



Research Study Results

Virginia Principal Retention, Attrition and Mobility Study

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Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership Shares Findings: Principal Attrition, Retention and Mobility Study



On June 19, 2020, the Virginia Foundation for Educational Leadership (VFEL) launched a study on *Principal Attrition, Retention and Mobility*. This study, supported by the Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals and Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals, is based on survey responses from elementary, middle and high school principals who served in principal roles in 2019-2020 in the Commonwealth's public schools. Respected members of the education community vetted 27 questions that provided a comprehensive picture of survey participants and were pertinent to the topic of principal attrition, retention, and mobility.

The 467 survey respondents were an equitable representation of **Virginia elementary, middle and high school principals** based on school size, gender, and years of experience. Surprisingly, the majority of principals have served in only one school division. In addition, the data reported by principals for their respective schools were representative of the Commonwealth's overall student enrollment and free and reduced lunch rate as indicated on the Virginia Department of Education's website.

The VFEL principal study comes on the heels of the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) and National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) report released in May 2020 - **Strengthening and Stabilizing the Principalship: Multiple Factors Matter**. NASSP and LPI used survey data from a nationally representative sample of hundreds of practicing principals to form strategies that address the biggest problem areas in the profession. The researchers investigated why excessive turnover exists and the relationship between principal turnover and various features of the principalship; which principals are most likely to leave; and which schools are more vulnerable to principal turnover.

While studies and surveys conducted at the national level have led to findings and recommendations, it is incredibly challenging to extrapolate state-specific data to analyze and use for state or local applications. The results included in this survey of participating principals in Virginia can be used for more relevant and timely discussions and decision-making among Virginia's division personnel, policymakers, and professional principal associations.

Principal investigator for this study was Dr. Kathleen Smith, a retired regional director for Cognia (formerly AdvancED). VFEL-VASSP Center for Educational Leadership Director at the University of Lynchburg Dr. Roger Jones is the research analyst for the project. A white paper will be published this fall.

Finding 1: Superintendent and Central Office Support

Over the past five years, **59% of principals have served under two or more superintendents**. While not necessarily a major issue, consistently changing leadership at the top can change what is done and how it is done. Twenty-three percent (**23%**) of principals are concerned that there is a high turnover in central office staff in their divisions; and **28% of principals feel there is not enough central office staff to support them in their role**. The issue of superintendent turnover and the impact that such change has on the culture and climate of the school division and community may need a deeper analysis.

Finding 2: Inadequate Student Services Personnel

About 41% of high school principals, 49% of middle school principals and 57% of elementary principals stated they do not have adequate student services personnel. This is a significant finding in this study. While there has been some movement to increase the number of counselors and support personnel, the evidence continues to demonstrate that our young people are challenged in many different ways. Trauma-informed care, mental health support, conflict resolution, and direct and virtual bullying intervention are areas in which students consistently need help. Requiring teachers and principals to take a course or complete a module cannot sufficiently prepare them to deal with students who are facing these types of serious issues. Students in crisis need trained personnel. While resources may not be needed in every school, this survey

indicates additional student services personnel may be needed in about half of the schools represented.

Finding 3: Administrative Team Adequacy

About **35% of high school principals, 36% of middle school principals and 30% of elementary principals say their administrative team is not adequate to provide support to faculty and staff.** When one-third of principals identify that their administrative teams are insufficient to provide adequate support, it should motivate superintendents to determine if this situation exists in their divisions and how it might affect their schools. This finding is one that reveals the need for more research and a deeper dive into the data analysis to determine where more administrative support is needed. A deeper analysis could reveal the need for higher ratios of assistant principals per school; additional counselors, social workers, and school psychologists; clear processes and procedures; strong partnerships with local agencies; and/or strategic training to ensure depth of knowledge and application. If principals had sufficient student services personnel (Finding 2), the need for additional administrative team members may have been reported differently.

Finding 4: Principal's Workload - Actual and Preferred

It was not surprising to discover from principals who participated in the survey that much (if not most) of their time is spent handling immediate problems. In fact, **high school principals spend, on average, 67% of their time solving immediate problems, with the percentage rising to 74% for middle school principals; elementary school principals reported they spend 64% of their time on such problems.** Fifty-three percent (**53%**) of principals surveyed deal with physical conflict among students; **81%** deal with student disrespect of teachers; and **56%** deal with issues related to bullying. Twenty percent (**20%**) of elementary principals reported that they deal with physical abuse of teachers at least once per month. In contrast, it is interesting to note what principals would prefer to be doing. These include: discussing instruction, student engagement, curriculum, achievement outcomes with teachers; fostering community and family engagement; and long-term problem-solving.

