



Understanding the Increase in Assistant Principals: Roles, District Structures, and Diversity

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Contents

Acknowledgment.....	ii
Executive Summary.....	vi
I. Introduction.....	1
A. Why this study?.....	1
B. Research questions.....	2
II. Study Methods and Setting.....	3
A. Study design, data, and analyses.....	3
1. Study design.....	3
2. Data.....	3
3. Analyses.....	4
B. Study setting.....	5
1. Student characteristics.....	5
2. Timeframe along the pathway to the principalship.....	6
III. The Growth and Evolving Roles of Assistant Principals.....	8
A. The number of assistant principals increased in all three study districts from 2012 to 2022	8
B. Leaders attributed the increase in assistant principals to intensified school needs, including around instructional leadership and safety	10
C. Assistant principals' roles vary but most have similar broad responsibilities	11
D. Principals built complementary assistant principal teams to fill expertise gaps, and some rotated roles to prepare assistant principals for the principalship	13
E. Districts braided funding to support assistant principal positions.....	14
IV. How Central Office Structures Shape Pathways to the Principalship	15
A. Central office structures for leadership development varied across districts.....	15
B. Centralized structures of leadership development in the district supported clear expectations and consistent development and mentoring of educators along the pathway to school leadership.....	16
V. Diversifying the Pathway to the Principalship.....	19
A. Two districts increased their shares of assistant principals who were Black and Hispanic/other race or ethnicity from 2012 to 2022	19

B.	Assistant principals of color more often worked in schools serving students of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, reflecting district strategies, school fit, and assistant principals' preferences and experiences	20
C.	In some schools, assistant principals' race and gender shaped their daily assignments and access to advancement-oriented experiences	23
D.	Across all three districts, Black men were more likely than White men to become principals within five years of entering the assistant principalship; patterns for women and Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals varied	24
VI.	Considerations for Policy, Practice, and Research.....	28
	References.....	30

Exhibits

Exhibit 1. Data sources	3
Exhibit 2. Analyses used to address each research question.....	4
Exhibit 3. Student characteristics and sample sizes in study districts, 2022	5
Exhibit 4. Rates of retention and advancement for assistant principals and principals in study districts, 2022.....	6
Exhibit 5. The number of assistant principals grew in all three districts from 2012 to 2022	8
Exhibit 6. The number of students per assistant principal fell in all three districts from 2012 to 2022	9
Exhibit 7. The shares of schools with multiple assistant principals increased in all three districts	10
Exhibit 8. School leaders reported that assistant principals spent time on a broad range of responsibilities beyond student discipline.....	12
Exhibit 9. How central office structures shaped leadership preparation, hiring, support, and evaluation across districts.....	15
Exhibit 10. Two districts increased their shares of Black and Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals.....	19
Exhibit 11. Assistant principals typically worked in schools where a relatively larger number of students shared their race and ethnicity, 2022	21
Exhibit 12. In all three districts, Black men were more likely than White men to advance to the principalship within five years of entering the assistant principalship.....	25

Executive Summary

Assistant principals have become increasingly central to how schools operate, support students, and build leadership capacity. Yet, little is known about why the number of assistant principals has expanded, how their responsibilities are organized, how district central office structures shape pathways to the principalship, and what these patterns mean for who moves into school leadership. This report examines assistant principal staffing, roles, career pathways, and diversity in three large districts—two urban and one suburban—using 11 years of district administrative data and interviews with central office leaders, principals, and assistant principals. The study finds:

- Assistant principal staffing increased in all three districts from 2012 to 2022, outpacing enrollment growth and reducing the number of students served per assistant principal. District leaders and school leaders attributed this growth to rising needs for supervision and safety, instructional leadership (such as classroom observations and coaching teachers), day-to-day operations management, and student support. Schools with multiple assistant principals became more common, especially in middle and high schools, with principals seeking leadership teams that bring multiple areas of expertise. Districts sustained assistant principal roles through a mix of state allotments and local and federal funds.
- District central office structures for leadership development shaped perceptions of how transparent and consistent the pathway from assistant principal to principal is. In the most centralized district, district-managed preparation, screening, and development opportunities created clearer expectations and more common experiences across schools. In the most decentralized district, greater school-level autonomy allowed hiring, roles, and mentoring to be tailored to local needs but made advancement more dependent on individual principals and school placements. The hybrid district combined some district-run preparation with school-based hiring and development, producing some districtwide coherence and school-level autonomy and variation.
- Race and gender shaped assistant principals' experiences and advancement opportunities. Two districts increased their shares of Black and Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals over the decade, while the other began with relatively high numbers of Black assistant principals but saw declines over time. Across districts, assistant principals of color were more likely to work in schools serving larger populations of students who shared their racial or ethnic backgrounds and in higher-need contexts. Respondents described that leaders of color may be steered toward particular schools or responsibilities, including discipline and parent-facing work, that can affect access to experiences needed for the principalship, such as direct support to teachers.

Taken together, the findings suggest that assistant principal positions are core leadership capacity for managing increasingly complex schools and developing future principals. Districts and policymakers may consider funding assistant principal roles in ways that reflect school needs beyond enrollment, establishing baseline support opportunities for all assistant principals and transparent advancement expectations while preserving school-level flexibility and autonomy and monitoring

how placement, role assignments, mentoring, and sponsorship affect equitable access to the principalship. Continued research should examine how different assistant principal staffing models influence school outcomes, leader retention, and the diversity and effectiveness of the principal pipeline.

I. Introduction

A. Why this study?

Over the past 30 years, the number of assistant principals in the United States has grown faster than student enrollment, and many schools now employ multiple assistant principals (Goldring et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2026). This growth may reflect expanding demands for instructional leadership, student support, safety, and school operations, but evidence remains limited on what drives staffing decisions and how principals divide responsibilities across multiple assistant principals (Goldring et al., 2025; Mitani, 2018). These questions are especially important as declining enrollment forces districts to weigh leadership capacity against other staffing needs (Council et al., 2025; Kaput et al., 2024).

The assistant principalship is a common pathway to the principalship, so differences in access to these roles, developmental assignments, and support may shape who ultimately advances (Gates et al., 2019; Goldring et al., 2021; Grissom et al., 2021; Hitt & Player, 2019; Osborne-Lampkin & Folsom, 2017). Central office structures for leadership development may influence these opportunities: decentralized systems give principals greater discretion over hiring and role design, whereas centralized systems can standardize selection, development, and advancement. These arrangements may create uneven opportunities across schools, yet research has not fully examined how they shape assistant principal hiring, support, and movement into the principalship (Bartanen et al., 2021; Castro, 2022; Engel et al., 2017; Goldring & Ogawa, 2002; Grissom et al., 2017; Moyer & Goldring, 2023; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Rogers et al., 2025).

Because the assistant principalship is a key entry point to the principalship, it is also central to efforts to diversify school leadership. People of color remain underrepresented among principals and assistant principals relative to students, even though research suggests that students of color can benefit from leaders who share their racial or cultural backgrounds (Clayton & Goodwin, 2015; Goldring et al., 2021; Grissom et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012; Theoharis & Haddix, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2023; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2022). Evidence that advancement rates and timing vary by race, gender, and their intersection underscores the need to examine how access to support and advancement opportunities differs along the leadership pathway (Bailes & Guthery, 2020; Crawford & Fuller, 2017; Fuller et al., 2019).

This report examines assistant principal staffing, roles, hiring, support, and advancement in three large districts. Using 11 years of administrative data and interviews with central office leaders, principals, and assistant principals, we analyze why positions expanded; how schools allocate leadership responsibilities; how central office structures shape hiring, placement, development, and advancement; and how these patterns differ by race and gender. We also consider how district policies and school practices may support or impede efforts to diversify the school leadership workforce and advance educational equity (see Box 1 for how this report builds on previous Wallace-funded work on assistant principals).

Box 1. Relationship to previous Wallace-supported work on assistant principals

This report is the third in a series of research reports on assistant principals funded by The Wallace Foundation. The first synthesized prior evidence, documenting substantial national growth in the number of assistant principals and limited information about their roles, preparation, and support (Goldring et al., 2021). The second used data from a nationally representative survey of principals conducted in fall 2024 to document continued national growth in assistant principals and limited district supports for assistant principal development (Smith et al., 2026).

This report complements those national findings with longitudinal, case-based evidence from three large districts, illuminating organizational and policy conditions that may explain variation in assistant principal staffing and experiences across contexts. Together, the three reports provide complementary evidence about both the scope of assistant principal staffing nationally and the district-level conditions that may shape the supports assistant principals receive, equitable access to developmental opportunities, and pathways to a more diverse school leader workforce.

B. Research questions

This report provides an in-depth examination of assistant principals in three districts. Specifically, we address the following research questions:

1. **Why has the number of assistant principals increased over time, and what roles do they serve in schools?** What are the changes in the prevalence of schools with multiple assistant principals, and how do principals organize leadership roles and allocate responsibilities in these schools?
2. **How do central office structures and district organizational practices shape pathways from the assistant principalship to the principalship?** How do these structures and practices influence assistant principal hiring, placement, support, and advancement?
3. **How do assistant principals' career pathways and experiences vary by race and gender?** What do these patterns suggest about leadership opportunities for educators of color and women?

