

ANNA SHAPIRO, HEATHER L. SCHWARTZ, SAMANTHA E. DINICOLA

How Large and Small Districts Develop Their Principals

Selected Findings from the American School District Panel

Effective school leadership is an integral component of high-quality schools. A recent meta-analysis of research on principal effectiveness found that high-quality principals improve school climate and increase teacher job satisfaction, reduce teacher turnover, and reduce student absenteeism (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay, 2021).

KEY FINDINGS

- As of the 2024–2025 school year, large school districts (those serving more than 10,000 students) hired most of their school principals from within the district, while small districts (serving fewer than 3,000 students) were more likely to hire from outside the district.
- Large school districts were more likely than small school districts to offer most of the six types of school principal professional development (PD) addressed in our survey.
- Larger school districts offered lower-cost PD to sitting principals and assistant principals alike but concentrated their high-cost PD on sitting principals only.
- Small districts offered less PD overall. When they did offer PD, small districts favored sitting principals over assistant principals.
- Principals and assistant principals in small school districts were more likely to choose their own PD than those in medium (serving 3,000 to 10,000 students) and large school districts.
- Small districts favored less resource-intensive PD forms for principals.

Highly effective principals can improve schools through engaging with their teachers around instructional practices, building a positive workplace climate, fostering collaboration between teachers, and managing resources and personnel effectively (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay, 2021). Developing these skills takes time and experience. However, a national average of 20 percent of public school principals were no longer in their jobs after one year, with an average principal tenure of four years (Levin and Bradley, 2019). High principal turnover means that districts lose valuable knowledge and expertise in school leadership. It also points to the imperative of developing a talent pipeline from which to draw

new school leaders. Although there is a strong evidence base on how to support principal development, limited information exists on the prevalence of these practices in districts across the country.

School districts can improve their principal pipelines through investment in pre-service and in-service training, systematic policies for the hiring and placement of new principals, and standards for principal leadership (Gates et al., 2019). Principals also typically bring prior experience to their present roles, including serving as a teacher, an assistant principal, or as a principal in another district or school. Assistant principals are increasingly common, with nearly 60 percent of elementary schools and 75 percent of secondary schools reporting having at least one assistant principal, a near doubling from the 1990–1991 school year (Goldring et al., 2025). In our national survey in 2024, assistant principalship was the predominant pathway for new principals in large districts (more than 10,000 students) and medium districts (3,000 to 9,999 students), while small districts (fewer than 3,000 students) were more likely to hire principals from outside the district or among current teachers (Diliberti, Schwartz, and DiNicola, 2024).¹ Rural schools are also less likely to have assistant principals; according to our calculations from National Teacher and Principal Survey 2020–2021 data, approximately 80 percent of schools in urban districts had an assistant principal compared with 50 percent of rural schools, which are typically smaller (Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, undated).

Previous experience in schools is only one aspect of principal preparation. There is a variety of ways to develop school leaders, both before they become principals and as principals. Some are lower cost, such as providing paid time to attend conferences and workshops on school leadership. Others are more costly or can be time-intensive, such as coaching or mentoring (Lochmiller, 2014). Research on the effectiveness of professional development (PD) for school leaders shows that such resource-intensive efforts are the most effective, while also the least commonly offered and more-expensive options (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

The objective of this report is to describe the pipeline to principalship in school districts across

the United States and the prevalence of PD targeted at building and strengthening principal pipelines. These findings can inform state policymakers who are grappling with school leadership shortages by describing where districts tend to find principals and how that varies by district characteristics, and what PD is most prevalent and for whom. These findings may also help universities that are redesigning pre-service leadership training programs by identifying gaps in leadership training offered by school districts. In this report, we focus on the types of PD districts offer and to whom, as well as which PD opportunities districts would like to invest in in the future.

