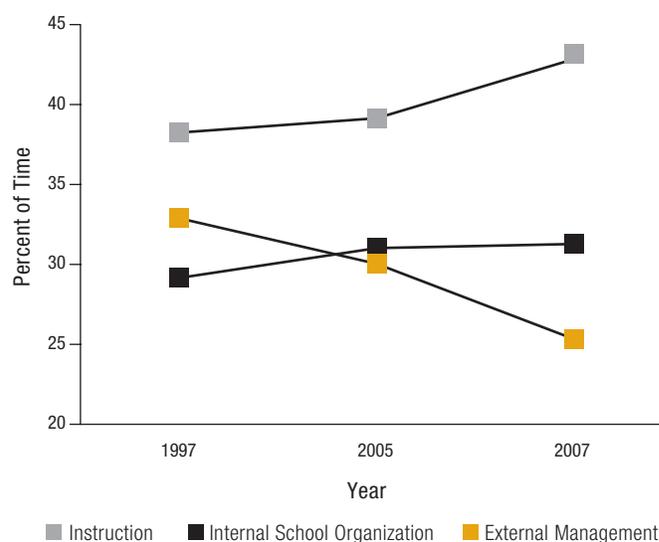
**Internal School Organization:** Planning, budget, internal school management, student discipline and attendance, student-related activities, walking hallways, playground, lunchroom, building maintenance, capital development, student-related activities

**External Management:** Area office, parents, community, LSC, student transportation

From 1997 to 2007, principals report spending an increased percentage of their time focused on the activities clustered in the instruction category and a decreased amount of time on external management activities, as seen in Figure 6.

The shift in time allocation toward instructional related activities resonated with interviewed principals. “I think this increased focus on instruction has come

**FIGURE 6**  
**CPS principals spend increasingly more time on instructional issues**



from the district policy level,” an elementary principal stated in a focus group. “From the Chicago Reading Initiative, to the Chicago Math Science Initiative, to things like the [Instructional Development Systems or IDS] for high schools, the real focus is on instruction,” he stated. This focus in Chicago parallels the national reform agenda in urban districts that has increasingly focused priorities on instructional improvement.<sup>29</sup>

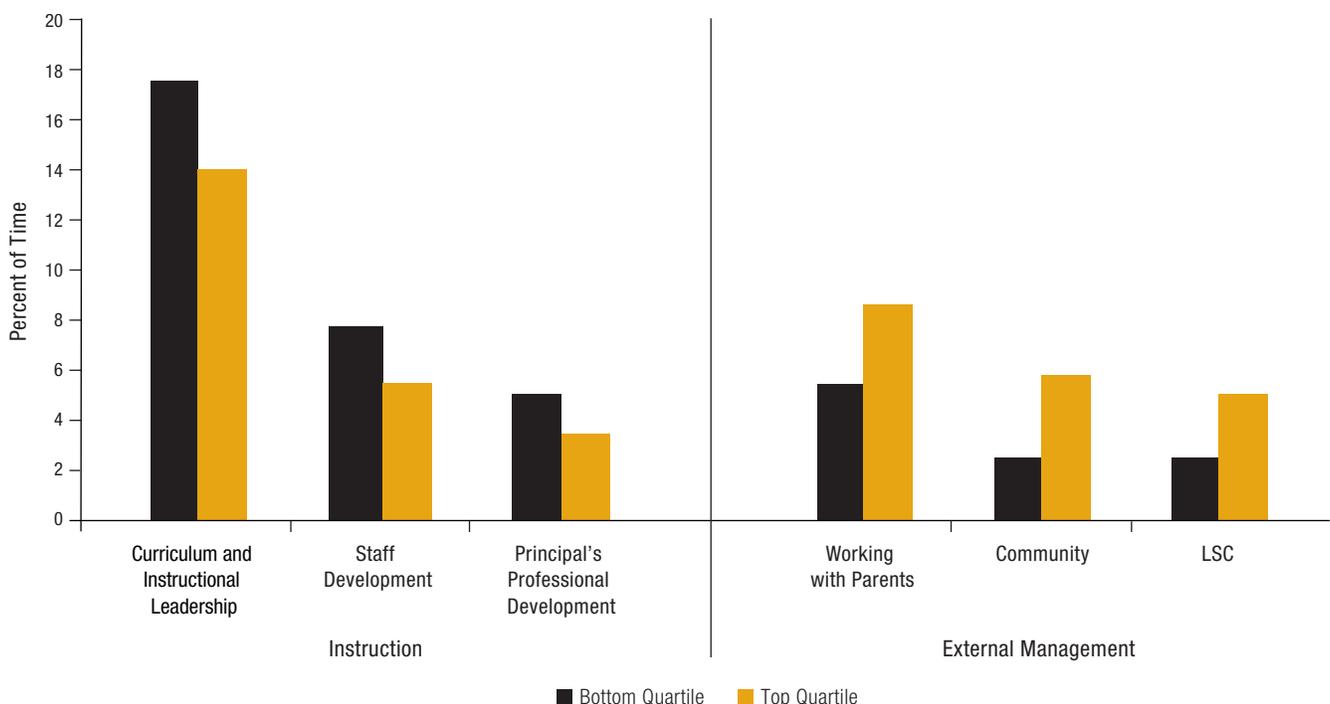
In 2007, time allocation across activities did not vary significantly between new versus experienced principals, elementary versus high school principals, or high school principals in low and high achieving schools. However, elementary principals in low achieving schools report differences in the way they spend their time from principals in high achieving elementary schools. Elementary principals in low achieving schools (bottom quartile) report spending a significantly higher percentage of their time focused on instructional activities, while elementary principals in high achieving schools (top quartile) report spending more time on external management activities. To gain a deeper understanding of the differences between these principals in the three broad categories, it is instructive to look at

the specific activities on which elementary principals in top quartile schools and those in bottom quartile schools report differences in time spent. This is summarized in Figure 7. The difference between elementary principals in top and bottom quartile schools is caused by variation in time allocation in three activities under the broad category of “Instruction” and three activities under the broad category of “External Management.” Elementary principals in bottom quartile schools report spending a greater percentage of their time on curriculum and instructional leadership, staff development, and their own professional development. Elementary principals in top quartile schools report spending a larger percentage of their time working with the parents, community, and LSC.

Interviewed principals speculated about the reasons for the differences between time allocation for elementary principals in top quartile schools and those in bottom quartile elementary schools. An elementary principal working in a bottom quartile school stated that her school had been mandated to join certain initiatives, use designated curricula, and attend required professional development sessions.

**FIGURE 7**

**Principals in highest performing elementary schools spend more time on external management while those in lowest performing spend more on instruction**



She thought these factors could explain some of the increased time elementary principals working in low achieving schools reported in curriculum and instructional leadership, staff development, and their own professional development.

“A few years back, for example, we were mandated to join the Chicago Math Science Initiative, and we adopted Everyday Math. There are professional development sessions for me . . . and for my staff. That is just one . . . there are many other sessions that are required now at the Area [office] for low achieving schools.”

An elementary principal at a top quartile school considered the results from his own perspective, highlighting his perception that schools serving high achieving students have more demanding parents.

“I look at these results, and what I see are the parents in schools like mine demanding attention... I have principal colleagues in low achieving schools who cannot fill their LSC positions, and I often have three or four people run for a community rep[resentative] spot.”

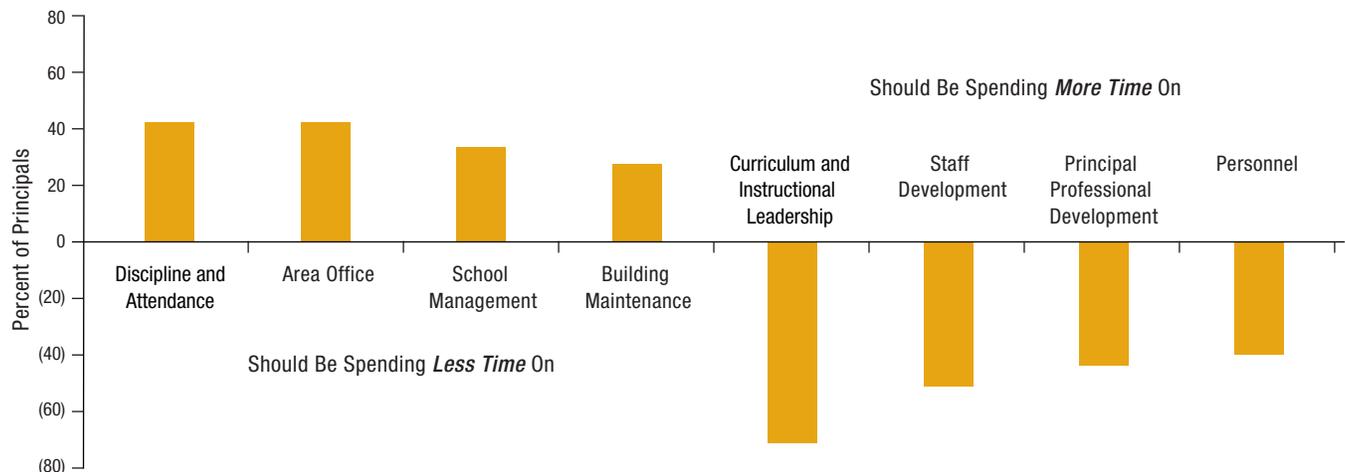
### Principal’s Time Usage Preferences

In addition to providing information about how they spent their time, principals also provided information

on the survey about how they *wished* they were using their time. Figure 8 summarizes the top four activities on which principals reported wishing they were spending *less* time and the top four activities on which they wished they were spending *more* time on the 2007 survey. Principals felt they spend too much of their time on discipline and attendance, Area Office activities, school management, and building maintenance. They wished they were spending more time on curriculum and instructional leadership, staff development, their own professional development, and personnel.

