



# Assistant Principals: Growth and Implications for School Leadership

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## Overview

Most schools in the United States today have an assistant principal who supports the principal in leading and managing the school (Goldring et al. 2021, 2025). The assistant principal role also provides valuable experience for those who aspire to become principals. The proliferation of assistant principals in public education, and the challenges of leading schools today, highlight the importance of better understanding what assistant principals do, what supports they receive, and how best to prepare them to take on the principalship (Goldring et al. 2025). This report examines the assistant principalship using survey data from a nationally representative sample of K–12 principals in fall 2024. The following key findings emerged:

- The number of assistant principals nationwide continues to grow, with a three-decade upward trend in the prevalence of the role.
- Assistant principals are most common in middle and high schools, urban schools, and schools with high percentages of students of color.
- Assistant principals' roles and tasks vary; many spend most of their time on student discipline and instructional leadership. Principals typically assign assistant principals to specific tasks or grade levels.
- Most assistant principals have access to mentoring and participate in various professional development opportunities, but principals said that assistant principals need additional support with leadership skills, using data for school improvement, and instructional leadership.
- Most principals said their assistant principals are ready for the principalship.

The report discusses each of these findings and concludes with ongoing considerations for continued development of the assistant principal role. A separate appendix document includes details on the research methodology and additional findings. ▲

## I. Introduction

### A. Why this study?

The number of assistant principals in U.S. K–12 schools has grown dramatically over the past three decades, but the roles of assistant principals remain unclear (Goldring et al. 2021, 2025). New research suggests that the increase in assistant principals appears intended to address the challenges and complexities of leading schools and the needs of students, and to strengthen overall school management, safety, discipline, student assessment, and instruction (Goldring et al. 2025). Studies of individual states and districts, however, indicate that the tasks of assistant principals vary and depend on their principal (Goldring et al. 2021, 2025; Somoza-Norton and Neumann 2021). Little is known about how principals decide to assign tasks to assistant principals and whether assistant principals receive the learning opportunities they need for continued career development toward the principalship. These gaps highlight the need to better understand the roles assistant principals currently play in schools, the supports they receive, and their preparedness to serve as principals.

This report addresses these gaps by providing national findings from the 2024–2025 school year on the prevalence of assistant principals and their roles, support, and preparedness for the principalship. It uses data from RAND’s American School Leader Panel (ASLP) Omnibus Survey, which was administered in fall 2024 to a nationally representative sample of 1,019 K–12 public school principals. Because principals responded to questions about their assistant principals, the results reflect principals’ reports and their perceptions about the assistant principal position rather than responses from assistant principals themselves. Still, these findings contribute to the research on assistant principals in two important ways. First, they illuminate the extent to which findings from studies of individual states and districts extend to other contexts (Goldring et al. 2021, 2025). Second, they provide an update on the roles and prevalence of assistant principals since the COVID-19 pandemic. In the aftermath of the pandemic, greater student needs and high rates of principal burnout and turnover may have changed assistant principals’ roles and needs for support (Nunez 2022; Woo and Steiner 2022; Gee et al. 2023; Gross and Hamilton 2023).

This new report is the first of two on assistant principals funded by The Wallace Foundation. It describes national trends for the assistant principal role and provides a broad overview of the role across urban, suburban, and town or rural areas in the United States. A subsequent report will delve deeper into the assistant principal role in three large urban districts to describe findings on assistant principals’ diversity, roles, support, and career paths. Together, these reports will help build evidence about assistant principals, identify opportunities to better support them in their current roles, and more effectively prepare them to be principals.

## **B. Research questions**

To provide a comprehensive description of assistant principals nationally, this report addresses the following research questions:

1. How prevalent are assistant principals, and what school contexts are most likely to have one or more assistant principals?
2. What roles do assistant principals currently play?
3. What supports do assistant principals receive? What supports do they need?
4. To what extent do principals see assistant principals as prepared for the principalship?

This study uses RAND’s fall 2024 ASLP Omnibus survey, a nationally representative survey of K–12 principals, to address these research questions about the prevalence, roles, supports, and preparedness of assistant principals, as perceived by principals. To describe national trends on the prevalence of assistant principals since the pandemic, the study extends the reporting of trends through the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) documented by Goldring et al. (2025). See Box 1 for an overview of the study’s data and analyses and Appendix A for more details.

As noted, findings from the ASLP reflect principals' reports and perceptions of their assistant principals, and these reports from principals could differ from reports of assistant principals themselves. The lack of self-reported data from assistant principals is one limitation of this report and the field more broadly. Obtaining national data from assistant principals about their roles, support, and preparedness remains an important opportunity for future research.

## Box 1. Study data and analyses

### What data did the study examine?

The study analyzed survey data on assistant principals' prevalence, roles, support, and preparedness. Data sources included the following:

- **RAND ASLP Omnibus Survey** administered in fall 2024. The ASLP is a nationally representative sample of K–12 public school principals. Principals responded to questions about their assistant principals. To support recall and reduce burden on principals, the survey asked principals to focus on a single assistant principal for survey items about assistant principals' tasks, professional development activities, and meetings with the principals. For schools with multiple assistant principals, the survey asked principals to focus on their least experienced assistant principal because their experiences may be a better indicator of what areas need support and reflect more recent trends. (See Appendix A.2 for survey questions.) Survey data were merged with data on student enrollment and district size from the Common Core of Data and Title I status from ED*Facts*.<sup>a</sup>
- The ASLP survey sample included responses from 1,019 principals in 587 elementary schools, 188 middle schools, and 224 high schools. In addition, 61 percent of schools received federal Title I funding, 45 percent enrolled a majority of students of color, 27 percent were in urban settings, 33 percent were in suburban settings, and 40 percent were in town/rural settings. Schools enrolled 557 students on average (see Appendix A.1 for full sample details).
- **NTPS 2020–2021**. The NTPS was administered to a nationally representative sample of K–12 public schools with questionnaires for schools, principals, and teachers. It includes about 9,900 public schools. The study uses information on the number of schools with assistant principals from the survey.