To address these questions, we used a sequential mixed-methods design in three districts, combining quantitative analyses of longitudinal administrative data with qualitative interviews. First, we collected 11 years of district administrative records (2011–2012 through 2021–2022), a period long enough to observe educators' movement across roles and career progression while limiting the burden on districts to assemble and provide historical data. The records covered educators' positions, school assignments, and demographic characteristics, including race and gender, and were linked to school-level data such as enrollment and student demographics. We then used initial findings from the administrative analyses to refine the interview protocols and identify topics that required additional context. Finally, from late 2023 through 2025, we interviewed current central office leaders, principals, and assistant principals about assistant principal staffing, role design, hiring and placement, professional learning and mentoring, and advancement to the principalship.

II. Study Methods and Setting

A. Study design, data, and analyses

1. Study design

The study used a sequential mixed-methods design: administrative data identified initial patterns, and interviews helped interpret them (see also Appendix A). We purposively selected large districts because their sizable workforces allowed us to follow enough educators across roles and to examine pathways to the principalship over time. We also selected districts that predominantly serve students of color because they offered important settings for examining efforts to build school leadership workforces that reflect the students and communities they serve. The districts also represented different geographic regions and varied in how centrally they organized leadership development. We refer to the districts using pseudonyms whose first letters indicate each district's approach to organizing leadership development in central office: Central Public Schools had the most *centralized* structure, Discovery Public Schools had the most *decentralized* structure, and Hillside Public Schools used a *hybrid* structure.

2. Data

The study drew on longitudinal administrative records and interviews with central office and school leaders (Exhibit 1; Appendix A). Eleven years of district administrative data, linked to school-level records, were used to document changes in assistant principal staffing, examine educators' placement and movement through leadership roles, and describe the contexts in which educators worked. Interviews with central office leaders, principals, and assistant principals helped us interpret the administrative findings and examine how district and school practices shaped assistant principals' roles and pathways. Central office leaders nominated interview respondents, and we sought variation by role, school level, race, ethnicity, and gender. When feasible, the study team interviewed principal–assistant principal pairs from the same school. Because the sample was nomination based and voluntary, it may overrepresent more visible or engaged leaders; findings therefore reflect informed perspectives but are not representative of all leaders.

Exhibit 1. Data sources

Data source	Key topics	Sample	Years and timing
Educator administrative data	Educator positions, school assignments, race, and gender; additional measures varied by district and included teacher records, school leader certification, and educator evaluation scores.	All teachers, assistant principals, and principals in two districts; only assistant principals and principals in Hillside	2011–2012 through 2021–2022
School-level data	Grade levels served, Title I status, student demographics, state test scores, suspension rates, and chronic absenteeism rates.	All district schools	2011–2012 through 2021–2022

Data source	Key topics	Sample	Years and timing
Interviews with central office leaders	District policies and practices related to assistant principal allocation, principal pipelines, role assignment, hiring, professional development, career pathways, and diversity goals.	Five central office leaders per district	Late 2023 through 2025
Interviews with principals and assistant principals	Role responsibilities, recruitment and hiring experiences, career progression, mentoring, and perceptions of district policies and supports.	Across districts, 7 to 11 principals; 6 to 16 assistant principals	2024 through 2025

3. Analyses

Three types of analyses—descriptive, regression, and qualitative interview analyses—were used to address the three research questions (Exhibit 2; Appendix A). Descriptive analyses documented changes in assistant principal staffing, school placement, and career progression, including differences by race and gender. Because the administrative records cover the full population of interest, the descriptive results reflect observed differences rather than sample estimates and statistical significance is not reported. Regression analyses assessed whether educator and school characteristics were associated with advancement and the time required to move into leadership roles. Qualitative analyses identified themes across interviews to explain the quantitative patterns and clarify how district policies and practices shaped assistant principals’ roles, support, and advancement.

Exhibit 2. Analyses used to address each research question

Research question	Administrative data analyses	Qualitative interview analyses
1. Growth and roles	Used descriptive analyses to document changes in assistant principal staffing over time, trends in schools with multiple assistant principals, and characteristics of schools where assistant principals worked.	Explained staffing trends and examined how principals organized leadership roles and allocated responsibilities within teams.
2. Central office structures and pathways	Not applicable.	Examined how central office structures and district practices shaped hiring, placement, support, and advancement.
3. Pathways by race and gender	Used descriptive analyses to examine career pathways by educators’ race and gender. Used regression analyses to examine associations between educator race and gender and advancement to assistant principal and principal roles.	Clarified how district policies and school-level practices may shape access to developmental opportunities, sponsorship, and advancement.

The study provides in-depth descriptive evidence from three purposively selected districts but has several limitations. The findings may not generalize to districts with different policy, funding, or labor-market contexts, and variation in the completeness of administrative records limited some measures and cross-district comparisons. In addition, the analyses identify patterns and associations but cannot isolate the causal effects of different district central office structures, policies, or other

conditions. Finally, as noted, the interview findings are not representative of all leaders in each district. The findings should therefore be interpreted as evidence about how staffing, roles, and pathways operated in these three settings.

B. Study setting

The study examines three large districts—two urban and one suburban—spanning two regions—Southeast and Northeast—in the United States. Districts varied in terms of student characteristics and pathways to the principalship.

1. Student characteristics

Each district serves more than 100,000 students, placing all three among the nation’s largest districts (Exhibit 3). Central was the largest, serving approximately 180,000 students, followed by Discovery with 160,000 students, and Hillside with 120,000 students. Enrollment increased in Central and Discovery from 2012 to 2022, but declined in Hillside, partly because of competition from charter schools.

Exhibit 3. Student characteristics and sample sizes in study districts, 2022

Characteristic (% unless otherwise noted)	Central Public Schools	Hillside Public Schools	Discovery Public Schools
Student enrollment number ^a	180k	120k	160k
Black students ^b	30	50	20
Hispanic students ^b	30	20	20
White students ^b	20	20	40
Other race students ^b	20	10	20
Economically disadvantaged ^b	50	100	20
Multilingual language learners ^b	30	20	10
Students receiving special education services ^b	10	20	10
Number of schools ^c	140	220	190
Title I schools ^b	50	100	50
Number of assistant principals	542	230	406
Number of principals	141	223	187

Source: Common Core of Data, 2022; administrative data from each district in the study.

Note: The exhibit presents information for the three districts in the study for the 2021–22 school year. Other race includes students identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and students of two or more races. Values for multilingual language learners, students receiving special education services, number of assistant principals, and number of principals come from administrative data from districts. The number of schools may not match the number of principals because of rounding, incomplete or missing data, or mid-year staff changes.

^a Value rounded to the nearest ten thousand for district anonymity.

^b Values rounded to the nearest ten percentage points for district anonymity.

^c Values rounded to the nearest ten for district anonymity.

All three districts enroll majority populations of students of color, though the racial and ethnic composition differs: Hillside serves a predominantly Black student population, Central serves similar

percentages of Black and Hispanic students that together account for roughly two-thirds of students, and Discovery serves students of whom a little more than half are students of color. During the study period, all three districts experienced steady increases in their Hispanic student populations, while the share of Black students declined in Hillside and Discovery and rose slightly in Central.

Across districts, students have complex educational needs, as reflected in the shares of economically disadvantaged students, multilingual language learners, and students receiving special education services. Each district operates more than 100 schools, highlighting both the scale of leadership staffing decisions and the importance of federal, state, and local funding streams (including potential use of Title I funding) for supporting assistant principal positions.

2. Timeframe along the pathway to the principalship

The three districts varied in how quickly assistant principals advanced to the principalship, how long assistant principals and principals remained in their roles, and the extent to which districts filled principal positions internally. The smallest district, Hillside, had relatively faster advancement from assistant principal to principal than other districts (26 percent of its first-time assistant principals became principals within five years) but lower rates of five-year assistant principal and principal retention (Exhibit 4). These lower retention rates could reflect Hillside's less isolated labor market, which may expose the district to greater competition for educators from surrounding districts. In contrast, the two larger districts, Central and Discovery, had higher rates of principal retention, which may have slowed assistant principal advancement. Central and Discovery also had high percentages of first-time principals who served as assistant principals in the district the prior year, indicating tight internal leadership pipelines.

Exhibit 4. Rates of retention and advancement for assistant principals and principals in study districts, 2022

Characteristic (% unless otherwise noted)	Central Public Schools	Hillside Public Schools	Discovery Public Schools
Five-year outcomes for first-time assistant principals			
Remained assistant principal	63	39	47
Became principal	5	26	14
Moved to other district role	10	3	10
No longer in district data ^a	22	33	30
First-time principals			
Served as an assistant principal in the district in the prior year	93	68	85
Principal retention			
Retention after five years in district	78	55	75

Source: Common Core of Data, 2022; administrative data from each district in the study.