Interviewed principals identified with the time usage preferences and spoke candidly about the trade-offs in their choices about how to use their time: “If I focus on my own professional development, it means I am not in the building spending time monitoring and developing my...staff,” one elementary principal stated. “If I am spending all of my time worrying about the budget or the [School Improvement Plan], I cannot be in classrooms evaluating teachers or providing instructional leadership.” A high school principal stated, “The push toward instructional improvement that we feel from the district means we feel pressure to improve our skills and those of our teachers and to push from all directions for deep changes in teaching.” One principal summed up the data in Figure 8 by saying: “Truly, all of these activities, on the left and the right of this graph, they are all important. There are just not enough hours in the day to do it all, and so if we have to prioritize we would choose the stuff on the right to spend more time.”

**FIGURE 8**  
CPS principals want to spend less time on some tasks and more on others



# Chapter 3

## Challenges and Supports

The experience of being a principal is influenced tremendously by challenges to the work and whether the appropriate supports exist to deal with those challenges. On the CCSR principal survey, principals ranked the importance of different roadblocks to school improvement. In this section, these roadblocks are summarized considering all principals together and then by subgroup pairs. The second part of the section highlights analysis of interviews in which principals talk about some of the possible solutions to these most challenging roadblocks. In the words of one interviewed elementary school principal, “These problems are so complex and so pressing, their solutions can only come from within the ranks of other principals.”

### Roadblocks: Considering All Principals over Time

The Consortium survey contains a list of 20 roadblocks ranging from human resource management, funding, and policy pressure to relationships with parents, teachers, central office, and LSCs. Principals are asked to describe each item as “not a factor,” “somewhat a factor,” or “a serious factor” that prevents their school from improving.<sup>30</sup>

One way to consider the influence of roadblocks is to look at the ranking of individual roadblocks by principals. Interestingly, the top four roadblocks remain the same in each of the survey years, evident in Table 2. The pressure to get test scores up quickly was the roadblock most frequently chosen by principals across the survey administrations, despite turnover in district administration, reorganization of district offices, and the changing initiatives and approaches. In interviews, principals clarified the perception that this pressure is a roadblock to school improvement. “I think the key part of this statement that makes it true are the words ‘up quickly,’ one elementary school principal explained. A high school principal similarly argued, “The pressure for instantaneous results eliminates some improvement paths that may lead to deeper change but may take more time to see results in test scores.”

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> “The pressure for instantaneous results eliminates some improvement paths that may lead to deeper change but may take more time to see results in test scores.”

**TABLE 2****Top roadblocks that prevent a school from improving**

Roadblocks	Rank 2007	Rank 2005	Rank 2003	Rank 1997
Pressure to Get Test Scores Up Quickly	1	1	1	1
Social Problems in the School's Community	2	3	3	3
Difficulty Removing Ineffective Teachers	3	2	4	2
Apathetic or Irresponsible Parents	4	4	2	4
Problem Students	5	(6)	(9)	(8)
State or Federal Mandates	(6)	5	5	(9)
Lack of Time to Evaluate Teachers	(9)	(9)	(6)	5

The remaining three roadblocks in the top four focus on problems in the school's community, difficult removing ineffective teachers, and challenges with parent apathy. These roadblocks change rank order in the survey years, but remain in the top four. The fifth top ranked roadblock across survey years is spread across three different items: "Lack of time to evaluate teachers" was chosen in 1997. In 2003 and 2005, number five was "State or federal mandates," perhaps highlighting the changes resulting from the passage of No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. Finally, principals chose "Problem students" as the number five most important roadblock in 2007.

### Roadblocks: Considering Subgroups in 2007

Subgroups differentially stress roadblocks and some interesting contrasts appear between subgroup pairs. When comparing new and experienced principals, we see that the top five roadblocks identified are the same as those for principals as a whole. The only contrast is in the rank ordering of those five items, as seen in Table 3.

New principals name as their top roadblock to school improvement difficulty removing ineffective teachers, not surprising given that as new principals they may not have had the opportunity to hire their own staff. One interviewed principal noted that she had been a principal for 19 years. "Just last year, I finally got to the point where everyone in the building is someone I hired! It takes a long, long time." The difference be-

**TABLE 3****Top 5 roadblocks in 2007: New vs. experienced principals****New (4 years or less)**

1. Difficulty removing ineffective teachers
2. Pressure to get test scores up quickly
3. Social problems in the school's community
4. Problem students
5. Parent apathy

**Experienced (5 years or more)**

1. Pressure to get test scores up quickly
2. Social problems in the school's community
3. Difficulty removing ineffective teachers
4. Parent apathy
5. Problem students

tween the number one rankings between new and experienced principals is the most significant percentage point difference. The remaining four items on the list are separated by only a small margin, suggesting that while new and experienced principals have slightly different priorities and perceptions on roadblocks to school improvement, their overall top items are the same.

Comparing elementary and high school principal perceptions on the top five roadblocks similarly reveals a large degree of overlap with only one item that differs between the two groups. High school and elementary principals similarly prioritize pressure to get test scores up quickly, difficulty removing ineffective teachers, social problems in the school's community,

and problem students as pressing roadblocks. The two subgroups, however, stress different external influences as roadblocks. Elementary principals choose parent apathy as the most serious factor, while high school principals choose negative stereotypes about the school's community.

**TABLE 4**  
**Top 5 roadblocks in 2007: Elementary vs. high school principals**

**Elementary School**

1. Pressure to get test scores up quickly
2. Difficulty removing ineffective teachers
3. Social problems in the school's community
4. Parent apathy
5. Problem students

**High School**

1. Pressure to get test scores up quickly
2. Social problems in the school's community
3. Difficulty removing ineffective teachers
4. Problem students
5. Negative stereotypes about the school's community

“There is an expectation at the elementary school level of parent involvement at the school and closely in the lives of students,” one elementary principal explained. A high school principal explained the influence of the school's community on many important factors. “As a high school principal, where our school is located really influences our work, either positively or negatively,” he explained. “It affects teacher recruitment—the kind of, and the quality of, teachers you can get at your school. It affects the students you can draw if you are a magnet. It is a real factor for high schools now that students and teachers have more choice.” The influence of school neighborhood on the recruitment of teachers will be considered in more detail in the section that follows on teacher hiring.

Comparing the responses of principals in bottom quartile schools versus those in top quartile schools reveals the most contrast in principal perceptions of roadblocks to school improvement, illustrated in Table 5.<sup>31</sup> The concerns emphasized by principals in bottom quartile schools focus on the influence of the school's community, problem students, and parent apathy.

**TABLE 5**  
**Top 5 roadblocks in 2007: Principals in bottom quartile vs. top quartile schools (elementary and high school)**

**Bottom Quartile**

1. Social problems in the school's community
2. Problem students
3. Parent apathy
4. Negative stereotypes about the school's community
5. Pressure to get test scores up quickly

**Top Quartile**

1. Pressure to get test scores up quickly
2. Lack of time to evaluate teachers
3. State or federal mandates
4. Pressure to obtain external funds
5. Difficulty removing ineffective teachers

Principals in top quartile schools express concern about having a lack of time to evaluate teachers, state or federal mandates, pressure to obtain external funds, and difficulty removing ineffective teachers. Interestingly, principals in top quartile schools rank pressure to get test scores up quickly at the top of their roadblock list, while it appears as number five on the list generated by principals in bottom quartile schools. Qualitative evidence suggests that some principals in bottom quartile elementary schools perceive that pressure to get test scores up quickly can be used to motivate teachers to improve and so may not be viewed as a roadblock. One elementary principal explained, “I have my problems with district and NCLB accountability, but I admit that it is useful to use those pressures to push teachers to attend professional development or courses outside of school. In some ways, it is a necessary evil, a lever.”

While principals in top and bottom quartile schools have contrasting perceptions on roadblocks, an interesting overlap occurs on issues surrounding the hiring, evaluation, and removal of teachers. While these items do not appear in the top five roadblocks for principals in bottom quartile schools, they make up items six, seven, and eight on the list (difficulty removing ineffective teachers, lack of time to evaluate teachers, and difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers). Two of these items—lack of time to evaluate teachers and difficulty removing ineffective teachers—appear in the top five roadblocks identified by principals in top

quartile schools. Due to the importance of teacher hiring, evaluation, and removal in principal perceptions, teacher hiring will be explored in more detail in the section that follows.

### Highlighting a Roadblock: Teacher Hiring

High school principals are significantly more likely to state that difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers is a serious factor or somewhat of a factor, while elementary principals are more likely to state that difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers is not a factor. This is illustrated in Figure 9.

