RAND | AMERICAN SCHOOL DISTRICT PANEL | CRPE REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Research Report

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How School Districts Prepare and Develop School Principals

Selected Findings from the Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey

Between 2011 and 2016, our RAND colleagues monitored six large urban districts' efforts to develop systematic processes to support the preparation, hiring, development, evaluation, and support of school leaders (subsequently referred to as *principal pipeline activities*) (Gates et al., 2019). These districts that invested in such activities outperformed comparison districts in reading and math achievement, leading researchers to conclude that implementation of principal pipeline activities was feasible, effective, and affordable (Gates et al., 2019). Given the promising results, our colleagues conducted interviews with 192 district leaders in 2019 to learn more details about their principal pipeline activities (Gates et al., 2020). These studies—funded under The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI)—identified 11 key principal pipeline activities distributed across seven domains, which we summarize in Table 1.

Importantly, until now, the body of work looking at principal pipeline activities has almost exclusively involved districts serving 10,000 students or more (Gates et al., 2019; Goldring et al., 2023) or involved case studies of single districts or states

KEY FINDINGS

- Assistant principalship is the main pathway into principalship in large districts (those serving 10,000 students or more) and medium districts (those serving 3,000 to 9,999 students), but not in small districts (those serving fewer than 3,000 students).
- Of the seven domains of principal pipeline activities we examined, districts most commonly provided written leader standards for principals and on-the-job supports for novice principals. Leader tracking systems and dedicated support staff were the least common activities.
- A greater share of large districts than of small (and often medium) districts invested in all seven domains of principal pipeline activities that we examined.
- As of spring 2024, districts did not foresee cuts to their existing principal pipeline infrastructure when coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) federal aid was set to expire in September 2024.

TABLE 1
Principal Pipeline Activities Identified in Prior Research

Domain	Recommended Pipeline Activities from Prior Research	Items Asked About on Our Survey
Leader standards (Domain 1)	• Leader standards	• Written standards for what principals need to know and do
Principal preparation (Domain 2)	• Processes that encourage staff to become school leaders • Professional development for aspiring principals • Engagement with principal preparation programs	• A district-led program to prepare candidates to become school principals • A partnership with one or more universities to prepare candidates to become school principals • A partnership with one or more nonuniversity programs to prepare candidates to become school principals
Selective hiring and placement (Domain 3)	• District talent pool process to screen individuals • Criteria used to evaluate and select candidates	• Selective hiring procedures in which the district uses data on the candidates and their demonstrated skills to match a principal to a particular school
On-the-job support and evaluation (Domain 4)	• Evaluations aligned to leader standards • Individualized coaching	• Executive coaching or other on-the-job professional development for current principals • On-the-job evaluation and support (e.g., assigning a current principal as mentor) for novice principals in the district
Principal supervision (Domain 5)	• Principal supervisor	• A principal supervisor dedicated to supporting principal growth
Leader tracking systems (Domain 6)	• Principal data system	• A data system about the qualifications and performance of the district's current principals • A data system about the qualifications and performance of aspiring principals
Systems of support (Domain 7)	• District position/office dedicated to school leadership	• A district staff person dedicated to overseeing principal pipelines (e.g., a director of education leadership)

SOURCE: Features information from Gates et al. (2020), p. xii.

(Hayes and Burkett, 2020; Pannell et al., 2015; Pendola and Fuller, 2021). These large districts, however, represent only a small minority (about 7 percent) of all K–12 public school districts (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-b). Furthermore, large districts likely differ from their smaller counterparts in ways that matter for principal pipeline activities. For example, smaller districts likely have fewer resources and fewer central office staff to dedicate to supporting their school principals. In fact, a prior PPI study supports our hypothesis that smaller districts are less likely to invest in principal pipeline activities.[1] As that study concluded, "officials in small districts [i.e., ones serving fewer than 10,000 students] suggested some potential differences between small and 10K+ districts in the way principals are supervised and supported; these differences are worthy of further exploration in future research" (Gates et al., 2020, p. xvi).

The Wallace Foundation is now tracking over time the share of districts nationally of all sizes that invest in principal pipeline activities. To aid in this effort, this report makes two contributions. First, we estimate the share of U.S. public school districts engaged in key principal pipeline activities for novice principals identified in prior research (see Table 1). Second, we separately examine principal pipeline activities by district enrollment size to investigate our hypothesis that the infrastructure to support the principal pipeline is generally confined to large districts. This report is therefore intended to support administrators of principal preparation programs, school district leaders, state department of education staff who oversee principal certification and leadership development, and education researchers who study school leadership.

To address our two objectives, we administered a survey focused on principal pipeline activities to a sample of K–12 public school districts to be completed by district central office staff. We recommended that a human resources (HR) director or principal

supervisor complete the survey items we analyzed in this report. We designed our survey items to align with the 11 principal pipeline activities distributed across seven domains identified in prior research, as shown in Table 1. We note that restrictions on survey space did not allow us to individually ask about all 11 principal pipeline activities, although our survey items covered all seven domains.[2] For consistency, we use terminology from prior PPI-related reports to describe the seven domains throughout this report.

We administered our survey between March 6 and May 3, 2024, to members of the American School District Panel (ASDP), which is a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools and MGT. Over the past four years, we have randomly selected 4,200 K–12 public school districts to invite them into the ASDP. As of spring 2024, the ASDP had a 31.2 percent recruitment rate. Of the 1,318 public school districts that were members of the ASDP as of spring 2024, 190 districts completed a sufficient number of items on the spring 2024 survey to be included in our dataset and receive a survey weight (a 14.4 percent completion rate). However, only 156 districts completed at least one survey item in the survey module about principal pipelines and thus are included in the analyses that we present in this report.

We caution readers that this is a very small share of the roughly 13,000 school districts located across the United States. Furthermore, although we weighted our small sample of districts to make it representative of school districts across the country at least on such observable characteristics as enrollment size, region, locale, and free or reduced-price lunch eligibility, even our weighted survey sample might not be entirely representative of districts nationally. It is highly likely that the public school districts that enroll in the ASDP and take our surveys (including this module on principal pipelines) differ from those who do not in meaningful ways that are impossible to measure.

