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Equity



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Pathway to the
Principalship



Improving School
Outcomes



The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership

Study Highlights

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For the full report, see:

Goldring, E., Rubin, M., & Herrmann, M. (2021). *The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership*. The Wallace Foundation. Available at: <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/the-role-of-assistant-principals-evidence-insights-for-advancing-school-leadership.aspx>.

Introduction

Over the past 25 years, the number of assistant principals has been steadily increasing, as has the number of principals with prior experience as an assistant principal. However, the knowledge base on assistant principals has not grown in parallel with their increased presence in schools.

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have not reached consensus on what the assistant principal role should entail, how to best prepare and support assistant principals, and how to effectively prepare them for success as principals. There is also little discussion about how the assistant principal role can promote equity and diversity in the pathway to the principalship, as well as contribute to equitable experiences and outcomes for students, teachers, and staff.

To help policymakers, practitioners, and researchers better understand the assistant principal role and leverage it to promote equity and school effectiveness, The Wallace Foundation commissioned a synthesis of empirical research on assistant principals published since 2000. These study highlights describe the results from the synthesis report.¹ The report includes 79 empirical research studies on assistant principals published since 2000 and new analyses of national data and data from two states, Tennessee and Pennsylvania. The full report can be found at <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/the-role-of-assistant-principals-evidence-insights-for-advancing-school-leadership.aspx>.

The results summarized here highlight the need for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to focus more on assistant principals, an increasingly prevalent yet often overlooked role. There are significant gaps in our understanding of assistant principals, their roles, and how they affect outcomes for students and schools. The topics addressed in this report can provide an agenda for reframing and redefining the assistant principal role.

Purpose

In these study highlights, we first provide a descriptive portrait of the assistant principal role. We then address two important issues: diversity and equity among assistant principals and assistant principals' influence on student and school outcomes. The report addresses five research questions:

- How prevalent are assistant principals? Which principals tend to have experience as an assistant principal?
- What are assistant principals' leadership roles?
- What is the pathway to the assistant principalship, and from the assistant principalship to the principalship?
- How does access to the assistant principalship and to the principalship differ by educators' race, ethnicity, and gender?
- What is the relationship between the assistant principal role and school outcomes? What is the relationship between experience as an assistant principal and future principal performance?

¹ Goldring, E., Rubin, M., & Herrmann, M. (2021). *The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership*. The Wallace Foundation.

Based on our interpretation of the research, we set forth an agenda for reframing and redefining the assistant principal role in three areas: (1) clarifying how the assistant principal role can be a stepping-stone to prepare effective principals, (2) exploring whether the role should be a discrete career position for some assistant principals rather than only a stepping-stone on the pathway to the principalship, and (3) examining how the role can contribute to a more diverse and equitable pathway to the principalship. We also present an agenda for future research.

A time to reconsider the role of the assistant principal

Now is an important time to reconsider the assistant principal role for several reasons:

The assistant principal role is an increasingly common stepping-stone to the principalship.

The pathway to the principalship is a leadership continuum, beginning for many educators as teacher leaders, then moving into the assistant principalship and onward to the principalship. Because most principals come from the ranks of assistant principals, it is imperative to consider how to explicitly design the assistant principal role as a stepping-stone to effective principal leadership.

The assistant principal role can contribute to a more equitable pathway to the principalship.

Research shows that people of color are underrepresented in the principal role, relative to their representation among students. The assistant principal role can promote diversity in the principal pipeline by providing equitable access to leadership experiences and professional development in preparation for the principalship.

Assistant principals are uniquely positioned to promote equitable outcomes for students.

Many schools have shifted toward a distributed leadership model in which school leadership responsibilities are shared among principals, assistant principals, department chairs, and teacher leaders. Many assistant principals work closely with students, teachers, and families and thus play a direct role in improving students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes. It is important to consider the training and skills necessary for assistant principals to engage in effective and equity-oriented leadership practices.

Assistant principals can help address principal attrition and teacher shortages. Current trends in education suggest ongoing principal attrition and teacher shortages. Assistant principals are well situated to provide a pool of experienced school leaders who are prepared to step into principal vacancies. Assistant principals may also help schools retain effective principals through collaborating on leadership responsibilities to make the principal role more manageable, thus reducing principal burnout and turnover. Additionally, research suggests that school leaders play an important role in creating positive and favorable teacher working conditions, indicating that assistant principals may be well-positioned to cultivate school cultures that attract and retain teachers.

Opportunities that come with experience as an assistant principal may be increasingly important for effective school leadership. Many schools have shifted away from a model where the principal alone is responsible for school improvement to a more distributed leadership approach. Studies demonstrate that school leadership is increasingly diffused to include leadership teams typically composed of assistant principals, department chairs, and other teacher leaders. It is

therefore paramount to reimagine the training and skills for assistant principals to fulfill leadership responsibilities and prepare them to take on the responsibilities of the principalship.

The report synthesizes the wide-ranging and varied empirical research base on assistant principals. The findings indicate the need to develop a clear agenda for the role and a shared understanding of what it entails. The report highlights the potential importance of the assistant principal role for developing a diverse and equitable pathway to the principalship. It also underscores our limited understanding of whether and how assistant principals contribute to improving student outcomes, teacher effectiveness and retention, and working conditions in schools, as well as whether and how experience as an assistant principal influences future effectiveness as a principal.