### How were the data analyzed?

- The study team conducted descriptive analyses of survey responses from principals to examine the assistant principal role. Responses on the ASLP survey are weighted to account for the survey's sampling design, ensure a nationally representative sample, and adjust for survey nonresponse (see Appendix A.3 for more details).
- Their other analyses examined relationships between survey responses and school characteristics, including school level (elementary, middle, and high), Title I status, school size (determined by number of enrolled students), and locale (urban, suburban, and town/rural), and district characteristics including district size.
- Finally, the study team provided descriptive analyses to extend trends from the NTPS using ASLP data on the prevalence of assistant principals in schools.

<sup>a</sup> For clarity, when comparing the RAND and NTPS findings, the report uses the terms "schools" and "districts" (instead of "principal reports") to discuss information that principals reported about their schools (such as the number of assistant principals) or districts (such as professional development and mentoring opportunities). ▲

## II. Key Findings

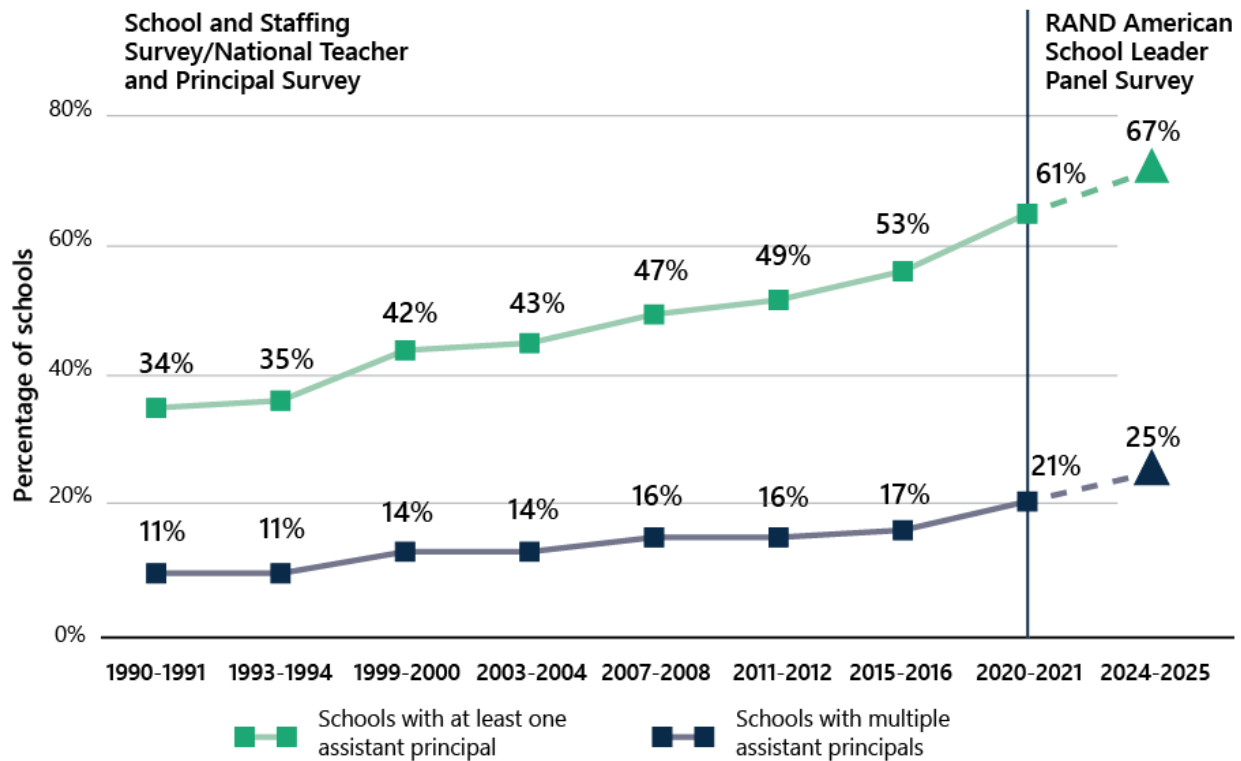
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### **Key finding 1: The number of assistant principals nationwide continues to grow, with a three-decade upward trend in the prevalence of the role.**

**The percentage of schools with assistant principals continued its three-decade upward trend in 2024–2025, rising to 67 percent.** Prior research shows that from 1990–1991 to 2020–2021, the percentages of public schools with at least one assistant principal grew from 34 to 61 percent, based on nationally representative data from the Schools and Staffing Survey and NTPS (Goldring et al. 2025, reproduced in Exhibit 1). Extending this trend using the ASLP survey for 2024–2025 shows the percentages of schools with at least one assistant principal grew further, from 61 to 67 percent over the four school years (Exhibit 1). This reflects a remarkable shift in the presence of assistant principals in schools, with roughly 65 percent of schools not having an assistant principal in 1990–1991 to 67 percent of schools having at least one in 2024–2025.

Similarly, the percentage of schools with multiple assistant principals continues to increase. Previous research finds that the percentages of schools with multiple assistant principals rose from 11 percent in 1990–1991 to 21 percent in 2020–2021 (Goldring et al. 2025). From 2020–2021 to 2024–2025, the percentage of schools with multiple assistant principals continued to rise, from 21 to 25 percent (Exhibit 1). Emerging research suggests that the growth in assistant principals may help address student needs and heightened demands of school management, safety, student assessment, and instructional leadership (Goldring et al. 2025).

