

# A PROFILE OF SCHOOL LEADERS IN ARIZONA\*

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## Abstract

The job of a principal involves a high level of stress and a multitude of responsibilities. The principal is ultimately responsible for the safety, welfare, and behavioral and academic performance of all students in his/her building. General leadership responsibilities involve setting goals and devising plans to meet these goals, making hundreds of decisions each day, and listening to and communicating with central office, teachers, students, parents, and community members. The principal must implement strategies to motivate teachers and students, lead and work with various committees and groups, resolve conflicts and issues, promote a positive culture and climate for learning, lead major changes, and evaluate procedures, programs, and faculty. The principal is accountable for adhering to fiscal and legal policy. This generally means budgeting for supplies and materials, purchase and maintenance of equipment, and facilities management. The principal ensures all practices comply with the law, that mandates are carried out, and that the rights of faculty, students, and parents are upheld. At the secondary level, numerous classes, clubs, and a host of extra-curricular programs require additional administrative fiscal and legal oversight. In many cases, personnel administration takes a majority of the principal's time. In large schools personnel can mean hundreds of teachers and thousands of students. For faculty and staff, this includes recruiting, hiring, placing, developing, and evaluating. Pupil personnel administration includes registration, attendance, class schedules, student records, and discipline. The principal is typically responsible for substitute teachers and parent volunteers. Principals are expected to be the voice of the school and the ear for concerns, complaints, and demands. Principals inform parents, community, central office and school board of the progress and events at their school. Additionally, community politics strongly influence the principal. Elected school board officials, influential community members, teacher organizations and parent organizations all are hopeful of influencing the principal to further their goals. In many districts, the principal is expected to take an active part in community and civic organizations. Yet, the most important job of the principal is to supervise instruction in the classroom.



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## 1 The Role of the Principal in Arizona Schools

The public school system in America has evolved to a point where the local school is subject to the control of several layers of government simultaneously. Education today is controlled by local, state and federal governments. This requires each governmental level to contribute in its own way to the support and governance of the public school system. It is also important to know the primary function of the American public school system, in legal theory, is not for the benefit of an individual or individuals, but rather the school exists as a state agency for the perpetuation of a civil society as we know it in America.

Historically, leading school improvement was generally left up to the individual principal of each school with guidance from the superintendent and school board. The local school principal was empowered to lead the staff in the process of identifying specific challenges facing the school and addressing them idiosyncratically. Typically, the local school principal assessed curriculum and instruction and was responsible for any necessary changes. The principal was free to infuse new technologies and introduce innovations considered appropriate.

Most school principals employed new technologies, methods, programs and innovations to resolve problems on a rather piecemeal basis. In some cases, the local school principal introduced several initiatives (reforms) each school year. Typically, the changes implemented by the principal were intended to address certain needs deemed important by the local school. Over several years a principal might introduce numerous reform initiatives, but the basic programs and services of the school remained intact. Reforms were simply attached to the existing school structure.

Today, leaders representing a variety of interest groups including the business community, parent organizations, teacher associations, state department of education and the federal government are actively involved with school reform and or school restructuring initiatives. This new leadership reality makes it very difficult for the principal to focus time and attention solely on education matters specific to the local school.

National reforms such as special education mandates and the recent No Child Left Behind legislation make it clear that elected officials outside of the local school have great influence in how schools are organized and curricula are developed, implemented and evaluated. The mandate to hold local school leaders accountable for assuring that all children make satisfactory academic progress annually brings greater outside pressure to bear on the local school principal, faculty and staff.

### Standards for the Preparation of Principals

During the latter part of the nineteenth century schools began to recognize a position of head-teacher to manage the affairs of the school and provide organization for the school's operation. The position of head-teacher gradually transitioned into the full time position of superintendent as the responsibilities for the running of schools became more demanding and the position was perceived to require a full time person. In the beginning days of the principals, the person who held the position was usually selected from the classroom and had little, if any, formal training in administration. Schools were simple organizations and administration was not considered to be a difficult task; the administrator could get his/her training on the job, based on trial and error processes. While the first book in school administration (Chapters on School Supervision) was written in 1875, "professors of educational leadership and programs specific to school administration were unknown until the early 1900's" (Fullan, 2002).

