

School Leadership in Washington State: Today's Leaders and Key Challenges They Face

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Introduction

Principals play a key role in how schools perform.

They support implementation of school-wide initiatives. They manage teacher talent, recruiting and retaining strong teachers. They are responsible for setting organizational goals and strategies, building school vision and culture, and allocating resources. But that is not all. In today's policy environment, principals are also responsible for meeting the demands of new teacher evaluations, implementing Common Core, and overseeing a host of other new policies on issues ranging from school discipline to new graduation requirements. And, on top of it all, principals themselves face pressure from new evaluations designed to assess their performance.

As urgency builds around the importance of school leadership, a common refrain is that we do not know as much about the principal workforce as we do about teachers. So, even as we rush forward with new policy initiatives for principals in Washington State, we are doing so without some fundamental information about the principal workforce.

With that in mind, this brief presents some baseline data on principals in Washington State to better understand the broad landscape of the state's principal workforce. Our goal is to share largely descriptive analyses and to raise some questions about what they might imply for strategies for improvement.

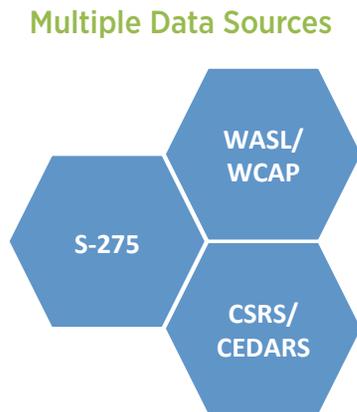
What we find is that Washington's principals work in very different conditions and circumstances, from school size to location to grade configuration, making the role of "principal" one that represents a range of experiences and needs.

We find evidence that principal turnover is highest in Washington's high-poverty schools, rural schools, and secondary schools. We also find that even after adjusting for context, high-poverty schools and rural schools appear to struggle with performance. These findings suggest that these roles are especially challenging and require specific talents, skillsets, and supports.

Data Sources

This brief relies on three major Washington State data sources on student achievement, student demographics, and school staff, linked across time from the 2004–05 to 2011–12 school years.

Figure 1. Washington State Data Sources Used for This Study



These data have three advantages: they allow us to follow 1,285 individual principals who were hired in 2005–06 for the first seven years of their careers (4,499 observations); they allow us to look at the entire state and across all grade spans; and they give us seven years of performance data to estimate some test score-based measures of school performance. Taken together, they suggest these conclusions.

- The principalship in Washington is quite varied, and in some ways it starts to look more different than alike. As we discuss later, these differences have potentially important implications for both training and support.
- Principal turnover rates are higher in certain types of schools: those with higher concentrations of students from low-income households, those in rural areas, and in secondary schools (these turnover rates might suggest that principals are unwilling to continue working in these schools under current conditions, but they could also mean there is something problematic about the way districts hire and assign principals in these schools – or a combination of both).
- Although there are important caveats to keep in mind about measuring principal effectiveness, which we discuss later, a number of high-poverty, rural, and secondary schools appear to struggle with performance more than we might predict based on the performance of schools across the entire state.

Across the state, the principalship looks more different than alike

In some ways, Washington looks typical

To begin with some broader context, we use data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to compare Washington to other states and the nation (the most recent version available at the time of writing covers the 2007–08 school year). The results suggest that Washington’s principal workforce looks, on average, fairly typical (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of Principal Demographics between Washington State and the United States

In 2008	WA	OR	CA	Nation
% Female	44%	53%	53%	50%
% White	92%	93%	73%	81%
% MA	92%	96%	91%	90%
Age	50	50	52	49
Salary	\$91,700	\$84,600	\$103,000	\$85,700

Source: US Department of Education, NCES 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey, “Public School Data File”

As Table 1 shows, Washington’s principal demographics look similar to Oregon’s (though Washington has slightly fewer female principals). Washington’s principal salaries appear to be relatively competitive, though the average salary in California is about \$10,000 higher. More recent state-based data from 2012 suggests that since the 2007–2008 SASS, Washington’s principal workforce has become:

