



## Research on Middle School Renewal

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Peter F. Mulhall, Nancy Flowers &  
Steven B. Mertens, Editors

# Are Middle Level Principals an Endangered Species?

Much has been written and recommended regarding the critical role of the principal as a transformational leader in the educational success of middle grade students (Anfara, Andrews, Hough, Mertens, Mizelle, & White, 2003; Clark & Clark, 2002; Jackson & Davis, 2000). What makes up this role and how it plays out in middle grades settings is a complex and poorly understood phenomenon. At the same time that national attention is being placed on the role of leadership in improving school achievement, educators and policymakers have become increasingly concerned about a potential principal shortage and apprehensive that a shortage of qualified principals will seriously affect middle grades reform. For example, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) reports that by 2005 almost 40% of public school administrators will be eligible to retire and that through 2006 the state will need approximately 2,100 new public school principals, assistant principals, and other school administrators (ISBE, 2003). Since middle grades comprise a majority of Illinois schools and serve a significant part of the student population, the impact of a principal shortage for the middle grades could be very serious. This problem is not unique to Illinois; it is a national issue that many states are either currently facing or are likely to face in the future. The results of this study have national implications for proposed solutions and recommendations to address this critical issue.

In late 2003, the Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois partnered with the Illinois Principals Association (IPA) to assess the status of principals in terms of current and

future labor supply, and some of the major factors that influence the decision to become a principal. Although the larger study examined high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools, this article focuses on the results of respondents from current and prospective middle grades principals in Illinois. The overall goals of the study were to address the following three questions:

- Is there, or will there soon be, a shortage of highly qualified principal candidates in Illinois? Is this a regional problem?
- What factors influence teachers and other certified staff to become, or to not become, a principal?
- What can be done to increase the number and quality of principal candidates and what could be done to retain high-quality principals?

### Study Design

The IPA study employed multiple methods to collect data from selected groups believed to be critical for understanding the issues of Illinois principals. The three information-gathering components of the study were: (a) focus groups to obtain qualitative data and guide the development of the statewide survey; (b) a statewide survey of current, prospective, and former principals; and (c) in-depth interviews with 20 education stakeholders, drawn from five groups: school district superintendents, education interest groups, higher education, legislators and other policymakers, and respondents from Illinois

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*Peter F. Mulhall* ([mulhall@uiuc.edu](mailto:mulhall@uiuc.edu)) is the Director of the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD), *Nancy Flowers* ([nflowers@uiuc.edu](mailto:nflowers@uiuc.edu)) is a coordinator of research programs at CPRD, and *Steven B. Mertens* ([mertens@uiuc.edu](mailto:mertens@uiuc.edu)) is a senior research scientist at CPRD at the University of Illinois, Champaign.

State Board of Education. Each study component was designed to obtain information from the various geographic regions in Illinois and the different types of schools—elementary, middle/junior high, and high school. A stratified random sample was used to divide Illinois into five geographic regions to prevent over-sampling smaller school districts that would be over-represented in a random sample. Response rates for the five geographical areas ranged from 58% to 77% with an overall rate of return of 70%.

Surveying prospective principals created numerous challenges. To that end, each current middle grade principal in the sample received three prospective principal surveys and was asked to identify three individuals in their respective building that they believe would be high quality principals (e.g., current associate & assistant principals, deans, teachers, counselors). The survey of current and prospective principals asked questions regarding their perceptions of the principal shortage, likelihood of applying for a principal position, and obstacles and barriers to becoming a principal. Survey results are presented by providing demographics of the sample and comparisons between current and prospective principals' perceptions of shortages, quality, and challenges of the principal's position. Both current and prospective principal surveys included open-ended questions regarding solutions and policies to address the principal position in Illinois. Potential solutions and recommendations were derived from surveys, focus groups, and key stakeholder analysis.

## Results

The sample demographics reflect the current status of Illinois current principals as well as the prospective principals in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment (Table 1). The only apparent differences between the two groups is the larger number of females who responded to the prospective principal survey and the greater number of current principals that already have a doctorate, which is to be expected. Female respondents who were considered to be prospective principals outnumber those females who currently hold these positions, which may indicate that women are increasingly moving into administrative positions in Illinois middle grade schools.

