

Principal Concerns in Wisconsin: Focus on Future Leaders for Rural Schools

By Katherine Martin

Overview

Common sense and recent research make it clear that schools cannot be successful without strong principals. Strong principals help improve student performance in many ways, from shaping a school's mission and culture to hiring, developing, and retaining its teachers.¹ Even so, principals often get short shrift in today's debates about human capital in public education. Compared to the large body of research and policy attention given to teachers, the field knows surprisingly little about the principal workforce.

This knowledge gap means that it often is hard for school districts and states to make strategic decisions to improve their principal workforces. Where do most principals come from? How long do they stay? How well do they perform? How many will need to be hired and developed in the future? Few districts or states know the answers.

To address these and other important questions about their principals, states need, among other things, to build detailed longitudinal data systems like the ones they use to track teachers and students. But in some places those types of systems are still a long way off. In the meantime, system leaders can examine the administrative data they already have to paint a basic picture of their principal workforce, one that can help prompt deeper questions and discussions about the challenges and opportunities they face.²

This *Principal Concerns* brief offers an example of this type of analysis for Wisconsin. Why should Wisconsin be concerned about its principal workforce? After all, by some measures, the state's schools are doing well. Wisconsin's NAEP scores, for example, are consistently higher than the national average.³ Yet there is still much work to be done to ensure that all students achieve at high levels, and strong leadership is key to that success. Under the state's recently revamped accountability system, 266 schools across the state are not meeting performance expectations. In Milwaukee Public Schools, the state's largest school system, only 21 percent of schools met or exceeded the state's expectations.⁴

Wisconsin will need to pursue a range of strategies and levers to improve results for all of its students. One important improvement strategy is to ensure that districts are recruiting, developing, and retaining good principals. Where there are many early- to mid-career principals, states need to emphasize professional development. But where there is an approaching wave of retirements, states should focus more heavily on recruiting and preparing new leaders.

To identify Wisconsin's specific needs, we need to answer these questions: How many principals are near retirement eligibility? How is retirement eligibility distributed across schools and locations? How are experienced and new principals distributed across school types?⁵

1. For example, see Gregory F. Branch, Eric A. Hanushek, and Steven G. Rivkin, *Estimating the Effect of Leaders on Public Sector Productivity: The Case of School Principals*, CALDER Working Paper 66 (Washington, DC: CALDER, American Institutes for Research, January 2012); Karen Seashore Louis et al., *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning* (Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota, and Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, July 2010).

2. For more information on a principal policy framework and data dashboard, see Christine Campbell and Betheny Gross, *Principal Concerns: Leadership Data and Strategies for States* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, September 2012).

3. National Assessment of Educational Progress scores were accessed on October 31, 2012 from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>.

4. Erin Richards, "Most Wisconsin Schools Get Good Marks Under New Report Card System," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, October 22, 2012.