**Exhibit 1.** Percentage of schools with at least one assistant principal and multiple assistant principals



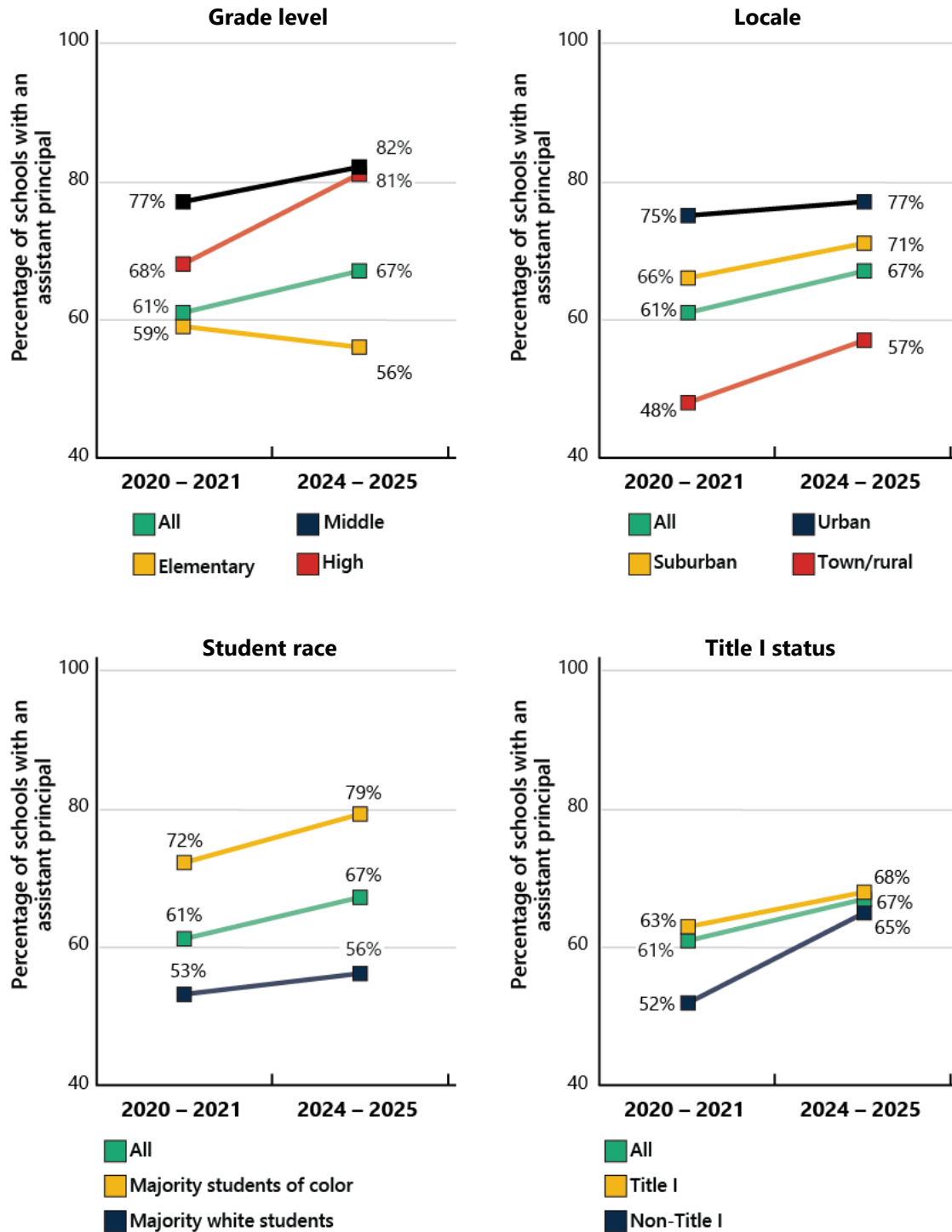
Source: Schools and Staffing Survey/NTPS, 1990–1991, 1993–1994, 1999–2000, 2003–2004, 2007–2008, 2011–2012, 2015–2016, 2020–2021; RAND 2024 Fall ASLP Omnibus Survey.

Note: Data for 2024–2025 come from the ASLP survey and include a nationally representative sample of 1,019 principals. Solid lines and square shapes indicate data from NTPS; dotted lines and triangle shapes indicate data from ASLP.

ASLP = American School Leader Panel; NTPS = National Teacher and Principal Survey.

**Increases in the percentage of schools with assistant principals occurred across school levels and school characteristics in recent years.** Comparing ASLP survey data in 2024–2025 with the most recent national data from NTPS in 2020–2021, the percentage of schools with an assistant principal grew at middle and high school levels (Exhibit 2). These percentages rose for all locales (urban, suburban, and town/rural), for schools that served higher and lower percentages of students of color, and Title I and non-Title I schools. Overall, the largest increase in the percentage of schools with an assistant principal occurred in high schools (13 percentage point increase), non-Title I schools (12 percentage points), and schools in town/rural locales (9 percentage points).

**Exhibit 2.** Percentage of schools with an assistant principal by school characteristics, 2020–2021 NTPS versus 2024–2025 ASLP



Source: RAND 2024 Fall ASLP Omnibus Survey; ED*Facts*, 2022–2023; NTPS, 2020–2021.

Notes: Data for 2024–2025 come from the ASLP survey and include a nationally representative sample of 1,019 principals. Sample size varies based on school characteristics; see Appendix Exhibit A.1.

ASLP = American School Leader Panel; NTPS = National Teacher and Principal Survey.

Just as the percentages of schools with at least one assistant principal increased across school characteristics in recent years, the percentage of schools with multiple assistant principals also increased for most characteristics (see Appendix Exhibit B.1). About one-quarter (25 percent) of principals reported having two or more assistant principals in their school: 11 percent of elementary schools, 36 percent of middle schools, and 50 percent of high schools. During this time, there was a similar increase in the overall percentages of schools with one, two, and three or more assistant principals, which varied by school characteristics (see Appendix Exhibit B.2). For example, high schools saw a 10 percentage-point increase in the number of schools with three or more assistant principals, and elementary schools experienced a 2 percentage-point decrease.

