

Principal Concerns: Iowa May Face Statewide Demand

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Overview

When people talk about human capital or talent in public education, they generally focus on teachers, not principals. That's a mistake. As any teacher will tell you, principals can make or break schoolwide efforts to improve teaching and learning. Yet school districts and states generally don't take a strategic approach toward managing their principal workforce. Often, they lack even the most basic information about who is leading their schools: Where do most principals come from? How long do they stay? How well do they perform? How many will need to be hired and developed in the future?

To answer some of these questions, states need detailed longitudinal data systems for principals like those currently being developed to track teachers and students. In some states, such systems are a few years off. In the meantime, states can get a better picture of their principal workforce by analyzing data they already collect.

This *Principal Concerns* data brief is a short example of this type of analysis, focused on principals working in Iowa. By combining state data with U.S. Department of Education data, we are able to present a broad picture of the principal workforce in Iowa's schools.¹

First, the brief identifies the share of principals who are eligible, and almost eligible, for retirement under Iowa's retirement system. This is a useful starting point because states that employ lots of younger principals need to focus on getting them training and support as they progress through their careers. Other states have a wave of principals near retirement and must plan for new hires. Determining where Iowa stands in that regard provides a rough measure of the demand for new principals in the near future.

The brief then matches up retirement eligibility with the location of schools (urban, suburban, town, and rural) and their level of student poverty. These comparisons provide a sense of how Iowa's future demand for principals might be distributed across the state.

Findings

The results suggest that over the next five years, just under half of principals in Iowa will be eligible for retirement. This group of principals is spread evenly across student poverty and location. For the Iowa Department of Education, the even spread suggests the need for statewide action to better understand Iowa's current principal workforce and for strategic initiatives that reach across many locales to ensure there is a pipeline of quality leaders in the future. A companion piece to this brief, *Principal Concerns: Addressing Statewide Principal Pipelines with Data and Strategy*, offers possible responses to these findings, such as policies that support teacher leaders in rural locations and help principal preparation programs meet the state's coming needs.²

1. The analysis uses the all-staff file from the Iowa Department of Education for the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years; from the U.S. Department of Education we use the Common Core of Data for the 2009-2010 school year. The analysis focused on full-time principals. In Figure 2, for principals who worked in more than one school, we averaged free and reduced-price lunch percentages across schools.

2. Christine Campbell and Betheny Gross, *Principal Concerns: Leadership Data and Strategies for States* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2012).

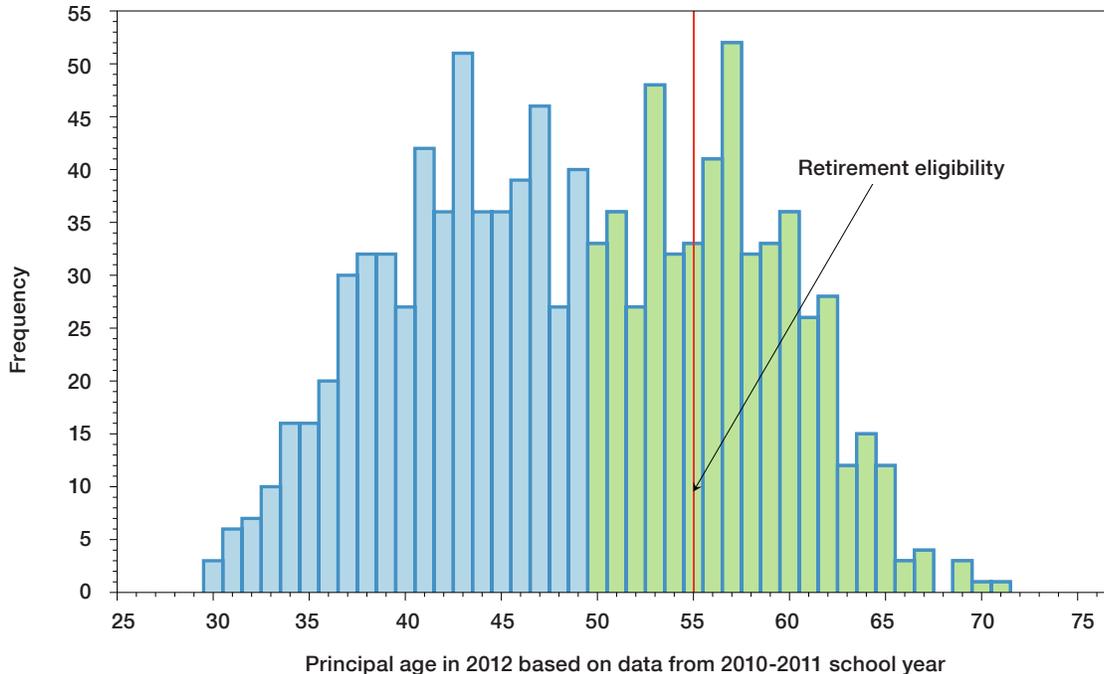
1. Almost half of Iowa's principals are within five years of retirement eligibility