We used data from the spring 2025 administration of the American School District Panel (ASDP) survey fielded to a nationally representative sample of school districts in March 2025 through May 2025. This report presents findings from the 207 school districts that answered the survey. To learn how districts invest in their pipelines—both for assistant principals and sitting principals—we asked school districts about six types of talent development, ranging from less resource-intensive offerings (paid time for conferences; professional learning communities; trainings and workshops) to more resource-heavy offerings (principal supervisors, principal mentors, and professional coaching). We asked about these types of PD for each of these three roles: assistant principal, novice principal, and veteran principal, the latter two we combine into one group—*sitting principals*—when the responses for the two roles are similar. Given that assistant principalship plays different-sized roles in the principal pipeline across small, medium, and large districts, we also compared responses from large and medium districts with responses from small districts.

However, we caution readers that, because our sample represents a very small share of the roughly 13,000 school districts located across the United States, the number of districts in each of our enrollment size subgroups is also quite small. These small sample sizes create a high degree of uncertainty for survey estimates, and 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 instead focus on the patterns across subgroups,

particularly in the areas where they are substantively large. Furthermore, although we weighted our small sample of districts to make it representative of school districts across the country, our survey sample might not be entirely representative of districts nationally if public school districts that participate in ASDP surveys (including this module on principal pipelines) differ from those that do not participate in meaningful ways that we cannot measure. 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. (2025).

Large School Districts Drew New Principals from Within; Small and Medium Districts Hire from Outside the District

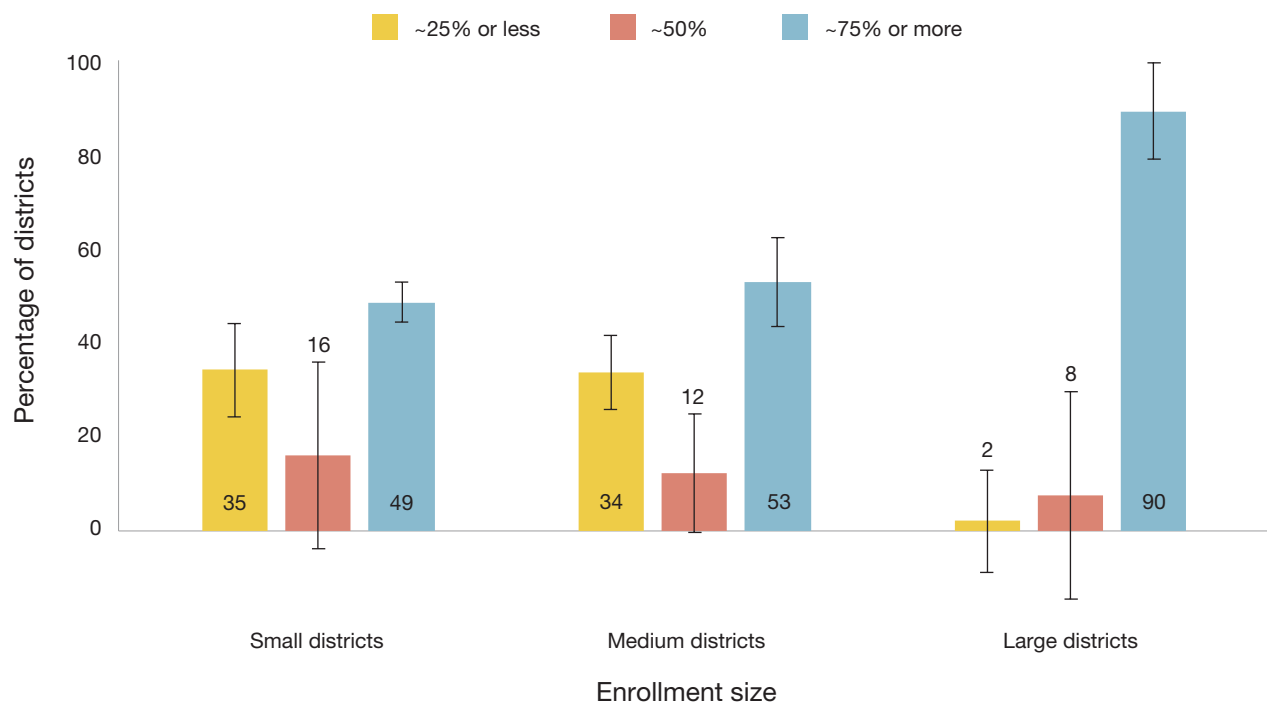
One of the factors that could influence how much PD districts offer to assistant, novice, and veteran princi-

pals is the share of new principals hired from within the district versus outside hires. If districts hire from within, they may be more incentivized to invest in PD for school leaders. To measure the source of new principals, we asked districts to report the share of school principals hired in the 2024–2025 and 2023–2024 school years that came from *outside* the district.