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## **Key finding 2: Assistant principals are most common in middle and high schools, urban schools, and schools with high percentages of students of color.**

**More than 70 percent of middle and high schools, urban schools, and schools with high percentages of students of color have an assistant principal.** In 2024–2025, more than 80 percent of middle schools and high schools, 77 percent of urban schools, 71 percent of suburban schools, and 79 percent of schools that predominantly served students of color had an assistant principal, compared with less than 60 percent of other schools (Exhibit 2).<sup>1</sup> Slightly higher percentages of Title I schools had assistant principals than non-Title I schools (68 percent versus 65 percent). These findings are consistent with previous research on the characteristics of schools with assistant principals and likely reflect states and districts allocating more assistant principals to schools that serve higher grades, larger student populations, and higher levels of student need (Goldring et al. 2021, 2025). The use of Title I and other funds to hire assistant principals to address student needs may also help explain the higher prevalence of assistant principals at schools that serve students with greater needs, such as multilingual language learners and students experiencing poverty (Fuller et al. 2018).

**By 2024–2025, there was one assistant principal for every 433 students among schools with assistant principals.**<sup>2</sup> This number is consistent with trends over the past 30 years that indicate the rise in the number of assistant principals goes beyond a response to higher student enrollment (Goldring et al. 2025), as the number of students per assistant principal has also decreased over time (see Appendix Exhibit B.3). Lower student-to-assistant principal ratios may

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<sup>1</sup> Regression analyses indicate that differences in student enrollment do not fully explain the higher prevalence of assistant principals at certain types of schools. Schools that predominantly serve students of color, are in urban areas, or are middle or high schools were significantly more likely than other schools to have assistant principals even after accounting for student enrollment (all  $ps < .05$ ), which could reflect assigning assistant principals to address greater student needs. After controlling for student enrollment, Title I and suburban schools had positive associations with having an assistant principal, but these associations were not statistically significant.

<sup>2</sup> To calculate students per assistant principal from the ASLP data, for each school with an assistant principal, the study team divided student enrollment by the number of assistant principals in the school and averaged it across schools in the sample with an assistant principal. A lower number indicated fewer students per assistant principal.

suggest intentionally allocating assistant principals to address school and student needs.<sup>3</sup> For instance, middle and high schools had lower student-to-assistant principal ratios than elementary schools (405 and 417 students per assistant principal versus 448). Urban schools also had lower student-to-assistant principal ratios than suburban schools (415 students per assistant principal versus 481), though town/rural schools had the lowest ratio across locales (404 students per assistant principal). Finally, schools that predominantly serve students of color had lower student-to-assistant principal ratios than schools that predominantly serve white students (416 students per assistant principal versus 455), and Title I schools had slightly lower ratios than non-Title I schools (433 students per assistant principal versus 448). Studies that account for enrollment also suggest the number of assistant principals is rising faster than would be expected due to increases in student population (Goldring et al. 2021).

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**Key finding 3: Assistant principals’ roles and tasks vary; many spend most of their time on student discipline and instructional leadership. Principals typically assign assistant principals to specific tasks or grade levels.**

**Assistant principals spent most of their time on student discipline and instructional leadership, followed by a mix of other activities.** According to principals, their assistant principals spent 29 percent of their time on student discipline and 25 percent on instructional leadership (that is, planning with, coaching, and observing teachers, Exhibit 3).

Assistant principals spent time on a mix of other activities, principals reported. These activities included:

- Non-disciplinary student supports, such as addressing mental health, teaching, and tutoring
- Parent engagement
- Student supervision, including lunch, hall, or bus duty
- Administrative duties, such as hiring, scheduling, budgeting, and participation in meetings.

These findings are consistent with state studies that find assistant principals typically spend most of their time on instructional leadership, student discipline, and other student affairs (Goldring et al. 2025; Moyer and Goldring 2023; DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran 2003; Ricciardi and Petrosko 2000; Searby et al. 2017).

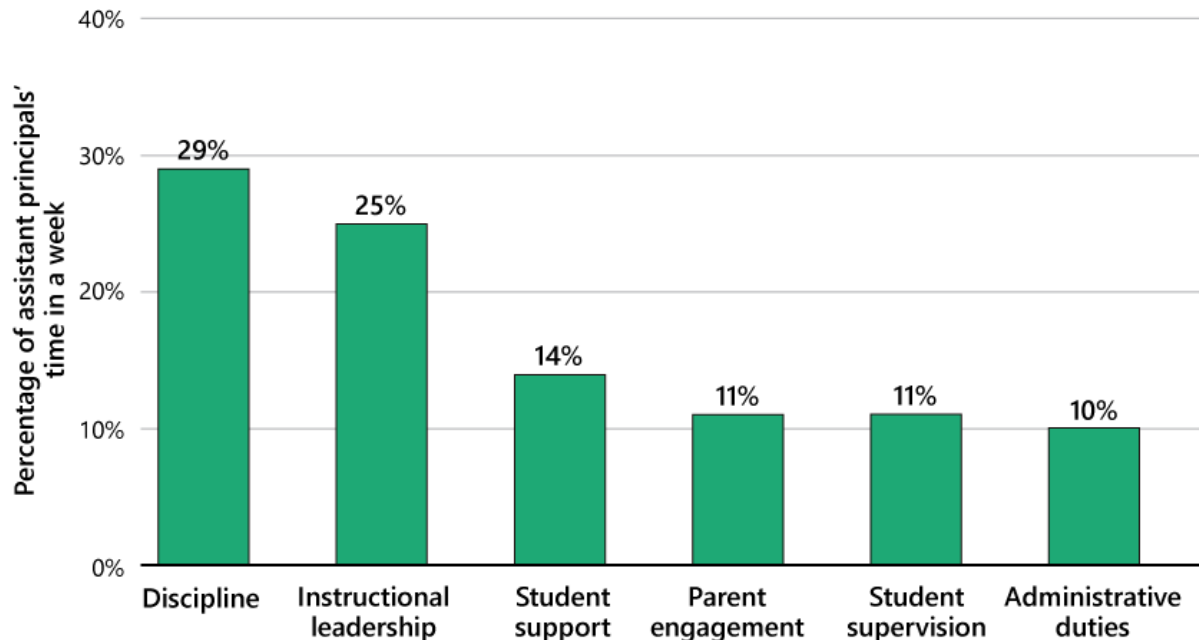
As with earlier studies, individual experiences varied for assistant principals. Most principals reported that their assistant principals spent 11 to 47 percent of their time on discipline, 9 to 40 percent of their time on instructional leadership, and 0 to 25 percent of their time on other