By the end of World War II there were 125 institutions of higher education which had programs specifically for the preparation of school administrators. During the 1950's and '60's the number of programs at different universities throughout the country burgeoned to over 500 specifically designed for preparation for educational administration. The primary driving force behind this growth of programs was individual states'

recognizing the uniqueness of being an educational administrator and requiring certification to hold the position. This general administrator's certification evolved into specific administrative position certification, i.e., principal or superintendent.

Arizona has three types of administrative certifications: principal, superintendent and supervisor. In order to qualify for a principal certificate in Arizona, as in most other states, prescribed coursework is necessary. The individual also must have three years of qualified experience as a teacher. In recent years, completing a program of university coursework for certification only qualifies an individual to take the examination developed by the state education department. Upon passing the exam, the candidate is entitled to a principal certificate. In Arizona this examination is called the Arizona Educator Proficiency Assessment (AEPA).

The programs for preparing principals have gone through three distinct transitions:

All three periods witnessed much critical analysis about the health of educational administration in general and the status of preparation programs in particular... (involving) considerable muckraking about the way practicing administrators were managing schools. Identifying these three eras as prescriptive (1900-1946), scientific (1947-1985) and dialectic (1986 to present) the present era of change is marked by "devastating attacks on the current state of preparation programs, critical analysis of practicing school administrators and references to alternate visions of preparation programs... the rhetoric in this third period... seems both more strident and comprehensive than found in earlier eras of reform." (Hseih & Shen, 1998, p. 110).

In response to the public demand for change in the way school administrators are prepared and practice, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) developed a set of six standards for administrative practice. Although commissioned by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), all of the 10 member organizations that make up the NPBEA have endorsed these standards. Aligned with the ISLLC standards for practice are the Education Leadership Constituency Council (ELCC) seven standards for preparation mandated by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Of the three state universities in Arizona (Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, and University of Arizona), only Northern Arizona University is currently seeking NCATE accreditation. The state department of education is one of the few states that did not adopt the ISLLC standards, although obviously based much of their own state standards on the ISLLC standards.

The Importance of Leadership Preparation

The Effective Schools research has indicated for more than two decades that a key component of a successful school is the leadership provided by the principal. This same literature also recognizes the importance of teacher leaders in schools that perform well. A study of 20 businesses which found some to be successful in the long term and found a similar number not successful, reported the following:

Larger than life, celebrity leaders who ride in from the outside are negatively correlated with taking a company from good to great. Ten of eleven good-to-great CEOs came from inside the company, whereas the comparison companies (lesser performing) tried outside CEOs six times more often. "Leaders who built enduring greatness were not high-profile flashy performers, but rather individuals who blend extreme personal humility with intense professional will (Fullan, 2002, p. 418).

In a comparison of 200 highly effective principals compared with 200 senior executives in business, Hay Management Consultants found that both groups were equally impressive in performance. Hay identified five domains of leadership evident in both groups. They were:

- teamwork and developing others
- drive and confidence
- vision and accountability
- influencing tactics and politics
- thinking styles (conceptual and analytical)

In a summary, the point is made that "the principal of the future has to be much more attuned to the big picture and much more sophisticated at conceptual thinking and transforming the organization through people and teams." (Fullan, 2002, p. 414)

Why is leadership as a principal difficult? A great deal may be related to the differing expectations of what leadership is for a principal. In an examination of the differences in the leadership expectations from teachers, principals, and superintendents, there was little congruency between the three groups in the areas of skills and knowledge. Superintendents and teachers have different perspectives on the expected leadership of a principal. Superintendents view the job of a principal from the managerial and political aspect while teachers have a high expectation of instructional leadership. An effective principal is one who is able to balance these differing demands (Hseih & Shen, 1998, p. 110).

#### Who Becomes a Principal?

Historically, teachers become principals. A recent study published by RAND Corporation demonstrates that 99 percent of public school principals had teaching experience prior to becoming a principal and that 90 percent of private school principals had teaching experience before assuming the duties of a principal. Currently, there appears to be a shift in the number of years in teaching experience prior to becoming a principal as is indicated in Table 1. This change in experience indicates persons interested in becoming a principal are remaining in the classroom for a longer period of time prior to actually assuming the role of principal.

Year	1994	2000
Public School	11	14
Private School	9.5	14.5

**Table 1**

Source: Susan M. Gates and colleagues, 2003.

Similarly, due to more extensive teaching experience, it appears there will be a briefer career as a principal (or in education administration in general) as age of approximately 55 remains the average for leaving a career in education (Gates, Ringel, Santibanez, Ross, & Chung, 2003, p. 5-7).