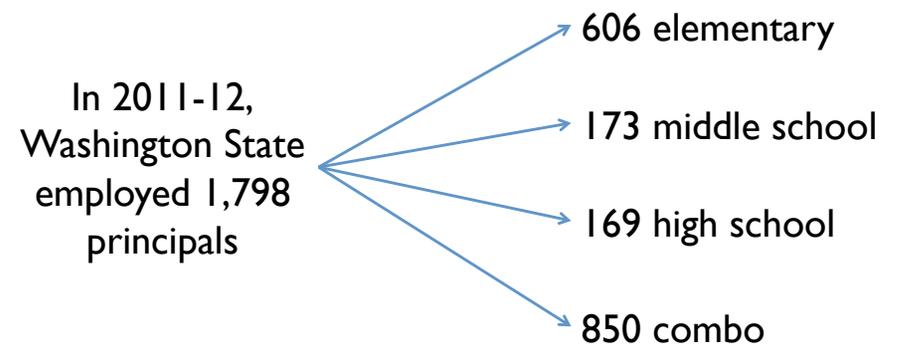
- Slightly more female (49%)
- Slightly more educated (MA) (95%)
- Better paid (\$106,218)

One reason to look at these basic measures is to explore the extent to which principal characteristics vary across school type and location. For example, do schools with higher concentrations of students from low-income households have principals with less experience or less education? Evidence from other states suggests these types of inequalities exist in the principal labor market much as they do in teacher labor markets. However, in Washington, the short answer is, they do not. For the most part, principals of high-poverty schools in Washington look similar to the average in terms of gender, race, experience,

and salary. Rural principals also look similar—though they are more likely to be caucasian males and earn about \$15,000 less.

Even though principals do not look that different across school types and geographies, it is clear that they work under very different conditions. For example, almost half of principals work in schools with non-traditional grade spans. Some of these are K-12 schools, some are junior-senior high schools, some are partial grade spans. There are also principals that lead more than one school in rural areas. Meanwhile, 34 percent work in elementary schools, 10 percent in middle schools, and 9 percent in high schools (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Types of Schools Where Washington Principals Work



In policy discussions, we sometimes take grade span differences for granted. But these distinctions matter to school leadership in important ways. For example, secondary school presents particular challenges for leaders.

- A wider array of extracurricular activities is available, including high-stakes athletics that require a great deal of coordination and attention to rules, not to mention community expectations for successful teams.
- Staff is typically larger and subjects more varied, making teacher evaluations especially demanding.
- Instructional cultures tend to be more fragmented, so building a common learning climate is more challenging.

- High schools are faced with implementing new graduation requirements at the same time as the Teacher/Principal Evaluation Project (TPEP) and Common Core.

Combination grades present their own challenges that are rarely considered; for example, working with multi-age students and staff or leading two buildings.

Principals oversee wide range of school sizes

Across the state, principals are in charge of very different-sized organizations. For example, the largest schools in the data for each grade span are 50 to 100 times larger than the smallest schools (Table 2). Again, size has implications for overseeing the quality of instruction, the school climate, and a whole host of leadership activities.

Table 2. Washington School Size by Grade Span

	Fewest	Most	Avg
Elementary	11	1216	518
Middle	21	1348	669
High School	32	2403	837
Combo	24	2495	645

There is also a wide range of student poverty: Washington schools average about 50 percent of students who qualify for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program (FRL), but individually they range from 100 percent to less than 10 percent.