Notes: This exhibit includes 348 assistant principals and 211 principals in Central; 80 assistant principals and 386 principals in Hillside; and 294 assistant principals and 274 principals in Discovery. For five-year outcomes, the exhibit examines educators during the 2011–2012 through 2016–2017 school years, whose roles could be observed five years later.

^a Indicates assistant principals who were not observed in the administrative data after five years. This could indicate taking a position in another district, leaving the field of education, or incomplete or missing data.

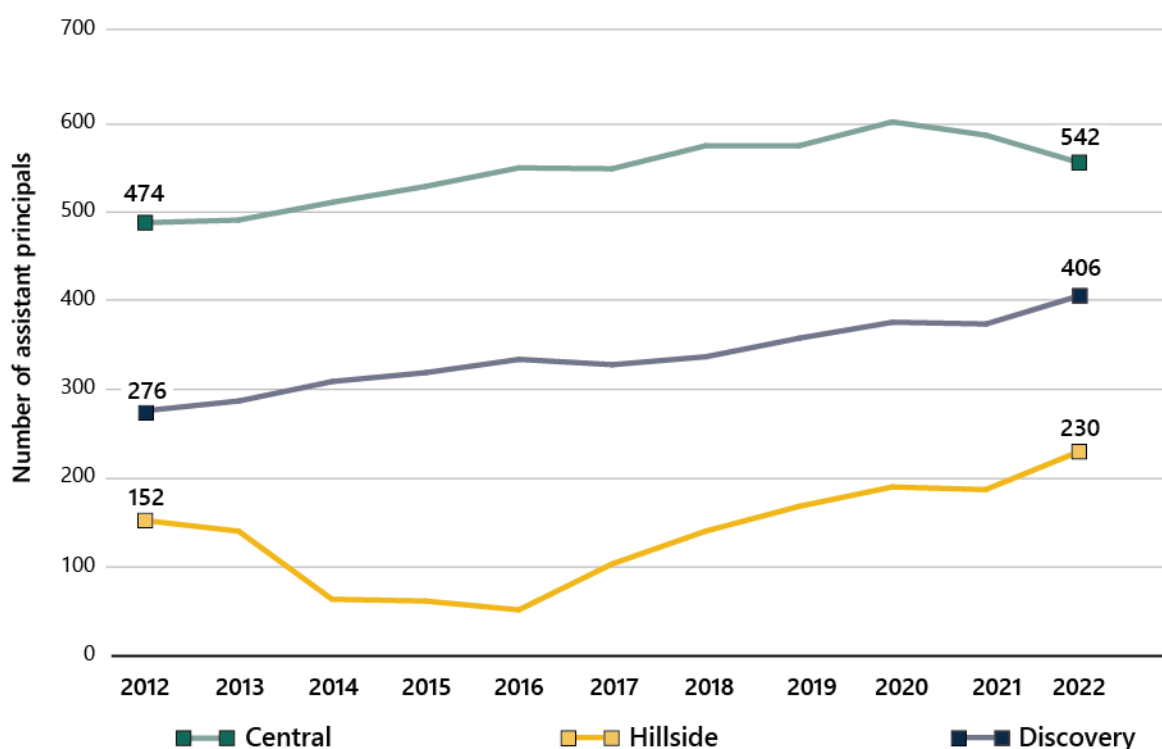
While these districts each have their own unique context, they can offer useful insights for other districts because they reflect conditions that many systems share: large-scale operations, substantial student needs, diverse student populations, and an imperative to build leadership pathways that are both sustainable and equitable. Their differences are also informative. The districts vary in central office approaches to hiring, support, and advancement, enabling comparisons of how leadership structures can shape assistant principals' experiences and advancement opportunities. Because all three districts serve high percentages of students of color, they also provide important contexts for examining efforts to diversify the principal workforce.

III. The Growth and Evolving Roles of Assistant Principals

A. The number of assistant principals increased in all three study districts from 2012 to 2022

The number of assistant principals increased in the three districts. Central had the largest assistant principal workforce of 474 in 2012, which grew slowly but steadily to 542 in 2022, a 14 percent increase (Exhibit 5). Discovery also grew steadily, from 276 to 406 assistant principals, a 47 percent increase. Hillside Public Schools followed a different trajectory: initially, the number of assistant principals fell from 152 in 2012 to about 60 in 2014 amid major budget cuts that led to layoffs and school closures. Then, after the district's financial situation stabilized around 2017, Hillside Public Schools began rehiring assistant principals and reopening schools, reaching 230 assistant principals by 2022—a net increase of 51 percent since 2012. Across districts, assistant principal staffing grew faster than student enrollment, reducing the number of students served per assistant principal (Exhibit 6).

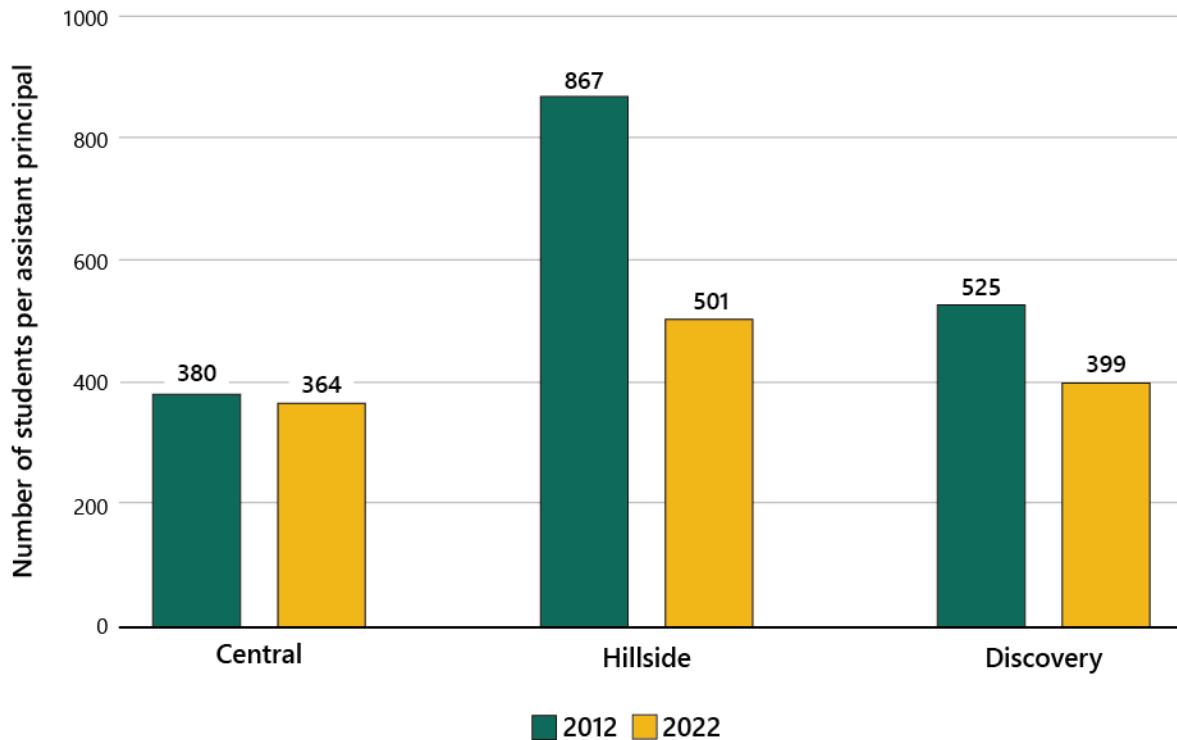
Exhibit 5. The number of assistant principals grew in all three districts from 2012 to 2022



Source: Administrative data from each district in the study.

Note: School year is indicated by the year for the spring term. For example, "2012" refers to the 2011–2012 school year, "2013" refers to the 2012–2013 school year, and so on.

Exhibit 6. The number of students per assistant principal fell in all three districts from 2012 to 2022



Source: Administrative data from each district in the study.