While teaching appears to be a mandatory prerequisite to becoming a principal, roughly 50 percent of newly appointed principals come directly from the classroom. If not directly from the classroom, then where do principals come from? Table 2 provides an insight into the types of experience educators have prior to becoming a principal and the possible administrative career paths to the principal's office. By comparing Arizona to the national average and surrounding states, one gains a perspective of whether Arizona is different or similar in the career path to the principal's position. It should be noted that the categories of experience are not mutually exclusive, i.e., an athletic director may not have moved directly to the principal's position but may have also been an assistant principal prior to becoming a principal (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999-2000, p. 27-28).

In Arizona the clearest career path to becoming a principal is to be an assistant principal followed by the positions of department head, athletic director, and curriculum specialist. Arizona draws more heavily on assistant principals than its surrounding states or the national average with nearly 80 percent of principals having been an assistant principal. By comparison the national average is 67 percent and the next highest state (Nevada) is 71 percent of principals having had experience as an assistant principal.

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Experience	No. of Principals	Teacher	Dept. Head	Curriculum Specialist	Assistant Principal	Guidance Counselor	Athletic Director
National	82802	99.3	36.6	24.6	66.8	7.9	34.1
Arizona	1165	100	40.4	31.8	79.9	6.6	34.3
Colorado	1402	98.5	41.9	24.3	67.4	14.9	38.9
Nevada	439	100	43.8	26.6	71.4	6.1	35.4
New Mex.	699	98.5	48.8	25.1	67.6	8.9	45.5
Utah	722	97.6	50.9	36.1	67.3	7.8	22

**Table 2**

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002.

While the information on charter school principals is not as discrete (the data are separated by region rather than state) an overview of charter school principals' background can be seen in Table 3. Arizona is included in the West region data of this regional format. It should be noted that the information in Table 3 is not as comprehensive as that on regular principals contained in Table 2. This is a result of a lower percentage of response to the survey. However, it does paint a reasonably accurate picture of charter school principals' prior experience. An open question regarding this data on prior experience is the lack of indication whether the non-principal experience reported was gained in regular public schools or in charter schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999-2000, p. 79).

Table 3. Types of Experience Prior to Becoming a Charter School Principal by Percent of Current Charter School Principals By Region*							
Experience	No. of Principals	Teacher	Dept. Head	Curriculum Specialist	Assistant Principal	Guidance Counselor	Athletic Director
National	988	89.3	41.8	34.1	55.4	10.6	22.8
Northeast	106	91.4	26.6	29.8	56.4	6.4	19.1
Midwest	226	90.5	36.4	27.1	47.2	10.9	28.3
South	248	83.2	45.2	34.4	58.5	11.1	14.8
West**	409	91.9	46.7	38.9	57.7	11.3	25.5

**Table 3**

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, U. S. Department of Education, 2002.

Note: \* Those responding to survey.

\*\* Arizona is in West region.

Previous teaching experience is found for 92 percent of charter school principals in the West Region which is slightly higher than the national average of 89 percent. Prior assistant principal experience is also found for a majority of charter school principals with the West Region showing slightly higher than the national average as well. In descending order of percentage, principals who had prior non-teaching experience in the positions other than assistant principal, came department head, curriculum specialist and athletic director – a pattern similar to regular public school principals.

When prior non-teaching experience of charter school principals and regular public school principals are compared, however, some differences do emerge (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparison of Types of Experience Prior to Becoming a Principal by Percent of Current Public and Charter School Principals*							
Experience	No. of Principals	Teacher	Dept. Head	Curriculum Specialist	Assistant Principal	Guidance Counselor	Athletic Director
National	82802	99.3	36.6	24.6	66.8	7.9	34.1
National Charter	988	89.3	41.8	34.1	55.4	10.6	22.8
Arizona	1165	100	40.4	31.8	79.9	6.6	34.3
West Charter**	409	91.9	46.7	38.9	57.7	11.3	25.5

**Table 4**

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002.

Note: \* Those responding to survey.

\*\* Arizona is in West region.

Charter school principals are much less likely to have been an assistant principal and somewhat less likely to have experience as an athletic director. Charter school principals, as a percentage, were more likely to have been a department head or curriculum specialist than their regular public education counterparts.

Who becomes a principal in Arizona? Teachers do, almost exclusively in regular public schools and to nearly the same degree in charter schools. Additionally, more than half of those who become principals have had some prior administrative experience. Eight out of ten regular public school principals in Arizona have been assistant principals as have six out ten charter school principals (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999-2000, p. 83).