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<sup>3</sup> Consistent with previous findings, the study found that schools that enroll more students are also more likely to have an assistant principal (Goldring et al. 2025). Average student enrollment across schools with an assistant principal was 671 students compared with 314 students on average across schools without an assistant principal. The pattern of schools with an assistant principal enrolling more students on average holds across all school characteristics examined (not reported): school level, locale, majority white students or students of color enrollment, and Title I status.

activities. Some principals reported, however, that their assistant principals spent as much as 90 percent of their time on student discipline, and others reported that assistant principals spent as much as 75 percent of their time on instructional leadership. The survey did not ask whether these tasks were guided by specialized job descriptions for assistant principals—such as assistant principal of student services or assistant principal of instruction—or if they were a result of principal discretion (Goldring et al. 2021).

**Exhibit 3.** Percentage of time that assistant principals devote to activities in a typical week, as reported by principals with an assistant principal



Source: RAND 2024 Fall ASLP Omnibus Survey.

Notes: This exhibit is based on a survey of 642 principals who had at least one assistant principal at their school. “Instructional leadership” includes instructional planning and coaching with teachers and teacher observations. “Student support” includes non-disciplinary activities, such as supports for mental health, and working directly with students through teaching or tutoring. “Student supervision” includes lunch, hall, or bus duty and extracurricular supervision. “Administrative duties” includes hiring, scheduling, budgeting, and participation in administrative meetings. See Appendix A.2 for survey item details. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

ASLP = American School Leader Panel.

The patterns of time spent on each task did not vary significantly across school level, though the exact percentages differed slightly (see Appendix Exhibit B.4). For example, middle school assistant principals spent slightly more time on activities including student discipline and supervision than elementary and high school assistant principals, which is consistent with students needing more behavioral support to navigate adolescence and transition between middle school classrooms (Goldring et al. 2021).

In addition, more time may be spent on instructional leadership based on school and district instructional needs. For example, principals in urban and suburban schools, in Title I schools, and

in large districts all reported that their assistant principals spent more time on instructional leadership than principals in town/rural schools, non-Title I schools, and smaller districts (see Appendix Exhibits B.5 to B.7).<sup>4</sup>

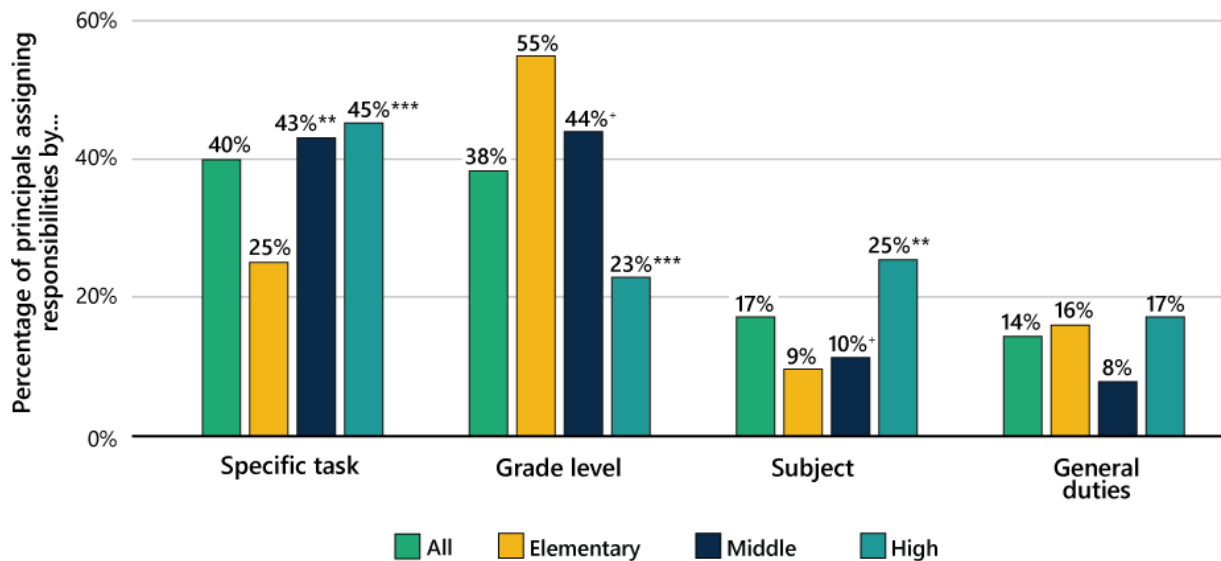
**Assistant principals' years of experience in the role had a limited relationship to time spent on various activities.** On average, assistant principals had about 4.8 years of experience in the role, with their experience ranging from 0 to 30 years. The time they spent on activities described above did not differ, however, between novice assistant principals with two or fewer years of experience and more experienced assistant principals with three or more years of experience.

**Principals with multiple assistant principals typically assigned roles and responsibilities by grade level or specific task.** In elementary schools with multiple assistant principals, about half of principals assigned responsibilities by grade level, such as K–2 or 3–5 (Exhibit 4). Middle school principals with multiple assistant principals were equally likely to assign responsibilities by grade level (44 percent) or task (43 percent), such as discipline, instruction, or student services. High school principals were most likely to assign responsibilities by specific task (45 percent), followed by subject matter, such as for English (25 percent), and grade level (23 percent).

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<sup>4</sup> The study examined responses to survey questions overall and by school characteristics (school level, Title I status, school size, locale) and district characteristics (district size). For brevity, we describe only the differences in survey responses by characteristics based on significant ( $p < .05$ ) factors in regression analyses and further prioritize discussion of results with higher magnitude and relevance.