Overall, less than one-third of large school districts reported that the large majority (i.e., 75 percent or more) of their new principals came from outside the district. At the other end of the spectrum, more than one-half reported that the large majority of principals came from within the district. As shown in Figure 1, the primary source of new principals varied considerably by district size. More than 90 percent of large districts hired the majority of their new school principals from inside the district. These results are similar to what we found in the spring 2024 survey, in which 91 percent of principals came from inside the district among the large districts surveyed. The

FIGURE 1

Share of Principals Hired from Inside the School District (2023–2024 and 2024–2025 School Years)



NOTE: Small district, $n = 114$; medium district, $n = 29$; large district, $n = 40$. Fourteen district superintendents did not answer the item represented in this figure and were excluded. The bars represent the percentage of districts that responded “~25% or less,” “~50%” or “~75% or more” to the following item: “Think about the school principals your district has hired for this school year (2024–2025) and the prior school year (2023–2024). What percentage came from outside the school district?” This figure displays the inverse responses to this survey item. Black bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

majority of those inside hires were assistant principals (69 percent). In contrast, small and medium districts were more likely to look outside the district: Only about one-half hired most of their principals from inside the district.

Districts Tended to Offer the Same Professional Development to Both Novice and Veteran Principals

To examine the types of PD available to school principals, we asked districts about the availability of six types of PD in their districts in the 2023–2024 school year. Note that we asked about the availability of PD rather than the share of sitting or assistant principals participating in each PD type. For the PD opportunities that districts selected, we then asked whether each offering was provided to assistant principals, novice principals, or veteran principals.

Across PD types, districts reported similar shares of novice and veteran principals having access to nearly all the PD we asked about in the survey. The

It is possible that large districts offer supports to assistant principals, in part, because they are more likely to pull from their staff when hiring new principals. Investing in leadership training for assistant principals is more likely to have a future payoff.

one exception was mentoring programs. Less than 30 percent of districts offered a mentoring program to novice principals compared with 8 percent that offered mentoring programs to veteran principals.

Given the similarity of districts' offerings to both their novice and veteran principals, for the rest of the report, we combine novice and veteran principals into one group to focus on the contrast in PD offerings between sitting principals and assistant principals. We also combine medium and large school districts into one group in the rest of the report because their responses are similar.