To assess the possible demand for new principal hires, we analyzed the most recent personnel file available from the state, which covers the 2010-2011 school year. Using dates of birth, we calculated the ages of all full-time principals in 2012. The results show that 28 percent of the principals are age 55 or older and thus already eligible for retirement under Iowa's retirement system. Forty-seven percent of the principals—a group that collectively oversees 168,468 students—are within five years of retirement eligibility, or are already eligible.

While a significant part of Iowa's principal workforce has been aging, in recent years Iowa districts have been hiring younger principals to fill vacancies. Iowa's Annual Condition of Education report indicates a shift in the 10-year trend in the age of most principals showing that the group as a whole is getting younger.³

Figure 1 shows the number of full-time principals falling into each age level. The red line highlights age 55, when principals are eligible for retirement in Iowa. The green bars represent principals who are within five years of retirement eligibility, as well as the many who work beyond (in some cases far beyond) their retirement eligibility. Whether such extended careers are a benefit to the state depends in part on how late-career principals perform and how much they earn—issues that suggest the need for a deeper look at the data.

Figure 1. 48 percent of Iowa's principals are within five or fewer years of retirement eligibility (SY 2011-2012)



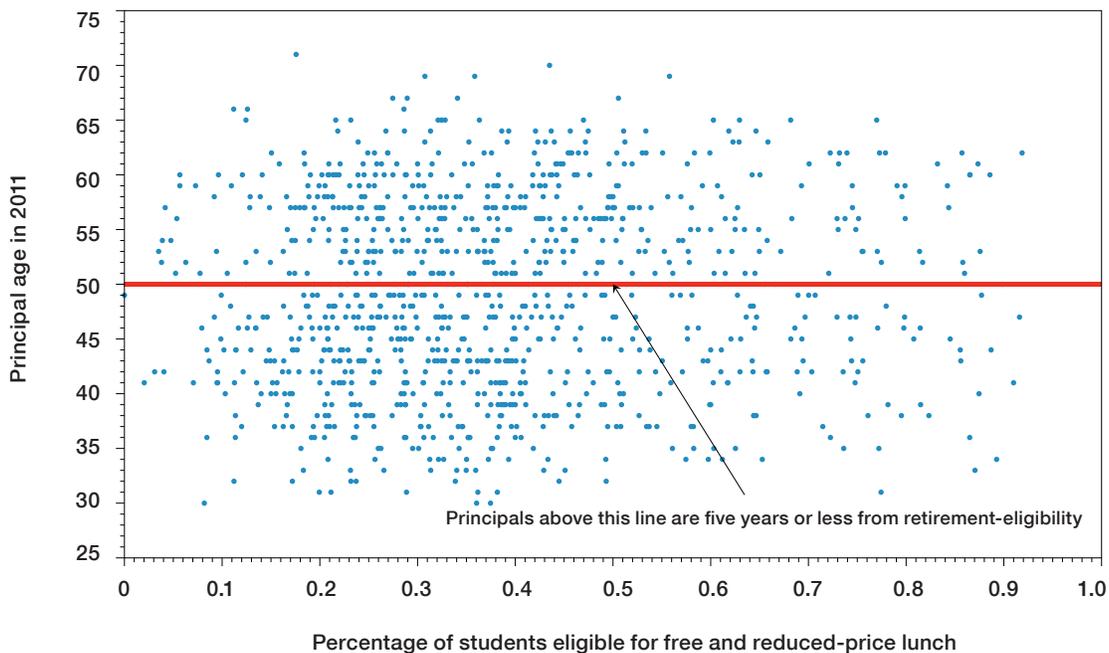
3. Iowa Department of Education, Annual Condition of Education Report, 2011.