**Exhibit 4.** Assignment of responsibilities among multiple assistant principals by school level



Source: RAND 2024 Fall ASLP Omnibus Survey.

Notes: This exhibit is based on a survey of 238 principals who reported having more than one assistant principal. Sample size varies based on school characteristics; see Appendix Exhibit A.1. Individual responses can be represented in multiple categories (assigning assistant principals by specific task and subject, for example). “Specific task” includes, for example, student services, athletics, instruction, testing, or student discipline. “Subject” includes, for example, specific subjects such as English or math. “General duties” indicates no assignment by grade level, subject matter, or specific task; see Appendix A.2 for survey item details.

\*\* indicates significant difference compared with elementary schools,  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\* indicates significant difference compared with elementary schools,  $p < .01$ .

+ indicates difference compared with high schools,  $p < .10$ .

ASLP = American School Leader Panel.

**Key finding 4: Most assistant principals have access to mentoring and participate in various professional development opportunities, but principals said that assistant principals need additional support with leadership skills, using data for school improvement, and instructional leadership.**

**Sixty-three percent of principals reported that their assistant principals had access to a mentoring or coaching program.** About one-third of principals with an assistant principal (29 percent) reported that mentoring or coaching programs were available to all assistant principals, and a similar share (34 percent) reported programs were available to only those new to the assistant principal role, school, or district. Still, 37 percent of principals reported that assistant principals at their school, new or experienced, had no access to a mentoring or coaching program. Middle school assistant principals had less access to mentoring or coaching programs

according to principals (52 percent), and assistant principals in large districts had greater access to these opportunities (75 percent; see Appendix B.4).

**Nearly all principals scheduled meetings with their assistant principals at least once a week.** Individual meetings with principals can be another avenue for assistant principals' development and support. Eighty-seven percent of principals with an assistant principal reported having a scheduled meeting with their assistant principal at least weekly, and 27 percent of those met with their assistant principal daily (see Appendix Exhibit B.8).<sup>5</sup>

**Leadership development programs, assistant principal networks, and workshops were the most common types of school- or district-supported professional development that assistant principals participated in.** In all, 62 percent of principals with an assistant principal reported that assistant principals received professional development (PD) through district-led academies and leader development programs in the past year (see Appendix Exhibit B.9). More than half of principals reported that assistant principals participated in assistant principal networks (56 percent) or attended workshops, conferences, and trainings (55 percent). Principals' reports of the most common PD formats for assistant principals varied by school level and district size. For example, higher percentages of principals in large districts reported assistant principals participated in district-led academies, assistant principal networks, and visits to other schools than principals in smaller districts (see Appendix Exhibits B.10 and B.11).<sup>6</sup>

**Principals identified leadership skills (that is, broader school leadership and instructional leadership) as the highest PD needs for assistant principals.** Of those with an assistant principal, 44 percent of principals cited leadership skills, such as strategic planning and working with a team, as one of the three most important PD needs for their assistant principals, followed by using data for school improvement (43 percent, Exhibit 5). About 30 percent of principals with an assistant principal cited as their highest PD needs observations and feedback to teachers and providing assistant principals with general preparation for the principalship. Less than 27 percent of principals cited other PD needs, such as financial management, parent engagement, subject matter expertise, or working with special populations of students. It is important to note that principals were asked to rank the top three PD needs for their assistant principals, so lower ranked choices may still represent important, but lower priority, PD needs (see Appendix Exhibit A.2). It is also possible that principals viewed some skills as relevant to multiple PD needs (for example, strong leadership skills could also strengthen observations and feedback with

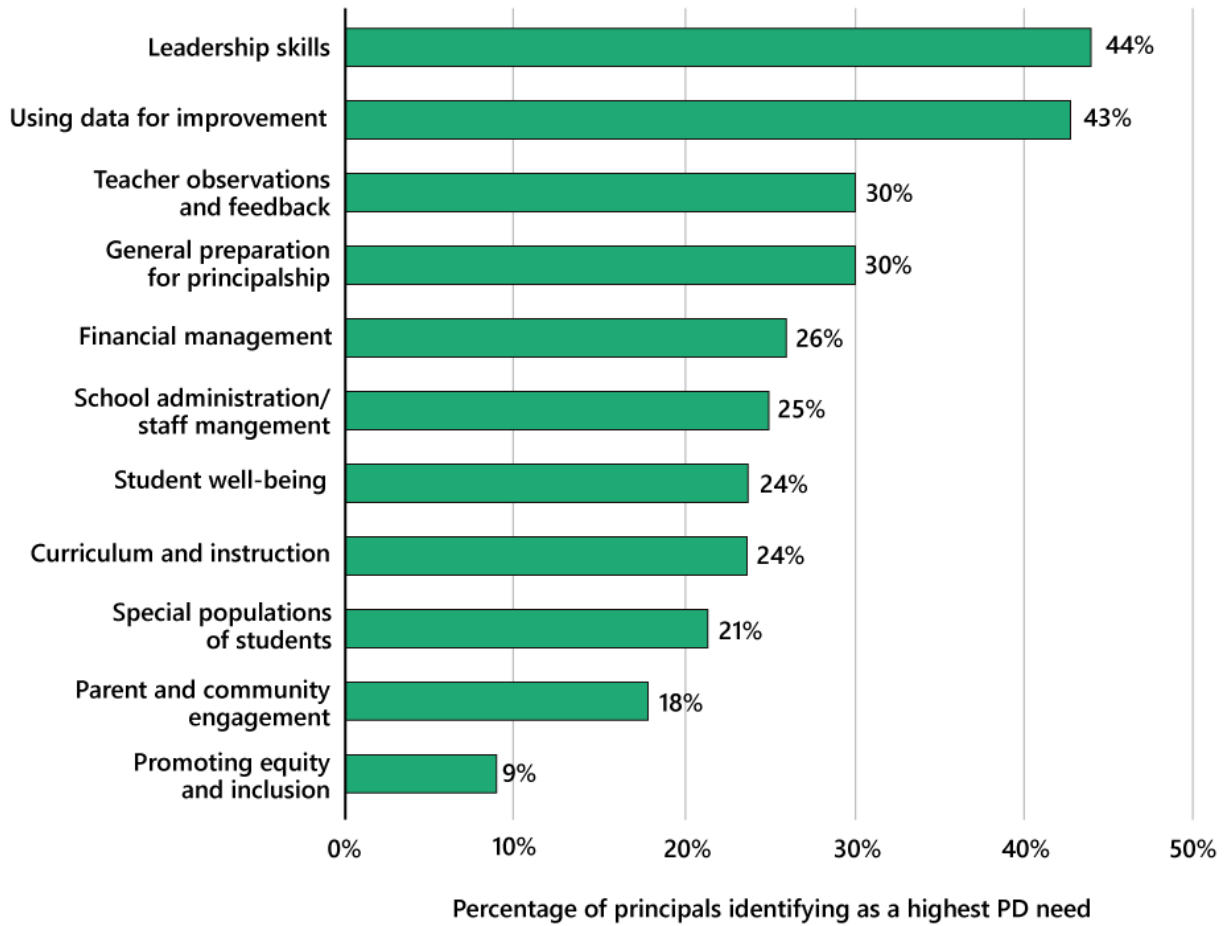
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<sup>5</sup> Though assistant principal experience was not related to how often principals reported meeting with assistant principals, a higher percentage of principals who had one assistant principal (34 percent) reported meeting daily with their assistant principal compared with principals who had multiple assistant principals (16 percent). In contrast, a higher percentage of principals who had multiple assistant principals (43 percent) reported meeting once a week compared with principals who had only one assistant principal (31 percent;  $p < .05$ ; see Appendix Exhibit B.8).