We disaggregated districts' responses to our survey by enrollment size (see the text box) to address one of our central research questions. However, we caution readers that the number of districts in each of our enrollment size subgroups (*small*, *medium*, and *large*) is quite small. These small sample sizes create a high degree of uncertainty for survey estimates. Therefore, substantively large differences across enrollment size subgroups are not always statistically significant. We encourage readers not to place undue emphasis on the estimated percentages and to instead focus on the patterns across subgroups, particularly in the areas where they are substantively large. A few additional details about our data collection and analysis are included at the end of this report, and more information can be found in Grant et al. (2024).

Large districts likely differ from their smaller counterparts in ways that matter for principal pipeline activities.

This report is organized as follows. First, we provide an overview of what principal pipelines looked like in small, medium, and large districts as of the spring of the 2023–2024 school year. Second, we discuss each of the seven domains shown in Table 1 in turn. We investigate what share of districts nationally engaged in activities within each domain and how this varied by district enrollment size. Third, we examine the extent to which district leaders foresaw cuts to these principal pipeline activities in coming school years because of the expiration of federal stimulus funds that may have been helping to fund these activities. We conclude with a summary discussion of patterns observed across the seven domains and district enrollment size.

Terms Used in This Report

Throughout our analyses, we examine how districts' principal pipeline activities vary by district enrollment size. In the text, we describe only those differences that are statistically significant at the 5-percent level. We defined our district size categories as follows:

- *Small* districts: fewer than 3,000 students (n = 84)
- *Medium* districts: 3,000–9,999 students (n = 40)
- *Large* districts: 10,000 students or more (n = 31).

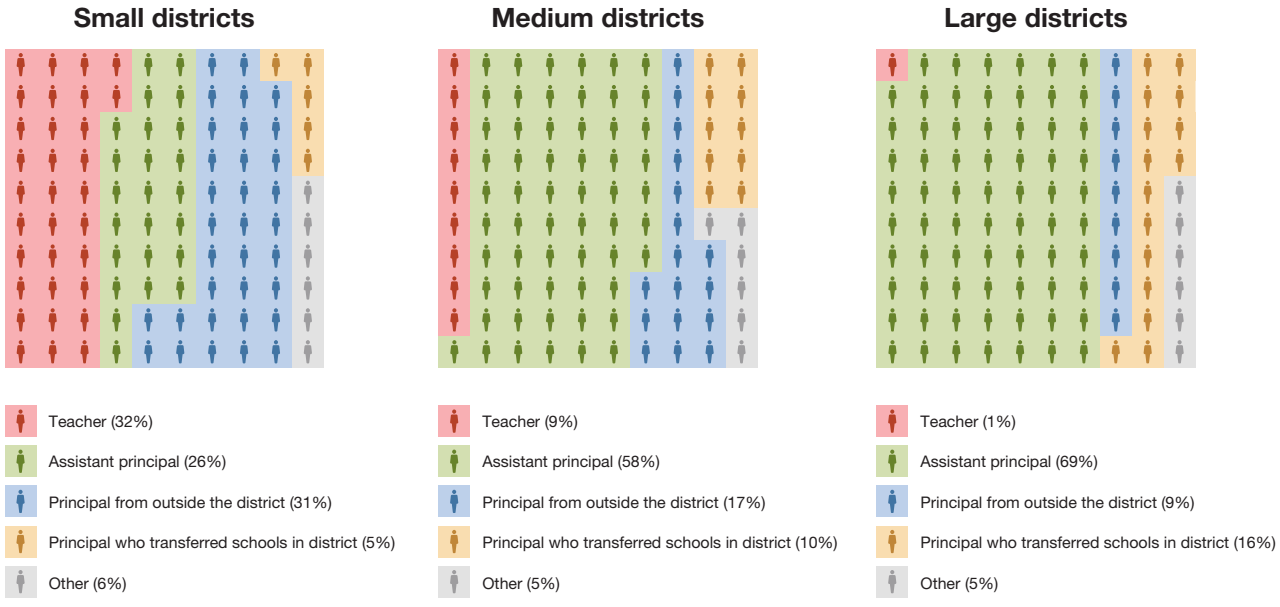
Assistant Principalship Was the Main Pathway into Principalship Reported by Medium and Large Districts, but Not by Small Districts

We asked leaders to report on behalf of their district what percentage of their current principal workforce came directly from previous positions. We listed several possible previous roles, including teacher, assistant principal, and transfers from inside and outside the district. As it is possible that respondents do not know the answers for all their principals, we emphasize in Figure 1 the difference in proportions rather than precise percentage differences between small, medium, and large districts.

Figure 1 shows that the backgrounds of districts' current principal workforce differed depending on the enrollment size of the district. That is, both medium and large districts reported that most current principals were most recently assistant principals. Medium and large districts estimated that, on average, about one-half and about two-thirds of their current principals, respectively, came from an assistant principalship. In contrast, small districts estimated that only about one-quarter of their current principals came from an assistant principalship. Instead, small districts estimated that one-third of their current principals came directly from teaching. Small districts also estimated that a greater share of their current principals were transfers from outside the school district. We hypothesize that small districts have insufficient budget and personnel to staff most of their schools with an assistant principal, and therefore rising principals come directly from teaching or else sitting principals move laterally into their positions from other districts. Smaller districts also tend to operate schools with smaller enrollment sizes, meaning that there might be less need for assistant principals.[3]

FIGURE 1

Districts' Estimates of the Percentage of Their Current Principals That Came Directly from Previous Positions



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "What percentage of your current principals came directly from the following positions?" (n = 140). Respondents were asked to enter percentages as a whole number without a decimal point or percent sign and were instructed that percentages should sum to 100. "Other" includes nonteaching school administrative position (e.g., guidance counselor, subject-matter coach, librarian), central district personnel, and other. We exclude responses for ten districts whose responses did not sum to 100 percent. Our results might not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

Large Districts Were More Likely Than Small Districts to Report Having Written Leader Standards for Principals

The first of seven domains we measured is *leader standards*, which refers to a set of written standards about what principals need to know and do. Written standards are important because they set the foundation for principal pipeline activities and are used to inform development of other activities (Gates et al., 2019).

Our survey asked districts whether they had a set of such standards during the 2023–2024 school year. Nationally, 60 percent of districts reported having written standards in place during the 2023–2024 school year that describe what principals need to know and do, as shown in Figure 2. (Although not shown in the figure, we note that 3 percent of districts nationally were not sure whether they had written standards.) Large districts were much more likely than small districts to report having written standards in place: 87 percent of large districts had written principal standards in place in 2023–2024 compared with 55 percent of small districts.