2. Principals nearing or beyond retirement eligibility are spread evenly across school poverty level and location

In order to see how principals nearing or beyond retirement eligibility are distributed across the state, we analyzed the most recent school year for which we have both principal data and school data, which was 2009-2010.⁴ For school data we used the nation's primary database on public schools, the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data (CCD).⁵

Principals nearing or beyond retirement eligibility in Iowa collectively oversee nearly half of all students in the state. This group of principals is relatively evenly dispersed in terms of the poverty level of students. For example, Figure 2 shows a scatter of principals' ages by the percentage of their schools' students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Given the typical distribution of *teacher* experience, one might expect that schools with higher levels of poverty would be led by less experienced principals (producing an empty upper-right quadrant). This does not seem to be the case in Iowa, however. The same is true when we look across other student demographics and school performance levels.

Figure 2. Principals nearing retirement lead all kinds of schools (SY 2009-2010)



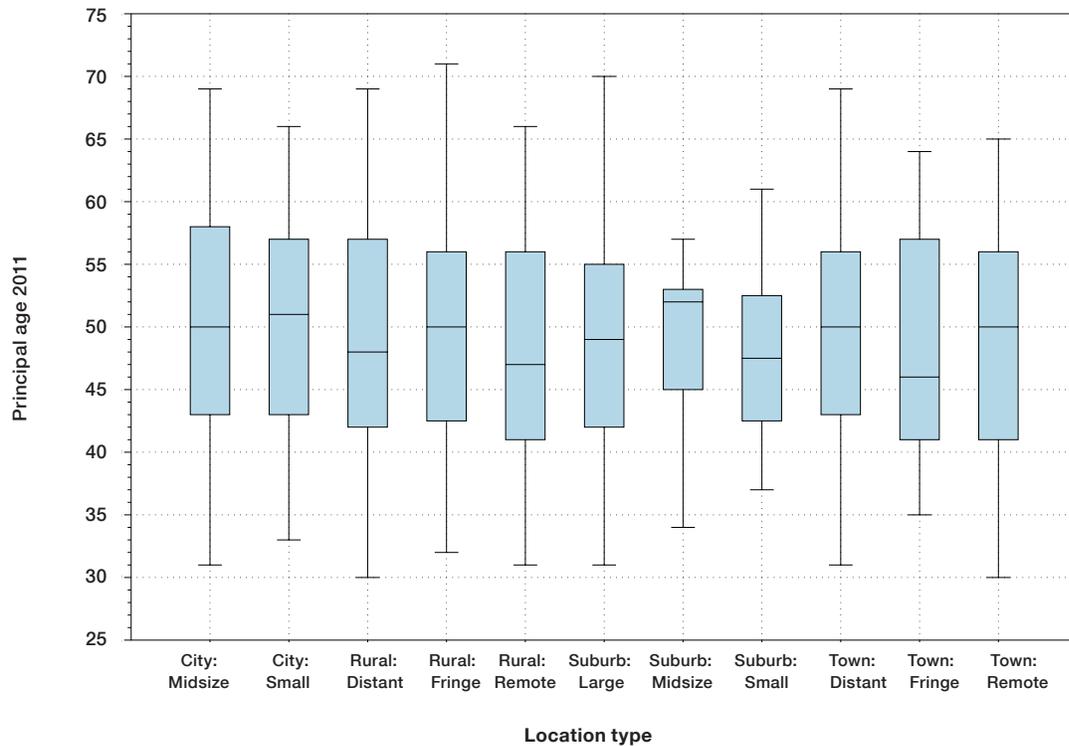
Just as there appears to be no systematic clustering of principals near or beyond retirement eligibility around student poverty, principals 50 years and older also do not appear to be clustered in certain types of communities in Iowa. The box and whiskers plots in Figure 3 show the spread of principal ages across location types. The “whiskers” that extend to the top and bottom of each plot show the range of ages in each location type.⁶ For example, in communities that are categorized as “town: remote,” the principal age range is 30 to 65 years old. The blue boxes show the age range that contains the middle 50 percent of principals. In other words, 25 percent of principals have ages above the top end of the blue box, and 25 percent of principals have ages that fall below the bottom end of the box. The line inside each box shows the median age for the location type. For remote townships, the median age of principals is 50 years old, for example. These plots reflect a uniformity among the median age and age range across all location types.