Methodology

The research synthesis includes 79 studies published in the United States from 2000 to 2019 that reflect the current educational landscape and context. We use a systematic and rigorous process to identify both peer-reviewed and unpublished research, code studies, and establish agreement between coders.²

The methodologies of the research on the assistant principalship vary widely and include qualitative methods, quantitative methods, and studies that use both methods (called “mixed method” studies). The synthesis includes 31 qualitative studies, 43 quantitative studies, and 5 mixed methods studies. Qualitative studies are well suited to answer “how and why” questions, such as how do assistant principals of color perceive their roles when working in schools with few students or teachers of color? Or how do assistant principals experience mentoring? Quantitative studies are well-suited to answer “what” questions, such as what is the relationship between experience as an assistant principal and future principal effectiveness? Most of the qualitative studies in the synthesis are case studies or interviews. Most of the quantitative studies in the synthesis use descriptive or correlational research designs.

The 79 studies include assistant principals who work in predominantly traditional public elementary, middle, and high schools and are largely conducted in Southern states, such as Florida and Texas. Most of the qualitative studies are conducted in urban locales, whereas most quantitative studies include all locales. Few studies include other leaders or school staff aside from assistant principals.

To address gaps in the research base, we supplement the synthesis with new analyses of data that are more recent than many studies in the literature, that are representative of larger populations or follow populations across multiple years, and that allow us to examine new topics or add depth and nuance to findings from the existing research. We use the Schools and Staffing and National Teacher and Principal Surveys spanning 1987–1988 to 2015–2016 to describe national trends on schools that have assistant principals and principals who have experience as an assistant principal. We also use state longitudinal data from Tennessee and Pennsylvania, which have substantial urban and rural populations. These analyses also allow us to explore the assistant principal role in more depth and to examine how findings from individual research studies compare with findings from

² Our process for the research synthesis is based on Petticrew, M., & Roberts, H. (2006). *Systematic reviews in the social sciences: A practical guide*. John Wiley & Sons.

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other states or districts.³ We use these data to describe the characteristics, career paths, and outcomes of assistant principals across multiple years in these two states. We use data from the Tennessee Department of Education and the Tennessee Education Research Alliance joint 2018 survey of assistant principals and principals to describe the leadership tasks of assistant principals and principals and the support assistant principals receive from principals. Finally, we use a sample of assistant principal job descriptions from districts in these two states to understand how districts formally define the assistant principal role to better understand the specific duties of assistant principals and principals.

We draw on both the research studies and new data analyses to address each of the research questions. We develop a holistic review of the evidence and summarize the common and emergent themes, noting the source of the evidence. We summarize alignment and discordance of research findings and note the strength of the evidence. Despite the substantial variation across the research studies and new analyses, they begin to paint a picture of the assistant principal role.

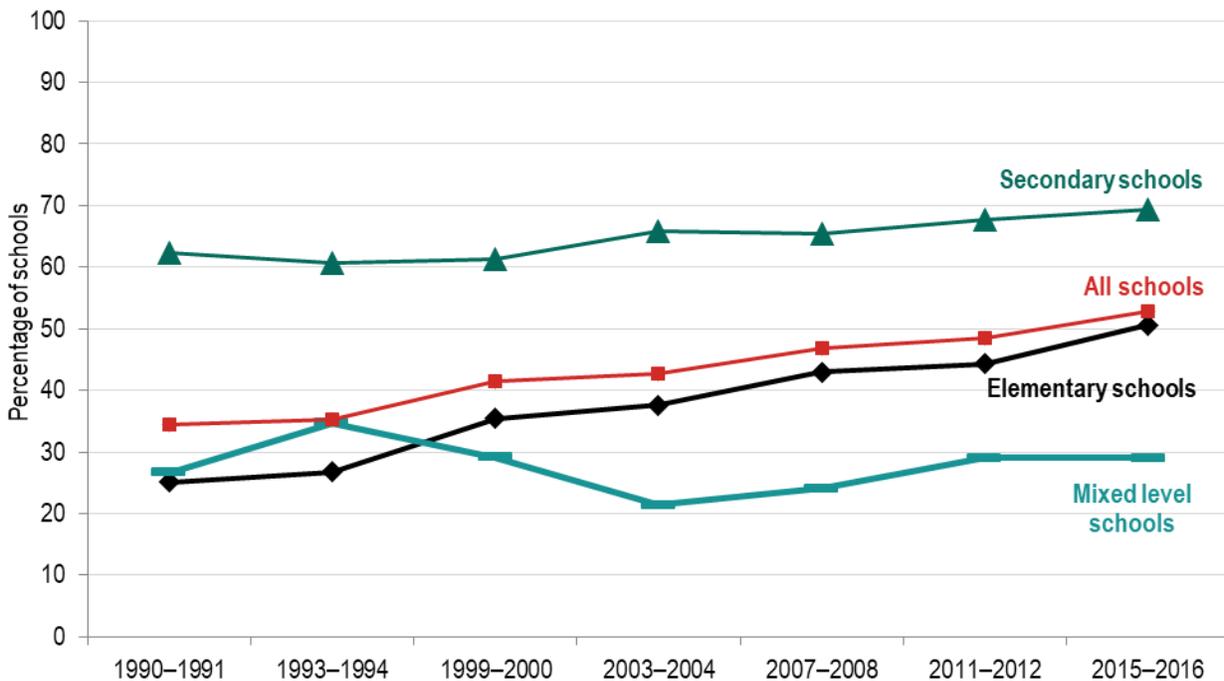
Key findings

The report includes the following key findings:

The number of assistant principals has been steadily increasing over the last 25 years, particularly in elementary schools, and has outpaced the increase in the number of principals. In 1990–1991, about one-third of all U.S. public schools had at least one full-time assistant principal, but more than half of these schools had an assistant principal by 2015–2016 (Figure 1). Most of the rise in the overall percentages of schools with assistant principals is explained by a dramatic increase in the percentage of elementary schools with assistant principals (from about one-quarter to more than half of elementary schools). The percentages of schools with multiple assistant principals also grew over this time period. We estimate that over the last 25 years, the number of assistant principals in the U.S. increased from 43,960 to 80,590, growing nearly six times as fast as the number of principals.