What principals prefer to be doing is consistent with the research and literature on creating great schools. Principals know what needs to be done to create great schools. They understand the importance of vision, core values, equity, cultural responsiveness, curriculum, instruction, assessment, creating professional communities, and engaging families. This is what great schools are about but not what principals are engaged in. It is what they want to be doing, but the structure and support is not always provided.

From the data, it appears that principals are spending much of their time managing. Managing transportation, cafeteria, school cleanliness, and discipline among other things, is important, but creating great schools is about leadership. Management is not leadership. Great schools are not created by managing them. They are created by leading them. More research is needed to determine possible connections between "leading versus management" and retention of quality school-based principals.

Finding 5: Professional Development

According to the survey, **78% of principals believe they have the greatest influence in determining professional development for their staff.** This professional development could manifest itself in one of two ways: self-development or teacher development. While a small percentage of principals (**15%**) **indicate they do not have the time for professional development,** even when it is offered, **57% reported they attend professional development activities on a regular basis. Only 7% of principals indicated that available professional development was not relevant.**

Creating a culture of achievement in a school— one of the major ways in which principals impact student learning – could be enhanced by providing relevant professional development based on school or individual teacher needs. This issue should be studied further to determine how relevant professional development promotes a culture of achievement and positively impacts student learning.

Finding 6: Coaching and Mentoring

According to research, mentoring is an integral component of induction programs intended to support principals in their first and second years. **Only one quarter of principals (25%) responded that they had been offered coaching and mentoring by their school divisions.** Since mentors are required for first-year principals at all levels (Code of Virginia, §22.1-294), a higher response percentage was anticipated. The General Assembly has yet to fund this Code mandate. For experienced principals, having a leadership coach serves as a resource to support retention, develop advanced leadership skills, and enhance job-embedded professional development.

Finding 7: Principal's Job Satisfaction

Seventy percent (70%) of principals are generally satisfied with their current

position, while 14% of principals feel the stress and disappointments involved in being a principal are not really worth it.

Assistant principals seeking principalships in elementary schools appear to advance into a principal position more quickly than their colleagues at middle and high schools. Twenty-eight percent (**28%**) of elementary principals, compared to **14%** of high school principals, served fewer than three years before being offered a principalship. According to the survey, 84% of elementary school principals have served in their roles in only one school division as compared to 73% of middle and high school principals.

When principals do change positions, they do not list one main reason for doing so. “More money” and “unresponsiveness from district and other support teams” are reported by more respondents, although not as overwhelming reasons. Fifteen percent (**15%**) of high school principals reported changing positions for more money as compared to **5%** of elementary principals. Principals are generally satisfied with being principals (**69%**), although a quarter of respondents (**25%**) indicated that they “don’t seem to have as much enthusiasm now as I did when I began the job.” Twenty-nine (**29%**) of principals said they plan to remain in their positions until a more desirable job opportunity comes along.

Finding 8: Principal’s Work Week

One of the most revealing aspects of the survey concerns the amount of time principals spend on the job. Not a single school principal indicated he or she worked what could be considered a normal work week (40 – 45 hours). Approximately **87% of high school principals reported that they worked 55 hours or more on average each week, with 65% of high school principals reporting a work week of 60 or more hours.** More than **76% of middle school principals said they worked 55 hours or more on average each week. Eighty percent (80%) of elementary school principals disclosed they worked 55 hours or more in an average work week.**

Summary

The data collected from this survey could inform future decisions and actions pertinent to principal attrition, retention, and mobility. Principals see their jobs as a “mission” and strive to provide strong leadership at the building level. They accept new challenges each day, along with long hours, often a lack of personnel to support students in crisis, and reduction in professional support for their administrative teams.

Since this survey is a self-reporting tool limited to a relatively small number of questions, it may not completely reflect all the “truths” and intense accountability associated with being a principal during this time of pandemic or reflect the hardships of dealing with issues related to social justice and political chaos. School divisions and policymakers should pay attention to data that reveals that the majority of principals work over 55 hours per week; that **41% to 57% say they do not have adequate student services personnel support;** and that **over 65% of principals spend their time solving immediate problems.** Although demanding, **over 70% of principals like their jobs .**

Our school leaders are dedicated professionals who work hard to provide a positive environment where teaching and learning can flourish, and they need and deserve continuous support from their divisions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Appreciation to VFEL President (and VASSP Executive Director) Dr. Randy Barrack, VAESP Executive Director Jim Baldwin, and State Superintendent Dr. James Lane for their support of this project. VASSP Field Consultant Dr. Carol Robinson, VASSP Director of Government Relations Elizabeth “Bet” Neale, VASSP-VFEL Board Development Chair Carolyn Bernard, and VASSP Membership Coordinator Nancy Hayden for their editing and design contributions.