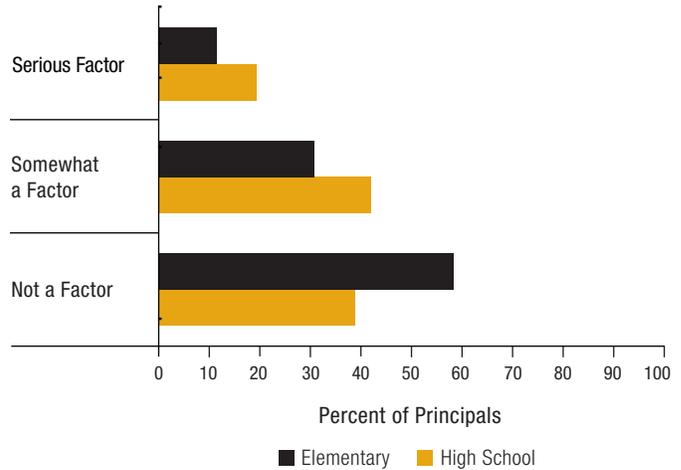
Approximately 60 percent of high school principals state that difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers is a serious factor or somewhat of a factor. For elementary principals this number is about 40 percent. The majority of elementary principals state that difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers is not a factor, while for high school principals this number is 38 percent. These differences are statistically significant, representing an important difference in perception of the extent to which recruiting and hiring the right teachers is a roadblock to school improvement.

A similar pattern is evident in the comparison of the responses of new versus experienced principals, illustrated in Figure 10. New principals are significantly more likely to perceive that the difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers is a serious factor impeding school improvement. When these principals are added to those who perceive it as somewhat a factor, more than half of new principals perceive that recruiting and hiring the right teachers is a factor that impedes school improvement. In contrast, more than 60 percent of experienced principals believe that difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers is not a factor impeding school improvement.

The starkest difference in subgroup perceptions of teacher hiring can be seen in comparing principals in bottom quartile schools to those in top quartile schools. Figures 11 and 12 demonstrate the significant difference in perception between principals in high and low achieving schools that difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers is a roadblock. Eighty percent of

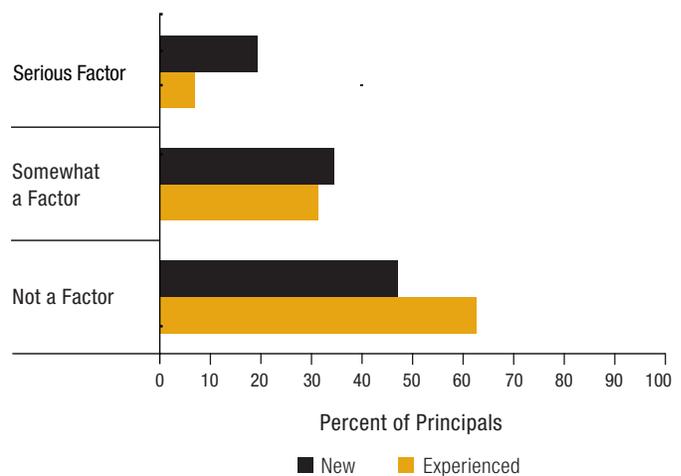
**FIGURE 9**

**High school principals find it more difficult to recruit and hire the right teachers**



**FIGURE 10**

**New principals find it difficult to recruit and hire the right teachers**

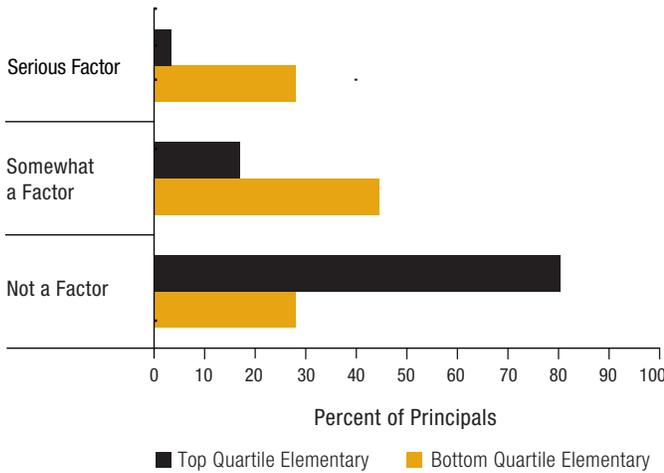


elementary school principals in top quartile schools and nearly 75 percent of high school principals in top quartile schools report that difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers is not a factor. In contrast, nearly 75 percent of elementary principals and 60 percent of high school principals in bottom quartile schools perceive that difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers impedes school improvement.

Additional items on the survey reveal some factors that contribute to the difficulty of teacher hiring in bottom quartile high schools. Principals in bottom quartile high schools were significantly more likely

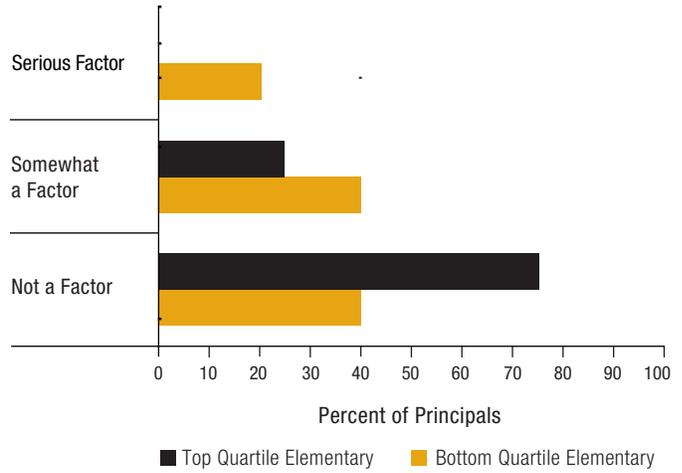
**FIGURE 11**

**Principals in highest achieving elementary schools find it easier to recruit and hire the right teachers**



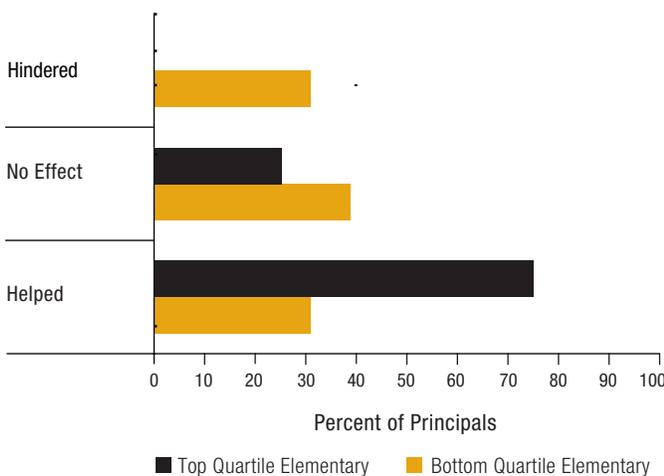
**FIGURE 12**

**Many principals in low achieving high schools find it difficult to recruit and hire the right teachers**



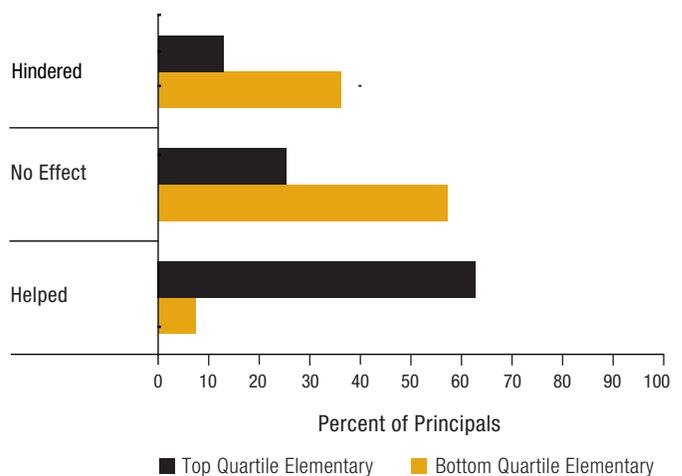
**FIGURE 13**

**Composition of student body may hinder or help teacher recruitment in high schools depending on the achievement level of the school**



**FIGURE 14**

**School neighborhood may hinder or help teacher recruitment in high schools depending on the achievement level of the school**



than those in top quartile high schools to state that the composition of their student body and the school neighborhood influenced teacher recruitment and hiring. More than 30 percent of principals in bottom quartile high schools stated that the composition of their student body and the school neighborhood *hindered* teacher recruitment and hiring. In comparison, approximately 76 percent of principals in top quartile high schools state that the composition of their student body *helped* in teacher hiring and nearly 65 percent of top quartile principals believed that the school neighborhood *helped* teacher recruitment.

Figures 13 and 14 summarize these results.

Interviews with principals corroborate these results and add more depth to principal perceptions about teacher hiring. In the survey data, it is clear that high school principals, new principals, and principals in bottom quartile schools find teacher hiring to be more difficult than elementary principals, experienced principals, and principals working in top quartile schools. Analysis of interview data revealed the same pattern: “Hiring is so hard because you are supposed to hire experts in . . . disciplines [in] which I [have] never actually taught,” a high school principal explained.