³ The supplemental data include traditional public schools and charter schools; however, there are very few charter schools in both Tennessee and Pennsylvania (only 6 percent of all public schools in each state) and nationally (only 8 percent of all public schools).

Figure 1. Nationally, the percentage of schools with assistant principals has increased over the past 25 years

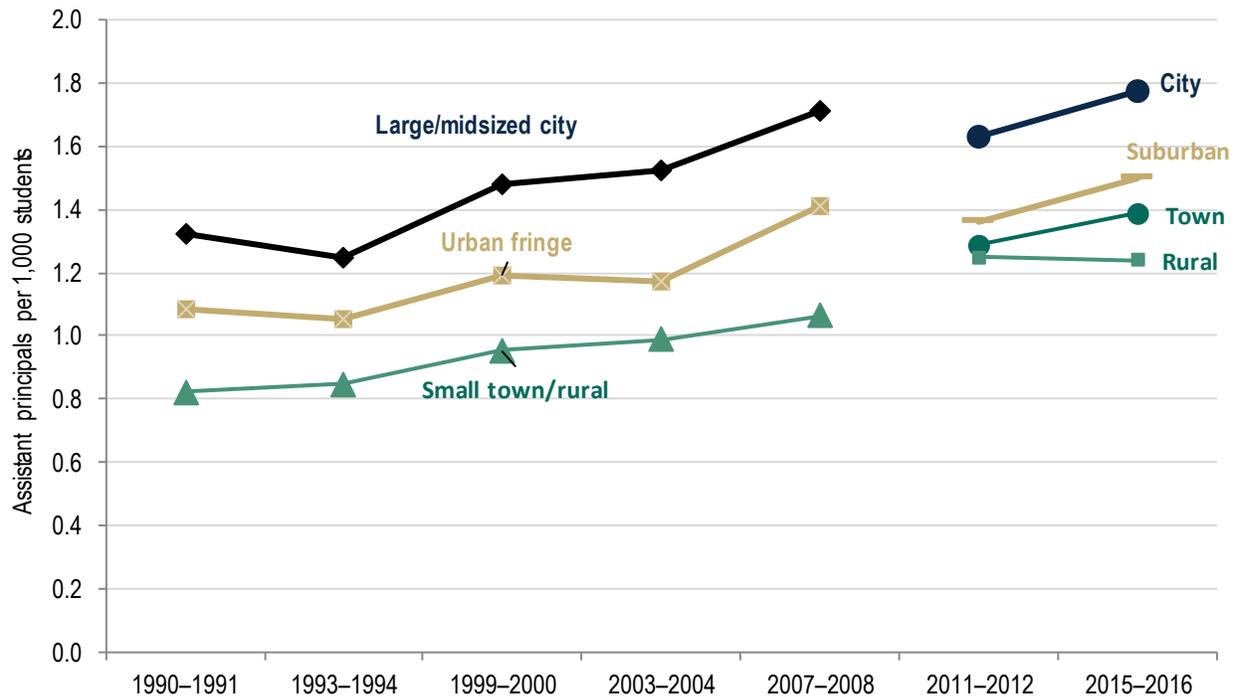


Source: Schools and Staffing Survey//National Teacher and Principal Survey, 1990-91, 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2003-04, 2007-08, 2011-12, 2015-16

Note: Number of schools range from 8,970 in 1990-91 to 5,770 in 2015-16. Estimates are nationally representative. Data on assistant principals was not available in the 1996-97 Schools and Staffing Survey.

Assistant principals are most common in larger schools, schools in the South, and in cities and suburbs. Although elementary schools have increased in size over this period, the growth in assistant principals is not fully explained by the increase in elementary school size. Cities, suburbs, and towns experienced relatively even growth in the ratios of assistant principals to students, but rural areas recently experienced a decline (Figure 2). A change in how the SASS/NTPS classified locales across years complicates comparisons over time; between 1990-1991 and 2007-2008, the assistant principal to student ratios increased in all three types of locales and in three of the four locales between 2011-2012 and 2015-2016. In 2015-2016, for every 1,000 students, cities had 1.8 assistant principals, compared with 1.5 for suburbs, 1.4 for towns, and 1.2 for rural areas.

Figure 2. Ratios of assistant principals to students have grown relatively equally in cities, suburbs, and towns but declined recently in rural areas



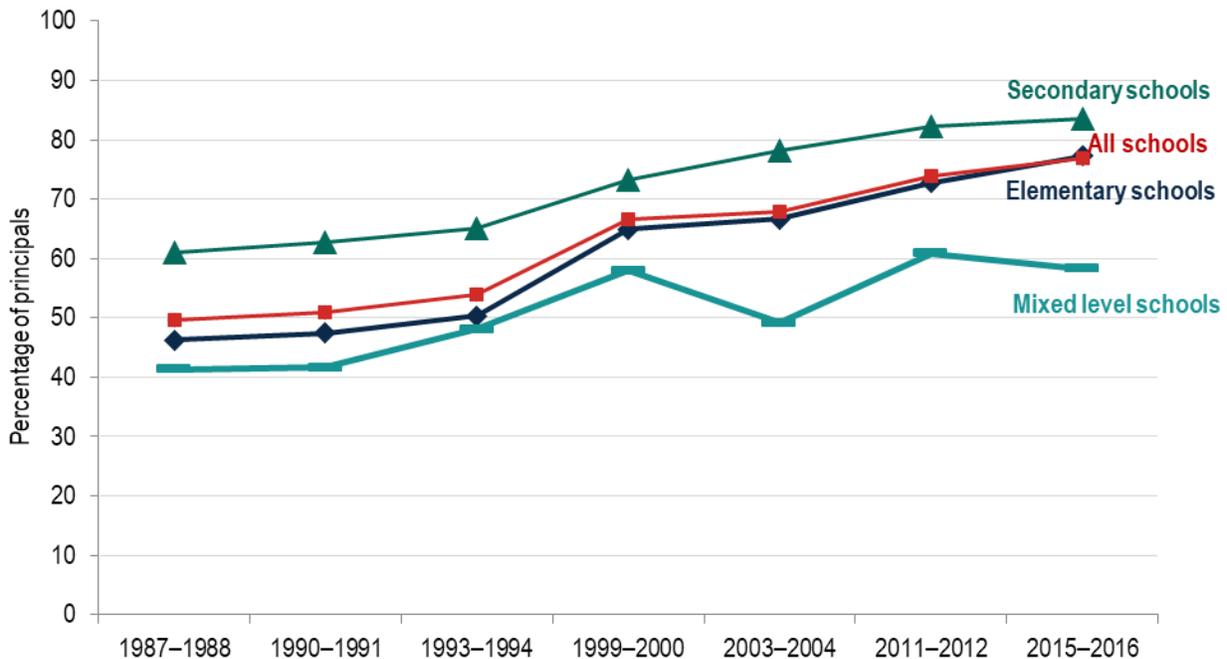
Source: Schools and Staffing Survey//National Teacher and Principal Survey, 1990-91, 1993-94, 1999-2000, 2003-04, 2007-08, 2011-12, 2015-16