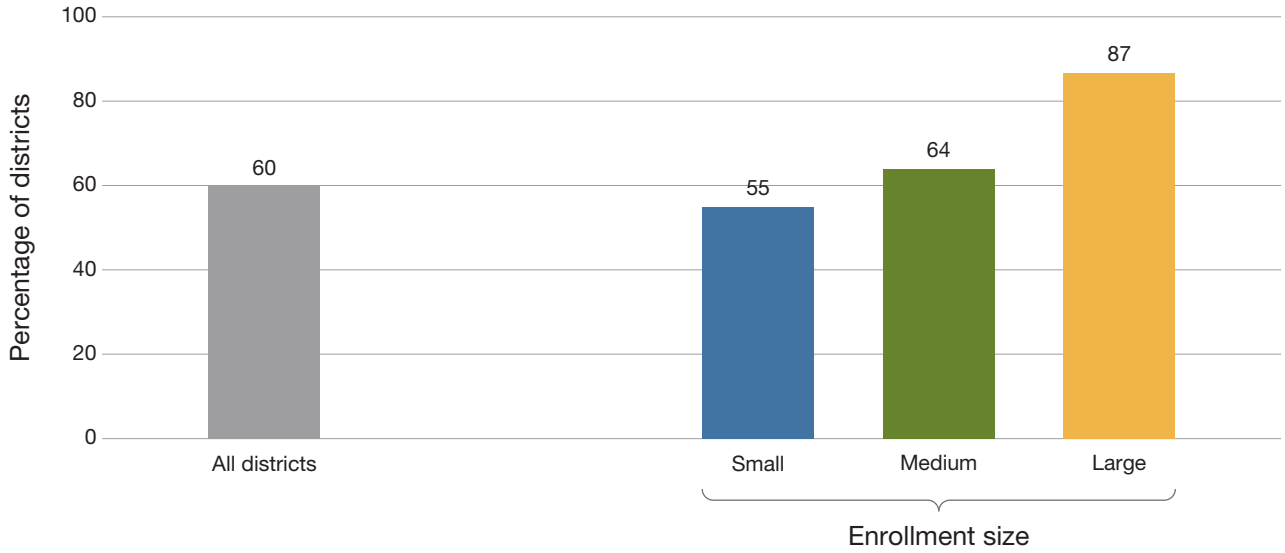
Nationally, 60 percent of districts reported having written standards describing what principals need to know and do.

Large Districts Were More Likely Than Small and Medium Districts to Report Engaging in Principal Preparation Activities

The second of seven domains is *principal preparation*, which encompasses district-run programs to help prepare assistant principals to become principals as well as district partnerships with external providers of principal preparation (Gates et al., 2019). We listed three activities and asked our sample of public school districts whether they had any of the three as

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Districts with Leader Standards (Domain 1)



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "As of the 2023–2024 school year, does your district have written standards for what principals need to know and do?" Respondents were asked to select "Yes," "No," or "Don't know." (n = 156)

41 percent of small districts, 54 percent of medium districts, and 76 percent of large districts reported engaging in at least one of the internal or external principal preparation activities we listed.

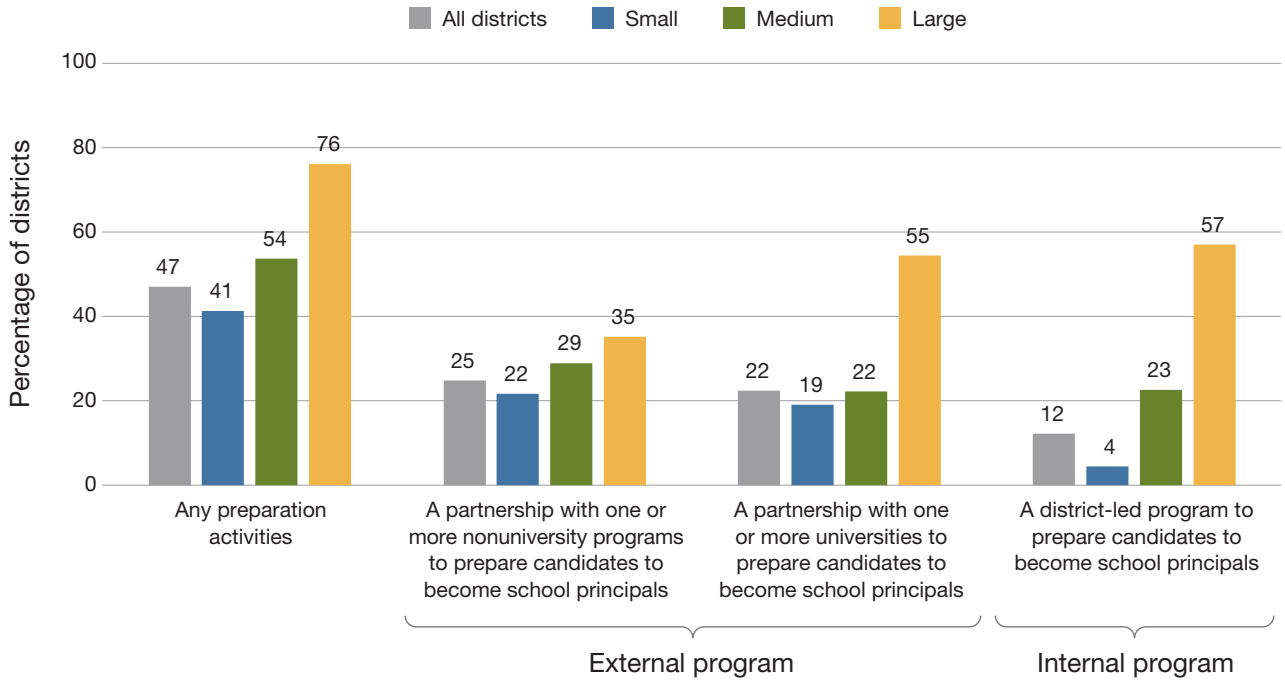
of the 2023–2024 school year. As shown in Figure 3, roughly one-half of the districts we surveyed (47 percent) reported having at least one of these activities.