A principal of two years similarly confided: “As excited as I get about the prospect of bringing in a new teacher, it at the same time fills me with fear. I don’t yet know how to recruit, how to pick someone good, how much to rely upon my teachers or decide myself.” A high school principal in a bottom quartile school spoke about the difficulties of finding qualified applicants who wanted to work in a low achieving school.

“My greatest challenge is finding the right teachers to fill my vacancies. How can I do that when I get one applicant for my open math position?”

In addition, the interviews reveal that principals in the subgroups who report not having difficulty with recruiting and hiring acknowledge that hiring is more difficult for their subgroup counterparts. Principals in elementary schools were empathetic toward their high school colleagues; experienced principals acknowledged that “tricks of the trade and friends downtown [at central office] have made hiring easier,” and principals in high achieving schools “see that finding qualified teachers is more difficult for schools on probation or in some neighborhoods.”

### Addressing Roadblocks: Principals Manage Challenges

In this section, principals share their thoughts about how to address the top four roadblocks across the survey years: pressure to get test scores up quickly, social problems in the school’s community, difficulty removing ineffective teachers, and apathetic or irresponsible parents. In these short vignettes, principals acknowledge the difficulty of these challenges and make it clear that there are no easy answers. In the words of one principal, “I wouldn’t call the way we attempted to deal with the issue a *solution*. This is not a problem we can *solve*. These are challenges that we *manage*.”

#### Pressure to Get Test Scores Up Quickly

Interviewed principals had three different strategies to manage pressures to improve test scores: targeted improvement, increasing the coherence of instructional materials, and maximizing uninterrupted instructional time.

Several principals stated that they managed pressures to improve test scores by analyzing assessment data to identify skills on which students were weak and then targeting instructional improvements on those specific skills. One principal stated:

“We use what I have called targeted improvement. This means we had a university partner who helped us to understand the item analysis on our standardized tests. They then looked at results from formative assessments from our literacy program. Together we wrote a summary of the strengths and weaknesses by standard and skill and grade. We then picked one to two areas of focus for each grade and planned ways to target improvements in those areas across the coming school year.”

Another principal described a similar strategy and noted that he then created the school’s professional development schedule based on the grade level goals. “If we want to improve instruction around certain skills, we have to give teachers some ideas of how to target those skills. So our professional development topics are focused on the areas where we are trying to improve.”

This description blends into the next strategy identified by principals to deal with pressures to improve test scores: increasing coherence. This strategy was the most commonly identified in the principal interviews, with approximately 65 percent of principals talking about their efforts to increase instructional coherence. Primarily, elementary principals thought the best way to increase coherence was to promote the use of a common set of instructional materials for each subject matter. “We brought in research based materials with a common inquiry focus for all subjects. Then we have hit hard with classroom observations, by administration, peers, and curriculum folks to push for better implementation.” High school principals similarly promoted coherence through ensuring the use of common materials in each subject taught. “We were all over the place, even within, say, the English department,” one high school principal explained. “So we had a two-day summer workshop and we worked it out. We chose a curriculum with

suggested literature, foci and approaches. Now they all do the same books and themes.”

Principals also talked about the importance of maximizing instructional time. This was accomplished through the establishment of time periods without interruption at the elementary school level, through the use of block scheduling at the high school level and through lengthening the school day in both levels. Interruptions in classrooms because of announcements, assemblies, and administrative requests, for example, were perceived by elementary principals to be a significant barrier to improving instruction and student achievement. Elementary school principals spoke of establishing “no interruption” periods of instruction, primarily for literacy and math periods, as a strategy to raise test scores. Block scheduling at the high school level was similarly seen by principals as a way to increase the intensity and focus of instruction. “It means a teacher has essentially a double period with students which means more discussion, more critical thinking, more time to problem solve,” one principal explained. High school principals cautioned that the productive use of time within the block period was the key to its success as an achievement improvement strategy, however. “Our first step was establishing the block period. Our second was learning how to use the time. Let’s not use 45 minutes for students to do worksheets. Let’s deepen what we are doing here.”

A handful of principals at the elementary and high school level talked about efforts to lengthen the school day to create room for more instructional minutes for students and teacher professional development. This involved a school-wide vote to extend hours beyond what was required in the union contract. Three principals interviewed were in schools that had voted for this extended day. Three other principals had attempted this strategy but had not secured enough teacher votes to do so. The additional time was used in a variety of ways, including adding an extra period of instruction for all students, adding a morning a week for professional development for teachers and extending the school day for low-performing students.

## Social Problems in the School’s Community

Principals described the school community as having a significant influence on student behavior, teacher recruiting, and school culture. Of the top four roadblocks, this challenge identified by principals, was acknowledged to be the most difficult to manage by interviewed principals. Half of the principals shared strategies they had used to increase knowledge of and cooperation with leaders and organizations in the community. These principals described their desire to educate themselves and their teachers about the resources available in the community. One principal described how the LSC got together on a Saturday and explored the surrounding neighborhood, making a list that included churches, health clinics, playgrounds, and the YMCA. “We then contacted them and asked about their programs. We put together a community directory and started to advertise community events to our faculty, students and parents.” Another principal similarly used a system in-service day to have all school staff tour the school’s neighborhood, compiling a list of positive attributes and available resources.

Three principals spoke about how the activity of getting to know the community raised awareness of teachers, changed perceptions of the community, improved the relationship between the school and community organizations, and connected parents and students with available resources. “Perhaps the most powerful thing about this is changed perceptions, both on the part of school staff and on the part of community organizations,” one principal explained. Another principal stated: “We didn’t change the community, we just got to know it.”

## Difficulty Removing Ineffective Teachers

Principals perceive the removal of ineffective teachers as a pressing roadblock to school improvement. In interviews, principals identified strategies to help teachers to improve their practice and to ensure that all faculty members were a good “fit” in the school. Peer review was the primary approach described by interviewed principals. Principals arranged peer review in a variety of ways. In one elementary school, peer review was conducted by grade level peers such that each teacher

in the grade level was evaluated and served as an evaluator. Peer review results were discussed in grade level meetings with the assistant principal and principal present. In another elementary school, grade levels were paired and evaluated one another such that third grade teachers reviewed fourth grade teachers and vice versa. In a high school, peer reviews were performed within departments with a junior teacher and a senior teacher teaming together on each observation and evaluation of a teacher. Principals who had these systems in their schools suggested that instructional practice was more likely to improve when feedback came from peers rather than from administration. “Sometimes a critique is more easily digested and accepted from a colleague than from myself or the assistant principal,” one elementary principal stated.

Several principals used “mini-contracts” with teachers that outlined expectations and individual goals that were monitored by the department chair or grade level team leader and the administration. In a small elementary school, the principal met with each teacher three times throughout the year to check in on goals and to provide feedback on classroom observations. “The teachers’ ratings on achieving their improvement goals were a combination of my score, the grade level chair’s score, and their score,” one elementary principal explained. “You would be surprised . . . teachers scored themselves lower sometimes than I did. It really helped teachers to be reflective and improve.” Another principal described how teacher ratings on their instructional improvement scorecards were used to provide incentives or sanctions. “The teachers with the top five ratings each year are given materials budgets, extra photocopies, extra prep periods, or time off lunch duty,” one principal explained. “The teachers with the bottom five ratings go to extra professional development.”

### Apathetic or Irresponsible Parents

One interviewed principal described his parent policy as “. . . outreach, outreach, outreach, outreach . . . and more outreach.” This was the common approach identified in working with parents. Principals talked about home visits, math or reading nights, parent phone calls, parent workshops, parent parties, parent libraries, and parent volunteer programs. “The best way to deal

with apathetic parents is to get them in the building playing math games with their kid or taking a GED class or attending a party in their honor. Then suddenly you see that they aren’t really apathetic at all.” One principal described the slow process of building a relationship between the school and parents across the 12 years of his tenure at the school. “At our first parent forum meeting, we had four parents. Four! I had put a notice on the sign in front of the school, and I thought that would bring them in,” he said, smiling. “Then I figured it out. The whole faculty hit the streets. We rang doorbells. We handed out flyers. We got donated plane tickets and radios and stuff to give away. Now we have so many parents coming to our events, we have ‘A through M’ coming one night and ‘N through Z’ coming the next night . . .”

Principals stressed that getting parents into the building was just the first step in translating parent involvement to improved student achievement. One principal stated: “So you use the incentives to get them to the parent night. Then you find out their concerns and learn what their lives are like. Now it is our turn to ask you for something. Here is a math game for you to play with your child. Here is a strategy to deal with this behavior issue . . .”

### Moving Forward with Roadblock Strategies: What have We Learned?

The stories of success in managing these issues identified as the most significant roadblocks to school improvement raise an important question: If some principals have found ways to manage or solve these issues, why are they still consistently identified as the top roadblocks to school improvement?

In answering this question, it is important to ask about the extent to which principal emphasis on certain roadblocks is dependent upon principals’ knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of strategies to effectively deal with these challenges. These are issues of perception and interpretation that we cannot untangle with the survey items. “I do not see apathetic parents as roadblocks,” one principal explained. “The roadblock is demonstrating to staff members that parents are generally not apathetic about their children but rather are intimidated by or not trusting of the school.” While

it is clear that the roadblocks identified and discussed here are extremely challenging, additional inquiry is needed to understand the extent to which principal perceptions of the roadblocks they face are influenced by a lack of knowledge of effective strategies to solve these problems.

