

Principal Resources: Acquisition, Deployment, and Barriers

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Getting Down to Facts

A research project designed to provide California's policy-makers and other education stakeholders with comprehensive information about the state's school finance and governance systems, and lay the groundwork for a conversation about needed reforms. The project was made possible by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation.

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For the full text of the author's research report and the other studies in this project, see: www.irepp.net

For background on California's school finance system, see: www.californiaschoolfinance.org

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This study examines how principals acquire and deploy fiscal and human resources, addressing four core questions:

1. What educational goals do principals pursue and prioritize?
2. What types of monetary, human, and information resources do principals acquire?
3. How do principals deploy resources within their schools?
4. What supports and constraints do principals experience when they attempt to allocate resources strategically to raise student performance?

Summary of Key Findings

Characteristics of California Principals

The Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS) data indicate that California's principals have comparable levels of experience to those in other states, but they have worked at their current schools for shorter periods of time, on average. While California principals earn more than principals in other states, this difference is due largely to higher prices in this state. They also have lower salaries relative to the market value of comparable workers.

The ratio of the mean (or average) principal salary to the mean teacher salary is similar to that of other states. California's principal workforce falls far short of matching the ethnic diversity of students, with 69.3% of principals being white and only 16.6% Latino.

The PACE survey data indicate that California principals working in schools with higher concentrations of students from low-income families (above the median of 25.5%) earn about \$7,000 less than principals working in schools with fewer such students.

California principals emphasize basic skills as the top educational goal

SASS interviewers asked principals about eight possible teaching and learning priorities and asked them to rank their first three. (See Figure 1 on page 2.) Compared to principals in other states, California principals place stronger emphasis on basic literacy skills. They are also more likely to rank multicultural awareness among their top priorities. This focus on basic

skills is less likely to be emphasized by the subset of California principals who serve students from high socioeconomic status (SES) families.

The PACE survey also asked principals to list what they perceived as their superintendent's top three goals. A focus on basic skills as the first priority was consistent with the principal's SASS results, but principals also report that they perceive themselves to be less focused on test preparation than are their respective superintendents.

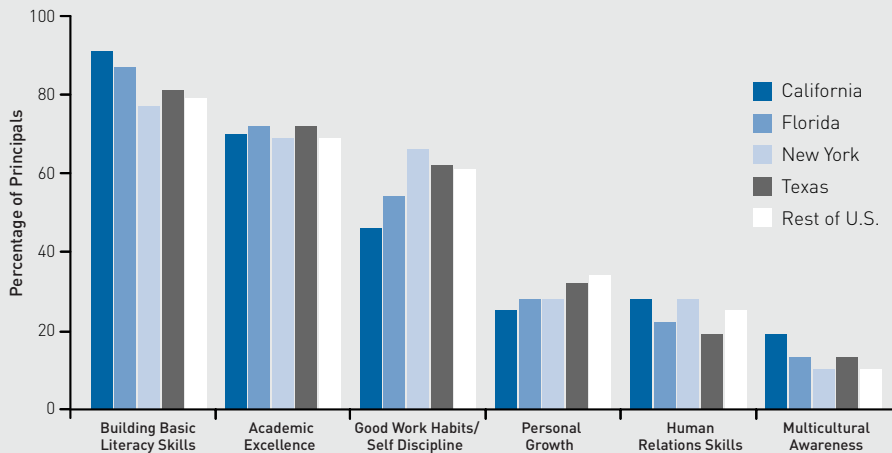
Study Methods

This study is a historical review of school facility finance. It first reviews what is known about principals' resource use, examining how the principal's role has changed over time and what factors shape principals' behavior and beliefs concerning school-level resources.

To compare California principals to those in other states, the study draws on the national Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS:1999–2000), collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The SASS data cited here reflect a sample of 8,527 public school principals nationwide, including 393 working in California. In their analysis of these data, the authors compare California to New York, Texas, and Florida, and then to all other states.