The demographic of prior experience for charter school principals is one that should be researched further. Conversations with three principals, two in regular public schools and one retired public school administrator who had become a charter school principal yielded an interesting trend in Arizona. Two principals in regular public schools indicated they intended to retire as soon as they were eligible and would seek principal positions in charter schools. One charter school principal that had moved from a regular school principal ship indicated that the new position was more satisfying. The reasons stated were that, while the responsibility for the entire operation was more demanding, there was less outside interference and less demand for administrative tasks which allowed for greater focus on the instructional program.

Who Prepares Principals in Arizona?

Arizona has several institutions that provide programs of study to qualify for the state examination and certification. Those that produce the greatest number of candidates for administrative certification, in order by number of students in their program, are:

1. Northern Arizona University
2. Arizona State University (main and West Campuses)
3. University of Phoenix
4. University of Arizona
5. Grand Canyon University

Due to the mobility of population, not all school administrators in Arizona's schools are trained in Arizona. If certification is granted by a state with which Arizona has reciprocity, certification can be obtained by presenting evidence of certification and passing the AEP and Arizona Constitution exam. It should be noted that charter and private school principals are not governed by the state requirement to have certification. Furthermore, critics of administrative certification requirements express that teaching requirements and certification are barriers that prevent alternative forms of leadership in schools, particularly from those outside of the education establishment (Gates et al., 2003, p. 5-7).

### 1.1 Is there a shortage of principals?

With the passage of the Federal Government's No Child Left Behind Act and its provisions for highly qualified educators, there has been a growing concern of a shortage of qualified individuals to assume leadership responsibilities in schools. A recently published RAND Research Brief specifically addressed the question: Are Schools Facing a Shortage of Qualified Administrators? Here are the findings of their study: E

- Existing data reveal no evidence of a national crisis in the labor market for school administrators.
- The number of administrators is stable though the group is aging.
- There is little evidence that school administrators are being lured into other career fields at this time.
- Principals are not fleeing schools serving disadvantaged students.
- Overall, individuals appear to have incentives to move into and through the administrative career path (RAND, 2003, p. 1).

The research does identify some areas of concern for future school leadership. They were characterized as (a) the aging trends in the principal population, (b) the variation in the incentives to become a principal and remain at a particular position and (c) barriers to entry. In the 12-year period of 1988 to 2000 the average age of principals increased from 47.8 to 49.3 for public school principals and from 46 to 49.9 for private school principals. During the same period of time the number of persons entering the position of principal under the age of 40 dropped from 38 percent to 12 percent. The best predictor of principal mobility is not the number of students in poverty or the perceived problems in a school but rather, compensation. More specifically, the closer a principal's salary is to the teachers' salary, the greater the dissatisfaction (Gates et al., 2003, p. 9).

School districts may be exacerbating a supply problem by simultaneously hiring older replacements for retiring principals and then offering early retirement incentive programs, thus creating a likely increase in the rate of retirement for principals. Policy makers at all levels need to find the means to encourage principals to remain in the position after eligibility for retirement and to explore hiring younger replacements in order to increase the longevity of career principals.

Critics of education cite the lock that educators have on leadership positions as one of the barriers to needed change in the education system. For example, the requirement of teaching experience and certification prevents non-educators from assuming administrative positions in education. Even more subtle are the district hiring practices that look for teaching or administrative experience as a prerequisite to consideration for hiring. Policy makers are often asked to examine means for removing these barriers. Examination of the free market systems of charter and private schools must give some pause to these claims, however, because they demonstrate a high propensity to hire school leaders that have teaching and previous administrative experience (RAND, 2003, p.2).

#### Gaps and Concerns for Principals

Many stakeholders believe that the most important function of a principal is to keep the school focused on certain goals and under control. However, some stakeholders think the school principal needs to be open minded, receptive to change, and receiving input from staff, students, parents and the public. Unfortunately, the public is not necessarily in agreement as to what certain goals the local school should achieve. This makes the task of remaining focused and making progress toward meeting those goals very difficult indeed. As a community needs change and the public's perception regarding what constitutes a quality education is altered, the principal can be caught up in a fairly volatile situation to which no clear cut solutions exist.