This way of thinking naturally leads us to wonder about the extent to which principals have opportunities to *learn about* effective strategies to solve pressing problems they face in their work. Interviewed principals reflected upon their principal training in this regard, stating that they generally did not get enough information about how to deal with the some of the issues identified as roadblocks in the Consortium survey: “My strategies for solving problems around parents and community, that is stuff I learned on the job,” one elementary principal explained. “Certainly we didn’t cover that kind of thing in principal preparation, either in coursework or district PD [professional development].” Another principal talked about the lack of opportunities to share effective strategies to deal with these roadblocks in ongoing professional development for principals stating, “I wish there was more time,

more structures, to share ideas between principals on how to manage problems like this. In some areas I [feel competent to share strategies], while in others I could use some ideas from other principals.”

Many of the interviewed principals framed their strategies to deal with the four most pressing roadblocks identified on the Consortium survey as “managing rather than solving” the problem. Upon closer examination, this is a bit modest on the part of these principals. The identified strategies to “manage” parent apathy have led to changes in school staff perceptions of parents and parents’ perceptions of the school. Similarly, the strategies principals described to “manage” social problems in the school community led school staff to identify and legitimate available community resources, serving an educative role for school faculty and creating a better relationship between community organizations and the school. Finding ways to share these strategies among principals is a critical step to changing principal, teacher, and parent perceptions about these pressing roadblocks and thus in battling the sense of hopelessness that can result from the complexity of these challenges.



# Chapter 4

## Considering Principal Turnover

Principal turnover is a significant barrier to school improvement. Recent research links principal turnover to teacher turnover and suggests that the stability of the principal in a school is a prerequisite to provide stability to school improvement efforts.<sup>32</sup> A report produced by the CPS Office of Accountability on principal turnover in 1995 documented this negative effect on schools, stating that it “. . . affected the ability of the school leadership, faculty, and staff to stay on steady track in terms of initiating, supporting, and sustaining their restructuring efforts.”<sup>33</sup> Districts in locations as diverse as Baltimore, Texas, and New York City report similar problems with principal turnover. These same reports also indicate that high schools and schools with low student-achievement are more prone to principal turnover.<sup>34</sup> This section considers CPS principal turnover from three different vantage points using analyses of principal experience, satisfaction, and future plans.

### Principal Experience

In 1992, the Consortium released a report of principal survey results.<sup>35</sup> One of the report findings was that a large turnover of principals followed the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act (PA 85-1418). The reform law ended principal tenure and created LSCs—a governing board of community members, parents, teachers, and other school staff members elected at the school level who were given, among other things, the power to hire and fire the principal. In the 1992 survey, 56 percent of principals reported they were hired at their school within the last four years.

Looking at the trend in the proportion of principals reporting they have been principals at their current school four years or less across the survey years after 1992 reveals, however, that while 56 percent is high, it is typical that about half of the system’s principals report being in their first four years at every survey administration, as is evident in Table 6 (see page 26). Additionally, the majority

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> Early retirement programs and available career opportunities after retirement continued to exert push toward principals leaving the profession.

of these principals who are new to their school are also new principals, as evidenced in Column B of Table 6. While it appears that the 1999 and 2001 results seemed to indicate a stabilizing of principal turnover, the years that followed show a continuing trend toward a principalship where about half of principals are new. The 2007 survey results indicate that 59 percent of responding principals are new to their school, the highest percentage across the seven survey administrations.

**TABLE 6**  
**Proportion of New Principals by Survey Year**

Survey Year	A	B
	New to School (Percent at current school 4 years or less)	New to School and Principalship (Percent of A who are first-time principals)
1992	56	80
1997	52	78
1999	41	72
2001	45	61
2003	50	73
2005	50	87
2007	59	78

In addition to looking at the length of principals' tenure in their current school, it is also informative to consider total years of principal experience. Figure 15 summarizes years of experience for elementary principals. In elementary schools, the influx of new principals in 1992 is evident; 56 percent of principals reported four or fewer years of experience. Over the next few years, the trend appears to stabilize as a lower percentage fall into the "Up to 4 years" category and as the principals with nine or more years experience increase. These most experienced principals were reaching retirement age and in 2003 made up 41 percent of elementary principals. Perhaps as a result, in 2003 we see another influx of new principals in the system as 35 percent of principals report having four or fewer years of experience. This number continues to increase across the remaining survey years to 41 percent in 2005. By 2007, 46 percent of principals fall into the least experienced category, approaching the 50 percent mark seen in 1992.

The pattern for high school principals mirrors the elementary principals, as seen in Figure 16. However, a larger proportion of high school principals are in the least experienced category. In 1992, more than half of high school principals reported having four or fewer years of experience. This proportion gradually decreased in 1997, 1999, and 2001, as this large group of principals moved into the "5 to 9 years" category. In 2005, a large influx of new principals again occurred.

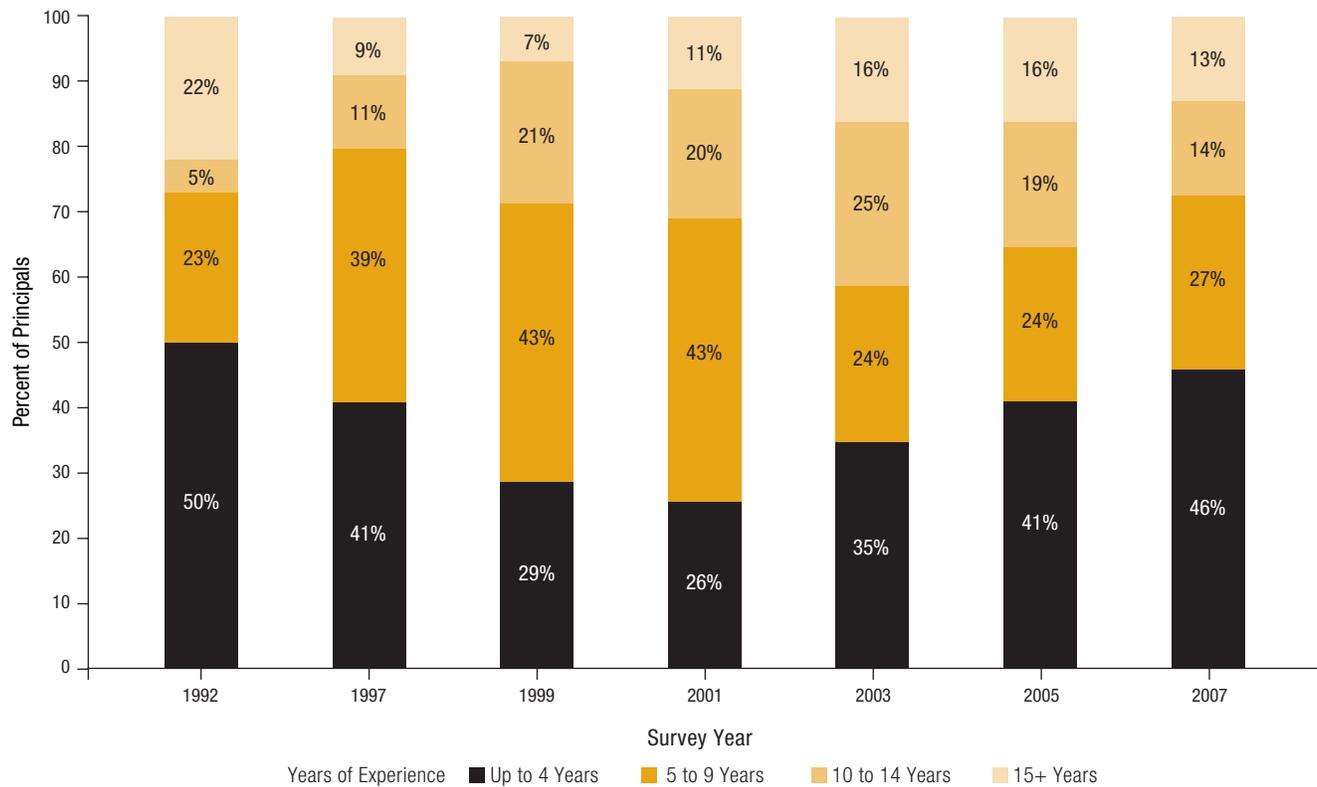
The patterns of experience point to a complex set of factors, both "pushes" for senior principals to leave and "pulls" for new principals to enter the role. At two time points in the 15-year span, there was a large influx of new principals and a corresponding decrease in the number of principals with ten or more years of experience—once in 1992 and again around 2003. The more experienced principals interviewed had ready explanations for these trends. They linked this turnover in the late 1980s and early 1990s to the emergence of early retirement options. Several principals described "five plus five," an early retirement incentive program for CPS principals. One principal explained: "Around that time, principals were given an early retirement option known as 'five plus five,' which provided principals with a certain number of years in the system to retire early with five free years toward their pension. For many, it was too good an opportunity to pass up."

Other principals pointed to the effects of the implementation of the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act, which eliminated principal tenure and allowed LSCs to select principals, as a likely source of both push and pull. "When the Chicago School Reform Act was put into place, many principals were eliminated in the years that followed and younger, new principals were hired," one high school principal explained. "For some principals the Reform Act was motivation to leave or retire even without being removed," an elementary principal stated. "The end of principal tenure and Local School Councils running schools led some principals to think they had lost the best parts of their job," she continued.