Finally, the authors report findings from a new survey developed by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) of a stratified random sample of 267 elementary and high school principals in California (2005–06).

Figure 1 • SASS data (1999–2000) compares principals’ priorities in California to other large states and the remainder of the United States



Most principals report significant parent volunteer time

About three-fourths of principals in the PACE survey report that their schools receive revenues from PTAs and local individuals (including parents). Based on those responses, the median elementary school raised \$15,000 through PTA activities, from individual parents, or through other private sources; the median high school raised about \$25,000 annually.

These private revenue streams vary sharply across communities: schools serving higher concentrations of students from low-income families (those below the median) raise about \$21 per pupil from these private sources, while schools serving fewer low-income students raise more than twice that amount per pupil (\$56 annually). While these differences are stark, the total funds raised through donations are small in most districts.

Almost nine in 10 California principals say they use volunteers “sometimes” or “a great deal” to help staff classrooms, provide tutorial services, or manage playgrounds. The use of volunteers is more common in elementary schools and in schools serving fewer children in poverty.

Principals do not consistently deploy resources strategically

The PACE survey examines the extent to which principals deploy resources in a strategic fashion, aiming to advance their stated educational priorities. The authors ask about a variety of resources, including the principal’s own use of time, the use of instructional time, the allocation of teachers, and the use of student assessment data.

Principals spend considerable time on noninstructional tasks

Principals report spending substantial time interacting with parents and handling teachers’ concerns. Interacting with the district office, handling student discipline issues, and working on compliance requirements are the next strongest demands on principals’ time.

They spend less time evaluating or coaching teachers, helping teachers align their pedagogy, and reviewing student work or classroom performance. Similarly, the SASS data show that when compared with principals in other states, California principals report spending less time on a variety of activities connected with instruction.

Principals report shifting instructional time toward core subject areas

Four in five of the principals surveyed report that in the past two years they have shifted instructional time to increase attention to reading and language arts. About two-fifths of elementary and three-fifths of high school principals report increasing the amount of time spent on test preparation. Two-thirds of principals report increasing the total length of instructional time through after-school or Saturday-school options. These changes are more frequently made by principals who serve higher shares of students from low-income families.

Teacher assignments are driven more by rules than by strategic considerations

A significant share of principals emphasized the importance of personnel rules, seniority, and other labor-contract provisions as criteria they used to allocate teachers to grade levels, courses, and differing students. Others, however, emphasized strategic concerns: creating assignments that freed time for planning and collaboration, or assigning stronger teachers to weaker students. High school principals and those serving low-income communities placed less emphasis on procedural rules in allocating teachers; elementary and female principals—and those in better-off communities—reported greater allegiance to rules and contract provisions.

In hiring new teachers, the most salient criterion for principals is the candidate’s fit with the school philosophy or educational approach. This criterion is significantly stronger among principals in poor communities and those who lead larger schools.

Principals use achievement data more often to assess students than teachers

Many California principals view student achievement data as a useful resource, but only about one-third