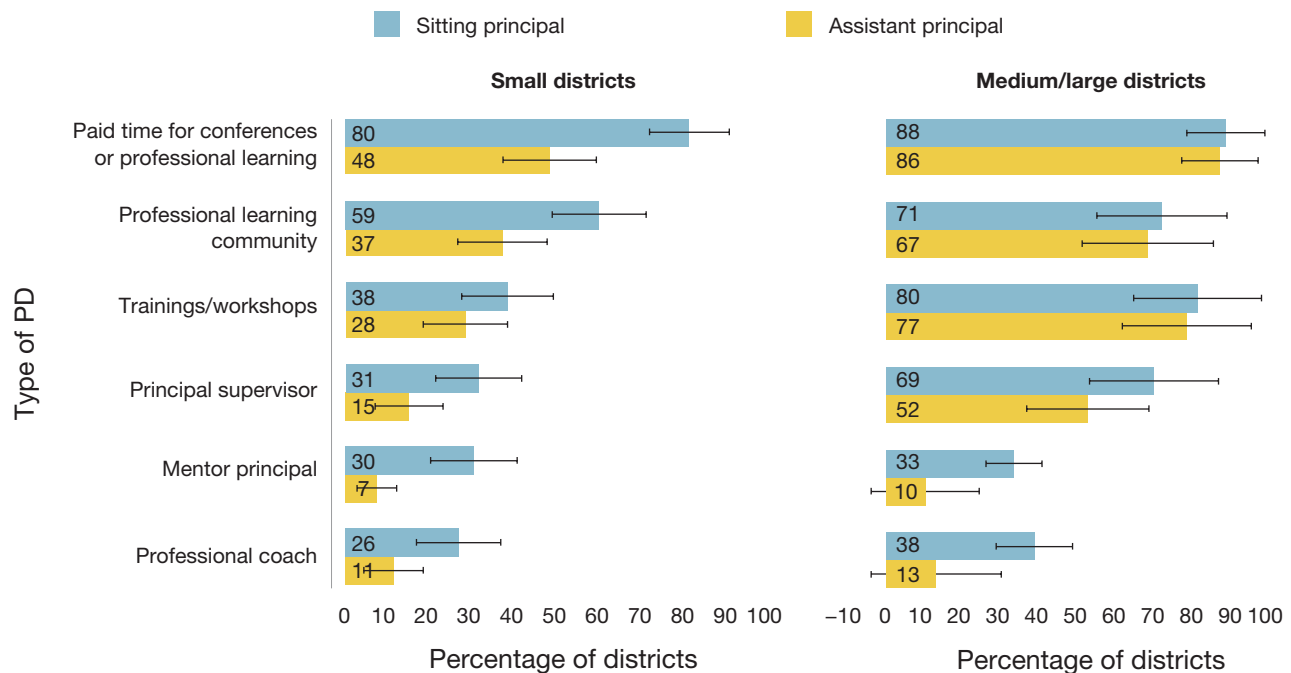
Medium and Large Districts Offered Less Resource-Intensive Professional Development to Both Principals and Assistant Principals Compared with Small Districts

Similar shares of medium and large school districts offered the six PD opportunities we asked about to principals and assistant principals. As shown in the right-hand column of Figure 2, medium and large districts offered paid time for conferences and PD to both sitting and assistant principals at high rates, with nearly 88 percent of these districts reporting that they offered this resource to sitting principals and 86 percent reporting that they offered it to assistant principals. Similarly, most sitting and assistant principals had access to professional learning communities comprising school leaders and to trainings and workshops.

Among the more resource-intensive PD offerings we asked about in the survey, medium and large districts offered a mentor principal more frequently to sitting principals (33 percent) than to assistant principals (10 percent). Districts were more likely to offer mentor principals to novice principals than to veterans. It is possible that large districts offer these supports to assistant principals, at least in part, because they are more likely to pull from their own assistant principal staff pool when hiring new principals (Diliberti, Schwartz, and DiNicola, 2024). Therefore, investing in leadership training for assistant principals is more likely to have a future payoff.

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Small and Medium/Large Districts That Offered Professional Development Opportunities or Supports, by Principal Role



NOTE: Small district, $n = 114$; medium/large district, $n = 69$. Fourteen district superintendents did not answer the item represented in this figure and were excluded. Bars represent responses to the following question: "What types of professional development opportunities and supports does your district offer for principals and/or assistant principals this school year? To which principals do you offer these supports?" Black bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

In contrast to medium and large districts, small school districts were less likely to offer nearly all of the six PD opportunities to assistant principals than to novice or veteran principals. Note that some districts may not have assistant principals in their schools, which would explain why they do not offer these PD opportunities. As shown in the left-hand panel of Figure 2, assistant principals were nearly one-half as likely to be offered less-time-intensive resources, such as paid time for conferences or professional learning and professional learning communities, than sitting principals. As in medium and large districts, assistant principals were considerably less likely to have access to mentor principals (7 percent of small districts offered this resource to assistant principals) than were sitting principals (30 percent). Our hypothesis is that small districts are less likely to invest their more limited resources into supports for assistant principals because they primarily draw new principals from outside their districts or from their own teacher pools (Diliberti, Schwartz, and DiNicola, 2024).