Several principals wondered about the influence of principals accepting new jobs within the district, either through job offers or requests from central office for principals to work in another school, on principal

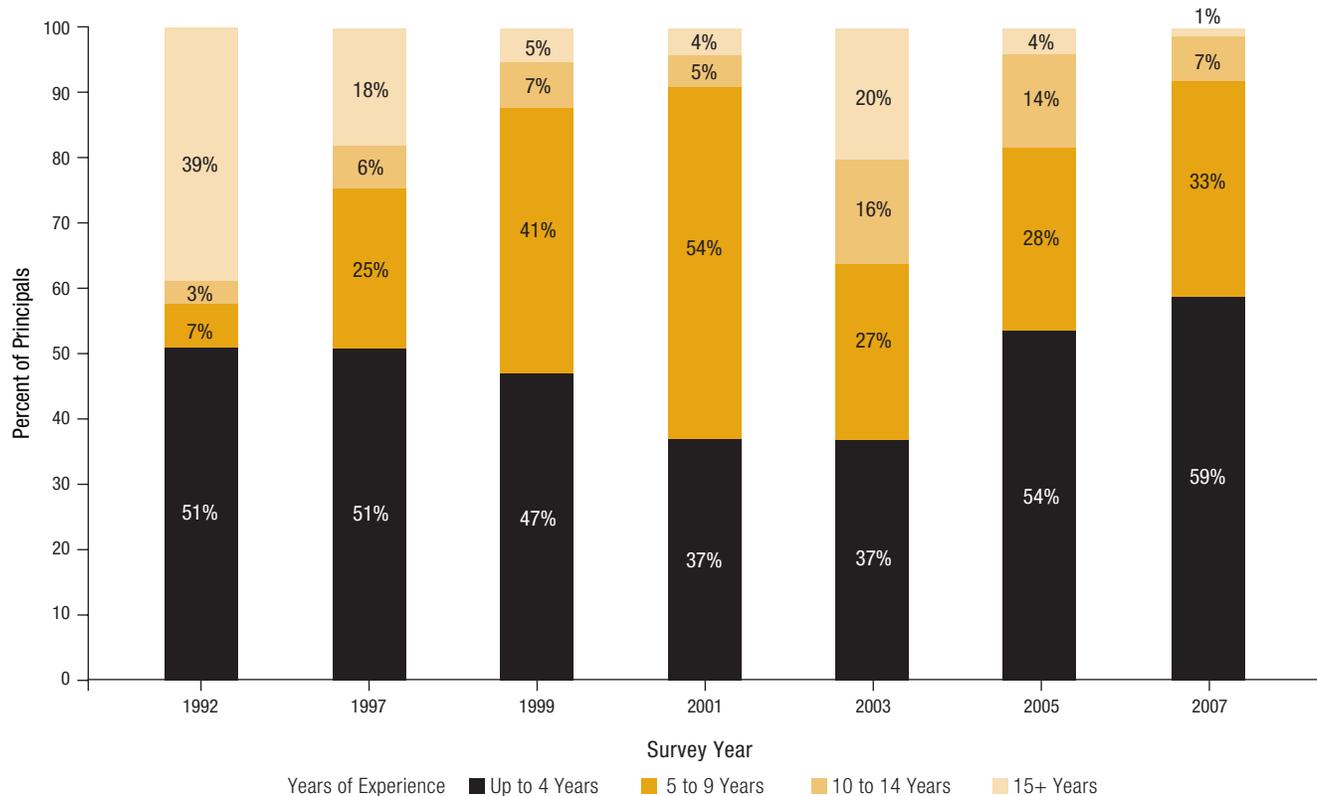
**FIGURE 15**

**In 2007 close to half of the elementary principals have less than five years of experience**



**FIGURE 16**

**In 2007 the majority of high school principals have less than five years of experience**



turnover rate. This is another aspect of principal turnover that is not necessarily captured when we consider principal experience. “We don’t always think about turnover in terms of principals moving from one school to another, but central office asks principals to move and principals move from job to job,” one principal explained. Another principal similarly stated: “It has only been recently that the central office has assigned or moved principals, and that has to affect principal turnover numbers.”

The trend toward the increase in the number of inexperienced principals from 2001 forward also seems to be due to both pushes and pulls. In terms of pulls, the emergence of new schools and of recruiting programs for principals that remove some of the traditional requirements to enter the principalship help to explain the increasing percentage of inexperienced principals. “The opening of new schools has produced new opportunities for principals, especially for young principals,” one elementary principal stated. Another pull for new principals surfaced in 2001 with the introduction of programs to recruit and train principals, such as New Leaders for New Schools.<sup>36</sup> These programs waive some of the experience requirements for participants, opening the door to aspiring principals with diverse professional backgrounds.

Early retirement programs and available career opportunities after retirement continued to exert a push toward principals leaving the profession. Principals taking advantage of the early retirement program has been linked to the exodus of principals from 2004 to 2007, when more than 350 principals took advantage of such incentives.<sup>37</sup> In addition, the majority of surveyed principals indicate that they plan to work in another job in education after retiring from the principalship, pointing to the existence of post-principal career options. This will be explored in more detail in the section on principal future plans.

These patterns of experience raise questions about the high level of turnover and the corresponding constant stream of new principals into the district each year. Research indicates that new principals often begin their positions lacking a thorough understanding of the complexity of the role they are undertaking.<sup>38</sup> The implications of having such a consistently large

proportion of fairly inexperienced principals in the system each year and the appropriate way to support new and inexperienced principals require further research.

## Principal Satisfaction

This report highlights the challenging nature of principal work: the long hours, the varied activities and the wide range of required expertise, and the impediments to school improvement they face. It also reveals the resilience of principals, their creative solutions to the complex roadblocks they encounter, and their sense of accomplishment when they see school improvement. Given the complexity and the demanding nature of their role, are principals satisfied with their work? Several items on the Consortium principal survey ask principals to rate their satisfaction. On these items, more than 90 percent of surveyed principals indicated that they “strongly agree” or “agree” as indicated in Figure 17.

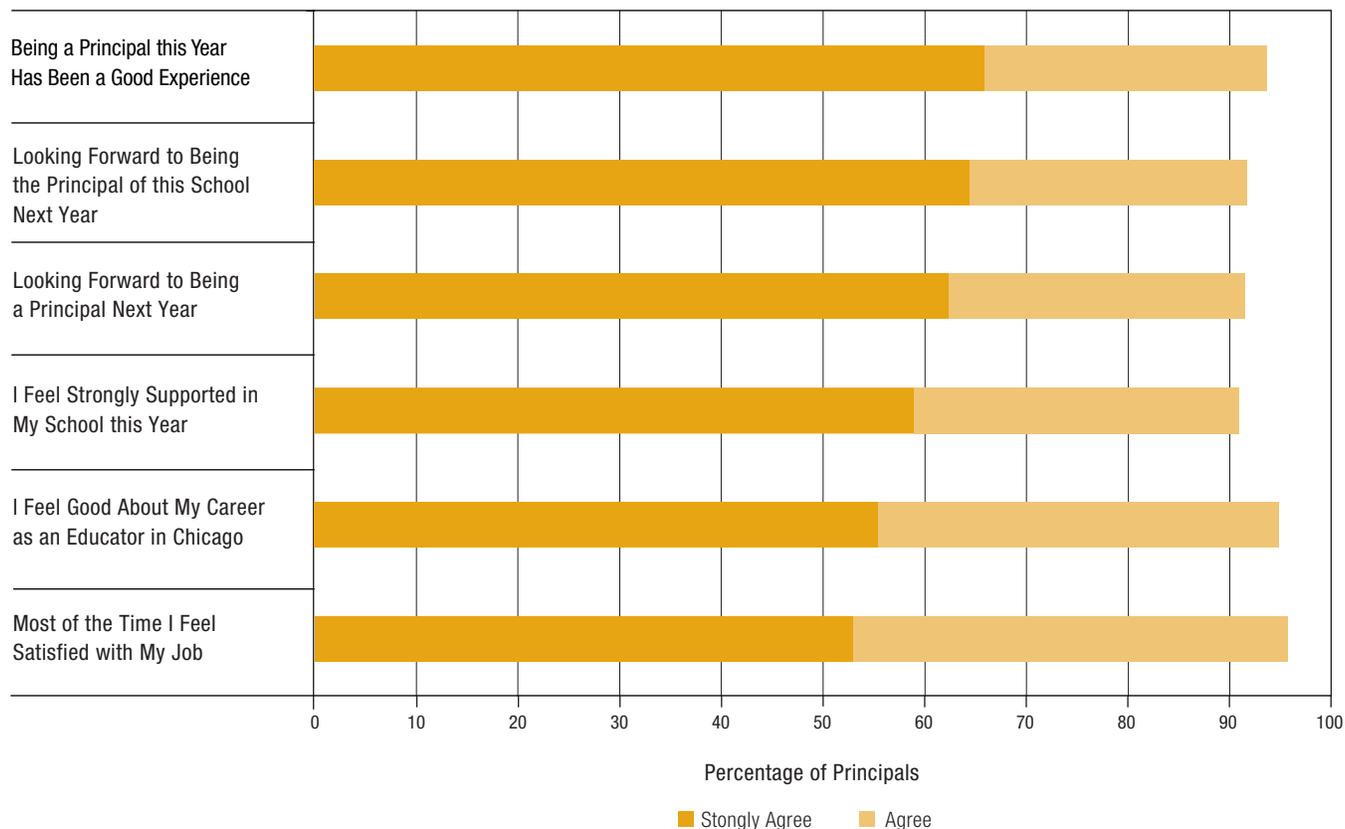
Despite the complexity of principals’ work and the challenges they face, the vast majority of principals express satisfaction with their work. Principal interviews provide some idea of the sources of principal satisfaction. Analysis of interview data revealed that principal satisfaction fell into four broad categories: (a) making a difference in the lives of students, (b) contributing to improvements in school achievement or culture, (c) enjoying the challenge, and (d) feeling a sense of personal growth or development. Many principals spoke about more than one of these sources of satisfaction. Of those interviewed, 80 percent spoke about making a difference in the lives of students, 75 percent talked about making improvements in school achievement or culture, about half spoke of enjoying the challenge, and 30 percent talked about a sense of personal growth.