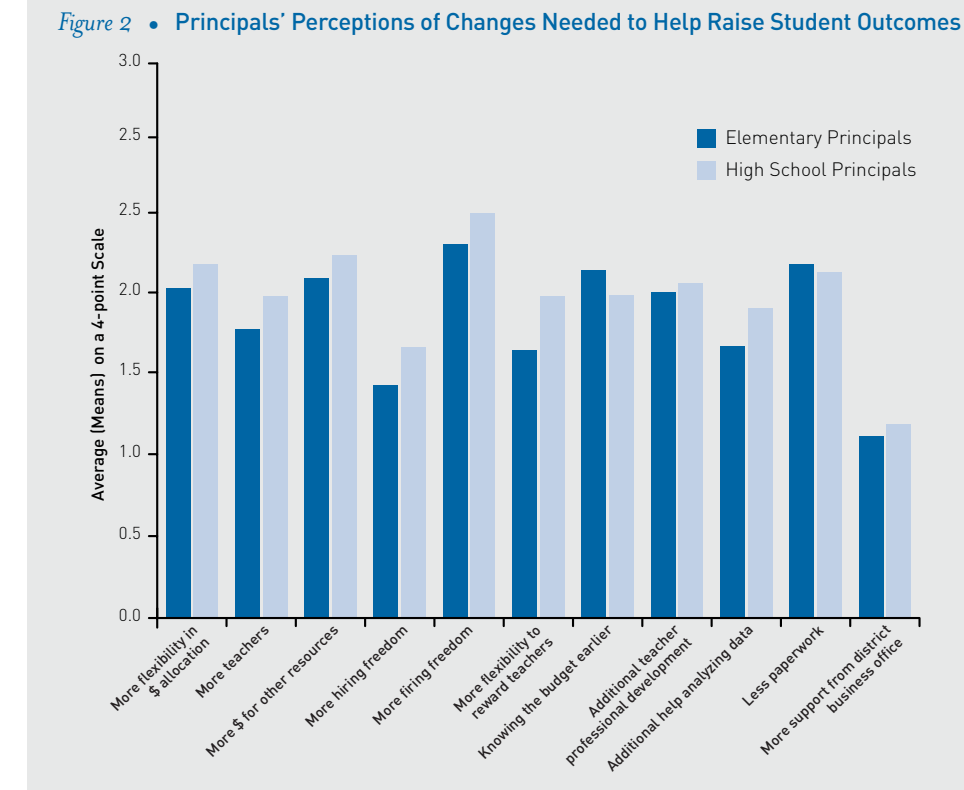
report working with this information at least once a month. They rarely use achievement data to assess the strengths or weaknesses of a teacher. And only a small share of California principals reward strong teachers with more desirable teaching assignments or other individual benefits.

Principals see constraints on teacher dismissals, categorical program rules, and paperwork requirements as obstacles to raising student performance

Based on the SASS data, the authors conclude that principals in California perceive greater barriers to firing ineffective teachers than do their peers in other states. In addition, California principals, especially those in schools with high levels of students on free- or reduced-priced meals, report lower levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching at their schools than their counterparts elsewhere.

On the PACE survey, principals are asked what changes are needed to help raise student outcomes. Overall, as shown in Figure 2, they value more flexibility in dismissing ineffective teachers above other choices they were given, including acquiring new teaching posts or other resources. Although in general they felt unconstrained in dismissing new teachers during their probationary period, they felt unable to fire teachers once they had tenure. Respondents emphasized the importance to student outcome gains of greater flexibility to dismiss teachers. However, among the principals who returned the survey, 158 also answered a question regarding the number of current teachers they would like to see leave their school; 75% said they wanted to dismiss two or fewer.

Principals also cite less paperwork and more flexibility in allocating dollars as important changes for improving student outcomes. They report feeling heavily constrained by restrictions embedded in labor contracts and



categorical funding prescriptions. In contrast, principals report significant support from their district offices and school site councils.

Authors' Conclusions

To a limited extent, California principals recognize and respond to the priorities and organizational tools associated with standards-based reform. They report that they value basic skill development over other goals and that they have shifted instructional time to focus on reading and language arts. Many have increased total instructional time.

Categorical aid offers resources with which some principals have been able to respond to new incentives, but they view accompanying regulatory and paperwork requirements as burdensome and detrimental to student outcomes. In addition, principals see themselves as particularly bound by the inability to fire ineffective teachers. They report that given additional authority, they would dismiss few

teachers; 75% of principals would dismiss two or fewer. However, this authority alone may increase a principals' influence in their school and their ability to implement effective reforms.

In summary, while some recent changes are evident, only a subset of principals appear to be making the most of the resources available to them. For example, few are strategic in their use of teachers' time and student achievement data. Change will depend on greater attention to the policy environment in which principals operate, most notably the flexibility and appropriate incentives available to them.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is a research center based at Stanford University and the University of California. The lead author, Bruce Fuller, is a PACE codirector and professor of education and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley. This study was completed in November 2006.