Large districts were more likely than small districts (but were statistically no more likely than medium districts) to report engaging in these activities: 41 percent of small districts, 54 percent of medium districts, and 76 percent of large districts reported engaging in at least one of the internal or external principal preparation activities we listed.

Looking at specific internal and external principal preparation activities, in the 2023–2024 school year, 25 percent of districts reported having a partnership with nonuniversity programs to prepare candidates to become school principals, 22 percent reported having such a program with a university, and 12 percent reported having a district-led (internal) program to prepare candidates to become school principals. As shown in Figure 3, both partnerships with universities and district-led principal preparation programs were considerably more common in large districts than in small and medium districts. For example, 57 percent of large districts reported having a district-led program in 2023–2024 compared with 23 percent of medium districts and 4 percent of small districts.

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Districts with Principal Preparation (Domain 2)



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "As of the 2023–2024 school year, does your district have any of the following for principal preparation?" Respondents were asked to select all that apply. (n = 155)

Large Districts Were More Than Twice as Likely as Small and Medium Districts to Report Using Selective Hiring and Placement Processes

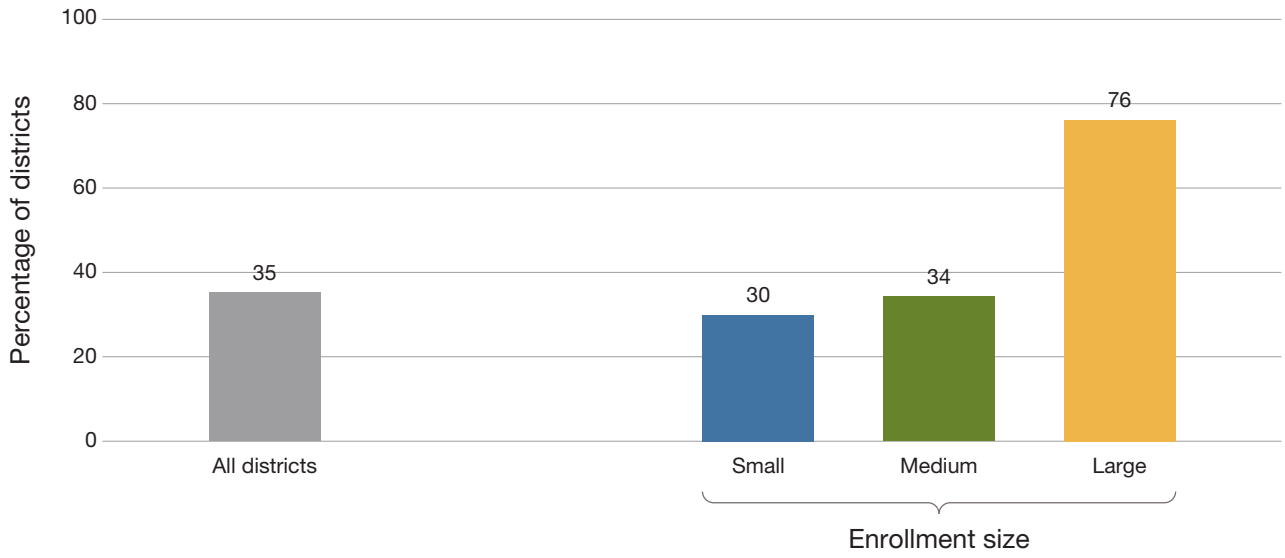
The third of seven domains is *selective hiring and placement*. This refers to competitive hiring processes in which candidates are screened and matched to existing vacancies (Gates et al., 2019). Our survey asked districts whether they used selective hiring procedures in which the district uses data on the candidates and their demonstrated skills to match a principal to a particular school.

Nationally, about one-third of districts (35 percent) reported using such procedures as of the 2023–2024 school year, as shown in Figure 4. However, large districts were more than twice as likely as small and medium districts to report using selective hiring and placement: In 2023–2024, 76 percent of large districts reported using selective hiring and placement processes compared with 30 percent of small districts and 34 percent of medium districts. This might reflect greater staff capacity within large districts' central offices to do this kind of matching of applicants to schools. And it could also mean simply that small districts have many fewer principal openings in a given year and, thus, less need to match principal applicants to specific schools.

76 percent of large districts reported using selective hiring and placement processes compared with 30 percent of small districts and 34 percent of medium districts.

FIGURE 4

Percentage of Districts with Selective Hiring and Placement (Domain 3)



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "As of the 2023–2024 school year, does your district have the following for hiring or supporting your school principals? Selective hiring procedures in which the district uses data on the candidates and their demonstrated skills to match a principal to a particular school." (*n* = 155)

Majorities of Small, Medium, and Large Districts Reported Engaging in On-the-Job Support and Evaluation of Principals

The fourth domain is *on-the-job support and evaluation*. *On-the-job supports* encompass such activities as mentoring and professional development, and *evaluation* refers to a standards-based evaluation system (Gates et al., 2019). Our survey items focused primarily on the support aspect, including mentoring for novice principals and executive coaching or professional development for current principals. As shown in Figure 5, about three-quarters of districts nationally (74 percent) reported having some form of on-the-job supports as of the 2023–2024 school year. Majorities of small and medium districts reported having some form of on-the-job supports, as did virtually all large districts. A greater share of large districts than of small districts (84 percent versus 51 percent, respectively) reported having such supports as mentoring specifically intended for novice principals.