Note: Number of schools range from 8,970 in 1990-91 to 5,770 in 2015-16. Estimates are nationally representative. Data on assistant principals was not available in the 1996-97 Schools and Staffing Survey.

Schools with assistant principals have more students of color than schools without assistant principals. Nationally, students of color made up 53 percent of students in schools with assistant principals, compared with 39 percent in schools without assistant principals. These differences are not entirely explained by differences in schools’ locales, regions, levels, student enrollment, and the percentages of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. No research explains the reason for these patterns. Evidence about how assistant principals are assigned to schools is limited, and there is no evidence on whether effective assistant principals are assigned to the schools where they are needed most.

The percentage of principals who have experience as an assistant principal has also increased over the last 25 years. In 1987-1988, about half of principals in all U.S. public schools had experience as assistant principals, but more than three-quarters of principals had this experience by 2015-2016 (Figure 3). We estimate that between 1987-1988 and 2015-2016, the numbers of principals with assistant principal experience grew from 39,100 to 69,600. Experience as an assistant principal was most common among principals who work in the types of schools where assistant principals were most common—schools in cities, suburbs, the South, larger schools, and schools with higher percentages of students of color.

Figure 3. Nationally, the percentage of principals with experience as an assistant principal has increased over the past 25 years



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

Note: Number of schools ranges from 8,520 in 1987–1988 to 5,710 in 2015–2016. Percentage reflects whether the individual held the position of assistant principal or program director before becoming a principal. Estimates are nationally representative. Data on whether principals had experience as an assistant principal were not available in the 2007–2008 Schools and Staffing Survey. Mixed level schools have both elementary and secondary levels, such as K–12 schools.

Assistant principals’ leadership roles vary considerably. The assistant principal role is complex and nuanced—it is not simply focused on instructional leadership or discipline. Most assistant principals undertake a mix of instructional leadership (for example, observing teachers); management (for example, scheduling testing, supervising after-school and athletic activities); and student discipline leadership tasks. However, the amount of time assistant principals spend on these tasks varies and is often based on principals’ discretion. There is much variation in the roles assistant principals undertake, and not all assistant principals have responsibilities that might best prepare them for the principalship. Furthermore, some assistant principals appear to take on similar duties as principals, although some assistant principals spend more time on specific responsibilities, such as student discipline, than principals. State policy contexts may explain some of the variation in assistant principals’ roles, and more recent data suggest instructional leadership, especially in the area of teacher observation and evaluation, is more of a focus than reported in earlier research. However, we have very limited understanding of how principals delegate duties to assistant principals. There are no unique professional standards for assistant professionals; states and districts mostly use the same standards and evaluation rubrics for both principals and assistant principals, contributing to the lack of clarity about the role.

Limitations in the research prevent a deeper understanding of the assistant principal role. For example, different studies measured assistant principals' responsibilities and time allocation in different ways, hindering comparisons. No studies examined the roles of assistant principals who have different titles or labels, such as assistant principal for instruction or assistant principal for administration. Some large high schools have a team of assistant principals and each could be assigned different roles. Principals play a key part in determining assistant principals' roles, yet we know little about how principals decide to assign leadership tasks to assistant principals or how these decisions might be influenced by district or school contexts. There is also very limited research on how assistant principals interact with other school staff, such as teacher leaders and instructional coaches. Finally, we need much more research about the relationships between assistant principals' roles; their background characteristics (including race, ethnicity, and gender); and school contexts.

Preservice programs do not specifically focus on training assistant principals, although graduates are more likely to initially serve as assistant principals, not principals. Most assistant principals start along the leadership pathway in preservice preparation for the principalship, and most graduates of these programs initially serve as assistant principals. The pathway to these preservice programs and the assistant principalship typically begins when teachers self-nominate or are formally or informally “tapped,” or encouraged to consider moving into administration. Importantly, most assistant principals aspire to be principals. Some districts have implemented principal pipeline programs that explicitly prepare teacher leaders for the assistant principalship and later prepare them to advance to the principalship.

Once on the job, assistant principals may participate in various types of professional development, mentoring, and networking activities. Assistant principals highly value these activities, particularly mentoring from their own principals. However, these supports are not systematically available to many assistant principals, such as those in rural areas or smaller districts. The research is unclear on the balance these supports strike between improving assistant principals' effectiveness in their current roles and preparing them for the principalship.