<sup>6</sup> The survey also included a question about the PD activities that principals participated in; see Appendix Exhibit B.12 for results.

teachers). Interestingly, across various school and district characteristics, principals generally identified similar support and development needs for assistant principals.<sup>7</sup>

**Exhibit 5.** Highest PD needs for assistant principals, as reported by principals with an assistant principal



Source: RAND 2024 Fall ASLP Omnibus Survey.

Notes: This exhibit is based on a survey of 634 principals who had at least one assistant principal at their school.

Principals responded to the question “please rank the top three areas for which your assistant principal needs professional development” (see Appendix A.2 for survey item details).

ASLP = American School Leader Panel; PD = professional development.

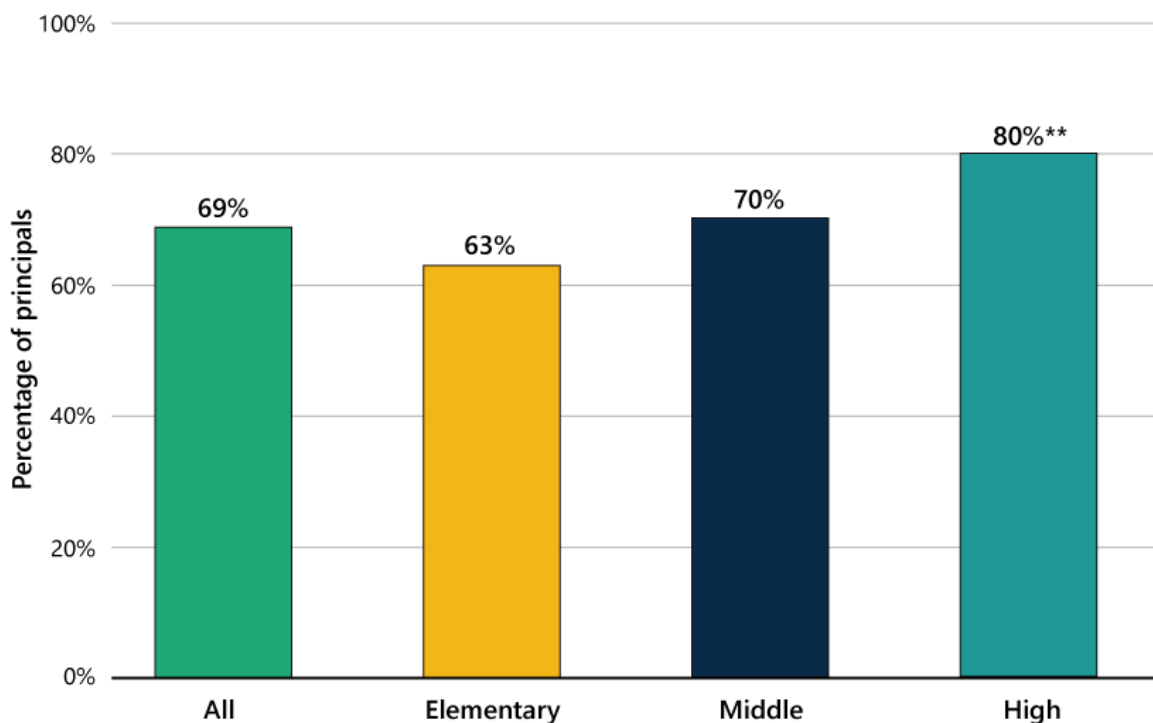
**Most assistant principals are evaluated using the same system as principals.** Though performance evaluations are an opportunity to align reviews, feedback, and supports to the specific roles of assistant principals, 82 percent of principals with an assistant principal reported that their district used the same evaluation system for assistant principals and principals. Previous research raised concerns that these evaluations may not align well with assistant principals’ roles, especially when evaluation systems are geared toward principals (Goldring et al. 2021).

<sup>7</sup> The survey also included a question about the PD needs of principals; see Appendix Exhibit B.13 for results.

### Key finding 5: Most principals said their assistant principals are ready for the principalship.

**More than two-thirds of principals (69 percent) reported at least some of their assistant principals were prepared for the principalship.** For principals with a novice assistant principal (two or fewer years in the position), 60 percent reported at least some of their assistant principals were prepared compared with 80 percent of principals with a more experienced assistant principal. A higher percentage of high school principals (80 percent) said that at least some of their assistant principals were prepared for the principalship, compared with 70 percent of middle school principals and 63 percent of elementary school principals (Exhibit 6). A substantial percentage of principals, however, nearly one-third (31 percent), reported that none of their assistant principals were prepared to be principals.