Principals and Assistant Principals in Small School Districts Were More Likely to Choose Their Own Professional Development Than Those in Medium and Large School Districts

The type of PD offered to sitting and assistant principals illustrates the resources that districts invest in their principal pipelines across school districts. Another factor that may influence how much PD, and the type of PD, that assistant and sitting principals receive is the extent to which school leaders have autonomy over choosing their own PD. Overall, less than 10 percent of districts reported that all PD is assigned to principals by their districts, with most of them reporting that principals and assistant principals choose all or some of their PD each year. However, this aspect varies by district size. About

one-quarter of novice, veteran, and assistant principals chose all their own PD in small school districts, compared with 5 percent or less in medium and large school districts (Figure 3). Most districts reported that which PD opportunities principals receive was a combination of principal choice and district assignment.

Large School Districts Would Like to Offer More Resource-Intensive Professional Development to All Types of Principals

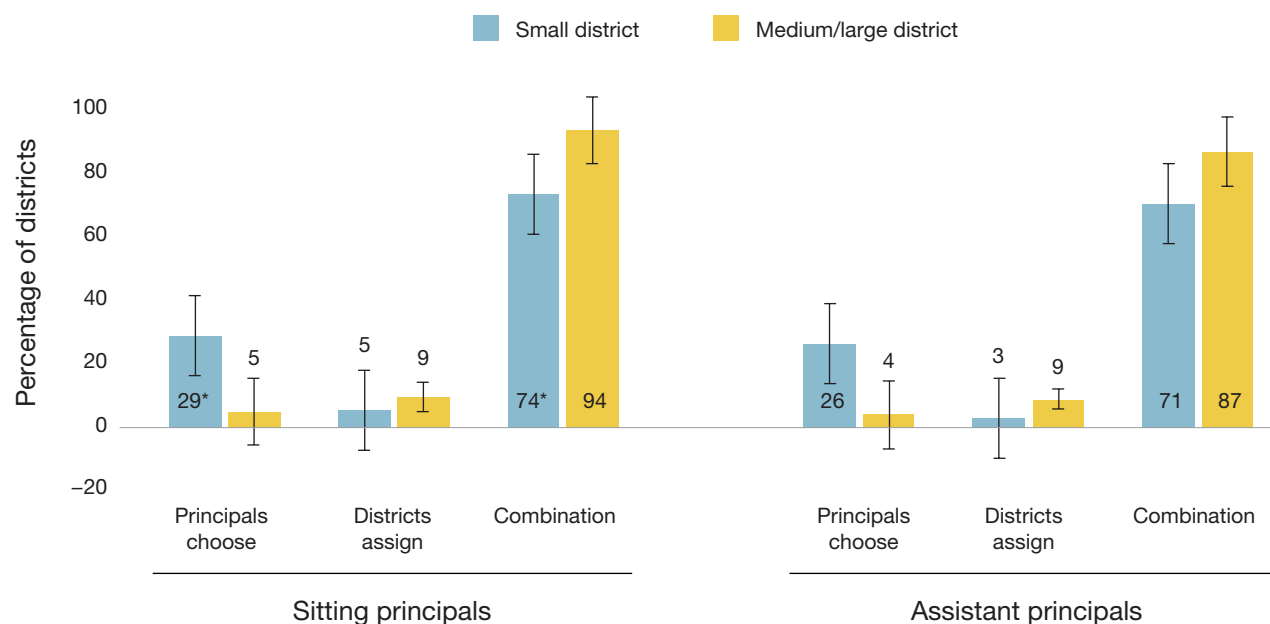
More than three-quarters of districts would like to offer additional supports to both sitting principals and assistant principals, with a higher share of districts wanting to offer more of these supports to assistant principals. For the less resource-intensive PD opportunities (i.e., professional learning communities; paid time for conferences; trainings and

workshops), a larger proportion of small districts reported wanting to offer more of those resources to their sitting principals than did medium and large districts. This aligns with our prior finding that these PD opportunities are already offered at high rates to sitting principals in medium and large districts but less commonly so in small districts.