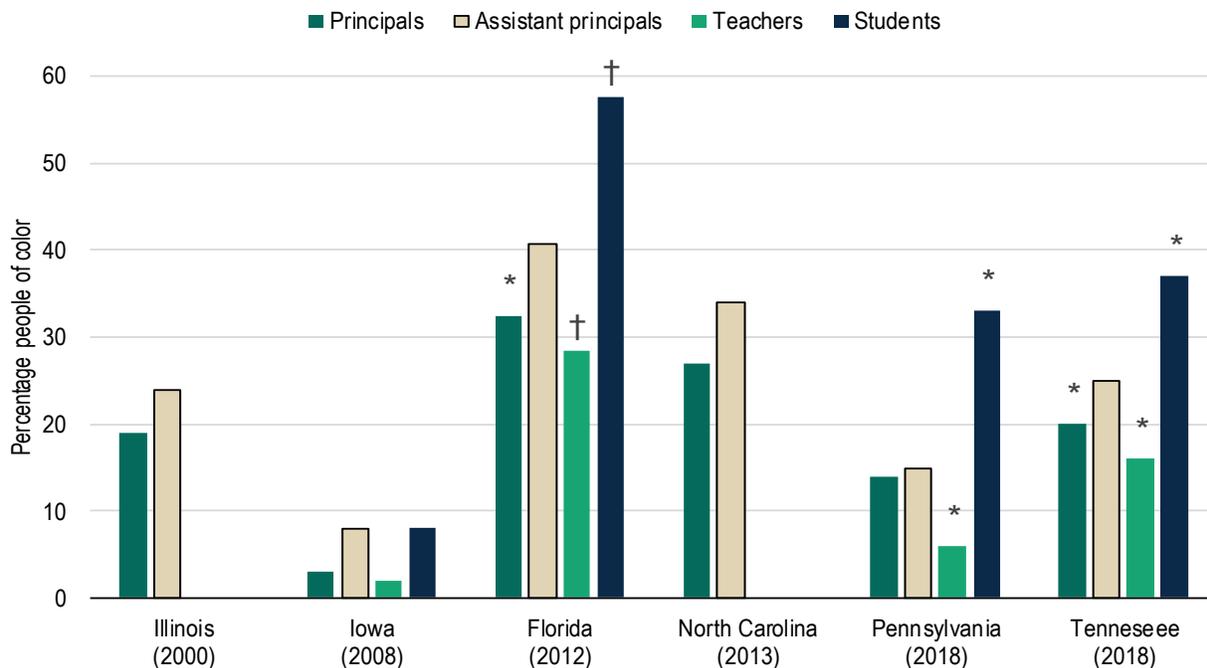
Studies provide limited information about the effectiveness of preservice preparation or professional development for assistant principals. Studies of specific programs often omit rich detail about program participants, context, and content, limiting comparisons across studies. There is no evidence about the relative effectiveness of different types of preservice preparation programs (traditional or district pipeline), or program components (such as mentoring and coursework) for improving assistant principals' leadership skills. Similarly, there is no evidence about the effectiveness of professional development, mentoring, and networking for success in the assistant principalship or advancement to the principalship. Most studies mainly describe assistant principals' perceptions of these experiences. Current evidence provides little indication that principals are required or prepared to work with assistant principals to prepare them for the principalship.

Educators of color are more likely to become assistant principals and less likely to become principals than white educators. People of color make up higher percentages of assistant principals than principals or teachers, although people of color are underrepresented among educators, relative to the student population (Figure 4). There are no national studies on the demographic characteristics of assistant principals, including race or ethnicity. However, across six

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states, on average, 24 percent of assistant principals were people of color, compared with 13 percent of teachers, 19 percent of principals, and 34 percent of students.

Figure 4. Assistant principals are more likely to be people of color than are teachers or principals



Source: Data from Illinois from Ringel et al. (2004); data from Iowa from Hollingworth and Dude (2009); data from North Carolina from Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017); data from Florida from Folsom et al. (2015); and administrative data from Pennsylvania and Tennessee, 2018.

Note: Ringel et al. (2004), Hollingworth and Dude (2009), and Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017) did not test for statistically significant differences between groups. Figure does not include North Carolina data from Gates et al. (2004) because Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017) provide more recent data for North Carolina. Ringel et al. (2004) and Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017) did not provide data on teachers or students.

* Difference, relative to assistant principals, is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

† Difference, relative to assistant principals and principals combined, is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