Table 3. Washington Principal Colleagues by Grade Span

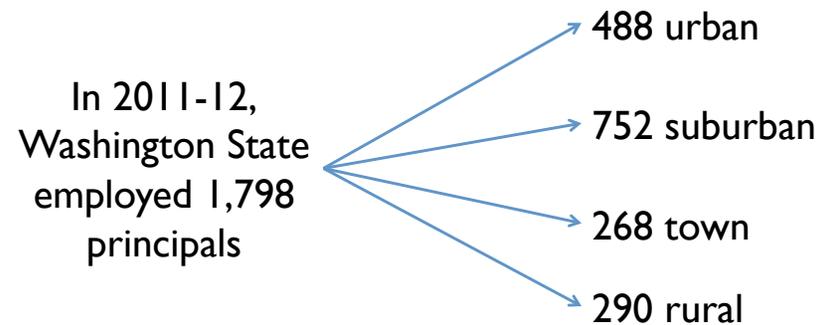
	Fewest	Most	Avg
Elementary	0	54	4
Middle	0	8	2
High School	0	14	2
Combo	0	42	4

Some principals have many colleagues, others have few

Variation in district size is another important factor, especially when considering opportunities for principal learning. As principals try to respond to new policy demands like TPEP, Common Core, and new assessments, some can learn from colleagues in their own district but others are far more isolated. Table 3 shows the number of colleagues by grade span that principals have in their districts.

As Table 3 shows, on average, an elementary principal in Washington works in a district with four other elementary principals. For middle and high schools, the average is two colleagues. Locations that only have one principal means that a leader has no district colleague who leads the same type of school (elementary, middle, high). Seventeen percent of Washington principals work without a peer colleague, including 58 elementary principals, 67 middle school principals, 80 high school principals, and 100 “combined” principals. This has implications for the learning and development of these principals, both with regard to policy implementation and to more general leadership, as we discuss later.

Figure 3. Principals Work in a Range of Geographic Locations



The differences discussed in the prior sections—primarily about organizational size—are related to the range of geographic locations in the state. Of Washington principals in 2011–2012, 27 percent were in urban schools, 42 percent were in suburban schools, 15 percent were in towns, and 16 percent were in rural areas. These categories, however, mask additional variation.

- RURAL:** About 27 percent are in rural fringe areas, 42 percent are in what the US Census calls distant rural areas, 31 percent (89 principals) are in what are called remote rural areas—farthest from urbanized areas (at least 25 miles).
- URBAN:** Almost half of principals—49 percent—are in large cities with over 250,000 people (Seattle and Tacoma), 32 percent are in mid-sized cities with populations above 100,000, and about 19 percent are in small cities with less than 100,000 people.

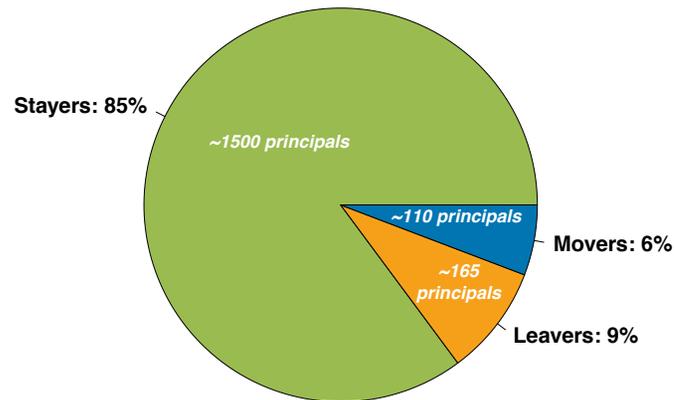
These differences may primarily matter for available resources—financial and professional—and labor markets and applicant pools.

To sum up, when we talk about principals in Washington state in general, we’re actually masking a lot of important variation that has implications for both the work and how it is supported.

Turnover is highest in Washington’s high-poverty schools, rural schools, and secondary schools

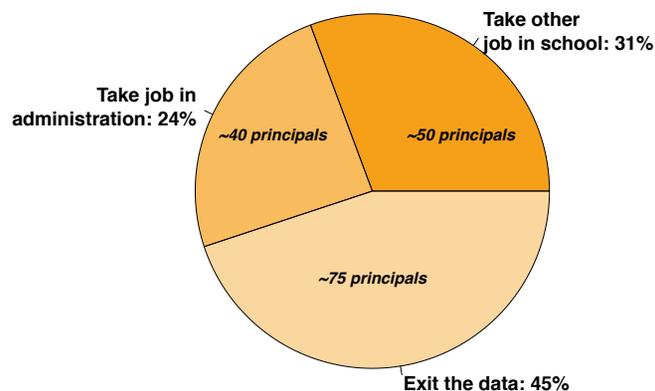
The second theme is that turnover rates are highest where you might expect: high-poverty schools, rural schools, and secondary schools. These unsurprising results suggest one way in which the difference contexts just reviewed may matter.

