

## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

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# ARE AMERICAN SCHOOLS FACING A SHORTAGE OF QUALIFIED ADMINISTRATORS?

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*Anecdotal evidence abounds regarding the shortage of principals to lead schools. Sustained attention to the research on recruitment and retention of principals reveals a fascinating development: Ample numbers of teachers have completed administrative licensure requirements and hold the credentials necessary to assume a principalship; however, few wish to apply for the position.*

A review of current research reveals that there is a shortage of qualified individuals to assume administrative positions in American schools. This research indicates that there are large numbers of individuals leaving administrative positions, districts are experiencing difficulty replacing those individuals leaving, and the replacements often lack the necessary skills required for school administration. In addressing this concern, it is interesting to note that there is not necessarily a shortage of qualified administrators in the field of education; rather, there are fewer wishing to apply for school leadership positions. The condition of leadership recruitment and retention is important for all educators, and Catholic education is not immune to trends in the public sector. To examine this further, a variety of research is reviewed. Roza, Celio, Harvey, and Wishon (2003) investigate the current supply and demand of administrators; Gates, Ringel, and Santibanez (2003) seek to highlight the movement of professionals into, within, and out of the field of administration; the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2003) scrutinizes the current demographics of school leaders within the United States, and examines the qualities desired in those wishing to become successful leaders; and Papa, Lankford, and Wyckoff (2002) provide both research and insight into the current shortage of administrators as it pertains to certification, age, and salary of the individual. It is a general finding of this body of recent research that, upon consideration of many factors, there is a nationwide shortage of qualified individuals wishing to assume roles in school administration.

## THE ADMINISTRATIVE PROBLEM FACING AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Research over the past two decades has indicated that successful schools are managed by talented, dynamic and focused administrators who are effective in collaborating with students, educators, parents, and community members to achieve shared goals. However, a report for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2003) notes that far too many American schools and school districts lack such leaders, and that

a worsening shortage of top-notch principals and superintendents – especially those willing to work and able to succeed in potentially difficult urban and rural situations – poses a significant barrier to our national commitment to educate all children to the limits of their abilities. (p. 4)

Specifically, 40% of the 92,000 public school principals are eligible to retire in the next 4 years, and in many districts, 67% of principals will reach retirement age during this decade.

Surprisingly, the issue central to this shortage is not of quantity, as most states have more individuals licensed as school administrators than there are administrative positions. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2003) suggests that the urgent problem is that of finding quality administrators, and that the “conventional procedures for training and certifying public-school administrators in the United States are simply failing to produce a sufficient number of leaders whose vision, energy and skill can successfully raise the educational standard for all children” (p. 4). Furthermore, state certification laws and regulations place increasingly stringent demands on aspiring principals, including: years of prior teaching experience, education-school courses in school administration, pedagogy, psychology, and philosophy, graduate degree and ongoing training. This myriad of requirements unfortunately deters some able leaders from entering the field, and fails to prepare others adequately for the actual challenges inherent in producing effective educational institutions.

In years past, the responsibilities of school leaders were to supervise teachers, manage the building, and deal with parents. Today, however, while those responsibilities remain, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2003) observes that the tasks of principals have evolved to include the following:

- to develop a vision of learning
- to build a school culture and instructional programs conducive to learning for all pupils
- to manage staff, students, and parents with needs and problems that did not exist or were largely ignored in the past
- to produce excellent academic results as gauged by external measures such as state proficiency tests keyed to statewide academic standards

In addition to these new roles undertaken by educational leaders, school budgets have become more complex, federal, state and local regulations proliferate, and personnel constraints have tightened. Essentially, the position of school administration has become more daunting, and the salary for such work

has not increased commensurately with the increase in responsibility.