## Future Plans

Examining principals’ future plans provides some additional perspective on principal turnover and principal satisfaction with their work. How long do principals, on average, intend to stay in their current

**FIGURE 17**

**CPS principals express high levels of satisfaction with their work**



school? How long do they intend to continue to work as a principal? How long do they think they will continue to work in the field of education? Table 7 (see page 30) summarizes principal responses to these questions on the 2007 survey. The table summarizes the means for all principals and then provides information on how these numbers vary by principal subgroup.

Three patterns are evident in the data on principals’ future plans. First, for principals as a whole and across all but one of the subgroups, principals perceive, on average, that they will not retire from their current school, but will spend some time as principal in another school. This is evident from the fact that across all of the rows in Table 7, the average number of years principals report they will serve as principal of their current school is less than the average number of years they report they will work as principal. The only subgroup for which this is not the case is for principals working in bottom quartile high schools. These principals estimate that they will serve as principal of their current school the same average number of years as they will

work as a principal, indicating that, in general, principals in these schools imagine they will retire from the principalship in their current school.

Principal interviews provide some perspective on principals’ thinking about moving from school to school in their careers. Interviewed principals perceived moving to a new school in three ways: as an opportunity to “apply lessons learned in one school to another,” as a chance to “re-energize by starting in a new place,” or “as a chance to move to a better or easier school.” Roughly a third of the principals interviewed subscribed to each of these three categories. The remaining 10 percent of those interviewed were split between approximately 5 percent who talked about moving from one school to the next as being a reality of the difficulty of contract negotiations with their LSCs, and 5 percent who had been assigned by the central office to their current school and could imagine being moved to another school with low achievement if they were successful in changing the trajectory of their current school.

**TABLE 7**

**Principals' Future Plans**

	Average Number of Years Expect to:		
	Serve as Principal of This School	Work as Principal	Work in Education
ALL	5.5	6.4	10.4
New (≤ 4 years)	6.9	8.5	13.2
Experienced	3.5	3.7	6.9
Elementary School	5.5	6.4	10.4
High School	5.1	6.1	10.6
Bottom Quartile Elementary School	5.3	5.7	11.1
Top Quartile Elementary School	5.8	6.6	10.9
Bottom Quartile High School	2.8	2.8	7.1
Top Quartile High School	6.1	7.5	12.5

The second pattern that is evident in Table 7 is that significant differences exist in the estimates of three of the subgroup pairs: new versus experienced principals, principals in top quartile high schools versus those working in bottom quartile high schools, and principals in top quartile elementary schools versus those working in bottom quartile elementary schools. High school principals in bottom quartile schools provide the lowest estimate of the number of years they will continue to work as principal, at an average of only 2.8 years. Comparing this average number of years with

high school principals working in top quartile schools provides the starkest contrast in subgroup pairs. These principals report that they will work, on average, about 6.1 more years at their current school and 7.5 more years as principal. Comparing the other subgroup pairs, new principals report they will work more years as principal than experienced, which makes sense given they have fewer years in the system. There is not a significant difference between high school and elementary principals in the number of years they estimate they will continue to work in their current school or as principal in general. Principals in bottom quartile elementary schools estimate they will work fewer years on average than those in top quartile elementary schools, both in their current school and in education.

Finally, it is evident that all principals on average, regardless of subgroup, plan to continue to work in education after they leave the principalship. Early retirement policies have opened up the possibility for principals to work more years in a different part of the field of education, as discussed in the section above on principal demographics. In addition, principals perceive that there are many continued career options available in the field of education. In the words of one principal: “There are so many career options for principals like me who want to retire a little early . . . so far I have an offer from [a local university] to be a clinical instructor, a curriculum project to do curriculum writing, or another curriculum company to do professional development in schools. So I take the pension and continue to work in education. That is my plan.”

# Chapter 5

## Interpretive Summary

“The more things change, the more they stay the same,” one elementary principal stated, when asked to talk about the evolution of the principalship in Chicago over her 25-year tenure. When asked the same question, another principal of 20 years responded, “Change, change, and more change. It is hard to keep up with all of the new reform fads, expectations, and policies.” In a sense, aspects of the findings of this report confirm each of these sentiments in different respects. The fact that this is true is a testimony to the complexity of the job of being a principal in an urban school system, such as Chicago Public Schools.

The face of the CPS principalship was dramatically and forever changed with the passage of the Chicago School Reform Act and the creation of Local School Councils that were given the responsibility of selecting new principals. After the inception of LSCs, the CPS principalship changed rapidly in terms of race and gender. While this trend toward the increase in the numbers of principal of color and female principals has slowed, it has continued—evidence of the immense and enduring impact of the 1988 reform. In this case, reform policy led to a massive change that has since become a consistency in the representation of principals of color in CPS.

Changes in reform policy are also likely to be one of the influences that resulted in the increased time principals spend on instructional issues. Principals spoke in interviews about the influence of CPS district initiatives (e.g., the Chicago Reading Initiative, the Chicago Math Science Initiative, and High School Transformation) on how they spend their time. There is evidence that principals have begun to engage in this instructional work—

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> While these aspects of the role of CPS principals illustrate the churn of change, there is also evidence of “the more things change, the more they stay the same.”

both by choice, by applying to participate in such reform initiatives; or by mandate. While changes have occurred that brought instruction more to the center of principal's work, principals report they wish they could spend even more time on instructional issues.

While these aspects of the role of CPS principals illustrate the churn of change described by the second principal above, there is also evidence of “the more things change the more they stay the same.” In particular, some of the most pressing challenges to school improvement have remained consistent for more than a decade. Principal turnover is clearly one such pressing issue. Analysis of the experience data revealed a consistent level of principal turnover, with roughly half of system's principals being in their first four years (their first contract) at each survey year. Even more remarkable, the vast majority of these principals are also new principals. A review both of the scholarly literature on principals and newspaper reports reveals the extent to which the problem of principal turnover is common to school systems throughout the country. While the pushes and pulls that influence these turnover patterns may be linked to different sources in various eras, the consistency of turnover itself is striking.

Similarly notable is the consistency of the top impediments identified by CPS principals to school improvement efforts. Principals—whether new or experienced, high school or elementary—largely agree on four of these most pressing challenges. Pressures to raise test scores quickly, social problems in the school community, difficulty removing ineffective teachers, and working with parents perceived to be apathetic have proven to be enduring roadblocks to the work of improving a school. The recruiting and hiring of the right teachers also presents a consistent challenge in the minds of principals, particularly those who are inexperienced or working in low performing schools.

While the challenges of principal turnover and these consistent roadblocks are daunting, there is evidence that potential solutions are underway in CPS. In an effort to support and retain principals, the Illinois State Board of Education passed new legislation effective July 1, 2007, that “restructure[d] the processes for mentoring, evaluation, and induction of new principals in Illinois.”<sup>39</sup> The legislation creates a

program to train and designate “Master Principals” to provide mentoring and support to principals in their first year.

In terms of the roadblocks, we highlight some of principals' creative management of these complex challenges. Drawing upon innovative approaches, principals described channeling pressures to perform well on standardized tests into initiatives that focused instructional improvement, increased instructional coherence, and expanded instructional time. They described changing perceptions within a school's community by bringing together school staff, community organizations, parents, and students. They improved the instructional practice of ineffective teachers through peer review and mini-contracts. They reached out to parents through classes, programs, and parties.

And yet much more work remains to be done in both the research and policy arenas. Reducing principal turnover in a manner that encourages the retention of the most effective school leaders suggests the need to focus on each stage in the selection and development of these critical leaders. These stages include: (a) the recruitment, hiring, support, and retention of new principals; (b) leadership “talent management”—designing ways to recruit, identify, encourage, and groom existing school staff for future leadership roles; (c) the identification and study of successful principals in an attempt to replicate their training, support, leadership, and actions; and (d) the identification and study of schools where principals have successfully instituted school improvement efforts that endure after their departure. Lessons learned from studies in these stages can lead to the design of policies at the district and state level to promote the recruitment, training, and retention of strong principals and the effective management of principal turnover.

More research needs to be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the top roadblocks to school improvement identified by principals and the trade-offs in the potential solutions. Providing principals with effective strategies to manage these pressing roadblocks relies on an increased understanding of the mechanisms behind how the challenges impede the work of school improvement and upon the evaluation and identification of effective solutions.