4. The share of principals who were within five years of retirement eligibility in 2009-2010 was 48 percent, roughly the same as in 2010-2011.

5. We were unable to obtain flat files of school-level data from the state's public online data system, so we used the CCD data.

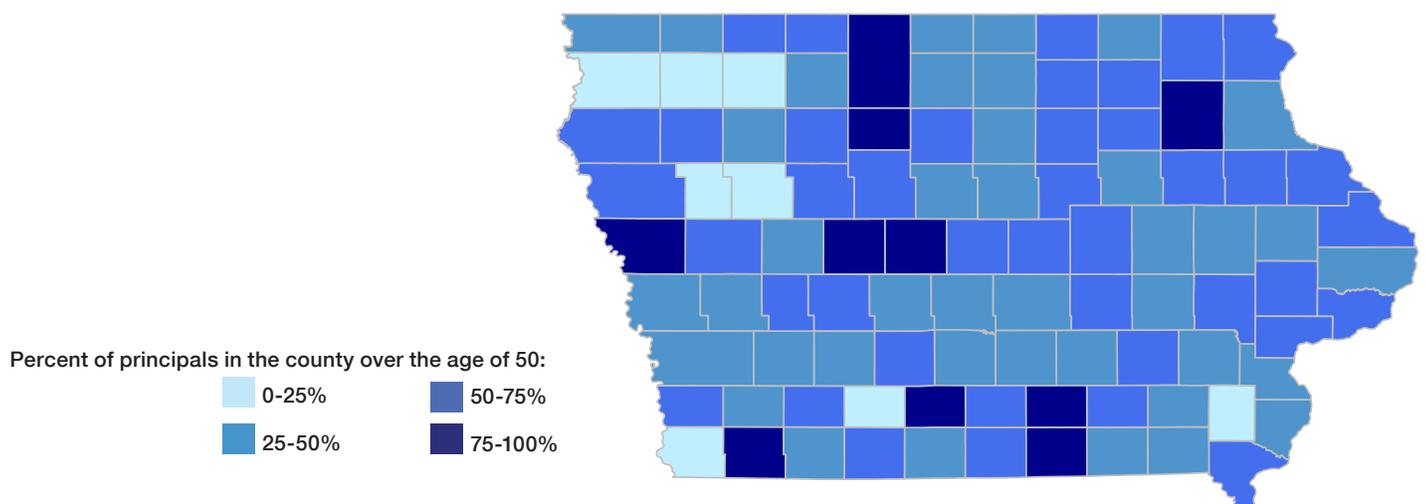
6. The CCD identifies schools by several location types, ranging from “large city” to “rural remote.”

Figure 3. Principals nearing retirement are evenly distributed across cities, suburbs, and towns (SY 2009-2010)



Finally, when we look across counties, we see that the average principal age does not vary much either. The map in Figure 4 shows the percent of principals in each county over the age of 50. Like the prior figure, the county map shows widespread distribution of principals nearing retirement across the state. The two darkest blue shades represent the 41 (of 99) counties where more than half of the principals are over 50.

Figure 4. Principals nearing retirement are evenly spread throughout the state (SY 2009-2010)



The Demand for Principals Is a Statewide Issue

The data presented here do not say anything about how well principals in Iowa are doing their jobs or what might help them perform better. The data do show, however, that in the next 5 to 10 years, Iowa may need to replace a sizable share of its principal workforce and, importantly, that this demand will likely be widespread, impacting all types of students, schools, and communities.

This picture of Iowa's principal workforce shows how important it is for state policymakers to create a statewide strategy for ensuring a pipeline of quality leaders in the future. With that in mind, the analysis underscores the importance of better understanding where Iowa's principals are prepared and trained, how the quality of training varies across preparation programs, and whether the state has the capacity to prepare principals to meet the future needs of all of its schools.

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