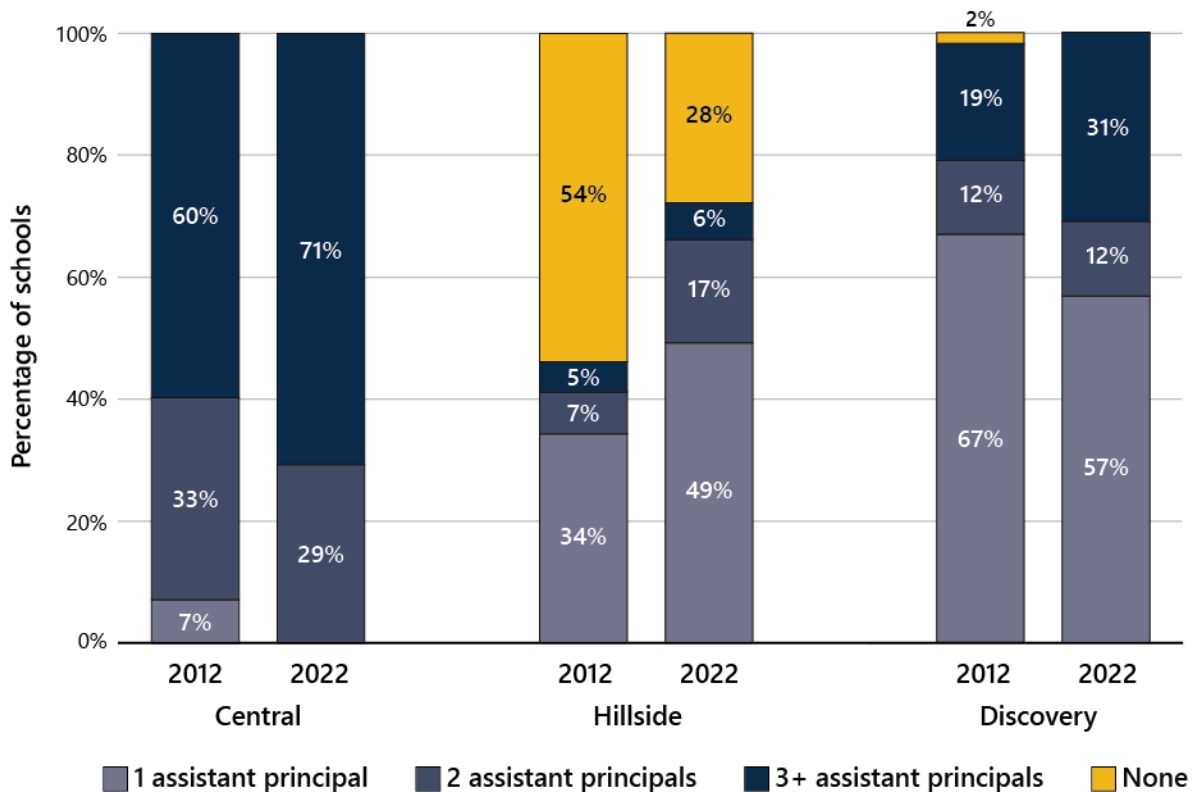
Note: School year is indicated by the year for the spring term. For example, "2012" refers to the 2011–2012 school year, "2022" refers to the 2021–2022 school year.

The shares of schools with multiple assistant principals increased in all three districts. In

Hillside, the increase was driven largely by adding assistant principals to schools that previously had none (Exhibit 7). In 2012, more than half of the district's schools had no assistant principals, but by 2022, 72 percent of schools had one or more. In contrast, Discovery and Central had very few schools without assistant principals in 2012; growth in these districts primarily reflected adding assistant principals to schools that already had them.

In both districts, the share of schools with three or more assistant principals rose by about 11 percentage points. In Discovery, this increase was concentrated in middle schools, where the share with three or more assistant principals more than doubled (from 32 percent to 68 percent). In Central, the share of elementary schools with three or more assistant principals nearly doubled (from 22 to 41 percent), and the share of middle schools increased by 9 percentage points (from 15 to 24 percent). In addition, the share of high schools in Central with eight or more assistant principals more than doubled (from 32 percent to 67 percent). High schools in Central also enrolled more students on average than in other districts. In 2022, average enrollment for high schools in Central was about 2,910 students, compared to 1,030 in Hillside and 1,870 in Discovery.

Exhibit 7. The shares of schools with multiple assistant principals increased in all three districts



Source: Administrative data from each district in the study.

Note: School year is indicated by the year for the spring term. That is, “2012” refers to the 2011–2012 school year, and “2022” refers to the 2021–2022 school year.

B. Leaders attributed the increase in assistant principals to intensified school needs, including around instructional leadership and safety

Across districts, leaders linked the increase in assistant principals to intensified student needs and the growing complexity of school operations. Central office leaders described assistant principals as essential “operationalizers” who translate school goals into day-to-day work. Principals emphasized that rising demands for teacher development, student support, supervision, and crisis response made it difficult to be present across classrooms, teacher collaboration, and student-facing work. Assistant principals likewise noted that unpredictable operational and student-related incidents can consume hours, making additional assistant principals necessary. As one principal explained:

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“...Prior to COVID, you needed assistant principals as well, but the work was different, and the overall child needs were different [...] Now, you need the assistant principals to develop the teachers and to support the students.”

—High school principal, Hillside Public Schools

Additional assistant principals also helped schools respond to intensified needs by expanding instructional leadership capacity. In Central, the district committed to all schools having at least two assistant principals to ensure principals had support to meet the district's expectations for instructional leadership. As one principal explained, it would be impossible to attend weekly collaboration meetings with teachers or conduct the expected classroom observations with only one administrator.

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"There is an increase in or emphasis on instructional leadership, being present in classrooms, being present when teachers are collaborating, being present with various departments and leading those departments that do require additional leadership.... There's no way that I could be in the Collaborative Learning Team meetings that occur each week if there were [only] one assistant principal in the building and to be present in classrooms, observing, providing feedback. It's impossible."

—Elementary school principal, Central Public Schools

Beyond expanding instructional leadership capacity, additional assistant principals helped schools meet growing demands for safety and supervision. In Central and Discovery, district leaders said they added assistant principals to increase adult presence and strengthen supervision. In Discovery, for example, the district adopted a policy requiring one assistant principal for each middle school grade (6th, 7th, and 8th) in response to safety and operations management concerns. Central office leaders and principals said that having more assistant principals allowed schools to be "well managed" by providing "visible" adults throughout the building, especially during arrivals and dismissals, lunch, and other non-instructional times. They also said that having more assistant principals helped develop relationships with students, address conflicts in and out of school, and support student social and emotional learning in nonacademic settings.

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"I think [the increase in assistant principals was] a supervision and safety issue; for a long time, middle school only had one [assistant principal]. Then we were basing [assistant principal] allotment on the state ADM (average daily membership), so you had whatever the state gave. Now with the number of safety and supervision concerns, the district pays for a lot of additional [assistant principals] through the local budget."

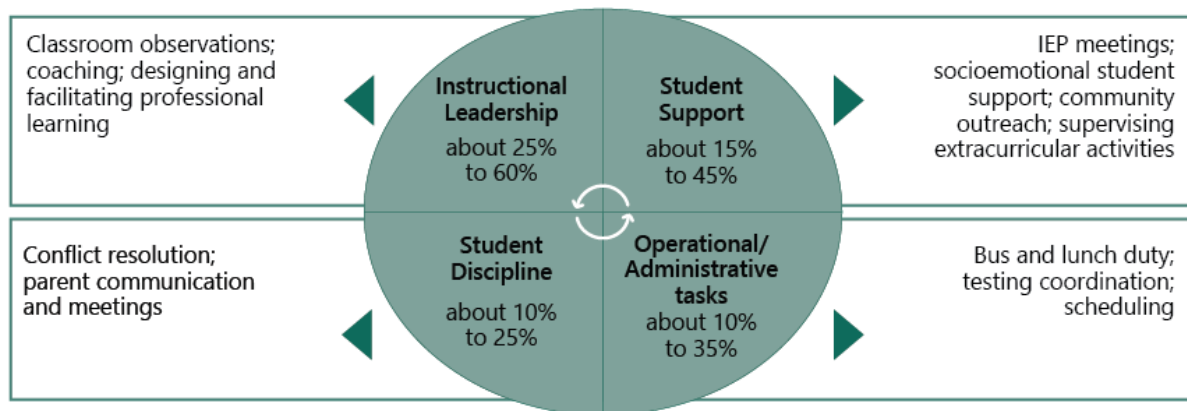
—Central office leader, Discovery Public Schools

C. Assistant principals' roles vary but most have similar broad responsibilities

Consistent with districts' reasons for increasing the number of assistant principals, assistant principals themselves reported spending time on a broad range of responsibilities. Principals and assistant principals said the role spans many responsibilities: instructional leadership (for example, teacher observations, evaluations, coaching), student support (for example, Individualized Education Program [IEP] meetings), student behavior and discipline (for example, resolving conflicts and investigating incidents), and operational and administrative tasks (for example, arrival and dismissal, lunch duty, hallway monitoring, facilities, testing coordination) (Exhibit 8). Time use varied substantially across assistant principals and schools, but across districts, respondents reported that

assistant principals spent the most time on instructional leadership (about 25 to 60 percent), followed by student support (about 15 to 45 percent), operational and administrative tasks (about 10 to 35 percent), and student discipline (about 10 to 25 percent).

Exhibit 8. School leaders reported that assistant principals spent time on a broad range of responsibilities beyond student discipline



Source: Interviews with principals and assistant principals from each district in the study (56 total interviews with school leaders).

Note: Respondents were asked "How much of the assistant principal role is devoted to instructional leadership, student discipline, administrative tasks (bus, lunch, textbooks), and student support (tutoring, sports)? How much time do you (or one of your APs) typically spend on each broad area?"