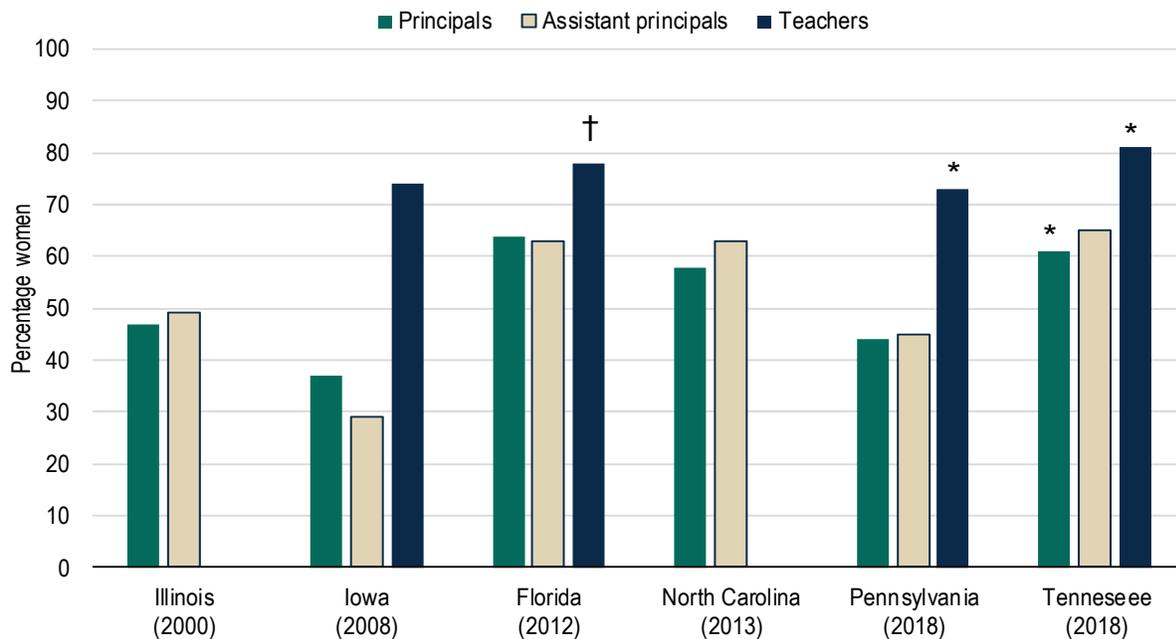
Nationally, principals of color are more likely to have experience as an assistant principal than white principals. These racial and ethnic differences are not entirely explained by people of color being more likely to work in urban schools, where assistant principals are more common. The national picture is consistent with evidence from Texas that after completing principal preparation programs, graduates of color were more likely than white graduates to advance to the assistant principalship rather than directly to the principalship. However, findings from other states on racial differences in the advancement of principal preparation graduates to the assistant principal and principal positions were more mixed. Research pointing to specific explanations driving these patterns for assistant principals is limited. Evidence suggests that for people of color, differences in access to mentoring and discrimination in hiring could play a role.

Women are underrepresented as assistant principals and principals, relative to their representation in the teacher workforce. Across six states, women make up 77 percent of teachers, on average, but only 52 percent of assistant principals and principals (Figure 5). After

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completing principal preparation programs, female graduates are less likely than male graduates to advance to the assistant principalship or principalship. Female assistant principals are more common in elementary schools than middle schools or high schools, consistent with higher percentages of female principals and teachers in elementary school. Studies suggest that differences in tapping, mentorship, hiring discrimination, and the time demands of administration (and how this interacts with family responsibilities) could play a role in explaining gender differences in advancement.

Figure 5. Women are underrepresented among assistant principals and principals, relative to their representation as teachers



Source: Data from Illinois from Ringel et al. (2004); data from Iowa from Hollingworth and Dude (2009); data from North Carolina from Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017); data from Florida from Folsom et al. (2015); and administrative data from Pennsylvania and Tennessee, 2018.

Note: Ringel et al. (2004), Hollingworth and Dude (2009), and Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017) did not test for statistically significant differences between groups. Figure does not include North Carolina data from Gates et al. (2004) because Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017) provide more recent data for North Carolina. Ringel et al. (2004) and Osborne-Lampkin and Folsom (2017) did not provide data on teachers.

* Difference, relative to assistant principals, is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

† Difference, relative to assistant principals and principals combined, is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Because the assistant principalship is a common stepping-stone to the principalship, it is important to understand how the role might hinder the advancement of educators of color and women along the pathway to the principalship or provide a stronger training ground. Studies highlight how women of color may face additional barriers, highlighting that intersections between race, ethnicity, and gender could limit access along the pathway.

Limited evidence exists about whether and how assistant principals contribute to improved student and school outcomes. One rigorous study indicated that an instructional leadership role for assistant principals improves student achievement. This study found that improving assistant

principals' coaching of teachers increased student achievement, supporting an increased instructional leadership role for assistant principals. Another study found an association between higher visibility of an assistant principal in the classroom and improved student behavior. Studies also describe how assistant principals could work to foster equitable environments through attention to cultural inclusivity in their daily work. However, there is insufficient research about which leadership tasks of assistant principals are most effective at improving student and school outcomes and advancing equity for teachers and students. Research also lacks valid and reliable measures of assistant principals' effectiveness.

There is little evidence of a relationship between assistant principal experience and future principal performance. Many principals believe that prior experience as an assistant principal was instrumental in their work as principals. However, studies indicate that principals with assistant principal experience generally perform no differently than principals without assistant principal experience. Some aspects of prior assistant principal experience, such as serving as an assistant principal in a more effective school, might be related to improved student achievement, but evidence is still emerging. Many more studies are needed, including across more states and contexts, to better document assistant principals' tasks and preparation experiences. Research can help district leaders and policymakers understand which aspects of the assistant principal role (if any) are most important for improving their future performance as principals and advancing equity for students and teachers.

Research topics on assistant principals vary widely, limiting the strength of the evidence.

There are few research studies that have addressed similar research questions about assistant principals. Research questions on the same topic use different measures or concepts, making comparisons and synthesis across studies difficult. Although many studies provide contextual information about study participants and research settings, this information is rarely analyzed or discussed in findings. Even when multiple studies focus on a specific subgroup of assistant principals, such as leaders of color, or a specific type of school, such as high schools, there is little overlap in the study's topics. One study might address the role of assistant principals of color, whereas another addresses the pathway to the principalship.

The quality of the research studies also varies widely. Some studies use multiple years of data and employ rigorous analytical methods to make well-founded claims; others are weaker in execution. For example, some collect survey data from one point in time with low response rates and do not report differences between respondents and non-respondents or potential biases related to these differences. Some studies provide detailed information about sampling procedures, while others do not describe how study participants are selected or do not provide other relevant background or contextual information. Findings about assistant principals and principals are commonly combined as findings about "school leaders." We excluded more than 22 studies from the synthesis because they only report combined data for assistant principals and principals. These limitations often obscure important research results on assistant principals.