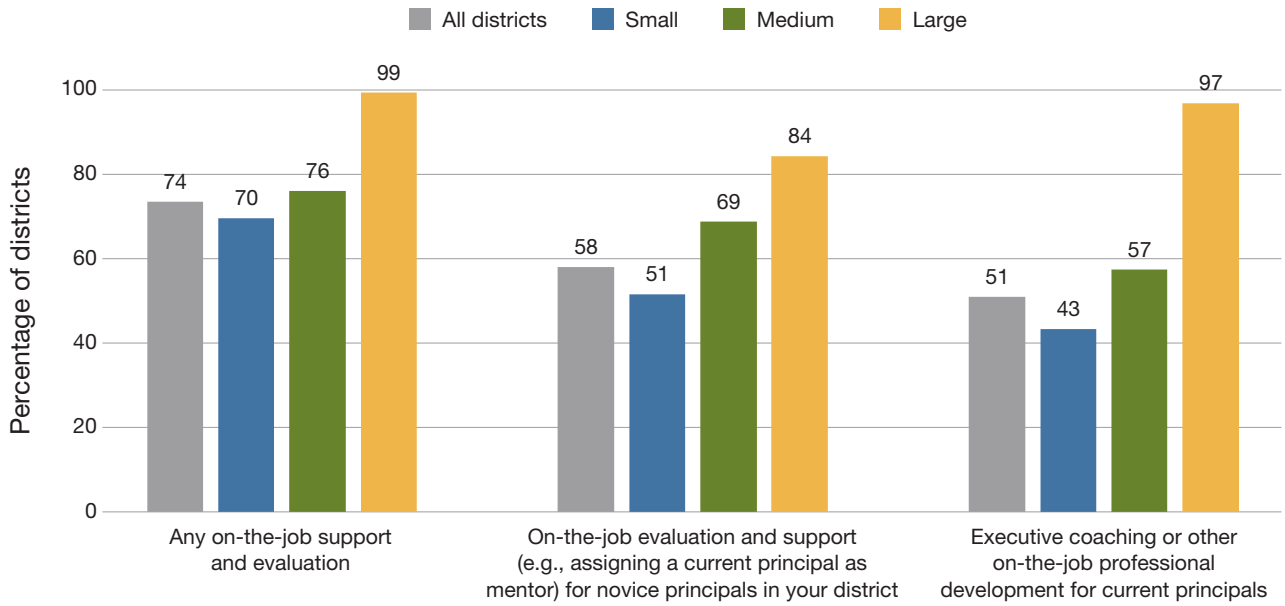
Nearly Three Times as Many Large Districts as Small and Medium Districts Employed a Principal Supervisor

The fifth domain is *principal supervision*, which refers to a dedicated staff person (or persons) who oversees principals, evaluates them, and supports their growth. We asked whether districts had a principal supervisor dedicated to supporting principal growth as of the 2023–2024 school year. Nationally, four in ten districts (39 percent) reported employing dedicated principal supervisors, as shown in Figure 6. However, nearly three times as many large districts as small and medium ones reported employing such staff: Virtually all large districts (98 percent) reported employing dedicated principal supervisors, compared with 33 percent of small districts and 38 percent of medium districts.

We suspect this pattern of small districts not needing a separate principal supervisor (who is in addition to the superintendent) might be due to the small number of schools, and therefore principals, in the district (three schools, on average), in addition to

FIGURE 5

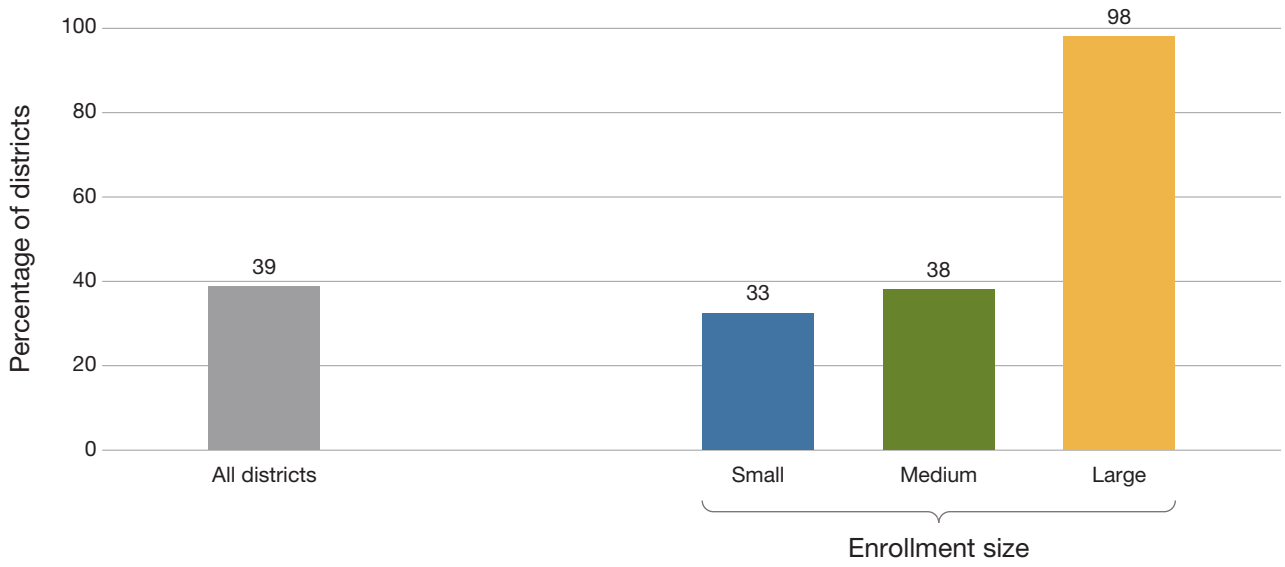
Percentage of Districts with On-the-Job Support and Evaluation (Domain 4)



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "As of the 2023–2024 school year, does your district have the following for hiring or supporting your school principals?" Respondents were asked to select all that apply. (n = 155)

FIGURE 6

Percentage of Districts with Principal Supervision (Domain 5)



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "As of the 2023–2024 school year, does your district have any of the following for the oversight of school principals? A principal supervisor dedicated to supporting principal growth." (*n* = 155)

not having the financial capacity to employ a principal supervisor. The case is less clear for medium-size districts, where there might be enough schools, and therefore principals, to justify it (ten schools, on average), but the district still might not have the financial capacity to employ a principal supervisor. But large districts, which operate 43 schools on average (and thus employ roughly an equivalent number of principals), might be sufficiently large to necessitate a principal supervisor.