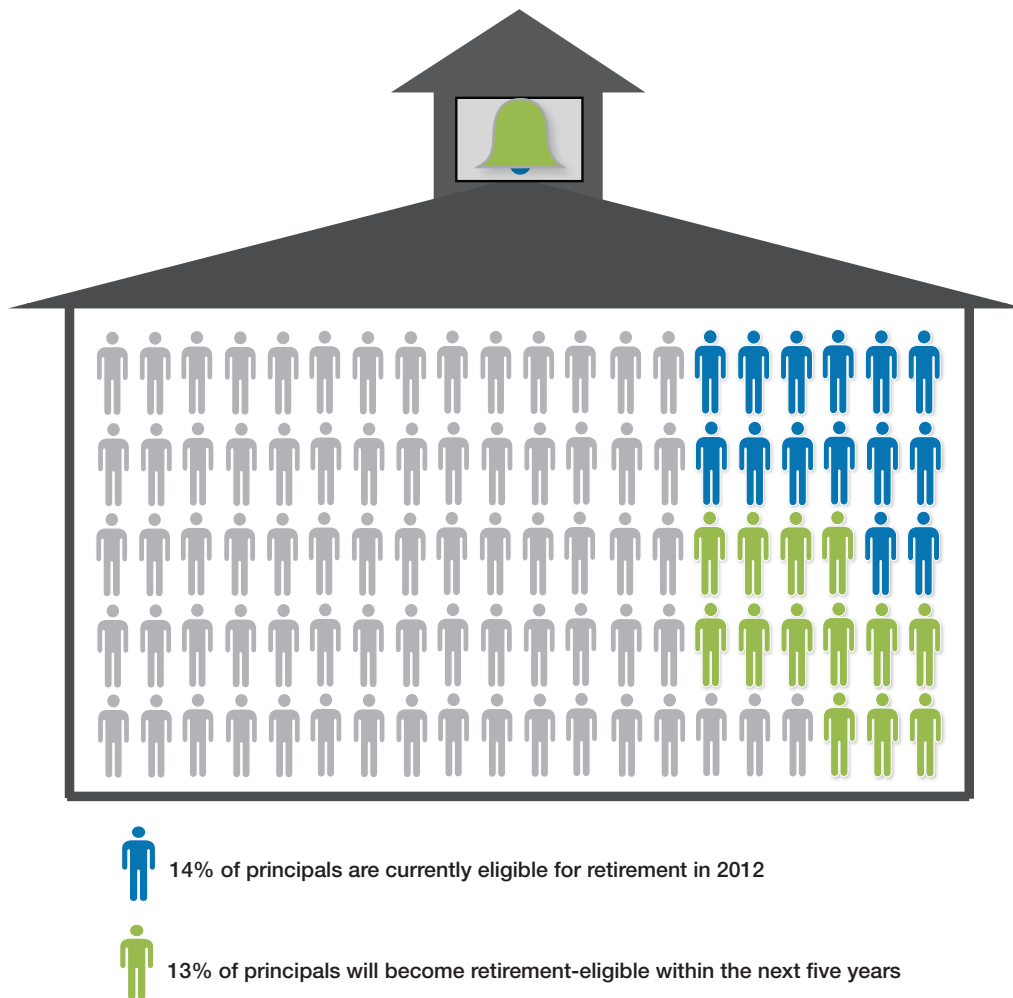
5. The analysis included in this report was conducted using publicly available administrative staffing and student achievement data from the Wisconsin

Findings

1. Most Wisconsin Principals Will Still Be on the Job in Five Years

We used birth year and experience data provided by the state to determine when principals in Wisconsin would be eligible for retirement with full benefits.⁶ We found that 14 percent of principals are currently eligible for retirement. In the next five years, an additional 13 percent of principals will become eligible for retirement.⁷ Figure 1 shows the percentages of retirement-eligible principals within the next five years.

Figure 1. Over 70 percent of principals in Wisconsin will still be on the job in five years



Department of Public Instruction (DPI). We analyzed staffing data from school year 2011-2012. The student achievement data used were from the 2011-2012 Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS).

6. In Wisconsin, most state employees have two options for retirement with full benefits. A principal or district administrator may retire with full benefits at age 65, or they may retire after 30 years of service, whichever comes first. Since our data included both birth years and total years of experience, we calculated retirement rates using both options.

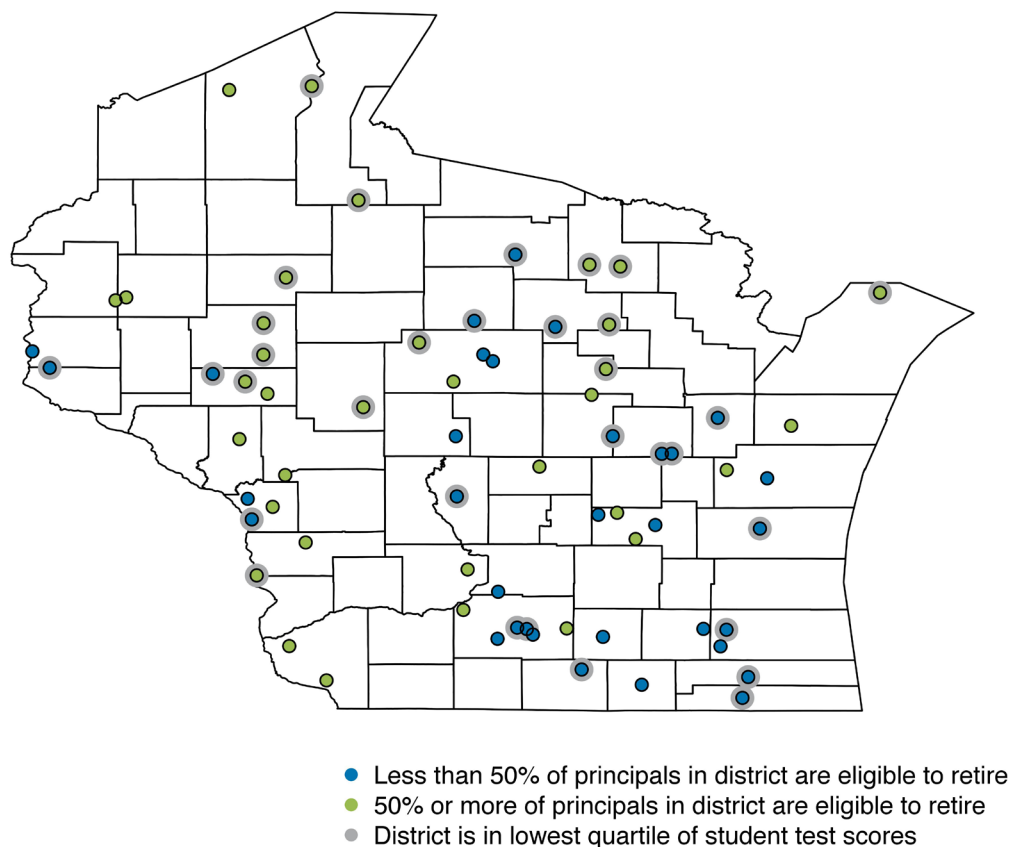
7. Using similar data from the DPI, we also found that 42 percent of Wisconsin's district administrators are currently eligible for retirement, and 17 percent will become retirement-eligible in the next five years.