About one-half of districts, regardless of size, reported wanting to offer more of the resource-intensive PD opportunities—mentor principals and professional coaches—to their sitting principals. Districts diverged, however, in whether they wanted to offer more of these resource-heavy forms of PD to assistant principals (see Figure 4). That is, 37 percent of medium and large districts wanted to offer more mentor principal programs to their assistant principals compared with only 20 percent of small districts. For professional coaching, this difference was even larger: 48 percent of medium and large districts wanted to offer more professional coaching to assistant principals compared with 19 percent of small districts.

FIGURE 3

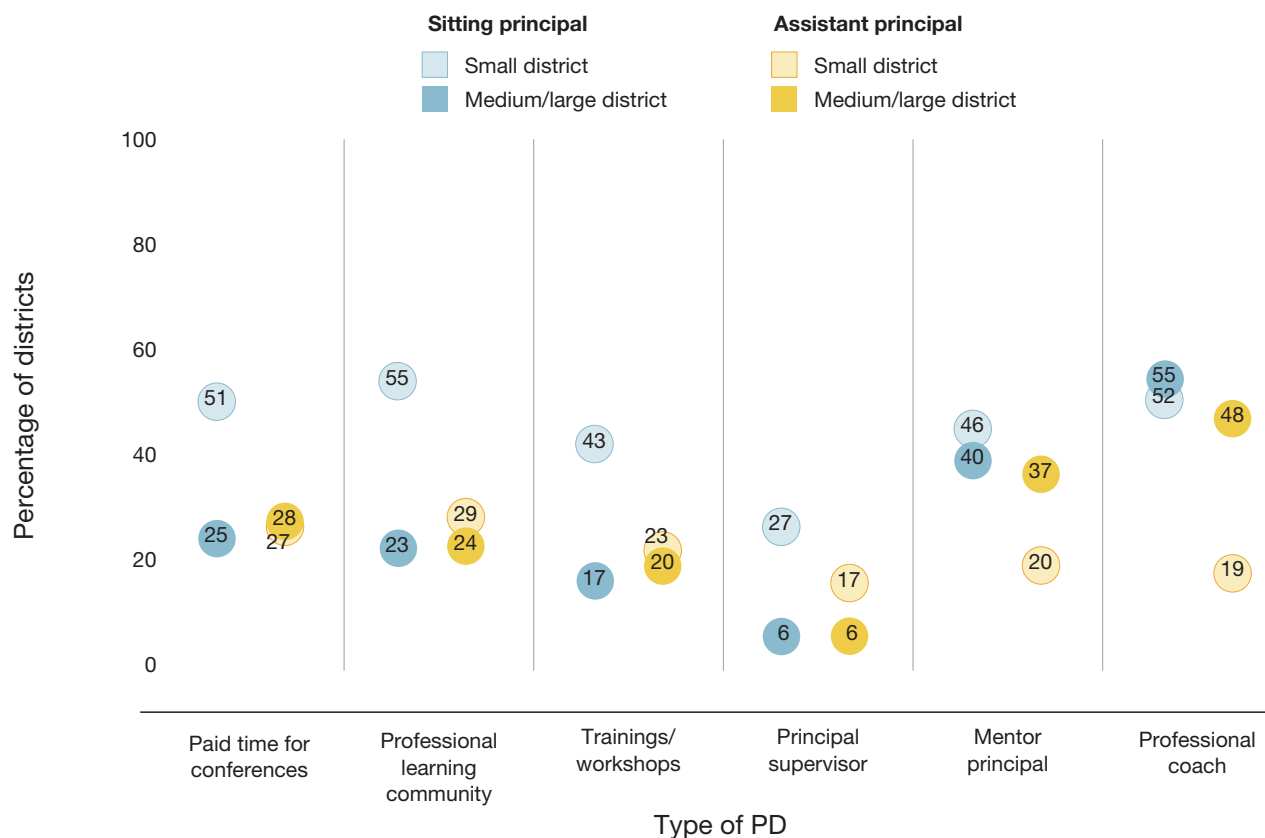
Percentage of Districts That Determine Professional Development Opportunities or Supports by Principal Choice, District Assignment, or a Combination, by Principal Role and District Size



NOTE: Small district, $n = 113$; medium/large district, $n = 69$. Fourteen district superintendents did not answer the item represented in this figure and were excluded. Bars represent responses to the following item: "Do principals have a say in what kinds of professional development they receive, or does the district assign it to them?" Black bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

FIGURE 4

Percentage of Districts That Would Like to Offer Additional Principal Supports and Professional Development, by Principal Role and District Size



NOTE: Small district, $n = 112$; medium/large district, $n = 68$. Fourteen district superintendents did not answer the item represented in this figure and were excluded. Circles represent the percentage of districts that responded yes to each response option in the following item: "What additional kinds of supports would you like to offer more of than you currently do?"