## **CURRENT DEMOGRAPHICS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS**

According to the Schools and Staffing Survey (Gruber, Wiley, Broughman, Strizek, & Burian-Fitzgerald, 2002), in 1999-2000 there were approximately 110,000 principals in the United States, 76% of whom worked in public schools. Between the periods of 1987-88 and 1999-2000, the number of principals grew by over 7% for public schools and by over 3% for private schools. Compensation for school leaders has more than kept up pace with inflation since 1987-88, as the average salary of public school principals has increased by 9% and the average salary of those in the private sector has increased by nearly 40%. Despite the higher rate of salary growth in private school administration, public school leaders still earned significantly more: \$65,000 per year versus \$40,000.

The average age for principals is in the late 40s. Between 1988 and 2000 the average age increased slightly from 47.8 to 49.3 years in the public sector and from 46 to 49.9 in private schools. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2003) explains that "whereas private school principals appear to be distributed fairly evenly across a wide age range, from 35 to 65, a majority (53%) of public school principals fall in the 10-year window from 46 to 55" (p. 15). Another noteworthy difference is that only 17% of public school principals are over age 55, compared with 27% of private school principals. Overall, these data suggest that principals are an aging population.

Hammer and Rohr (1994) believe that educational literature has given substantial attention to the gender composition of principals, mainly because of concerns that the proportion of female principals is low compared to that of female teachers. Research into this topic reveals that in 1999-2000, 44% of all public school principals were women – a significant increase from 35% in 1993-1994 and 25% in 1987-1988. Additionally, in 1999-2000, a report for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2003) asserts that "women made up 55% of public elementary principals but just 21% of public high school principals" (p. 19). In private schools, women comprised a majority of all elementary and combined school principals and occupied 38% of high school principalships. Although it seems that women are making up an increasingly greater portion of the teaching workforce, researchers emphasize that the average male teacher is still much more likely than the average female teacher to become a principal (Riehl & Byrd, 1997).

## **QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL EDUCATIONAL LEADERS**

Current literature on professional leaders reveals that they must be flexible with regard to their frames of reference, and be able and willing to adjust their thinking in response to the needs of different individuals and situations (Collins & Porras, 1994). Similar results are found in examining the qualities of those involved in school leadership roles. Until the early 1980s, leaders were expected to manage institutions well. During the mid 1980s, the focus

shifted toward administrators taking more active roles in instructional leadership. In subsequent years, a strong argument has echoed that both good management skills and strong academic leadership are required attributes for school leaders (Avioli & Bass, 1988).

Recent research has shown that other qualities are commonly desired in prospective school administrators. These include managerial competence, vision, perseverance, and experience, and an ability to create an effective school organizational culture (Papa et al., 2002).

Other studies indicate that due to increased public information on student performance and the associated accountability of school systems, leaders must demonstrate proficiency in two main areas. These are creating a vision and plan to guide their school's improvement, and to be effective in communicating this vision to school employees and the public (Teske & Schneider, 1999). The Thomas B. Fordham Institute (2003) reveals that leadership, resourcefulness, a sense of urgency and political savvy are important attributes for leaders of schools to possess.

## **THE SUPPLY OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS**

The research by Roza et al. (2003) was conducted on a nationwide scale. They concluded that "a shortage of qualified candidates for principal vacancies in the United States exists, among rural, urban and suburban schools, and in elementary, middle and high schools" (Roza et al., 2003, p. 17).

Of the school districts surveyed, human resource directors reported that overall there has been a slight reduction in applicants per vacancy, from 19 in 1994 to 17 in 2001. Approximately 33% of these districts reported a decrease in the number of applicants per vacancy, with 50% of the respondents stating their applicant pools were stable over the 7-year period. Further analysis of these data reveals that the decline in numbers of applicants per vacancy appears to be confined to a limited number of districts in the surveyed regions. This suggests, according to Roza et al. (2003) that "the distribution of applicants among time indicates that disparities in applicant pools are growing" (p. 22). In other words, applicants for administrative positions cluster in certain districts and avoid others. Therefore, the implication is clear in that within each region, the existing problem is one of distribution and not of adequate supply.