Figure 4. Almost 2 out of 10 Principals Turn Over Each Year



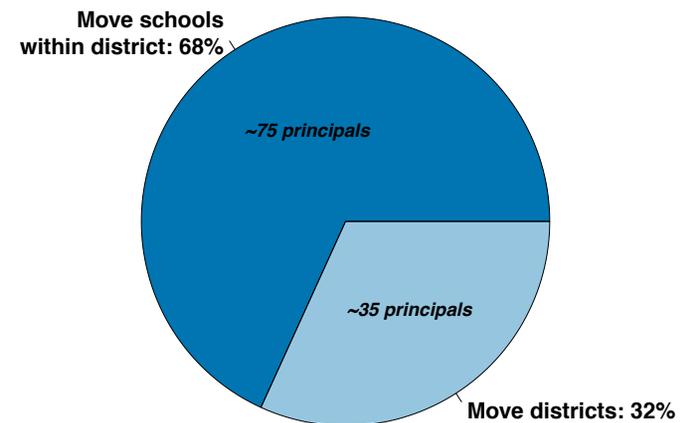
Overall, Washington turnover rates look slightly lower than national averages. Each year, around 15 percent of principal positions turn over, compared to 21 percent nationally.¹ As Figure 4 shows, when we look at turnover more closely, we find that around 9 percent of principals leave the principalship altogether and about 6 percent move to another principal job.

Figure 5. About Half Who Leave the Principalship Retire, Half Change Their Role



Drilling down a little further we see that, of those who leave the principalship completely, about half exit the data—they likely retire or move—and about half take some other job in the system, either in administration or a different school-based position.

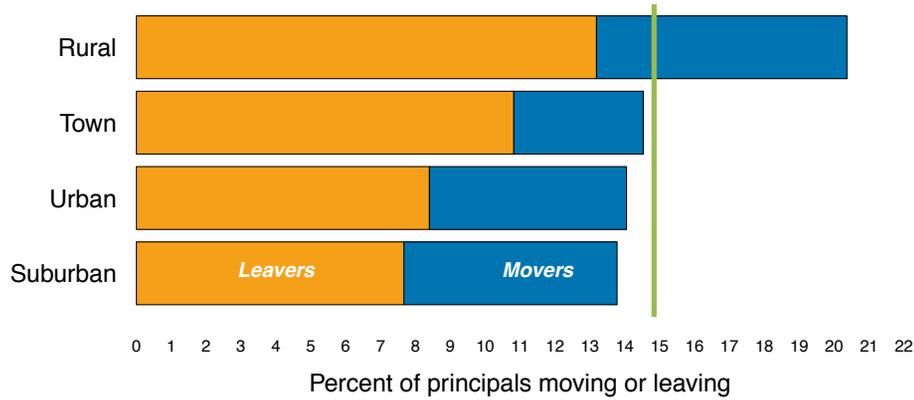
Figure 6. Most School-To-School Movement Is Within Districts



As for those who remain as principals but move schools, most—68 percent—move to a school within their district. About 32 percent move to another district. Looking more closely at some of the characteristics of the sending and receiving schools, receiving schools tend to serve a slightly smaller share of students eligible for FRL (on average a drop of about 5 percent in FRL), a pattern that reflects similar trends in teacher labor markets. The gaps in sending/receiving school-level poverty are highest in suburbs (5 percent) and towns (7 percent), and lowest in urban (2 percent) and rural (same) localities.