IEP = Individualized Education Program.

In schools with one assistant principal, responsibilities tended to be broad. In schools with one assistant principal, mostly elementary schools, principals and assistant principals typically divided ownership of observations, transportation, student conduct, scheduling, and other work while continuing to consult one another on schoolwide decisions. One principal–assistant principal pair described the arrangement as collaborative: each took primary responsibility for particular areas but worked together to lead the school and follow through on major issues.

In schools with multiple assistant principals, mostly middle schools and high schools, principals often differentiated roles by grade level, department, or program. Assistant principals might oversee specific grades, subject areas, or programs such as special education, yet many still managed broad responsibilities across instruction, student support, and operations. For example, one high school assistant principal described overseeing dual enrollment, the social studies department, goals for a school improvement plan, grade 10 achievement data, climate and culture work, attendance reporting, and grades 9–12 social studies and language classes. In Hillside, assistant principals focused on student academic progress and support, collaborating with climate managers, who addressed school culture and climate, including positive behavior support and discipline, and teacher leaders who took on some instructional leadership responsibilities.

Some districts created specialized assistant principal roles—such as an "assistant principal of instruction"—so one administrator could focus more on curriculum and teaching, while others

handled more operational and building management responsibilities. One assistant principal described their instructional leadership specialization:

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"The [assistant principal of instruction] tends to have more focus on instructional leadership...working with our advanced placement classes, working on course registration, working on credit by demonstrating mastery.... Really, I don't think there's anything in my column of responsibilities that doesn't relate to instruction, where the same cannot be said for the other members of the team, where they have their managerial base responsibilities as well."

—High school assistant principal, Discovery Public Schools

When the team size allowed, high school principals assigned one assistant principal exclusively to grade 9 students to build closer relationships with students during a difficult transition year.

D. Principals built complementary assistant principal teams to fill expertise gaps, and some rotated roles to prepare assistant principals for the principalship

Principals in schools with multiple assistant principals intentionally built leadership teams with complementary expertise. Principals emphasized "team fit," seeking candidates whose interests, personalities, and strengths broadened the team's ability to support school improvement and connect with students and families. One high school principal noted that hiring decisions were shaped by gaps in their own knowledge, such as special education, so they recruited assistant principals with backgrounds in those areas to balance the team. Because these teams were based around complementary strengths rather than fixed positions, assistant principal responsibilities often shifted when people transitioned or departed, reinforcing that assistant principal roles are highly variable and context-specific.

Principals and assistant principals emphasized that intentional task allocation is central to developing future principals, especially in schools with multiple assistant principals. Rather than keeping assistant principals in one domain, some principals deliberately rotate responsibilities so each assistant principal gains meaningful instructional leadership and operational experience. Some principals and assistant principals said they revisit role assignments annually—especially when staffing changes create opportunities to redistribute work—and involve the full leadership team, so individual interests and career aspirations inform decisions. At the same time, other principals and veteran assistant principals expressed frustration in their lack of exposure to key leadership responsibilities, such as budgeting and management, during their years as an assistant principal.

One assistant principal described how their principal assigns roles to develop future principals:

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"Our principal dictates what the line items are.... We strategically make sure that everyone is having adequate instructional exposure. We sit in a room, and we go through it until everyone has whatever they prefer. It's a very democratic process.... [Our principal] really takes seriously the responsibility of preparing us for the principalship if that's something that would be desired."

—High school assistant principal, Discovery Public Schools

E. Districts braided funding to support assistant principal positions

Given the importance of assistant principal roles, districts used a mix of state allotments and flexible local funding streams to support these positions. In Discovery, central office leaders used local funds to add assistant principals beyond state allocations, particularly when allotments based on student enrollment did not keep pace with supervision and safety needs. Central provided principals the flexibility to use Title I funds for assistant principal positions, allowing the district to exceed state allotments and establish a minimum of two assistant principals per school. Although this flexibility later tightened, district leaders maintained the minimum with local funds as needed. Hillside reduced assistant principal positions during severe budget shortfalls early in the study period but expanded them as funding became available. Most recently, the district used temporary federal COVID-19 relief funds to add 100 assistant principal positions. Although renewed fiscal pressures put these positions at risk, the district preserved them because, as one leader observed, “assistant principals are essential to the daily functioning and success of our schools.”



Overall, these findings show that the three districts prioritized assistant principal positions despite fiscal constraints and shifting funding streams. They also suggest that staffing decisions are closely tied to how districts define school leadership work and how much capacity they expect schools to have. The next section builds on this foundation by examining how central office structure shapes the pathway into—and through—the assistant principalship, including how districts organize hiring, placement, development, and advancement to principal roles.

IV. How Central Office Structures Shape Pathways to the Principalship

A. Central office structures for leadership development varied across districts

Central office structures for leadership development reflected different balances between districtwide coherence and school-level autonomy. Central used the most centralized approach: the district provided pre-service programming, screened candidates, created a vetted hiring pool, and established common expectations for support and evaluation (Exhibit 9). Hillside used a hybrid approach: the central office screened candidates, created an eligible pool, and provided early support, while principals made final selections and shaped much of assistant principals' development after placement. Discovery used the most decentralized approach: the central office verified eligibility, while principals managed recruitment, interviewing, hiring, and support at the school level.

Exhibit 9. How central office structures shaped leadership preparation, hiring, support, and evaluation across districts

Pathway component	Central (most centralized)	Hillside (hybrid)	Discovery (most decentralized)
Pre-service training	District-led partnerships with universities create common pre-service expectations, aligned to Central pipeline programs (for example, Aspiring Leadership Program/Aspiring Principals Program).	District–university partnerships (for example, Pathways to Leadership) offer a structured pre-service route, but participation is not the sole or required entry point.	Preparation is largely candidate-driven (district partners exist, but information and access are not centrally coordinated); educators often pursue certification independently.
Screening and applications	Centralized application and human resources screening; district vets candidates for eligibility and placement in the leadership pipeline.	Central office screens applicants and conducts initial interviews and performance tasks to create an eligible candidate pool.	Central office verifies licensure and eligibility; candidates apply to individual school postings, and principals conduct screening for fit.
Interviewing and hiring	Principals conduct school-based interviews and make final selections, typically from district-vetted and eligible candidates.	Principals lead interviews and hire from a centrally established eligible pool; interview formats vary by school.	Principals lead outreach, interviews, and hiring for each vacancy from applicants to that specific school posting.
Support	Structured district-run learning (for example, required Aspiring Leadership Program/ongoing development days) plus principal mentoring expected by the district.	District provides some structured supports (for example, pipeline programs, coaching, cohort networking, or role-specific PD), but ongoing mentoring and PD expectations vary by school.	Support is primarily principal and school determined; district offers limited standardized assistant principal development beyond onboarding and required compliance.

Pathway component	Central (most centralized)	Hillside (hybrid)	Discovery (most decentralized)
Evaluation	Formal evaluation using districtwide criteria and tools; aligned with centralized expectations for the assistant principal role.	Formal evaluation using district tools; implementation and feedback practices can vary by principal or school.	Formal evaluation (typically principal-led) with fewer standardized districtwide expectations for assistant principal practice beyond required processes.

Source: Interviews with central office staff, principals, and assistant principals from each district in the study (71 total interviews).

PD = professional development.

B. Centralized structures of leadership development in the district supported clear expectations and consistent development and mentoring of educators along the pathway to school leadership

In Central, the most centralized district, educators reported a transparent, standardized pathway with clear requirements and common preparation experiences. Central office leaders and principals said district programs such as the Aspiring Leadership Program and Aspiring Principals Program established shared expectations and signaled what candidates needed to demonstrate to be ready for advancement. Principals also described the advancement requirements as clearly communicated, including the required experience and performance-based activity.

Centralized preparation, professional learning, and screening created more consistent leadership preparation experiences across Central's schools. Principals said the district's centralized preparation and upfront screening of assistant principal candidates increased their confidence that candidates met common standards and reduced uncertainty during the interview and selection process. Principals and assistant principals also said centralized professional learning structures—such as the Aspiring Leadership Program and ongoing role-specific development days—made preparation experiences more uniform and reinforced shared norms across the district, strengthening the sense that advancement was embedded in a coherent, districtwide pathway rather than negotiated school by school. Assistant principals reported that the district did a good job of providing multiple professional development opportunities both for their current roles and for advancement to the next level. Principals likewise reported being invested in identifying and developing future leaders.