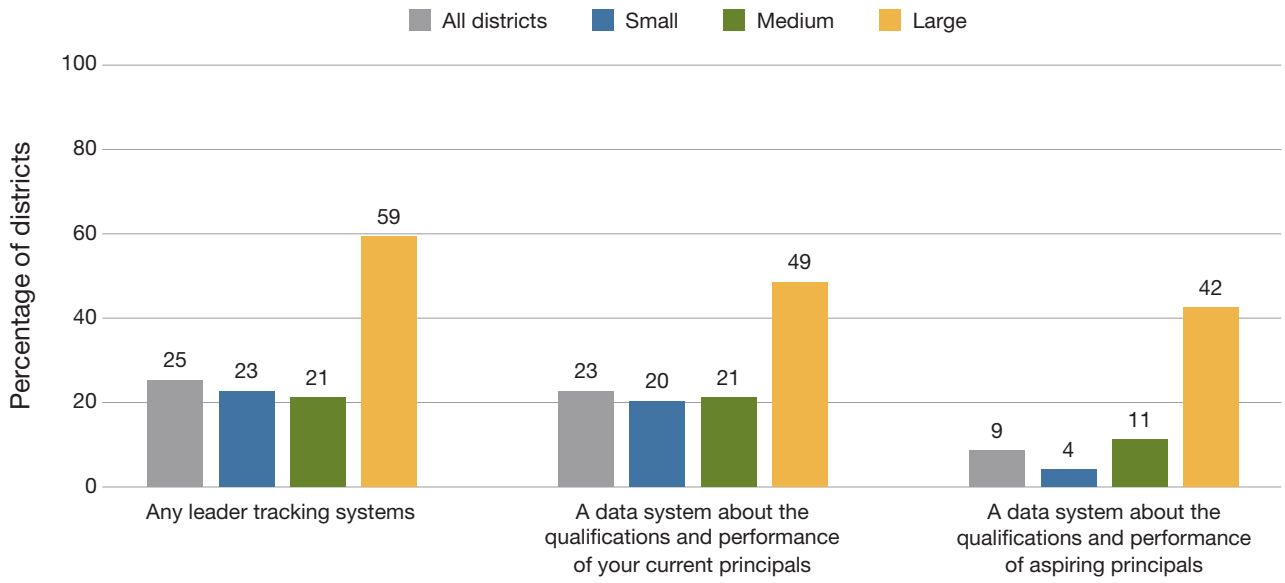
More Than Twice as Many Large Districts as Small and Medium Districts Reported Having Leader Tracking Systems

The sixth domain is *leader tracking systems*, which refers to computerized data systems to support decisionmaking with respect to principal hiring, placement, evaluation, and support (Gates et al., 2020). Our survey asked districts whether they had a data system about the qualifications and performance of their current and/or aspiring principals as of the 2023–2024 school year. As shown in Figure 7, nationally, only one-quarter of districts (25 percent) reported having some sort of school leader tracking system. However, large districts were more than twice as likely as smaller ones to report having any leader tracking systems and were especially more likely to report having those focused on the performance of aspiring principals. For example, 42 percent of large districts reported having a data system about the qualifications and performance of their aspiring principals, compared with 11 percent of medium districts and 4 percent of small districts. This could be because large districts are often hiring district-employed assistant principals into the principalship position.

Nationally, four in ten districts (39 percent) reported employing dedicated principal supervisors.

FIGURE 7

Percentage of Districts with Leader Tracking Systems (Domain 6)



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "As of the 2023–2024 school year, does your district have the following for hiring or supporting your school principals?" Respondents were asked to select all that apply. (*n* = 155)

Roughly Three Times as Many Large Districts as Small and Medium Districts Reported Having Staff Dedicated to Principal Pipelines

The seventh and final domain is *systems of support*, which for the purposes of this study refers to whether districts have a dedicated staff person or office to support school leadership (Gates et al., 2020). Our survey asked districts whether they had a district staff person dedicated to overseeing principal pipelines (e.g., a director of education leadership) as of the 2023–2024 school year. Nationally, about three in ten districts (29 percent) said that they had such a staff person, as shown in Figure 8. However, large districts were roughly three times more likely than small and medium districts to report having a dedicated staff person to support principal pipeline activities. Roughly two-thirds of large districts reported having such a staff person in 2023–2024. This aligns with findings from prior work, which found that 79 percent of large districts reported having a dedicated position to support school leadership, although only 45 percent of medium districts and approximately 30 percent of small districts reported having such a position (Gates et al., 2020).[4]

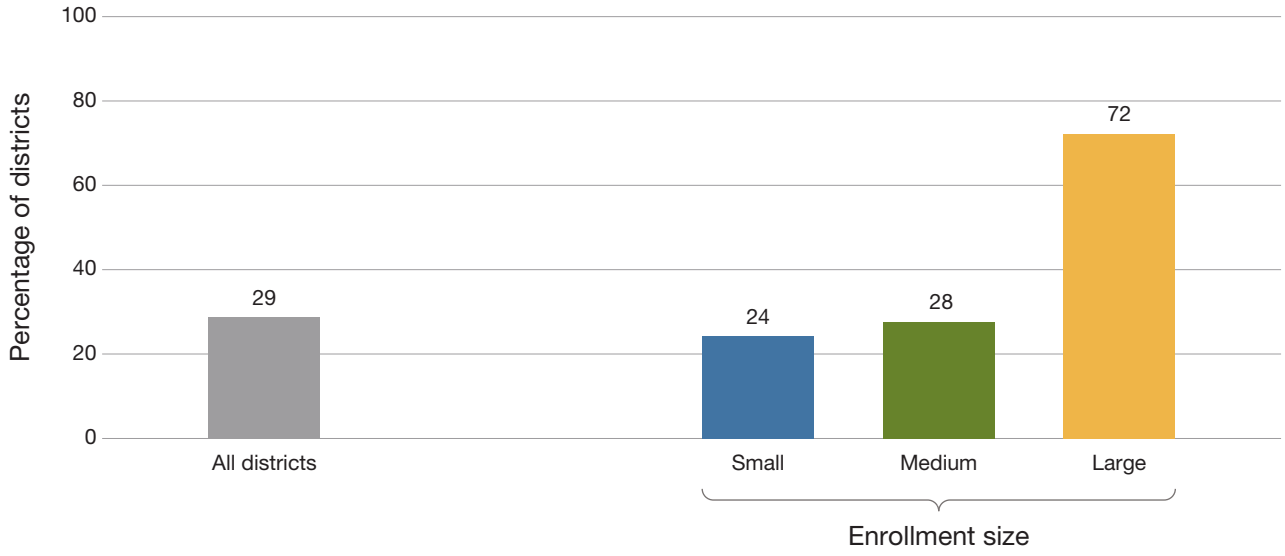
Infrastructure to Support the Principal Pipeline Not Expected to Be a Focus of Budget Cuts

Given the expiration of federal coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) federal aid in September 2024, we asked districts whether they foresaw cuts to any of these services because of budget cuts resulting from the expiration of this aid. Each district was asked about only those principal pipeline activities that they reported having in place as of the 2023–2024 school year.