1. Rebecca Goldring and SoheyLaTaie, Principal Attrition and Mobility: Results From the 2012–13 Principal Follow-up Survey First Look (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Accessed August 5, 2014, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

Figure 7. Rural Schools Have Higher Turnover Rates



As Figure 7 shows, when we look at turnover by school location, we find that just over 20 percent of principals are leaving rural schools, with about 13 percent leaving the principalship (roughly two-thirds of the total rural turnover). By contrast, turnover in suburban and urban districts includes a larger share of movers, where principals have more schools to choose from.

Figure 8. High-poverty Schools Have Higher Turnover Rates

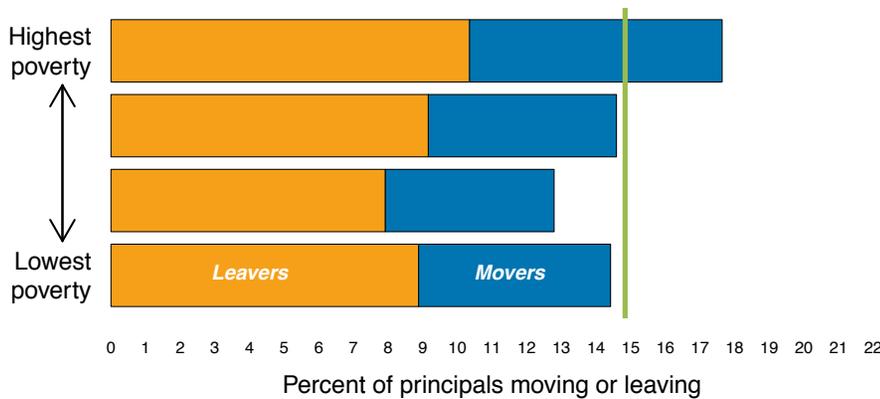
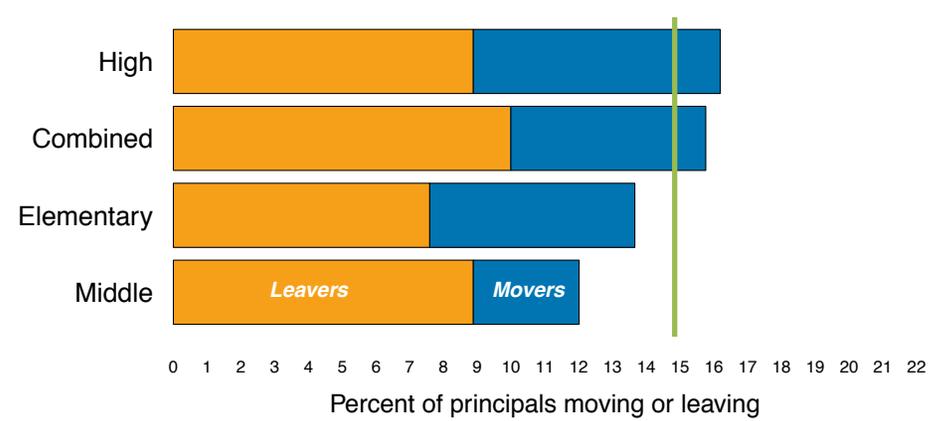


Figure 8 shows that there are similar gaps in turnover rates between the highest- and lowest-poverty schools.

Figure 9. Secondary Schools Have Higher Turnover Rates



Finally, Figure 9 shows that secondary schools also have higher turnover rates compared to elementary and middle schools. Interviews with high school leaders suggest a possible explanation for these differences; namely that the secondary school principalship has many more managerial demands, larger staff, and more complex student dynamics that make it especially challenging to implement ambitious reforms, ranging from Common Core to evaluation to graduation requirements.

Even after adjusting for context, high-poverty schools and rural schools appear to struggle with performance

How do we measure performance?

Measuring principal performance is notoriously difficult. It is difficult because principals are responsible for many different outcomes that people value, from academics to shepherding students through rites of passage, and some of which vary by grade span (for example, graduation or ACT achievement for high schools but not elementary schools). For this work, we decided to look at test scores, recognizing that they are not all that matters, but clearly they are an important measure for the system.