In Discovery, the most decentralized district, school-level autonomy allowed schools to tailor hiring and preparation and advancement practices to local needs, though limited central coordination of communication contributed to uncertainty about how to prepare for and navigate movement to the principalship. In Discovery, there was limited districtwide communication and more school-specific selection processes; consequently, screening, interviewing, and hiring expectations were less consistent across Discovery schools. Assistant principals reported that information about licensure and certification options was not systematically shared, so educators sometimes learned about stronger residency or internship pathways only after completing certification. In the absence of a clear systemwide pathway, principals and assistant principals emphasized the importance of individual relationships, including connections and “tapping”—encouragement from others to consider leadership or apply for open positions. Central office leaders

said individual schools set expectations for assistant principals, and principals noted that although job postings could be similar, principals had substantial discretion in interviewing and selecting candidates, contributing to variation in role expectations. Assistant principals and principals also said candidates applied separately to each individual school and often received limited communication and feedback about principals' selection decisions. District central office leaders recounted instances in which frustration with the process led assistant principals to pursue principal roles in other districts.



"I do not feel like in this district, there is common understanding about the role of an [assistant principal] from school to school, because again, it is so dependent on every single principal and what they require them to do."

—Elementary school principal, Discovery Public Schools (decentralized district)

In Discovery, advancement depended heavily on school placement and principal support. All interviewees confirmed that assistant principals' preparation was shaped primarily by principal mentoring rather than a common central office learning sequence with shared benchmarks. District support was primarily focused on onboarding and optional opportunities, such as an informal assistant principal network. Principals and assistant principals reported that some principals intentionally built readiness by assigning instructional leadership responsibilities, whereas others provided fewer developmental opportunities. As a result, assistant principals said that advancing required finding a school led by a strong, well-respected principal who would mentor them and sponsor their growth:



"Something important for both principal interns and early-career [assistant principals] is acknowledging the politics of career development, and then pursuing positions in schools in which principals are well respected. Knowing that, if I go train under this principal, that will either develop me for a successful career as an assistant principal or put me on a track for principalship. That's, typically, within our district, when folks move from school to school, it's usually not due to being unhappy in a certain school context, but again, looking for growth."

—High school assistant principal, Discovery Public Schools (decentralized district)

In Hillside, the hybrid approach combined districtwide communication and early preparation supports with school-level discretion, creating a broadly understood pathway to advancement but less consistent preparation experiences after placement. Central office leaders described intentional district-level communication about the purpose of the pipeline, resulting in a strong, widely understood message of "growing from within," positioning the assistant principalship as a key source of internal leadership capacity. Centralized screening and a districtwide candidate pool also reduced school leaders' workload around hiring and ensured a supply of eligible candidates. Hillside provided district-level professional development and coaching, but principals were uncertain about whether these supports were consistently available across the district. District programming included cohort-based networking and role-specific professional development, and central office leaders

recognized the need to differentiate supports for assistant principals who do not seek the principalship from those who aspire to the principalship.

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"As I've gone through the transition from assistant principal to principal, and having that coaching within that program, I was able to have a coach and request continued coaching. I don't know how universal that is."

—High school principal, Hillside Public Schools

In Hillside, assistant principals said their development depended heavily on school-level leadership. Central office leaders referenced an "unspoken expectation" that assistant principals would move into the principalship within three to five years and perceptions that remaining in the role too long could be viewed negatively.

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"I've noticed that it's completely night and day under different leaders. Leadership matters. So, with my principal, I make sure to check in with her at least once a day. She has an open-door policy."

—High school assistant principal, Hillside Public Schools

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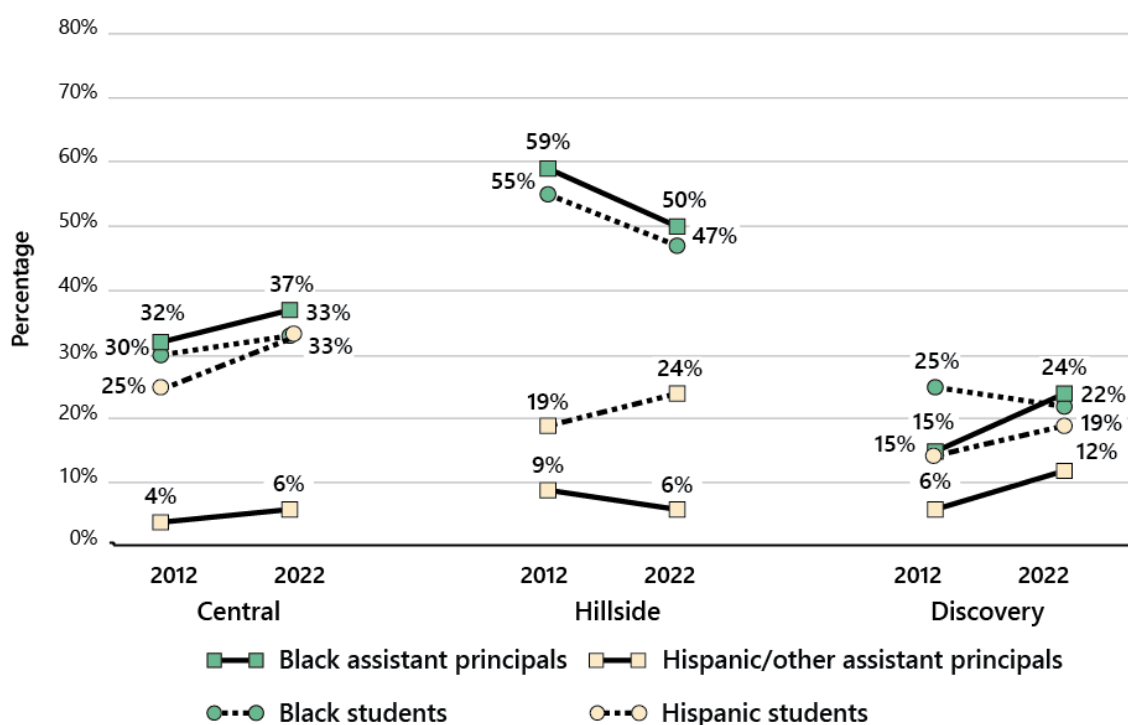
Overall, the three districts balanced districtwide consistency and school-level discretion in different ways, shaping how clearly educators understood advancement expectations to the principalship and how consistently they experienced preparation and support. More centralized approaches provided clearer requirements, more uniform processes, and common development opportunities across schools. More locally driven approaches gave principals greater flexibility to tailor hiring, roles, professional development, and mentoring to school needs but made educators' experiences more dependent on individual principals and placements. The next section examines whether access to developmental experiences and advancement opportunities also differed by race and gender.

V. Diversifying the Pathway to the Principalship

A. Two districts increased their shares of assistant principals who were Black and Hispanic/other race or ethnicity from 2012 to 2022

From 2012 to 2022, Discovery and Central increased their shares of Black and Hispanic/other race or ethnicity¹ assistant principals. The numbers of Black assistant principals increased in both districts, though Discovery still had the lowest share across the three districts (Exhibit 10). In Hillside, the share of Black assistant principals declined, but the district continued to have the highest share of Black assistant principals, at 50 percent in 2022. Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals remained low overall. These shifts occurred as Black student populations remained relatively stable or declined and Hispanic student populations grew. Patterns among principals were generally similar, except the share of Hispanic/other race or ethnicity principals increased in Hillside and declined slightly in Discovery (see Appendix B, Exhibit B.1). Overall, the numbers of school leaders of color improved relative to student populations, though notable gaps—especially in Hispanic representation—remained.

Exhibit 10. Two districts increased their shares of Black and Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals



Source: Administrative data from each district in the study; Common Core of Data, 2012, 2022.

Note: "Hispanic/other" refers to "Hispanic/other race or ethnicity," and includes assistant principals identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races. Due to the small numbers of non-Black or non-White assistant principals in each district, these groups are combined for reporting to ensure

¹ Hispanic/other race or ethnicity refers to staff identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races.

groups of at least 10 for each district; at least 60 percent of assistant principals in the combined group are Hispanic for each district.

Most assistant principals in the three districts were women, though their shares declined in two districts. Women consistently comprised more than 70 percent of assistant principals across districts, although their share declined in Central and Hillside and remained stable in Discovery across the study period (Appendix B, Exhibit B.2). Among principals, the share of women likewise declined in Central and Hillside but increased in Discovery.

B. Assistant principals of color more often worked in schools serving students of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, reflecting district strategies, school fit, and assistant principals' preferences and experiences

Across all three districts, assistant principals of color were more likely to work in schools serving larger populations of students from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. On average, Black assistant principals worked in schools with higher shares of Black students, Hispanic assistant principals worked in schools with higher shares of Hispanic students, and White assistant principals worked in schools with higher shares of White students. For example, in Central, Black assistant principals led schools where, on average, 37 percent of students were Black, compared with 31 percent for schools led by White assistant principals and 27 percent for schools led by assistant principals who were Hispanic/other race or ethnicity (Exhibit 11). Differences were larger in Hillside. On average, schools led by Black assistant principals enrolled over 10 percentage points more Black students than those led by other assistant principals. In the same district, schools led by assistant principals who were Hispanic/other race or ethnicity enrolled at least 14 percentage points more Hispanic students than those led by Black or White assistant principals. Schools led by assistant principals of color also had lower achievement and attendance rates and higher chronic absenteeism and discipline rates (Appendix B, Exhibit B.3).