**Exhibit 6.** Percentage of principals reporting some of their assistant principals are prepared for the principalship



Source: RAND 2024 Fall ASLP Omnibus Survey.

Notes: This exhibit is based on a survey of 626 principals who had at least one assistant principal at their school. Sample size varies based on school characteristics; see Appendix Exhibit A.1. Values represent the percentage of principals who did not indicate that “none” of their assistant principals were prepared to be principals. See Appendix A.2 for survey item details.

\*\* indicates significant difference compared with elementary schools,  $p < .05$ .

ASLP = American School Leader Panel.

### III. Findings, takeaways, and areas for future research

#### A. Recap of key findings

This study presents findings from nationally representative data on the prevalence of assistant principals in the United States and their roles, support, and preparedness for the principalship. Using data from K–12 principal reports about their assistant principals in the 2024–2025 school year along with NTPS survey data from years prior, findings indicate the following:

- The number of assistant principals nationwide continues to grow, extending a three-decade trend. Both the percentages of schools with at least one assistant principal and with multiple assistant principals have risen. Increases in assistant principals also occurred across school level and a range of characteristics, such as locale, student race, and Title I status.
- Assistant principals are most common in middle and high schools, urban schools, and schools with high percentages of students of color. Schools with assistant principals also have lower student-to-assistant principal ratios, indicating that the increase in assistant principals is not solely driven by increasing student enrollments. Middle and high schools and Title I schools also have lower student-to-assistant principal ratios, suggesting that assistant principals may be allocated to schools with both greater student enrollment and needs.
- Assistant principal roles vary, but many spend most of their time on student discipline and instructional leadership. Principals typically assign assistant principals to specific tasks or grade levels. Time allocated for discipline versus instruction and other student support activities may vary depending on the needs and characteristics of the school.
- Most assistant principals have access to mentoring and participate in various PD opportunities, but principals report that their assistant principals need additional support on leadership skills, using data for improvement, and instructional leadership. Even so, a considerable share of assistant principals (roughly 10 to 30 percent) may not receive mentoring, coaching, or regular one-on-one principal support. Most assistant principals are evaluated with the same tools as principals.
- Most principals said that their assistant principals are ready for the principalship. Yet about one-third of assistant principals may require additional development, according to their principals, to be prepared for the principal role. Assistant principals need support with leadership skills and data use, principals report.

#### B. Takeaways and considerations for policy and practice

Policymakers and practitioners should consider ways to support assistant principals in their roles and ongoing development, including:

- **Develop the assistant principal role to strengthen high-quality, equitable teaching and learning and student support.** Continued growth in the number of assistant principals reinforces the importance of the role in supporting principals and strengthening schools. Assistant principals are especially critical in not just management and oversight duties but also instructional leadership and support of high-need schools and students.
- **Seek ways to ensure assistant principal roles align with school needs and assistant principals' own career aspirations.** In schools with multiple assistant principals, role allocation and mentorship have implications for career advancement, yet some assistant principals' experiences may focus on only a limited set of tasks. Providing intentional instructional leadership opportunities and experiences with other key school leadership tasks while serving as an assistant principal may be critical to preparing assistant principals to be principals.
- **Strengthen and ensure access to PD opportunities in the areas of highest need for assistant principals.** Although assistant principals generally have access to PD opportunities, development of specific skills such as data use and leadership skills can enhance their capabilities in other areas, such as working with and providing feedback to teachers and supporting students in non-academic areas of development. Other research suggests that assistant principals need deeper development in organizational management, managing personnel, and shaping schoolwide vision through strategic decision making (Goldring et al. 2021). High-quality PD opportunities with evidence of effectiveness at building key skills will provide the most benefit.
- **Provide principals with high-quality PD and support designed to enhance their mentorship and development of assistant principals.** Principals play an important role as mentors to assistant principals. Most principals meet with their assistant principals weekly, providing multiple opportunities to share knowledge, provide feedback, and build assistant principals' skills. Evaluation systems, which could be a valuable mechanism for principals to provide developmental feedback, could be better aligned with the assistant principal role.

### C. Questions for continued research

This study also raises questions for future research that can deepen the knowledge base on assistant principals, their roles, and their potential to contribute to improved outcomes for schools. Although this study examined national trends in the prevalence and roles of assistant principals, a study underway in three large school districts is exploring the assistant principal position under varying organizational approaches to leadership development, principal pipelines, and management structure. The forthcoming study will include explanations of the trends for the increasing prevalence of assistant principals and findings from interviews with school leadership staff about hiring practices, PD and supports, and job tasks and responsibilities.

Future research could build on the findings presented in this report to address several topics. **First, to what extent are the perspectives of assistant principals on a national level consistent with those of principals?** The current findings reflect the perceptions of principals

about the role, so hearing from assistant principals about their own experiences would provide additional insights and confirm existing findings.

**Next, what support do principals need to effectively mentor assistant principals?** How might support vary based on assistant principals' experience, the needs of the school being served, or the number of assistant principals in the school? How can principals best allocate and distribute expertise when working with multiple assistant principals? This study shows that appropriate mentorship and development of assistant principals is an ongoing concern for principals; further research could develop our knowledge about the variation and possibilities in this area to help ensure all assistant principals receive high quality career development.

**Finally, how can evaluation systems be aligned with assistant principals' roles to fairly and effectively evaluate skills and capabilities and to deliver strong formative feedback that supports improvement and development?** Moreover, what processes can support leaders in ascertaining an assistant principal's "readiness" for the principalship? Structuring evaluation systems to inform decisions about readiness could enhance the feedback and support that assistant principals ultimately receive. For districts that have developed evaluation systems specifically for the assistant principal role, future research could examine how these systems enhance quality and strengthen the development of assistant principals.

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