But even starting with a narrow conception of outcomes—test scores—there are still trade-offs between different approaches to measuring principal performance. These trade-offs include how many principals you can calculate the score for, how much noise is in the measure, and the underlying logic about the time frame in which we might expect principals to have an impact on performance. Researchers Susannah Loeb and Jason Grissom recently provided an important and useful review of these issues.²

After considering several options, we decided to use school effectiveness as a proxy for principal performance. School effectiveness reflects how students do on performance tests during a principal's employment, relative to students at other schools in the state who have similar backgrounds, peers, and prior achievement. In short, the measures answer the question, do students do better than expected, about as expected, or worse than expected while a particular principal is in charge of a school?

The advantage of this measure is that we can calculate it for most principals. Compared to other approaches (e.g., direct principal value-added measurement or improvement while a principal is employed at a school), this measure is relatively more correlated with other non-test-based measures of principal performance. For example, Loeb's work in Florida found school effectiveness was correlated with district evaluations of principals and other assessments.³ School effectiveness is also correlated with Washington's new performance index.

The disadvantage of this approach is that although it is more correlated with other measures of principal effectiveness, those other measures might not be accurate. Perhaps more importantly, this approach attributes any growth that is different to what is predicted for similar students in similar contexts to the principal, an approach that surely gives some people too much credit and others too little because principals inherit schools that are better or worse and may take a while to improve them. Finally, it is important to remember that this approach speaks to how effective a school was while a principal was in charge, but it does not directly attribute that performance to the principal. Nevertheless, by examining distributions of effectiveness, we can begin to look at broad patterns of performance that may have implications for policy. In the charts that follow, we are not using these measures—nor would we suggest they be used—to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of *individual principals*.

2. Susannah Loeb and Jason Grissom, *What Do We Know About the Use of Value-Added Measures for Principal Evaluation?* (Stanford, CA: Carnegie Knowledge Network, 2013).

3. *Ibid.*

Figure 10. School Effectiveness in Washington

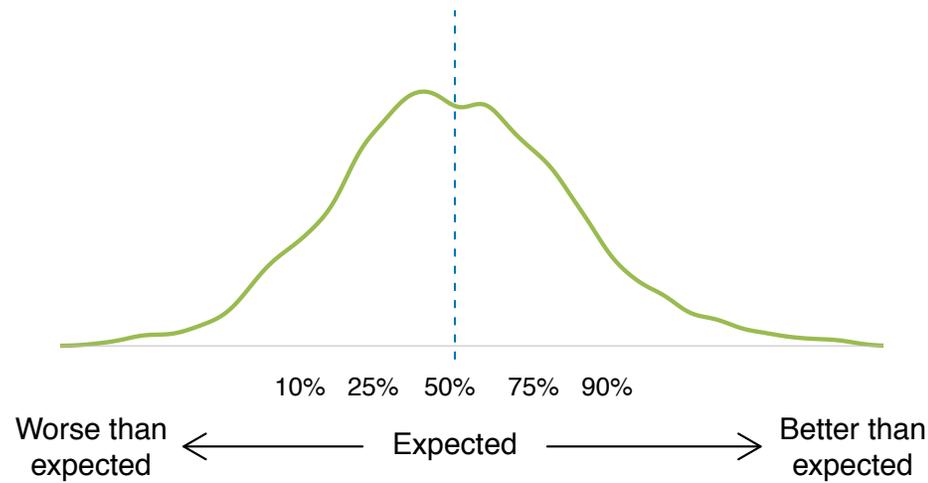


Figure 10 shows the overall distribution of school effectiveness across the state based on seven years of data. To understand the figure, imagine that underneath the curve there are a series of principal-by-school scores of effectiveness. Most of those scores are in the middle. These principals are leading schools where schools perform about what we would expect, given the mix of students they serve.

On the right side of the distribution are principals whose schools beat the odds while they were in charge (doing better than expected). On the left side of the distribution are principals whose schools are under-performing while they were in charge (doing worse than expected given the mix of students they serve).