### Perceptions of middle grades principals shortage

To understand what current and prospective principals believe regarding the possible principal shortage in Illinois, they were asked their perceptions of the principal shortage and the quality of the candidates

in their district and region (Table 2). Responses generally show high rates of perceived shortages by both groups, but vary significantly in their opinion as to whether there is currently a shortage or not. Both groups perceive a greater shortage in five years. However, current principals perceive a larger current shortage in their region. Perhaps more importantly, both groups believe that highly qualified candidates are currently difficult to find, and that the problem will continue to exist over the next five years.

Two other important questions that current and prospective principals were asked was whether they intend to retire (current principals) or for prospective principals, whether they plan to seek a principal position in the next five years. A sizeable number of principals (36%) indicated they will retire in the next five years, and a remarkable 67% of prospective principals indicate they will be seeking a principal's position in the next five years, which should easily replace the numbers that are leaving. Despite this potentially large number of prospective candidates indicating they will be pursuing a principal position, questions remain whether they will follow through on this intention, and whether the quality of these individuals will be adequate to successfully compete and succeed at a principal position.

### Factors influencing job choice

Research suggests that the two major conceptual frameworks for job selection and retention are attraction and satisfaction with the position (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Individuals were

**Table 1: Demographics of Illinois Middle Grade Current and Prospective Principals**

	Current Principal (N=281)	Prospective Principal (N=248)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	63.9	47.0
Female	36.1	53.0
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
Black/African	6.0	6.9
White	91.1	90.3
Hispanic	1.4	0.8
Asian	1.1	0.4
Multi-Racial	0.4	0.0
No Response	0.0	1.6
<i>Educational Attainment</i>		
Bachelors	0.0	24.7
Masters	54.3	51.4
Beyond Masters	29.9	19.8
Doctorate	15.5	3.6
Other	0.4	0.4

**Table 2: Perceptions of Principal Shortage: Current and Prospective Principals**

	Percent responding "Agree" and "Strongly agree"	
	Current (N=281)	Prospective (N=248)
Currently a shortage of candidates in my district	48.4	37.6
Likely be a shortage of candidates in my district in 5 next years	73.8	67.2
Currently a shortage of candidates in my region	64.6	47.8
Likely be a shortage of candidates in my region in 5 years	84.4	74.6
Currently a shortage of highly qualified candidates in my district	50.9	65.8
Likely be a shortage of highly qualified candidates in region	54.8	71.6

**Note:** Response metric for perceptions of principal shortage questions: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree, (4) Strongly agree.

motivated to become principals for a variety of reasons. The results of the focus groups indicated the three most frequent reasons for becoming a principal were (a) the ability to positively impact student learning, (b) professional and personal advancement, and (c) diversity in the work. Factors cited that make the principal's position less desirable, or undesirable, could be broadly grouped into four categories (a) physical and psychological demands, (b) increasing expectations and responsibilities, (c) lack or loss of control, and (d) lack of support (Mulhall, Hartter & Camp, 2003). In addition, a quantitative assessment of factors which make the principal position less desirable was included in the survey questions. Current and prospective principals were asked about 19 "factors" that would influence the decision of a teacher or certified staff member *not* to become a principal. These factors were based on the focus groups and research literature and are similar to other principal studies (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002).

Survey results indicate that current and prospective principals have varying perceptions of those factors that are likely to influence an individual's decision not become a principal (Table 3). Overall, current middle grades principals were much more likely to identify factors that would detract an individual from becoming a principal. That is, of the 19 factors on the survey, current principals were

substantially and statistically significantly higher on all items with the exception of one factor, *micromanagement by school board*. These differences clearly indicate two different perspectives on the principal's position. This is not to say that prospective middle grade principals did not view many of these items as major/moderate factors that influence an individual's decision not to become a principal, but current principals were almost unanimous (ranging from 62-99%) in their agreement on the factors that would keep individuals from not choosing to

**Table 3: Choice Factors Likely to Negatively Influence Teacher Decision to Become a Principal: Current and Prospective Principals**