Central office structures may have shaped how districts pursued leadership diversity: centralized systems coordinated recruitment and development, while decentralized systems relied more on school-level hiring and perceptions of fit. Across districts, interviewees emphasized the goal of having school leaders who represented the race and ethnicity of students and understood the communities they serve. However, they described different ways that central office organization influences these. In the most centralized district (Central), central office staff said the leadership pipeline process intentionally recruits and develops a diverse pool of candidates, ensuring opportunities for candidates who reflect district demographics. Principals in this district also emphasized hiring assistant principal candidates from different racial backgrounds to complement the leadership team and strengthen connections between schools, students, and communities.

“We are not blind to the fact that we do need to recruit and retain diverse candidates.... We understand that we are a diverse district. And so, you do have principals that are intentional about diversifying their leadership teams...that is something that we also consider when we’re looking at our cohort, making sure that we have diversity, that we are providing those opportunities for all candidates, especially those that represent the diverse groups of kids that we serve.”

—Central office staff, Central Public Schools

Exhibit 11. Assistant principals typically worked in schools where a relatively larger number of students shared their race and ethnicity, 2022

Assistant principal race	Average percentage of		
	Black students	Hispanic students	White students
Central Public Schools			
Black assistant principals	37	38	13
Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals	27	48	13
White assistant principals	31	31	21
Hillside Public Schools			
Black assistant principals	61	19	9
Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals	47	39	6
White assistant principals	48	25	13
Discovery Public Schools			
Black assistant principals	28	22	37
Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals	25	22	37
White assistant principals	22	19	45

Source: Administrative data from each district in the study; Common Core of Data, 2022.

Note: Data shown for 2021–2022, the most recent year of the study; patterns are similar for earlier school years. The exhibit provides the percentage of students identified as Black, Hispanic, or White averaged across assistant principals of each race and ethnicity. “Hispanic/other race or ethnicity” includes assistant principals identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races. Due to the small numbers of non-Black or non-White assistant principals in each district, these groups are combined for reporting to ensure groups of at least 10 for each district; at least 60 percent of assistant principals in the combined group are Hispanic for each district. Bold font indicates the cells where assistant principals and students share the same race and ethnicity.

In the most decentralized district (Discovery), central office leaders did not describe an explicit central office strategy to recruit school leaders of color. Instead, they noted how school-level hiring and assumptions about “fit” can shape where leaders of color are hired. Some central office staff suggested that beliefs that leaders of color are better equipped to support students of color may contribute to their hiring in schools that predominantly serve students of color. Some leaders also felt these dynamics made them more likely to be considered for positions at lower-performing schools or schools with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students.

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"There's certainly benefit to things like representation, and relatability...but the [inverse] of that would be the ability to progress vertically if the schools you desire to be at, the demographics don't reflect your own identity."

—High school assistant principal, Discovery Public Schools

In Hillside, the hybrid structure combined district-level attention to diversity with school-level discretion over hiring. Principals and assistant principals emphasized selecting assistant principals whose linguistic and cultural backgrounds aligned with community needs, illustrating how school leaders used that discretion to build more diverse leadership teams:

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"I believe, and my principal believes, we need an assistant principal that's bilingual, that understands that culture far better than we do...that's exactly what our school community needs in terms of equity. I mean, 60 percent of our students are Spanish speaking, and I believe that they should have someone in their school, in school leadership, that mirrors them and their community."

—Middle school assistant principal, Hillside Public Schools

Assistant principals of color described placement decisions that are influenced by a sense of purpose and connection in schools serving students of color as well as marginalization or challenges to their competence in predominantly White settings. Many assistant principals of color said they actively seek schools serving predominantly students of color because they viewed racial or cultural connections as central to their sense of purpose and impact.

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"My identity allows me to connect with students, especially Black boys who might not otherwise see adults who look like them in positions of authority. That visibility matters for student aspirations."

—High school assistant principal, Hillside Public Schools

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"It's not just because I look like the children I serve, but I also want to be a voice for them, and teach them, and give them the resources that I can provide."

—Middle school assistant principal, Hillside Public Schools

At the same time, some assistant principals of color described experiences that discouraged them from pursuing roles in schools with predominantly White staff or students. They reported feeling alienated when White colleagues expressed deficit-based assumptions about students and families of color, as well as anticipating that White parents might question their competence or require them to repeatedly prove themselves.

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"Having worked in a...school [where]...the teachers were mostly White women and some White men...I heard teachers judging the families of our [non-White] students about how they don't value education and making assumptions about the family values...it was something that...alienated me from other teachers when I heard those kinds of comments."

—Elementary school assistant principal, Hillside Public Schools

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"If someone of color is at a school that is predominantly White, it can be more challenging. And it could be because parents don't want them there. [Parents will] go to the school board, or they just make it very challenging for someone of color to even feel wanted...they will constantly complain."

—High school assistant principal, Discovery Public Schools

C. In some schools, assistant principals' race and gender shaped their daily assignments and access to advancement-oriented experiences

Some assistant principals and principals noted race and gender could expand some assistant principals' leadership opportunities while limiting others' access to roles that prepare them for the principalship. Some assistant principals of color reported an additional, less-visible workload, particularly related to discipline and parent issues, because they were perceived as more relatable to students and families. Respondents suggested that, over time, these assignments could limit access to instructional leadership roles and other experiences associated with advancement.

At the same time, some respondents said race supported advancement for certain groups. For example, school leaders noted that Black men—though underrepresented as educators—often move into leadership roles relatively quickly. One Black male assistant principal said race was a double-edged sword, facilitating future opportunities but requiring careful navigation of negative stereotypes:

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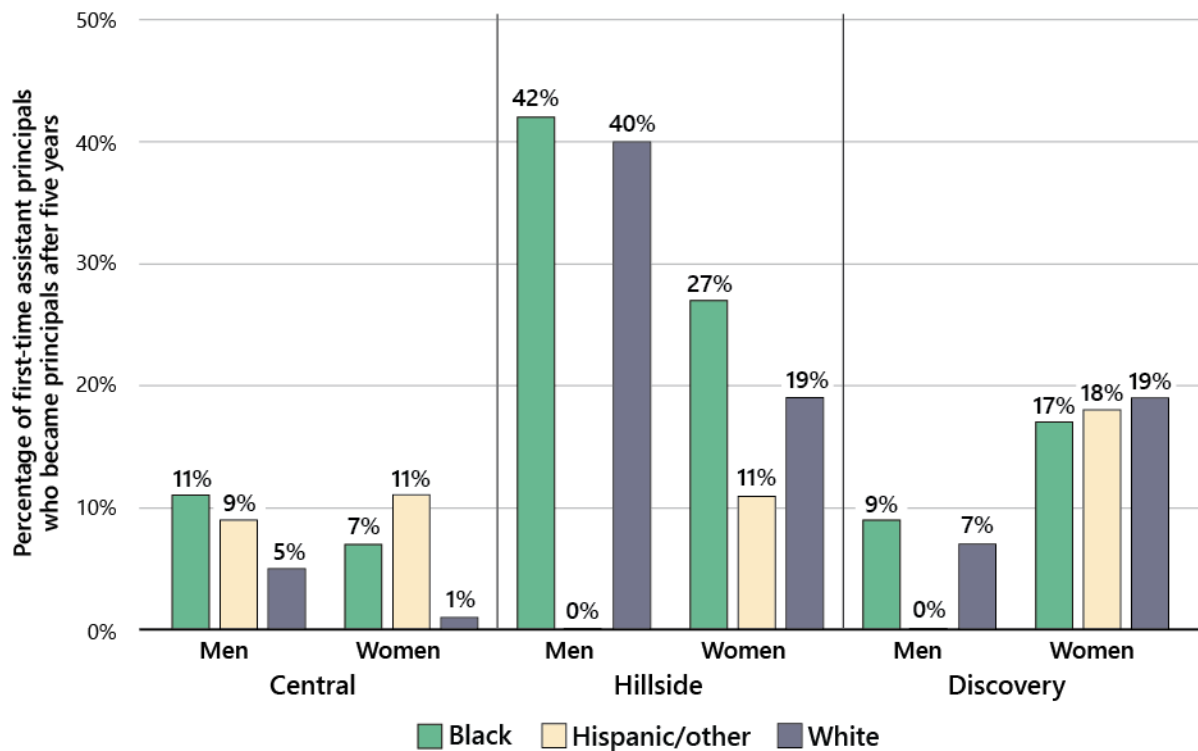
"I think my stature helps me to stand out.... Not many people are going to say no to a [tall] Black male that's coming into education with experience....it's a gift and a curse, because people view me as a leader. But I also have to be very careful with the stigmas that come with it...So regardless of who I'm talking to, this is always my tone, kid, parent, teacher. It could be discipline; it could be accolades or applause.... I know...the stigmas that come with being a tall African American male in the educational field..."