Setting an agenda for reframing and redefining the assistant principal role

Despite limitations in the research base, the research does point to strong trends. The assistant principal role is increasingly common, and most assistant principals aspire to become principals; principals report that serving as an assistant principal was useful preparation for the principalship. However, at the same time, assistant principals are given neither sequential, skill-building opportunities nor tailored evaluations. In addition, principals are not coached to develop assistant principals. Changes in the racial and ethnic composition of students have far outpaced the change in composition of those who teach in and run schools. As a link between teaching and the principalship, the assistant principal role is either a “choke point” for diversifying the principalship or a helpful gateway.

Giving the assistant principal role the attention it deserves—by formalizing standards consistent with the role’s function as preparation for the principalship; developing specialized preparation, sequenced leadership tasks, and dedicated evaluation systems; and investing in more research—could help achieve two distinct goals for the role. First, it could ensure that the role better prepares future principals for the principalship. Second, it could advance equity by increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the principalship and improving how school leaders promote equity for students, teachers, and schools as a whole. However, we recognize that assistant principals exist within a broader context; their roles need to be flexible enough to adapt to the needs of students, teachers, and principals. Formalization of the role can help strike a balance to help assistant principals work effectively in their local context while also gaining the experience and development opportunities to become successful principals.

Our findings suggest an agenda for reframing and redefining the assistant principal role, despite the limitations of the research base. We pivot here to set forth an agenda to strengthen the role based upon our interpretation of the research findings. Specifically, we posit that the assistant principal role is well positioned to serve as a stepping-stone to the principalship; should be strengthened around instructional leadership tasks; and, with some strategic changes, can help to better prepare future principals and diversify the principal pipeline. Furthermore, as leaders in their schools and members of school leadership teams, assistant principals can perhaps play key roles in making the job of the principalship more manageable, thus creating better working conditions for teachers and leaders and even helping to stem the tide of educator shortages and attrition.

The assistant principal role is well positioned to serve as a stepping-stone to the principalship and could be used strategically and consistently to better prepare future principals. Currently, the assistant principal position is not explicitly designed to prepare effective principals. A refocused role could provide dedicated and specific opportunities to prepare future candidates for the principalship and improve the effectiveness of assistant principals in their current roles. Although district leaders and policymakers may surmise that this new emphasis could completely disrupt current assistant principal responsibilities, we do not suggest that assistant principals be removed from their current roles and responsibilities as members of their school’s leadership teams and as allocated by school principals. We do think that these roles and responsibilities can be simultaneously designed to more thoughtfully and equitably prepare assistant principals to move along the pathway to the principalship. For some districts, this might be a heavier

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lift than for others, especially if assistant principals have limited opportunities related to instructional leadership. In some cases, assistant principals might benefit from professional development offered to principals given the overlap in leadership responsibilities. Much can be learned from districts that have already implemented principal pipelines. Intentionally designing the assistant principal role as a step along a pathway to the principalship, with added emphases on instructional leadership and equity, could involve the following:

- **Develop standards for assistant principals that are consistent with the role’s function as preparation for the principalship.** Developing standards that identify competencies for assistant principals’ primary responsibilities would allow assistant principals to gain experience needed for success as a principal. Assistant principals’ standards should explicitly include instructional leadership skills, such as coaching and providing feedback to teachers, alongside other tasks, given the importance of instructional leadership for highly effective principals.⁴
- **Implement developmental, sequenced leadership tasks and opportunities for assistant principals aligned with the standards.** Designating a set of leadership tasks for assistant principals, with training and ongoing support for mastery of each of the tasks, could help assistant principals progress toward the principalship.
- **Articulate in job descriptions that the assistant principal role includes preparation for the principalship.** Job descriptions should include explicit language that the assistant principal position is a step along the pathway to the principalship.
- **Provide principals with professional development on how to mentor assistant principals and delegate leadership tasks to help them grow and advance.** Clarifying the roles of principals and other central office staff and providing training to principals would help make principals’ work with assistant principals more systematic and focused on the competencies needed for success in the principalship. This skill set can also be included in principal standards and job descriptions.
- **Implement unique systems of evaluation for assistant principals.** Evaluations can provide valuable feedback to assistant principals about their effectiveness and areas for development. Evaluation processes could be tailored by identifying focal indicators and competencies aligned to the standards and articulating expectations for assistant principals to advance to the principalship. It could also provide important information for districts about strong candidates for open principal positions.
- **Clarify policies around assistant principals.** There is little articulation or understanding of policies about assistant principals, including policies about how to assign assistant principals to specific schools and how funding is allocated to schools to pay for assistant principals. For example, policies could require that assistant principals be allocated to low-performing schools with greatest needs to help advance equity within states and districts.

⁴ Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). *How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research*. The Wallace Foundation.

- **Identify and expand ways to measure the impacts of assistant principals on students and teachers.** Researchers can expand studies to focus beyond student achievement into such areas as equity and social-emotional learning needs of students and staff. They can also examine assistant principals' influence on school climate and working conditions that are related to attracting and retaining effective teachers and staff.

Little evidence suggests that districts should invest in developing a discrete career for the assistant principal role that is separate from the role as a stepping-stone on the pathway to the principalship. At the same time, there is no direct evidence that a differentiated role would be ill advised. Rather, the overlap between the assistant principal and principal roles suggests that principals need administrators who can support the school across a broad range of leadership responsibilities.

Development of a unique position for assistant principals could entail two challenges:

- Differentiate the role, not only from that of the principal but also from other leadership positions such as teacher leaders and instructional coaches
- Design and implement preservice principal preparation programs for the unique role

Addressing barriers to assistant principal advancement for educators of color and women can contribute to a more diverse and equitable pathway to the principalship. Evidence indicates that educators of color are more likely to become assistant principals than white educators. It is not clear whether this additional preparation in the assistant principal role improves their success as principals and whether they receive access to the supports, such as mentoring, that might help their advancement. Female educators are less likely to advance to either the assistant principalship or principalship than male educators. There is also evidence that women of color face different barriers to advancement than other educators. Some studies provide evidence that assistant principals of color have less access to mentoring. Current research also suggests a relationship between race and ethnicity and the assignment of assistant principal duties.