We found that districts overwhelmingly did not foresee cuts to principal pipeline infrastructure in the coming months. Nearly nine in ten districts (88 percent) did not foresee cuts to any of their current activities after the expiration of COVID-19 federal aid. Among the few districts that did expect cuts to any one or more of their current principal pipeline activities, the most commonly anticipated cut was to executive coaching or other on-the-job professional development for current principals. Twelve percent

FIGURE 8

Percentage of Districts with Systems of Support (Domain 7)



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "As of the 2023–2024 school year, does your district have any of the following for the oversight of school principals? A district staff person dedicated to overseeing principal pipelines (e.g., a director of education leadership)." (*n* = 155)

of the districts that provided executive coaching or other on-the-job professional development for current principals as of the 2023–2024 school year reported foreseeing cuts to this service because of the expiration of federal COVID-19 aid.

Implications

In this report, we used data from a spring 2024 nationally representative survey of public school districts to investigate two main research questions: (1) what share of districts nationally engaged in key principal pipeline activities identified in prior research (see Table 1), and (2) to what extent did the presence of such activities depend on districts' enrollment size? We qualify our answers to these questions because a relatively small number of district leaders (156) answered our questions on behalf of their districts. Although we weighted their answers to represent districts nationally, it is still likely that they differ in unobservable ways from the balance of their U.S. district peers.

The left side of Figure 9 summarizes our findings related to the first research question about our sample of national districts that reported engaging

We found that districts overwhelmingly did not foresee cuts to principal pipeline infrastructure in the coming months. Nearly nine in ten districts (88 percent) did not foresee cuts to any of their current activities after the expiration of COVID-19 federal aid.

The simple fact that large districts have many school principals to prepare, screen, hire, place, and develop compared with smaller districts likely explains many of the large differences we see.

in activities aligned to each of the seven principal pipeline domains as of the 2023–2024. Specifically, districts most commonly reported providing on-the-job supports, such as mentoring and professional development, and written standards for what leaders should know and do. Majorities of districts reported engaging in these activities in 2023–2024. Other supports, such as having school leader tracking systems and having a dedicated staff person to support school leadership, were much rarer. Roughly one-quarter of districts reported engaging in each of these activities. This suggests that, nationally, only some of the principal pipeline activities are common.

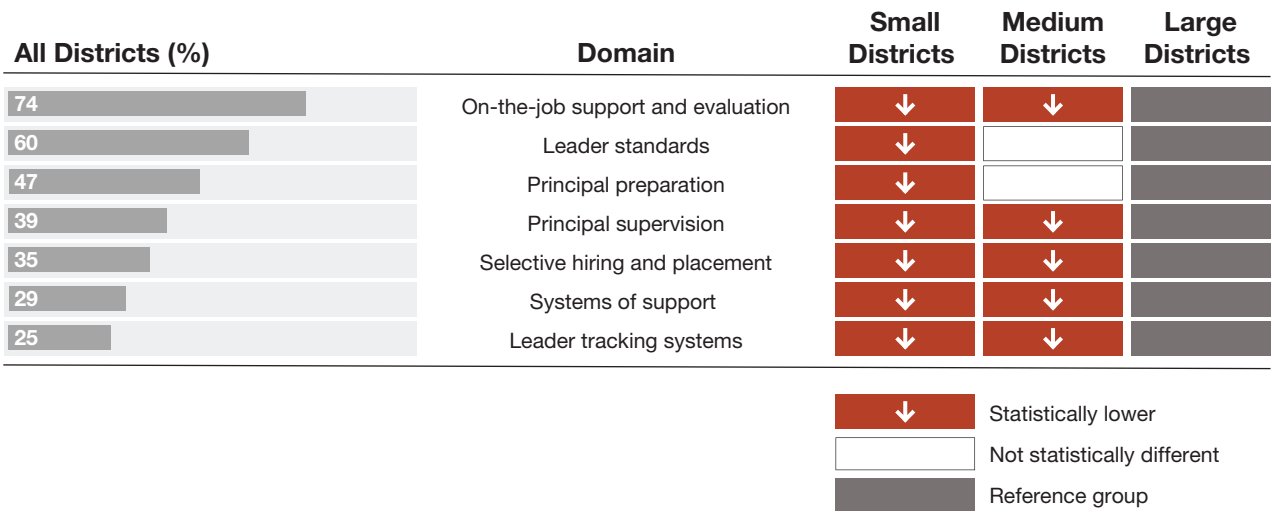
The right side of Figure 9 summarizes our findings for the second research question about to what extent this principal pipeline infrastructure differs by district enrollment size. In short, there is a gulf between the infrastructure that large districts have compared with that of medium and small districts.

The simple fact that large districts have many school principals to prepare, screen, hire, place, and develop compared with smaller districts likely explains many of the large differences we see. For example, a formal database to track the qualifications of current and aspiring principals might not be needed in a district with three schools in total. But the relative lack of infrastructure that we see includes not just small districts but also medium ones, which operate ten schools on average.[5] Furthermore, written leader standards, supervision, and systems for mentoring and coaching of acting principals are types of supports needed regardless of size, yet they are much less prevalent in small and medium districts than large ones.

School principal associations, principal preparation programs, and state departments of education can help small and medium districts by providing samples of principal standards and a playbook that small central district offices could feasibly use to

FIGURE 9

Summary of Districts' Principal Pipeline Activities as of the 2023–2024 School Year



support acting principals. This is no simple feat for districts that lack staff dedicated to principal development and oversight. A 2023 study of principal pipelines found that districts with a core team to enact the work had more operational elements in their infrastructure than those that lacked it (Goldring et al., 2023). Nevertheless, some small districts *do* have the domains we covered, and even among those that do not, there are still likely best practices to elevate and share.

Education researchers can help by studying how different small and medium districts create pared-down versions of principal pipeline infrastructure. Likewise, researchers should study which elements of principal pipelines, whether in full or simplified form, improve school leader performance. Providing such supports as practical guidance, peer networks focused on school leadership, and research showing which elements can make the greatest difference could help lessen the gap between large districts and their medium and small district peers.

Methodology

Our methodology for analyzing survey data remains relatively consistent across survey waves; therefore, the description of our methods here is text that we updated from a previous publication (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2024).