With many current school leaders expected to be on the job in five years, Wisconsin's principal strategies need to emphasize development, assessment, and retention of the best leaders. But it is also important to look at where the retirements will happen, because school leadership is really a local story. Where are these retirement-eligible principals located? Will certain areas of the state or school districts experience more turnover than others?

2. Small, Rural Districts Are Affected Most by Upcoming Retirements

Using staffing data for the 2011-2012 school year, we found that of the roughly 430 school districts represented in Wisconsin's data, 104 had two or more principals eligible for retirement within the next five years.⁸ Of these 104 districts, 55 percent could lose half or more of their principals to retirement within the next five years. These districts are small and tend to be rural; the majority of them are comprised of four schools or less. That suggests that smaller districts across the state may need to make important hiring decisions within the next five years, in some cases with single hires that affect multiple schools. (Of these 104 districts, 29 have retirement-eligible principals who lead more than one school.) Thirteen of the 104 districts have retirement-eligible principals in charge of schools with test scores in the lowest quartile of Wisconsin schools.⁹ Figure 2 shows the statewide picture of these retirement eligibility measures.

Figure 2. Upcoming retirements mostly affect small, rural districts



8. The total number of districts varies slightly depending on the source. Rural districts may combine for a year or two and then separate, and sometimes other institutions, like corrections facilities, can be included in state numbers.

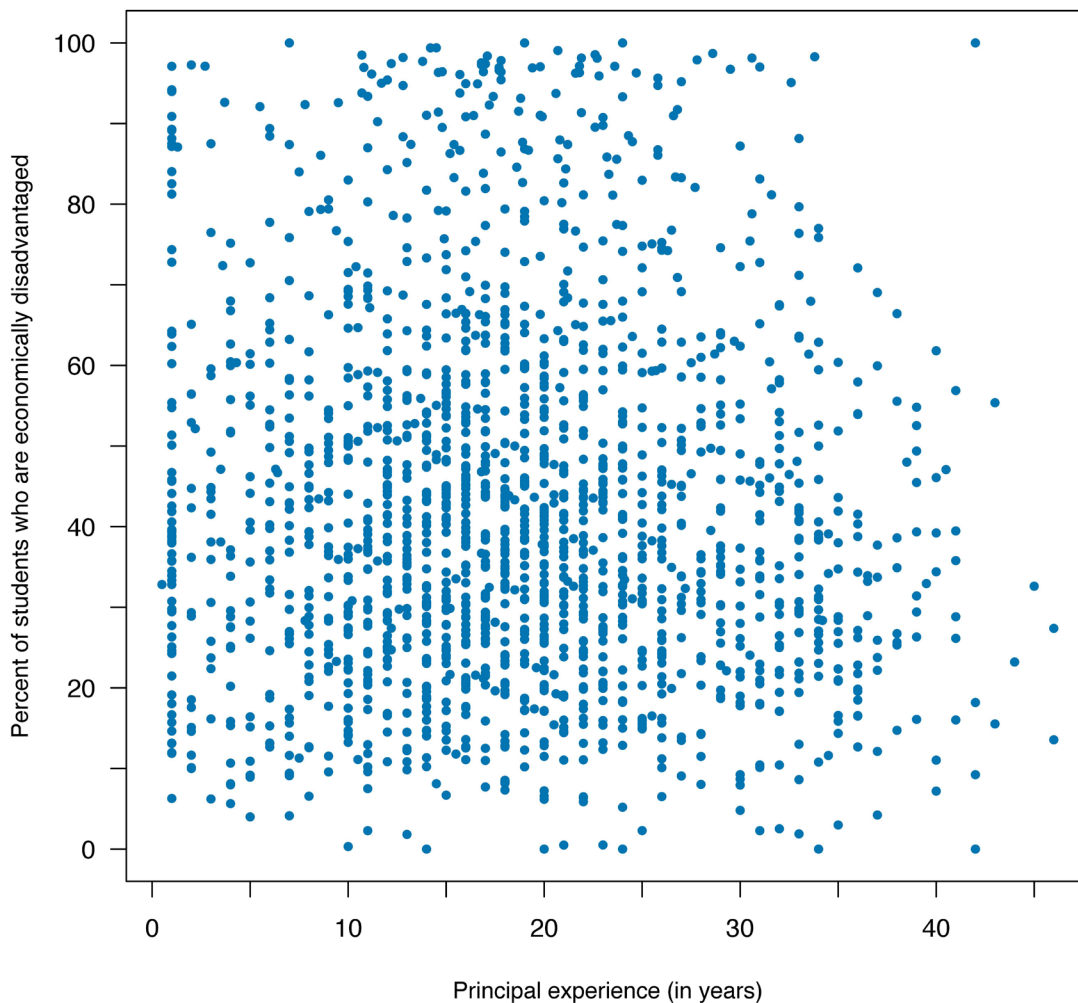
9. For the 2011-2012 school year, these schools were ranked in the lowest quartile of the cumulative percentage of their students who scored either proficient or advanced on the math or reading WSAS.