Compounding this dilemma is the fact that the educational goals and standards set by federal and state governments continue to shift. Utah's House of Representatives voted to make Utah the first state to scrap the No Child Left Behind Act due to the mandates that would cost more than the federal government was willing to pay (Foy, 2004, p. 2). The Arizona legislature has considered following Utah's lead with regard to the No Child Left Behind Act. The matter of shifting federal and state priorities is made worse for the principal whenever changes in local school boards occur and new demands are placed on the local school.

#### Readiness for No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

To satisfy NCLB requirements, principals in Arizona need the state and the federal government to clearly define what is expected in terms of accountability. This is perhaps best evidenced by several high performing, affluent schools in Arizona having been labeled as failing schools (Todd, publication date not cited).

Reporting of data on school performance by the state or federal government often skew actual results, give an inaccurate picture of school performance, damage faculty morale, and lower public confidence and support for the school system. Arizona principals will need better assessments that fairly reflect actual school performance, along with adequate resources and less political interference from both the state and federal government in order to successfully meet the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act.

#### Leadership in the School: Leading vs. Managing

Leading is about change. Leading takes the organization and its members from point A to point B, with the vision that point B is a new and better place. This differs from the managing, where the goal is to maintain the status quo. A manager might want improvement, but not change. Managers view their responsibility as keeping the current system working as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Like all other states, Arizona has very few school leaders and a lot of school managers. This is understandable given what is known about change:

- Research tells us change must begin with the individual and requires accepting new beliefs.
- Change is difficult and seldom worth the effort, and most changes fail.
- Real need or pressure is required and not everyone will change.
- No amount of information will make the change totally clear and there will always be disagreement and conflict.
- The leader must take a key role monitoring and evaluating the change process while involving all those affected by the change.
- Despite the obstacles to change, school improvement cannot occur without it (Martin, Wright, Danzig, Flanary, & Brown, 2005, p. 94-96).

Other key factors limiting change in schools are lack of power, time, support, and expectation. School principals have little power to make significant changes. The power resides in the local, state, and national elected / appointed officials. Principals spend the majority of time on day-to-day operations while superintendents spend the majority of their time carrying out mandates from boards, legislatures, courts, and relevant federal, state, and local agencies. These bodies tend not to support substantial change as Warren Bennis found that “we’ve got a bunch of people that want the world [school] to be the way it used to be and are very disinclined to accept any alternative forecast of the future” (Bennis, 2001, p. 117). Few job descriptions and/or administrative evaluations mention change.

Scholars of school administration are divided on who should be the instructional leader (Drake & Roe, 1999). Some believe it should be the principal, while others believe it should be master teachers or subject area specialists due to the operational demands on the school principal. Most concur that it is much more difficult for the principal to be the instructional leader in secondary schools. Regardless of who is assigned this responsibility, instructional leadership is vital if all students are expected to meet mandated minimum competencies and excel in their areas of interest and ability.

The knowledge and skill necessary to ensure all students perform adequately is enormous. While the breadth and depth of this issue cannot be adequately covered in this paper, it is important to consider two facts. First, in the 15,000 school districts in the U.S. there are some teachers finding success with one or more differing types of students. Secondly, these teachers are not communicating with each other. In essence, we have 15,000 school systems, each trying to resolve the issue of differing needs for differing students.

#### Implications and Further Research

A logical alternative to practices such as labeling individual schools or holding the principal solely accountable is for principals and teachers to work collaboratively with colleagues in other schools, districts, and states. The goal should be to communicate what instructional strategies, materials, activities, and assessments work with what types of students. This demands accountability but shifts the burden from the shoulders of the principal to all educators working together. Leadership should be the job of all educators

and educational leaders must retain the power, voice, and freedom to move learning forward in moral, positive, and caring fashion. This shift of power to the educational leader with a focus on change, adequate resources and support, and collaboration will yield greater results than current threats and pressures placed on professionals in the role of the principal.

It is recommended that further research consider several patterns in the traditional functions and expectations for school principals. First, researchers should consider whether the current role of the principal best meets the demands of the position and is conducive to optimal student learning. Job descriptions, goals, and consequent evaluations could vary depending on time, locations, and circumstances. Secondly, the role of instructional leader should be studied with regard to master teachers, subject or grade level supervisors, instructional teams, or other alternatives for accountability and authority given to professionals other than the principal. Further study should also evaluate the practice of requiring principals to have previous teaching experience. Finally, research should seek answers to the current concerns of low compensation, high stress, diminishing longevity of career principals.

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