In school districts experiencing declining numbers of applicants for administrative positions, certain factors render these areas inherently undesirable: low income, per-pupil expenditures, and average salaries. Roza et al. (2003) note that "among the districts with the smallest applicant pools, all were in low-price housing areas and low-income communities" (p. 24). Specifically, median income in districts with six or fewer applicants per position is considerably less than median income in districts with seven or more, with a difference of 20%, or \$7,400. Similarly, districts with fewer applicants per vacancy have lower per-pupil expenditures (\$4,854 versus \$5,370 per pupil). Finally, districts with six or fewer applicants per vacancy offer less for both elementary and secondary school principals than districts with 10 or more

applicants per position. Low-applicant pool districts averaged approximately \$4,000 less annually in salary for elementary school leaders than high-applicant pool districts, and \$11,000 less for secondary school principals. These findings show that financial incentives make a difference in attracting educational leaders.

Studies confirm that principals' positions in high schools are more difficult to fill than are those in elementary schools. Prince (2003) notes that the pool is small for high school openings, greater for middle schools, and largest for elementary schools. Comparing high-school only and elementary-school only districts, Roza et al. (2003) found that on average, elementary districts receive four more applicants per vacancy than do high school districts.

Many policy recommendations appear grounded in the belief that there are not enough certified principal candidates in the labor market. However, several studies show that training programs are producing more than an adequate amount of certified school leaders. According to one California study, over 34,000 people hold required California administration credentials, with only 23,000 positions available (Roza et al., 2003). A study of certified principals in Montana indicated that almost half of those individuals had no intention of becoming a principal (Montana School Boards Association, 1999). A similar situation exists in Louisiana, where fewer than half of certified candidates expressed willingness in applying for a principalship (Jordan, McCauley, & Comeaux, 1994). An examination of these findings revealed that while abundant numbers of people certified to become school leaders are in supply, many have no intention of undertaking administrative roles.

## **THE DEMAND FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS**

Superintendents are faced today with the challenge of seeking qualified individuals who have leadership skills and considerable teaching experience. Roza et al. (2003) state that because "leadership skills do not necessarily relate in any way to lengthy teaching tenure, superintendents often found themselves dissatisfied with the people placed in principals' chairs" (p. 33). In fact, a Public Agenda Foundation survey of superintendents found that nearly 50% are unhappy with the current ability of their principals (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001). While district leaders once may have expected principals to be responsible for implementing district-wide policies, tending to administrative tasks and recordkeeping, and maintaining buildings and order, the focus for demand has shifted. In a survey, superintendents ranked the following managerial and leadership skills they desire in prospective principals, with the percentages showing what skill ranked as most important and as second most important, represented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Leadership Skills Desired in Prospective Principals (Farkas et al., 2001)**

Skill	Primary importance	Secondary importance
Ability to motivate staff and hold them accountable for results	67%	31%
Ability to execute a school improvement strategy	31%	59%
Ability to use money to effectively further improvement goals	6%	0%
Ability to minimize conflict at school level (among teachers and parents)	3%	6%
Responsiveness to demands from central office	0%	1%

As the results demonstrate, superintendents appear to be much more interested in principals possessing strong leadership attributes than management skills.

In addition to these attributes sought in principals, superintendents seek certain kinds of experiences that may assist in developing leadership skills further. A second survey reveals that broad leadership experiences are desired more than a traditional background in education. The results are ranked in order, with the percentages showing which experiences ranked as most important and as second most important as seen in Table 2.

**Table 2: Leadership Experiences Desired in Prospective Principals (Farkas et al., 2001)**

Experience	Primary importance	Secondary importance
Experience leading professional colleagues	83%	9%
Managing conflict resolution	3%	39%
Teaching experience	14%	21%
Curriculum experience	0%	21%
Using resources effectively and efficiently	1%	14%

In looking for new principals, therefore, superintendents wish to hire candidates who can effectively lead and motivate their colleagues, and sustain accountability for results.