	Percent responding "Somewhat a factor" or a "Major factor"	
	Current (N=281)	Prospective (N=248)
1. Pay differential too small	86.3	67.0
2. Inadequate fringe benefits	80.6	66.6
3. Time demands too great	98.6	89.8
4. Unwilling to manage/organize	85.2	23.4
5. Required to engage in the community	78.3	43.5
6. Conflict with job and family responsibilities	93.5	75.6
7. Pressure for school improvement	93.5	64.4
8. Meeting state and federal mandates	95.0	75.7
9. Meeting state standards and assessments	95.3	68.5
10. Lack knowledge of human resources/management	64.2	24.1
11. Responsibility for school safety/security	71.0	31.3
12. Lack of autonomy in personnel decisions	70.0	50.0
13. Finding good teachers	62.0	50.0
14. School Board's micromanagement	73.0	67.3
15. Lack of support/staff	73.8	60.9
16. Time demands that detract from school improvement	90.6	71.9
17. Isolation	76.0	50.4
18. Lack of mentorship	64.7	43.1
19. Too much stress	96.7	71.8

**Note:** Response metric for job choice factors questions: (1) Not a factor, (2) Somewhat a factor, (3) Major factor.

become a principal. Current principals weighted these factors much higher than the prospective principals which may be the result of “living” the principals’ role. A final point should be made regarding job choice factors. When comparing the overall IPA study job choice factors with those of middle grades personnel, both current and prospective middle grades principals rated these factors substantially higher across most of the 19 items; in the overall study only 4 of the 19 items showed significant differences between current and prospective principals compared to 18 out of 19 items from the middle grades sample. This result may suggest that current and prospective middle grades principals are more likely to view the principal position as having more negative job choice factors associated with the position compared to the larger IPA sample. This finding requires further investigation.

### Proposed Solutions and Recommendations

Although the solutions and recommendations for the overall IPA study were not differentiated by grade level, they do provide important guidelines that are applicable to Illinois middle grade principals. The overall recommendation is to develop and implement a systematic, statewide strategy for recruitment and retention of principals. To be effective, a system of this type must address (a) eliminating the barriers that prevent people from choosing to become principals; (b) enhancing the positive aspects of the principalship; (c) increasing the job satisfaction of current principals; and (d) decreasing the job dissatisfaction of current principals. Specific recommendations that address the issues highlighted in this article as challenges for the middle level include:

1. Establish mentoring programs for prospective principals that include opportunities to take classes toward earning an administrative certification and opportunities to engage in administrative responsibilities.
2. Offer paid internship opportunities for prospective principals.
3. Implement continuing education requirements for current principals that include ongoing professional development experiences.
4. Provide support to current principals in the form of networking with other principals in the district, region, or state.
5. Evaluate district needs regarding the demands on principals’ time for attending school events and implement reasonable and realistic policies.

### Summary

The Illinois Principal Study employed multiple measures and methods to understand the current status of middle grade principals, factors that influence job choice and satisfaction, and solutions and recommendations to the changing educational environment in Illinois. The study also examined perceptions of prospective middle grade job candidates. Overall, both current and prospective principals agree that there will likely be a principal shortage in Illinois in the next five years. Adequate numbers of individuals, however, appear to be interested and potentially eligible for the vacant principal positions, but the quality and preparation of the candidates is uncertain. What is increasingly clear is that current Illinois middle grade principals report more job factors that are likely to influence prospective principals *not* to pursue a principalship than the prospective principals themselves. Many of these factors have also been identified in other studies that have examined middle grades leadership (Valentine et al. 2002). State and district level policymakers must address these issues to ensure that they attract the most highly qualified and best prepared candidates to become effective middle grades leaders. Mentoring programs and internships can assist prospective principals in gaining a better understanding of the principalship, as well as provide experience. Retention of current principals can also ameliorate a principal shortage. Current principals value ongoing professional development experiences and support via networking with other principals.

The collaborative nature of high performing middle grades schools provides a unique structure and organization to assist and facilitate major challenges faced by principals, which if done effectively can share the workload and responsibility. Clark and Clark (2002) proposed that effective middle grade principals must have a commitment to collaboration and decision making (power sharing); promote a climate of trust; ensure an intense focus on teaching and learning; and foster full engagement of teachers, parents, and community to promote student success. Principals and school leadership will continue to be the cornerstone of effective education at all levels, but it will require new knowledge, practices, resources, and supports to be effective. This study suggests that many Illinois educators are willing to undertake the principal’s role, and it identifies many of the issues that can increase their likelihood of a smooth transition and a long and satisfying career as a principal.

### Author note

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