As shown earlier in Figure 2, a similar share of small and medium or large districts offered professional coaches or mentor principals to assistant principals (less than 15 percent for both PD opportunities), but large districts were more likely to say they wanted to offer more. These results align with our findings on how much PD is currently offered to assistant principals in large districts; offering more of these resources to assistant principals would strengthen districts' principal pipelines. In contrast, if small districts are more likely to turn to outside hires or do not have assistant principals in every school building, investing in resource-intensive PD may be less useful. Assistant principals are also less common in small districts, making this a less-established job category in which to invest.

Implications

Investing in building a pipeline to recruit, train, and retain high-quality school principals can be feasible, affordable, and effective (Gates et al., 2019). In this report, we describe who became a new principal and what PD districts typically offered to assistant, novice, and veteran principals in the 2024–2025 school year.

Overall, medium and large districts hired most of their principals from inside the school district, with assistant principalship being the most common pathway to principalship. Most of these districts offered PD to both assistant and sitting principals. But they reserved the more intensive individually delivered resources, such as mentorship and professional coaching, for sitting principals rather than

assistant principals. However, most of these districts would like to offer mentorship to their assistant principals if it were feasible to do so.

Large districts, which typically hired more of their new principals from inside the district, might have more incentive to invest in developing assistant principals. We also found that very few medium or large districts allowed principals full autonomy over which PD they took, suggesting more formalized oversight and training for their school leaders.

In contrast, small districts drew most of their school leaders from outside the district. Therefore, small districts may have less reason to invest in developing assistant principals. Small school districts offered less PD to principals, and less than one-half offered any PD to assistant principals. Small districts were also less likely to want to offer more PD to assistant principals and more likely to report that school leaders can choose which PD they participate in. More-detailed research on *why* districts offer the PD they offer to staff in each of these roles could help explore these patterns further.

We offer three recommendations for how school districts can target investment in principal pipelines that reflect where and how they recruit new principals.

- **In larger districts, invest in coaching for assistant principals.** Our findings show that medium and large districts invested in PD for their assistant and sitting principals at similar rates but typically only for lower-cost PD, such as workshops and conferences. More resource-intensive programs, such as coaching, have been shown to be more effective for developing high-quality school leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Although many states offer these programs to novice principals, extending coaching to other administrative roles is less common.

Encouragingly, many large and medium districts wish to offer more of the higher-cost PD offerings to assistant principals. In other words, less access to these resources for assistant principals likely reflects a resource constraint rather than an unwillingness to invest in the principal pipeline. Still, given

that a high share of new principals come from serving assistant principals in medium and large districts, districts may want to consider how limited resources could be reallocated to support increased investment in pre-service training for assistant principals while providing on-the-job training to novice and veteran principals. For example, Michigan recently passed a law that requires districts to assign a coach or mentor to all new school administrators in their first three years, including assistant principals (Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals, undated).

- **In small districts, focus on pre-service training for aspiring principals from all roles.** Small districts did not offer much PD to assistant principals, and many schools in small districts lack that role in the first place. The lack of assistant principals in small districts shortens the length of small districts' principal pipelines by either drawing on teachers to become principals or hiring principals from outside the district (Diliberti, Schwartz, and DiNicola, 2024). As principal shortages become more acute, small districts' systems of tapping teachers to become new principals may be increasingly common in hard-to-staff districts (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2021).