Considering the level of certification, skills, and experiences desired in principals today, superintendents report that finding effective leaders is a considerable challenge. Roza et al. (2003) acknowledge this difficulty, and state that "superintendents are alarmed about the need to find good principals because they are worried about student achievement and convinced that schools need new and better leadership" (p. 40). According to one survey, 43% of superintendents report experiencing difficulties finding principals; 39%, a moderate problem; 13%, a slight problem; 5%, no problem (Roza et al., 2003). In conjunction with these findings, human resource directors have noted that although schools are not necessarily experiencing a shortage of leaders today, it is anticipated that a shortage will approach in the near future. Additionally, district officials have remarked that superintendents will be harder and harder pressed in the future to find candidates who are certified, able, and interested.

## **MOVEMENT INTO AND OUT OF THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE CAREER FIELD**

Recent analyses of movement into and out of the school administrative career field indicate that there are few factors influencing such movement. Overall, the "rates at which people enter into school administration from other career fields and leave school administration for other fields have remained stable over time" (Gates et al., 2003, p. 38). However, while there are no major shifts in the factors that would be expected to influence individuals' entry and exit in the field, financial incentives, certification requirements, expense, and effort contribute to inhibiting movement from teaching to administration.

Studies concerning the movement from teaching to administration reveal that over 99% of principals in the public sector and nearly 90% in private school positions have had teaching experience (Gates et al., 2003). As of 1999-2000, public school principals had an average of 14 years' teaching experience, and private school principals had an average of 14.5 years. Fiore and Curtin (1997) note that these data indicate an increase from 1994, when the averages were 11 and 9 years' teaching experience respectively. Additionally, superintendents responding to a 2000 survey reported having spent considerable time in the classroom, with approximately 90% having taught. It is clear that teaching is a common prerequisite when making the transition from the classroom into school administration.

Typically, teacher labor markets consider movement into school administration as an exit from teaching (Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1989). Nearly 50% of entrants into school administration had worked as teachers the previous year, and 37% of those who had left school administration did so to return to teaching. These data suggest that there is a strong revolving door between

teaching and the principalship (Papa et al., 2002). Brewer (1996) offers that administrative compensation affects teachers' decisions to stay in a school district. Generally, teachers tend to not only think of their salary in making decisions about where to work, but also about their future earning potential. Brewer continues to suggest that teachers do consider their promotion opportunities in deciding whether to remain in the field of education, as research shows that "districts with lower administrative salaries have higher teacher turnover" (1996, p. 25).

Recently, the Education Writers Association (2002) found that policymakers have expressed concern that teachers are increasingly reluctant to move into school administration. A frequent observation made is that school administrative jobs are more difficult than teaching, and that the difference in salary does not compensate for the increased demands. Continual changes in relative compensation between teachers and administrators over time may impact teachers' motivation to move into leadership positions. As Gates et al. (2003) note, "in 1984, the real weekly earnings of school administrators were 31% higher than those of teachers, a gap that then narrowed until 1996, when it hit 15%" (p. 28). After 1996, this trend turned, with school administrators earnings growing relative to those of teachers, and by 1999, the gap had grown such that leaders were earning 24% more than teachers were.

According to Gates et al. (2003), policymakers have begun to wonder whether state-level certification requirements deter individuals from becoming school administrators. In reviewing state-level policies, 49 out of 50 states require a special certification for administrative positions in public schools, with Michigan having eliminated their administrative requirement in 1994. Twenty-one states offer a general administrative credential that is applicable across a variety of positions, 28 other states require specific credentials for different positions such as principal or superintendent, and a Master's degree is required for some other states. Forty-one states require that applicants for leadership positions have experience in primary or secondary education. Other common certification requirements, as described by Tryneski (2000) include completion of specific course content, a teaching certificate, and a passing grade on national or state examinations. This list of requirements may deter aspiring school administrators, particularly those who are not already teachers.

Hoff (1999) contends that there is a strong parallel between the decision a teacher makes to move into school administration and the decisions other professionals make to move into corporate administration. In deciding whether to move into a school leadership position, individuals face additional barriers. Hoff suggests that they are often reluctant to make a career change from practice to management, and those who do may face significant challenges. Such challenges include and are not limited to understanding and operating in a more complex environment, dealing with people, and relinquishing their specialty. These hold true for those wishing to move from teaching to administration, as the environment is demonstrably more complex than is teaching. Furthermore, administrators face scrutiny from a wider array of people than do

teachers, and must also give up their specialty of teaching classes.