Addressing potential barriers to advancement may require the following:

- **Develop clearer policies and procedures for advancement along the pathway.** The lack of clear policies and procedures can compromise equal access for advancement. Each step along the pathway presents opportunities for biases—whether structural or social—that alter career trajectories for women and educators of color. Although clear policies and procedures for advancement cannot alone eliminate inequity, they can reduce the opportunities for bias. In addition, setting clear criteria around core competencies for the assistant principalship and principalship can help demystify the advancement process and make it more transparent.
- **Ensure equitable experiences in leadership roles while in the assistant principal position.** Creating policies and guidelines to ensure that all assistant principals have equal opportunities to experience a variety of leadership roles will help them develop competencies for the principalship. Developing these systems can help reduce bias by making clear to principals and central office staff that they need to provide opportunities for all assistant principals to take on varied leadership roles to prepare them to become principals.

- **Develop systems to ensure equitable access to mentoring and professional development.** Mentoring and professional development should be available and accessible to all assistant principals, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, and not based on individual preference or social networks. Developing expertise among principals and principal supervisors on how to effectively coach assistant principals and prepare them to become principals is also important for reducing bias.
- **Collect and analyze data by race or ethnicity and gender in leader tracking systems.** Leader tracking systems, or data systems that track the background, career progressions, qualifications, and effectiveness of educators, can provide information about differential rates of hiring, promotion, and assignment of assistant principals to schools. These systems can also include nominations for career advancement into teacher leadership roles and leadership pipeline programs via processes like tapping and sponsoring.
- **Implement equity audits for district policies and practices to understand barriers to advancement and putting into place responses to those audits.** Districts can collect and monitor these data to identify and address inequality. School districts can use data systems to monitor how assistant principals' responsibilities and duties are assigned and whether there is equitable access to training and mentoring. These processes could also help identify and suggest how to counter the trends and biases that may result from tapping.

Researchers should embark on a more coherent and larger-scale research agenda. Research studies can examine the ways in which the assistant principal position might promote or impede equitable outcomes for students, staff, and faculty. For example, what are the practices associated with the role of the assistant principal, such as enacting discipline policies for students and evaluating teachers, that have direct links to inequitable outcomes? And how can assistant principals be best prepared to carry out these duties in ways that lead to equitable outcomes for all members of the school community?

The assistant principal position could impede progress along the pathway to the principalship, particularly for people of color, but the research on this is not clear. Experience as an assistant principal might be beneficial, leading to better preparation for and performance as principal, but it could also be detrimental, lengthening educators' ascent to the principalship or leading them to exit the profession before they have the opportunity for promotion. If there are benefits to assistant principal experience, then identifying the elements of the role that convey these benefits and ensuring they are equally available, can help prepare candidates for the principalship. Time in the assistant principalship could then help rather than hurt, career trajectories. Overall, there is a lack of research specifically focused on issues of equity as they relate to the pathway into the assistant principal position and then on to the principalship. Existing research does, however, paint a clear picture by describing patterns of underrepresentation. These patterns call attention to the need for more research to explore the factors driving these differences because understanding these factors can guide local and state-level efforts to advance equity.

Agenda for future research on the assistant principalship

- Why is the number of assistant principals increasing?
- Are effective assistant principals equitably allocated to schools?
- How do principals decide which tasks to assign assistant principals?
- How do assistant principals work with other school staff?
- What leadership titles denote the assistant principal role?
- What are the most effective approaches to prepare and develop assistant principals?
- Why are educators of color more likely than white educators to become assistant principals and less likely than white educators to directly advance to the principalship?
- Are assistant principals of color promoted to the principalship at the same rate as white assistant principals?
- How can experiences in the pathway from teacher to principal be more equitable for educators of color and female educators?
- Which assistant principal roles are most related to improved student and school outcomes?
- How can assistant principals best advance equity for students and teachers?
- What experiences as an assistant principal are most related to stronger principal performance, including in advancing equity for students and teachers?

Summary

The state of the knowledge base on assistant principals has not grown in step with the increased prevalence of assistant principals, and there are significant gaps in our understanding of assistant principals, their role, and how they affect outcomes for students and schools. These highlights and the full report highlight the need to focus more on an increasingly prevalent yet often overlooked role. Indeed, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers can all contribute to the evolution of the assistant principal role. The recommendations in the report can provide an agenda for reframing and redefining the assistant principal role.

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“This research confirms the need to reculture the assistant principalship in perceptions and practices. Assistant principals are poised and ready to assume deeper leadership roles in our schools. This report provides a roadmap for us to elevate the position, increase the impact of the school leadership team, and address the systems and structures that can enable assistant principals to offer their true strengths and full potential in the pursuit of increased student achievement and success.”

*Beverly J. Hutton, Ed.D.
NASSP Chief Programs Officer
National Association of Secondary School Principals*

“School and student success depends on strong leadership teams, and that includes the role of the assistant principal. This report provides a strong foundation for what we know about the assistant principal role and more important, what we must learn to ensure that schools have the strong leadership that they need.”

*L. Earl Franks, Ed.D., CAE
Executive Director
National Association of Elementary School Principals*

“This research recognizes assistant principals’ complex role and gives it the attention it deserves by highlighting assistant principals as leaders. The report addresses the pipeline needed to strengthen one’s administrative skills, resulting in a distributed leadership model where assistant principals contribute to and share school leadership responsibilities beyond day-to-day management and discipline.”

*Debra Paradowski
Associate Principal, Arrowhead Union High School, Hartland, Wisc.
NASSP National Assistant Principal of the Year, 2020*

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