This map highlights the areas across the state that could be disproportionately affected by upcoming retirements. These retirements also represent an opportunity for change. Districts can use this opportunity to define the skills they need for particular schools and begin to identify and develop strong teachers who may make good principals or recruit talented new candidates.

3. Economically Disadvantaged Students Are Led by Principals with Varied Experience Levels

Are experienced Wisconsin principals clustered in high-income schools? We analyzed the most recent year for which we have both staffing and student demographic data and found an even distribution of experience across school types.¹⁰ Figure 3 displays a scatterplot of principals' total years of experience by the percentage of economically disadvantaged students enrolled in their schools.¹¹

Figure 3. No pattern links years of experience and percentage of economically disadvantaged students



10. For student demographic data, we used 2011-2012 poverty status data from the Wisconsin DPI. Economically disadvantaged students are those who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

11. For principals that led more than one school, their percentages of economically disadvantaged students were averaged.

Given what is typically true of teacher experience, one might expect that schools with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students would be led by less experienced principals. However, Figure 3 illustrates that there appears to be no pattern that links principals' total years of experience and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students they lead.

Wisconsin Should Focus on a Dual Strategy: Current Principals and Replacement in Rural Areas

Given that over 70 percent of principals in Wisconsin will still be on the job in five years, and upcoming retirements mostly affect small, rural districts, the state should focus on supports for current principals, as well as new recruitment and development strategies for rural schools.

Pay attention to current principals.

Wisconsin's principals will be facing new expectations, including a more rigorous teacher evaluation process that requires principals to administer multiple subjective evaluations and provide guidance on how to improve. Principals will also have to oversee the adaptation of instruction to the Common Core standards, and related changes to assessments will undoubtedly result in a serious drop in scores. School leaders will need targeted support, practice, and mentors. Wisconsin, like all states, should heed the front end of the principal pipeline, by recruiting strong prospects and improving principal preparation options. But the main focus of attention should be on training the current workforce and developing a fair and rigorous evaluation system. Good principals need help growing into great ones, while principals who consistently underperform need to be supported or, at times, removed—since they are not likely to age out of the system anytime soon.

Focus principal replacement strategies on rural needs.

Retirement in Wisconsin is a rural story, for now. Fifty districts could lose half or more of their principals to retirement within the next five years. These districts are small and tend to be rural; the majority of them are comprised of four schools or less, and about half of these districts have principals who lead more than one school. The people likely to replace them are most likely already teaching in their schools. Wisconsin should consider ways to identify and develop these future leaders so they are ready for the challenges of leading a rural school. This preparation will need to be creative—most rural educators will not be interested in leaving their school to train at an urban campus. To cultivate a new, successful class of rural school leaders, the state should support programs that provide weekend and summer training courses, mentoring with strong rural school leaders, and the development of a cohort of future leaders who can learn from each other.

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