The age of principals appears to be increasingly older, on average, and the average age of entry into principalship has increased. Unless efforts are made to bring younger people into administrative positions, schools may face an increased retirement rate and increased overall turnover. However, as Gates et al. (2003) acknowledge, retirement eligibility does not necessarily mean immediate retirement; it simply means that individuals have access to full retirement benefits if they retire. It is noted that retirement decisions involve many factors, and that people may become eligible for retirement at a certain age but be able to increase their retirement benefits by continuing to work. A difference in the age distribution of principals in both public and private schools suggests that the two sectors' retirement benefits may affect retirement behavior. In 1994, 32% of public and 52% of private school principals reported that they would remain at their job if able to; 23% and 9%, respectively, said that they would remain only until they achieved retirement eligibility (Fiore & Curtin, 1997).

## **MOVEMENT BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS**

Although movement exists between public and private school administrative positions, the sample of people moving is limited. According to Gates et al. (2003), "an analysis of data revealed that from 1983 to 1999, public school administrators left public schools for private schools at an annual rate of 2.2% and came to public schools from private schools at an annual rate of 2%" (p. 33). However, a comparison of public and private school compensation indicates that some possible changes may have been key factors motivating individuals to work in either sector. Public school administrators have consistently earned more than those in private school positions, but the differential has decreased significantly over the past two decades. Gates et al. (2003) state that in 1984 public school administrators earned, on average, 40% more than private school administrators. However, by 1999, this difference in salary had been reduced to 12%.

Another important aspect in which public and private school principalships differ is how principals perceive the problems at their school. According to the Schools and Staffing Survey (Gruber et al., 2002), public schools are typically larger institutions and public school principals report significantly more problems than does the average private school principal. It is also noted that principals may experience more flexibility and freedom within private schools. With regard to experience, private school principals became more experienced in the 1990s, while public school principals became less so. Gates et al. (2003) report that in 1999-2000, the average private school principal had 10.2 years of experience in leadership - 1.2 years more than the average public school principal.

## **MOVEMENT WITHIN THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE CAREER FIELD**

Movement between different school administration positions is considered common and “a natural part of a career path in education” (Gates et al., 2003, p. 41). Such movement within the field of education exposes people to a wide variety of activities undertaken in school systems, and provides insight into the complexity of different tasks and responsibilities. Gruber et al. (2002) report that individuals are likely to hold another administrative position before assuming a principalship. More specifically, research reveals that 66.8% of public school principals and 44.2% of private school principals have held an assistant principalship or program director position before becoming principals. Additionally, 36% of both public and private school principals had served as department heads, and 25% of public and 29% of private school principals had served as curriculum specialists.

Research conducted by Papa et al. (2002) sought to track the first 6 years of first-time principals in New York. It was found that a majority of the individuals had spent time as assistant principals, and 36% of them were no longer principals in the same school district by the next school year. Of the group, 22% had moved into another administrative position in the same district, with many assuming positions as assistant principals. Interestingly, after 6 years only 34% of the original group were still serving as principal in the same school, over 12% had left for another school in the same district, over 8% had moved to another district, and over 20% were in another administrative position in either their or another area.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings reviewed here indicate that American schools are currently facing a shortage of qualified individuals to assume administrative positions. With large numbers of individuals already leaving school administration, districts are experiencing difficulty replacing those leaving, and finding that the replacements often lack the necessary skills required for school administration. While there is not necessarily a shortage of qualified administrators within the field of education, the research reveals that fewer professionals wish to apply for school leadership positions. Some factors that school districts may consider in alleviating this problem include reducing the myriad of requirements needed for certification, increasing the relative compensation for work, and hiring younger administrators. Although addressing these factors might not instantly improve the present shortage of school administrators, such action may prove to be invaluable for American schools in the near future. Catholic educational leaders need to stay aware of the overall trends in the recruitment of qualified administrators in addition to conducting sector-specific research about principal recruitment and retention in Catholic schools.

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