Data Sources

Starting in fall 2020 and in several waves since, RAND researchers randomly sampled districts to invite them to enroll in the ASDP. (We note that all districts that are members of the Council of the Great City Schools were automatically enrolled in the ASDP.) All enrolled districts were invited to complete the spring 2024 ASDP survey. This survey—the ninth in the ASDP series—was fielded from March 6 through May 3, 2024. Of the 1,318 public school districts that enrolled in the panel between fall 2020 and spring 2024, 190 districts completed enough of the survey to receive a weight (14.4 percent survey completion rate). We designed the ten-minute survey to allow multiple different respondents from the same district central office to complete portions of the survey. We recommended that an HR director or principal supervisor complete the survey items we analyzed in this report. However, we do not know which person(s) in each district completed the survey on behalf of their district.

> School principal associations, principal preparation programs, and state departments of education can help small and medium districts by providing samples of principal standards and a playbook that small central district offices could feasibly use to support acting principals.

Survey responses were weighted to be representative of the national population of public school districts across several dimensions, including district enrollment size, geographic region, locale, and free or reduced-price meal eligibility. For more information about the sampling and weighting procedures for the spring 2024 ASDP survey, see Grant et al. (2024).

Importantly, data were not designed to be representative of the national population of public school students. Students are not evenly distributed across school districts. More specifically, among the population of 13,000 school districts in the United States,

only 7 percent are in urban areas, whereas 25 percent are in suburban areas and 69 percent are in rural areas (Grant et al., 2024). Yet roughly 30 percent of the country's 50 million public school students are enrolled in urban districts (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-a). And the country's 120 largest school districts (which represent less than 1 percent of all public school districts)—many of which are urban—alone account for roughly 20 percent of all student enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-c). Thus, although (small) rural districts represent a majority of school districts, they do not represent a majority of public school students.

Analysis

We examined differences in districts' responses to the spring 2024 survey by district enrollment size. We obtained data on district enrollment size by linking survey data files to the 2021–2022 Common Core of Data issued by the National Center for Education Statistics. We categorize districts that enroll fewer than 3,000 students as *small* and districts with more than 10,000 as *large*;[6] we categorize the remaining districts as *medium*. We conducted significance testing to assess whether subgroups were statistically different at the $p < 0.05$ level. In this report, we call attention to only differences that are statistically significant at the 5-percent level, unless otherwise noted. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, we did not apply multiple hypothesis test corrections.

Through the American Educator Panels Data Portal available on www.rand.org/aep, researchers can download survey data files to perform their own analyses. The full set of survey results can be viewed and user-friendly charts can be created in Bento, a free data visualization tool. To learn more about Bento, go to www.getbento.info/about or email bento@kitamba.com.

Notes

[1] The first PPI study was conducted exclusively in large districts, and more than 90 percent of the interviews conducted as part of the 2019 follow-up study were conducted with leaders of large districts (defined as those serving 10,000 or more students). The American School District Panel (ASDP) uses slightly different definitions of district enrollment size than our RAND colleagues did in Gates et al. (2019). That is, the ASDP refers to districts serving 10,000 students or more as *large*, districts serving 3,000 to 9,999 students as *medium*, and districts serving fewer than 3,000 students as *small*. The Gates et al. (2019) study also used 10,000 students as a cut point and primarily focused on districts serving 10,000 students or more. However, this study categorized districts with fewer than 10,000 students as *small*, districts serving 10,000 to 49,999 students as *medium*, and districts serving more than 50,000 students as *large*.

[2] Our survey also asked districts whether they had "Training for current or aspiring principals about equity (e.g., understanding historical oppression, how to make schools a place where all feel welcome, how to support teachers to provide culturally responsive instruction)." We omit this survey item because it does not fit into the framework that we use in this report.

[3] We confirmed that smaller districts operated schools with smaller enrollment sizes using the districts that comprise the ASDP sampling frame. Among these districts, on average, small districts had an average school enrollment size of 320, medium districts had an average school enrollment size of 600, and large districts had an average school enrollment size of 690.

[4] We derived the estimate of approximately 30 percent of small districts having a dedicated position to support school leadership from the following finding in Gates et al. (2020): "With regard to principal supervision, 71 percent of respondents from small districts reported that the superintendent was the only supervisor of principals in the district. This contrasts with 12 percent for 10K+ districts" (p. 39).

[5] Among the districts in the ASDP sampling frame, on average, small districts operate three schools, medium districts operate ten, and large districts operate 43. We use counts of schools and assume each school employs one head principal on average. This is because school administrator counts from the Common Core of Data cannot separate out principals from assistant principals or other personnel in school leadership positions.

[6] We note that large districts' enrollment sizes range from just over 10,000 students up to several hundred thousand students. It is possible, even likely, that districts on the lower end of this distribution are different in both observed and unobservable ways from districts at the upper end of the distribution. However, because of our small sample size, we are unable to examine to what extent variation in large districts' enrollment sizes are associated with their survey responses.

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Acknowledgments

We are extremely grateful to the educators who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand how to better support their hard work in schools. We thank Daniel Ibarrola for serving as the survey manager, Gerald Hunter for serving as the data manager for this survey, and Tim Colvin, Roberto Guevara, and Julie Newell for programming the survey. Thanks to Claude Messan Setodji for producing the sampling and weighting for these analyses. We greatly appreciate the administrative support provided by Tina Petrossian and AEP management provided by David Grant. We also thank Jill Cannon, Sy Doan, and Laura Hamilton for helpful feedback that greatly improved this report. We thank Anna Bloom for her editorial expertise and Monette Velasco for overseeing the publication process for this report.

About This Report

In spring 2024, we surveyed 156 American School District Panel (ASDP) member districts about principal pipelines, preparation, and supports. This series is intended to provide brief analyses of educator survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, see *Technical Documentation for the Ninth American School District Panel Survey* (Grant et al., 2024) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting.

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and districts across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own surveys or analysis or in reading other publications related to the AEP, please email aep@rand.org or visit www.rand.org/aep.

The American School District Panel (ASDP) is a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations—including the Council of the Great City Schools and MGT—to help ensure we produce actionable results. For more information, visit the ASDP website at www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org.

RAND Education and Labor

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of RAND that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. This research was funded by The Wallace Foundation. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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