Additional work is also needed to understand the overlap between the areas of study presented in this report. For example, past studies have analyzed the relationship between principal turnover and race or gender, and between principal turnover and the achievement level of the school; these are important interactions to consider. Similarly, our understandings of principal time allocation would be deepened considerably through a better understanding of the way other school leaders (e.g., department chairs, literacy specialists, and math specialists) use their time. Likewise, the identification and study of successful principals is dependent upon documenting and understanding specific skills that these effective leaders have mastered, such as relationship-building and creating cultures of trust, both within their school and between their school, parents, and community. The interrelated nature of many of these issues adds complexity to the work before us.

Finally, there are many aspects of the work and role of CPS principals about which we have been unable to successfully collect information. Consortium survey items focused on sensitive topics, such as principal relationships with the CPS central and area offices and principal perceptions of their professional development, have not yielded usable information. Similarly, survey questions that aim to document principals' distribution of tasks to other school leaders have been difficult to design. We do not yet have good information on the extent of, membership on, and effectiveness of leadership teams within schools.

In short, it is clear that gaining a deeper understanding of many of these essential issues will necessitate incorporating innovative and diverse ways of collecting information. The principal interviews conducted for this report provide evidence of the usefulness and necessity of capturing principal insights through in-person interviews and focus groups. Moving beyond identifying consistently ranked roadblocks of school improvement to the discussion of potential ways to deal with those challenges marks an important step in moving toward hopeful solutions. Expanding the scope and depth of principal interviews and focus groups will similarly allow for research into other areas that cannot be adequately explored with the Consortium survey.

A larger-scale interview and focus group project is thus a critical step to deepening our understanding of the work and perceptions of principals. Principals made it clear that taking the time to speak with them in person is also important in building relationships of trust between the Consortium and CPS principals.

*"I have to be honest here. Because it is not going to happen the way you have been doing it [just through surveys]. It happens like this, what we are doing here. It is a lot of work. It isn't 'collecting data,' it is building relationships over coffee and you feeding me breakfast. [Group laughs.] I am serious! This is where relationships and respect are built."*

The purpose of this report has been to explore the background and perceptions of Chicago Public Schools' principals; to provide a preliminary analysis of their background, work, challenges, and solutions to those challenges. It is clear, however, that this is an early chapter in a longer story that is yet to be written. There are reasons for concern: principal turnover, daunting roadblocks, and complex problems that are difficult to understand and even more challenging to solve. Yet, there are many reasons to be hopeful: principal satisfaction with their work, their creative solutions to difficult challenges, and their tone of hope and resilience. It is our hope that the lessons learned in this report can create a foundation for later chapters documenting the work of CPS principals and in promoting policies that recruit, train, support, and retain effective principals.



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## Appendix A

### Survey Representativeness

The findings reported here primarily rely upon the 2007 survey of principals conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. Table 8 summarizes the representativeness of the 2007 survey.

The 2007 sample of respondents included 65 percent of principals overall. The survey sample is representative in terms of gender, education, and experience. The survey sample is not representative by the race of the principal or the racial/ethnic composition of the school. African American principals are underrepresented, while white and Hispanic principals are overrepresented. Significance tests revealed that the lack of representativeness by race of the principal and racial/ethnic composition of the school was significant. As a result, survey analyses were weighted to correct the representativeness.

**TABLE 8**  
**Representativeness of Principal Survey Respondents, 2007**

	All CPS Principals	Survey Respondents
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	68%	67%
Male	32%	33%
<b>Race/Ethnicity of Principal</b>		
African American	54%	44%
White	28%	36%
Hispanic	16%	18%
<b>Highest Degree Earned</b>		
Master's	81%	81%
Doctorate	10%	10%
Bachelor's	9%	9%
<b>Experience</b>		
New (0–4 yrs)	58%	59%
Veteran (>4 yrs)	42%	41%
<b>Percent Low Income of Students at School</b>		
Less than 50%	10%	11%
50% to 80%	12%	14%
80% to 95%	39%	37%
More than 95%	39%	38%
<b>Racial/Ethnic Composition of School</b>		
Predominantly African American	45%	38%
Predominantly Latino	13%	15%
Predominantly Minority	21%	20%
Mixed Race	7%	9%
Integrated	13%	18%

## Appendix B

### Demographics of Interviewed Principals

Principal interviews were conducted with 20 principals during the fall of 2007 and the winter of 2008. The sample of principals was chosen using a stratified random sample to represent the subgroups of interest in this study: elementary and high school; new and experienced; top and bottom quartile schools. The

sample was also drawn to approximately represent the proportion of race/ethnicity of Chicago Public Schools' principals (African American, 60 percent; white, 25 percent; and Hispanic, 15 percent). The table below summarizes the background of the participating principals.

**TABLE 9**  
**Background of Interviewed Principals**

Informant	Race/Ethnicity	New/Experienced	High School/ Elementary	Quartile Achievement
Principal A	Hispanic	Experienced	Elementary	Top
Principal B	African American	New	High school	Second
Principal C	White	Experienced	High school	Bottom
Principal D	African American	New	Elementary	Third
Principal E	White	New	Elementary	Top
Principal F	African American	Experienced	High school	Bottom
Principal G	African American	Experienced	Elementary	Top
Principal H	Hispanic	New	High school	Third
Principal I	African American	Experienced	Elementary	Bottom
Principal J	Hispanic	New	Elementary	Third
Principal K	African American	Experienced	High school	Top
Principal L	White	New	Elementary	Second
Principal M	African American	New	Elementary	Bottom
Principal N	African American	Experienced	High school	Second
Principal O	White	New	Elementary	Third
Principal P	African American	New	Elementary	Second
Principal Q	White	Experienced	High school	Second
Principal R	African American	Experienced	Elementary	Bottom
Principal S	African American	New	Elementary	Second
Principal T	African American	Experienced	Elementary	Top

# Appendix C

## Roadblock Items

**TABLE 10**

**Survey Item Text**

Below are several factors that could be considered “roadblocks” that prevent a school from improving. Please indicate the extent to which each may be a factor in preventing your school from improving.

Response categories: Not a Factor, Somewhat a Factor, Serious Factor
Lack of support from external organizations (universities, businesses, reform groups, educational consultants, etc.).
Pressure to constantly adopt new programs.
Pressure to get test scores up quickly.
Pressure to obtain external funds.
Disagreements or lack of coordination among school partners.
Lack of teacher knowledge and skills.
Faculty apathy and resistance to change.
Teacher turnover.
Difficult recruiting and hiring the right teachers.
Difficulty removing poor teachers.
Lack of time to evaluate teachers.
Leaders within the faculty.
State or federal mandates (desegregation, special education, bilingual education, etc.).
Mistrust between parents and teachers.
Parents apathetic or irresponsible about their children.
Problem students (apathetic, hostile, etc.).
Lack of support from the school’s community.
Social problems in the school’s community (poverty, gangs, drugs, etc.).
Racial or ethnic tensions in the school’s community.
Negative stereotypes about the school’s community.



# Endnotes

## Introduction

- 1 Bennett et al. (1992).
- 2 Illinois State Assembly (1995); Sunderman (2001).
- 3 Sergiovanni (1987).
- 4 Taylor (2008).
- 5 A table summarizing the demographics of the interviewed principals is included in Appendix B.
- 6 Alvy & Robbins (1998); Lovely (2004).
- 7 Conyers (2004); Mawhinney (2005); Moir & Bloom (2003).
- 8 Salley et al. (1979).
- 9 Goldring et al. (2008).
- 10 Bossert et al. (1982); Hallinger & Murphy (1986).

## Chapter One

- 11 Bossert et al. (1982), p. 52.
- 12 Andrews & Basom (1990).
- 13 Smulyan (2000), p. 217.
- 14 Lee, Smith & Cioci (1993).
- 15 Tillman (2008), p. 186
- 16 Lomotey (1993).
- 17 Oberman (1996).
- 18 The term Hispanic, rather than Latino/a, is used to mirror the categories used in the CPS personnel files.
- 19 Oberman (1996).

## Chapter Two

- 20 Hallinger (1992); Smith & Andrews (1989).
- 21 Hallinger (1992); Marsh (2000).
- 22 Murphy (1990).
- 23 Bennett et al. (1992); Bryk et al. (1998).
- 24 Marsh (2000).
- 25 Hoy & Hoy (2003); Ruebling et al. (2004).
- 26 Hightower (2002); Shipps (2003).
- 27 Goldring et al. (2008).
- 28 Strizek et al. (2006).
- 29 Hightower (2002); Murphy (1990); Shipps (2003).

## Chapter Three

- 30 For full roadblock item text, see Appendix C.
- 31 For the purposes of this analysis, elementary and high school principals are grouped together, given the similarity of their responses.

## Chapter Four

- 32 UCEA (2008).
- 33 Oberman (1996).
- 34 Advocates for Children and Youth (2007); UCEA (2008); Wasserman (1998).
- 35 Bennett et al. (1992).
- 36 Goldstein (2001); Hart et al. (2006); Hart et al. (2008).
- 37 Schaper (2008).
- 38 Alvy & Robbins (1998); Lovely (2004).

## Chapter Five

- 39 Illinois State Assembly (2006).



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The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. CCSR encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.



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