—High school assistant principal, Hillside Public Schools

D. Across all three districts, Black men were more likely than White men to become principals within five years of entering the assistant principalship; patterns for women and Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals varied

Advancement patterns for assistant principals varied across districts and by the intersection of race and gender. In Central, the most centralized district, Black and Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals of both genders advanced at higher rates than White assistant principals of the same gender. Among men, 11 percent of Black and 9 percent of Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals advanced, compared with 5 percent of White men; among women, the corresponding rates were 7 percent, 11 percent, and 1 percent (Exhibit 12). In Hillside, the hybrid district, Black men and women also advanced at higher rates than White assistant principals, whereas Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals of both genders had the lowest rates. In Discovery, the decentralized district, Black men had the highest advancement rate among men, followed by Hispanic/other race or ethnicity and White men; among women, White women had the highest advancement rates. Estimates for Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals varied widely, partly because of small sample sizes. Time-to-event analyses examining how quickly assistant principals advanced to the principalship generally yielded similar patterns, but due to small sample sizes, the analyses excluded Hispanic/other race or ethnicity assistant principals, and few differences were statistically significant (Appendix B, Exhibit B.4).

Exhibit 12. In all three districts, Black men were more likely than White men to advance to the principalship within five years of entering the assistant principalship



Source: Administrative data from each district in the study.

Note: The exhibit shows first-time assistant principals in the 2011–2012 through 2016–2017 school years and the percentage in the principal role after five years. “Hispanic/other” refers to “Hispanic/other race or ethnicity,” and includes assistant principals identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races. Due to the small numbers of non-Black or non-White assistant principals in each district, these groups are combined for reporting. The sample size for Hispanic/other men ranged from three to 11 across districts; the sample size for Hispanic/other women ranged from nine to 18 across districts. The sample sizes for Black and White gender groups were consistently above 10 for each district.

These advancement patterns, together with district differences in principal turnover and external hiring, may help explain changes in the racial and ethnic composition of school leaders over time. A separate set of time-to-event analyses examined how quickly teachers advanced to assistant principal positions and identified similar differences by race and gender. In Central and Discovery, Black men were more likely than White men to advance to the assistant principalship; in Central, Black women were also more likely than White women to advance. Hillside was excluded because the district did not provide data on teachers who never became assistant principals or principals (Appendix B, Exhibit B.5).

Central office structure may have shaped advancement opportunities and the supports available to leaders of color and women.

In Central, the most centralized district, intentional efforts to build a diverse leadership pipeline created clear expectations and structured development opportunities for all leaders, including leaders of color and women. District-managed recruitment,

preparation, and advancement supports made access to professional learning and sponsorship less dependent on an individual school or principal.

By contrast, in Discovery, the most decentralized district, the absence of a formal districtwide process for identifying, hiring, and developing assistant principals made access to opportunities more dependent on principal discretion and school placement. Limited districtwide communication, separate applications to individual schools, and limited feedback also made the pathway harder to navigate. Principals and assistant principals described perceptions that some communities would not readily accept Black principals. In the absence of more formal district supports, assistant principals described an informal approach to professional development led by current assistant principals, who met at a restaurant and used affinity groups to support one another, though this practice became less common after the pandemic.

In Hillside, the hybrid district, formal, district-sponsored affinity groups complemented centralized screening and school-level discretion over hiring and development. Hillside created dedicated affinity-based spaces, such as a Black Male Think Tank and Black Woman Think Tank, to develop and connect leaders of color. These groups provided professional learning, collaboration, visibility, encouragement, timely information about openings, and access to mentors and sponsors beyond a single school. Leaders of color emphasized that both formal and informal networks can support advancement to the principalship by providing sponsorship, timely information about openings, and guidance on advancement steps. Beyond recruitment and advancement, respondents noted that affinity groups and communities can also help retain leaders of color and women by offering advice and camaraderie as they navigate additional barriers.

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"This is a group of African American principals or assistant principals that come together to help in leadership development. In addition to that, my [mentor] and I have biweekly to monthly conversations about what's next in the grand scheme of what I want within my career."

—High school assistant principal, Hillside Public Schools

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"The Black Woman Think Tank...I participate in that. That's nice. I collaborate with other women of color and discuss some of the areas for motivation and encouragement that we need...because it can be a difficult space."

—Elementary school assistant principal, Hillside Public Schools

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Taken together, the findings suggest that racial and gender differences emerge at multiple points along the leadership pathway: who enters the assistant principalship, where assistant principals are placed, which day-to-day responsibilities they have, and whether they have access to mentoring and professional networks that support advancement. Across districts, assistant principals of color were more likely to work in schools serving larger shares of students who shared their race and ethnicity and in higher-need contexts. Respondents attributed these patterns to an interplay of district and

school hiring practices, perceptions of alignment, and assistant principals' preferences for serving particular communities.

Advancement to the principalship also varied by district and at the intersection of race and gender. Black assistant principals—particularly Black men—sometimes advanced more quickly than their White peers. This suggests that these novice principals may need targeted supports during this important transition. Because the study lacks information on principal vacancies and applicant pools, it cannot determine which mechanisms drove the observed differences in workforce diversity, advancement, or time to advancement. The next section draws on these findings to identify implications for sustaining leadership capacity while strengthening transparent, equitable pathways and supports before and after the transition to the principalship.

VI. Considerations for Policy, Practice, and Research

The findings point to several potential steps for policymakers and district leaders to consider as they make decisions about staffing, leadership development, and equity in advancement:

- **Fund assistant principal positions as a core leadership capacity.** State policymakers can review whether staffing formulas and state allotments provide adequate leadership capacity for schools with greater operational complexity and student need, rather than considering assistant principal positions based primarily on enrollment. District leaders can combine available funding streams—such as local funds, Title I flexibility, and other targeted resources—to support assistant principal positions while developing sustainability plans, using temporary funds and clear criteria for protecting assistant principal capacity in high-need schools during budget reductions.
- **Balance standardized leadership pathways with school-level discretion.** Districts can establish a transparent and uniform set of leadership development opportunities, including common information about preparation routes, centralized or coordinated application portals, clear eligibility and advancement criteria, baseline mentoring and evaluation expectations, and access to role-aligned professional learning—while preserving principals’ discretion and school autonomy to tailor hiring, role design, and mentoring to local context. Districts can monitor within-district variation so that access to information, developmental experiences, feedback, and advancement does not depend primarily on an individual principal or school placement.
- **Support principals in building effective assistant principal teams.** Districts can develop opportunities for principals to consider how to best compose and deploy teams of multiple assistant principals with complementary expertise in instruction, special education, school climate, operations, and student support without prescribing a single staffing model. Cross-school learning communities can help principals exchange approaches to staffing and role assignments and consider how leadership teams can reflect and serve students, families, and communities.
- **Consider role design and task rotation as leadership development.** Districts can guide principals to consider approaches to distributing and rotating responsibilities so that assistant principals gain experience across instructional leadership, supervision, budgeting, operations, school improvement planning, and family and community engagement. Monitoring access to these experiences can prevent assistant principals from being confined to narrow portfolios and strengthen readiness for the principalship.
- **Focus on placement, role design, and sponsorship—not only recruitment—to strengthen diversity.** Districts can review recruitment, hiring, placement, retention, and promotion practices to identify where informal navigation, principal discretion, or assumptions about “fit” may limit opportunities for leaders of color and women. They can monitor placement and assignment patterns; ensure equitable access to instructional leadership and other advancement-oriented work across school contexts; and strengthen sponsorship, mentoring, coaching, professional networks, and affinity groups so that timely information and advocacy are available across schools. These efforts should build diverse leadership teams while avoiding tokenism and steering leaders toward roles or schools that may constrain advancement.

- **Differentiate development for varied career goals and strengthen retention.** Not every assistant principal seeks the principalship. Districts can offer role-specific professional learning, coaching, and recognition for both aspiring principals and experienced assistant principals who want to deepen their impact in the role. Clear options for advancement and sustained development can reduce pressure to move prematurely, preserve effective assistant principals, and support leadership stability.

This study also raises several questions for future work that could strengthen evidence about how assistant principal staffing and pathways affect leaders and schools (Box 2).

Box 2. Questions for continued research

- Will assistant principal positions continue to grow as student enrollment declines in many districts? What are possible consequences of reductions for leadership stability and equity?
- How do multiple assistant principal staffing models fit within broader school staffing strategies? How do investments in assistant principals, instructional coaches, counselors, and other complementary roles affect the distribution of leadership and student-support responsibilities, principals' time use, staff retention, school climate, and teacher and student outcomes?
- To what extent do ongoing support and professional development (for example, coaching, cohort-based development, principal mentoring structures, performance tasks) and their content (such as budgeting or data use) influence assistant principals' readiness and successful transitions to the principalship?
- How do hiring and placement decisions interact with school context (for example, performance level, student need, community demographics) to shape long-term advancement patterns for educators of color and women?
- To what extent do day-to-day roles (for example, discipline versus instructional leadership) predict later advancement, retention, and effectiveness as principals, and do these relationships differ by race and gender? ▲

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