Because smaller districts are less likely to have assistant principals, small districts should consider how to support their teachers participating in pre-principal development programs, either through developing their own programs in collaboration with other small school districts or connecting teachers to state-supported opportunities. By offering pre-service leadership training to teachers, districts can formalize the recruitment process and strengthen their own principal pipelines by reducing their reliance on outside hires for new principal roles.

- **Given resource constraints, consider targeting resource-intensive PD to aspiring or novice principals.** Many districts reported offering the same package of PD opportunities to their principals, regardless of the experi-

ence levels of those principals. With resource constraints, districts could consider targeting their one-on-one PD opportunities to novice principals or those schools where the principal pipeline is the thinnest. Districts could also consider peer coaching models in which principals who receive more PD provide coaching and mentorship to other school leaders.

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, Schwartz, and DiNicola, 2024).

Data Sources

The spring 2025 ASDP survey was administered to a national sample of K–12 public school districts between March 11, 2025, and May 2, 2025. Of the 7,888 public school districts that we invited to take our survey, 207 districts completed the survey items used in this report (a 2.6 percent response rate).

We designed our ASDP surveys to allow multiple respondents from the same district central office to complete portions of the survey. We recommended that the person in the district central office who oversees HR and/or principal supervision complete the survey items we analyzed in the report. However, we do not know which person(s) in each district completed the survey on behalf of their districts.

Estimates were produced using cross-sectional survey weights designed specifically to provide nationally representative estimates at the time when the survey was administered. To produce these weights, we obtained data on district demographics by linking survey data files to the Common Core of Data issued by the National Center for Education Statistics. We obtained data on the district poverty level from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program School District Estimates. We divided public school districts into quartiles using the family poverty rate of their populations of 5- to 17-year-olds in a district’s attendance

boundary. When applied, these survey weights make the districts in our sample look similar to the national population of K–12 public school districts, at least on such observable characteristics as district locale, enrollment size, poverty level, geographic region, and student racial or ethnic composition. Importantly, survey responses were weighted to be representative of the national population of public school districts, not the national population of public school students. For more information about the weighting procedures for ASDP surveys, see Grant et al. (2025).

Analysis

We analyzed differences in districts’ responses to survey items by the following characteristics, though not all are included in the report due to a lack of significant differences:

- enrollment size (we categorize *small districts* as those with fewer than 3,000 students and *large districts* as those with more than 10,000 students; we categorize the remaining districts as *medium*)
- locale (urban, suburban, and rural)
- student racial or ethnic composition (we categorize districts in which more than one-half of students are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native or of two or more races as having majority students of color, with the remaining districts categorized as having majority White students)
- poverty status (*low-poverty* districts are those in the first quartile—that is, those with the fewest families with income below the federal poverty rate; *middle-poverty* districts are those in the second and third quartiles; *high-poverty* districts are those in the fourth quartile—that is, those with the highest shares of families with incomes below the federal poverty rate).

We conducted significance testing to assess whether district subgroups were statistically different at the $p < 0.05$ level. Specifically, we tested whether the percentage of districts in one subgroup reporting a response was statistically different from the remaining districts that took the survey (e.g., urban

districts versus other districts that are not urban). In the report, unless otherwise noted, we describe only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5 percent level. Furthermore, because of the exploratory nature of this study, we did not apply multiple hypothesis test corrections.

Notes

¹ These findings are also reflected in National Teacher Principal Survey data: In the 2020–2021 school year, 86 percent to 87 percent of principals in city and suburban schools (typically larger schools) had previously been assistant principals, compared with 73 percent in town schools and 69 percent in rural schools (Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, undated).

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About the American School District Panel

The American School District Panel conducts nationally representative surveys of public school district leaders twice a year, in addition to focused interviews to gather more context for select survey topics. For more information, visit www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org.

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About This Report

In spring 2025, we surveyed 245 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 Eleventh American School District Panel Survey* (Grant et al., 2025) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting.

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@mgt.us.

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 that we produce actionable results. For more information, visit the ASDP website at www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org.

The American School District Panel (ASDP) is one of the American Educator Panels (AEP), which are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and K–12 public school 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. Through the AEP Data Portal available from that site, researchers can download survey data files to perform their own analyses.

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