Figure 11. How Does Effectiveness Vary Across Types of Schools and Assignments?

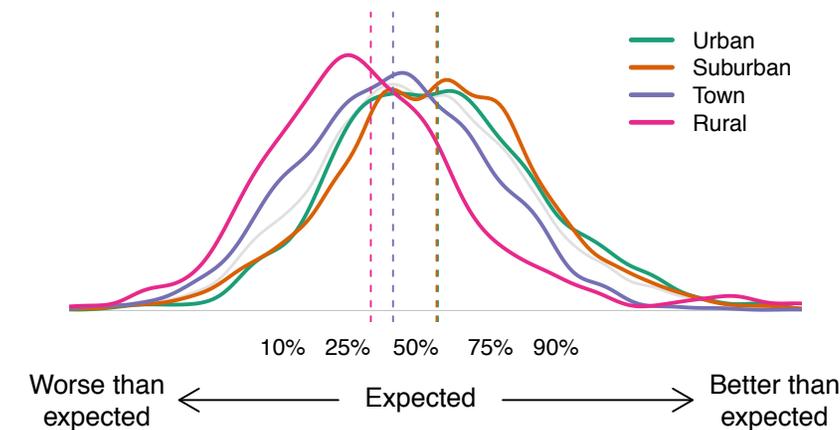
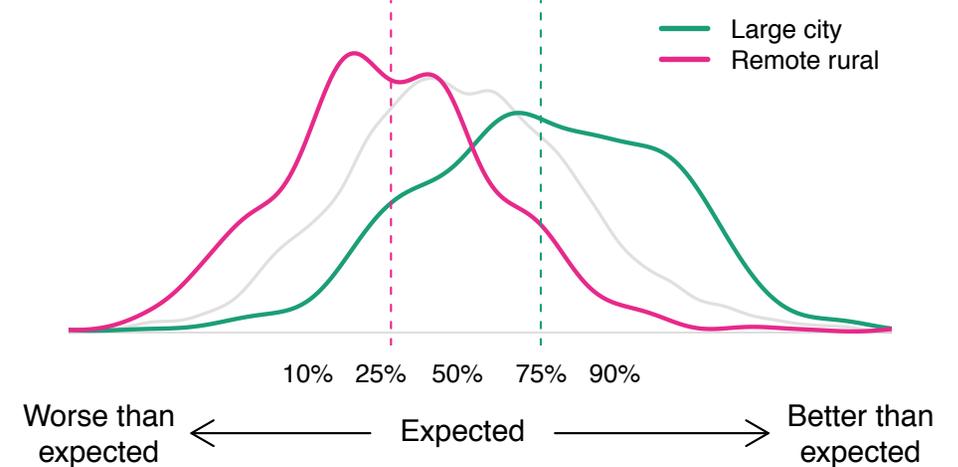


Figure 11 includes the overall distribution (in light gray) and overlays the distribution for schools in different locations. The big takeaway is that, overall, rural schools (in pink) appear, on average, to perform lower than expected, even when adjusting for the mix of students they serve. Washington’s urban and suburban schools perform slightly better than expected. The gap between how well Washington rural students are doing compared to urban students—even adjusting for the mix of students and context—is equivalent to about 2.4 months of school. So it is as if students in rural schools are let out for summer vacation in April. In terms of elementary years, that is more than an extra school year for urban students over their elementary careers. The difference between urban and rural schools amounts to about .08 of a standard deviation and is statistically significant.

Figure 12. Performance Gaps Between Large City and Remote Rural Schools



As Figure 12 shows, the gaps are even more extreme when comparing how Washington’s large cities are doing as compared to Washington’s most remote rural schools. Here the gap is almost five months of learning a year. Taking into account that the groups are not equivalent in size, they are nevertheless big enough to test differences (just under 90 in the remote group and around 240 in large cities). Over the course of four years of high school, that adds up to over two more years of school for students in large cities.

Figure 13. High-Poverty Schools Underperform

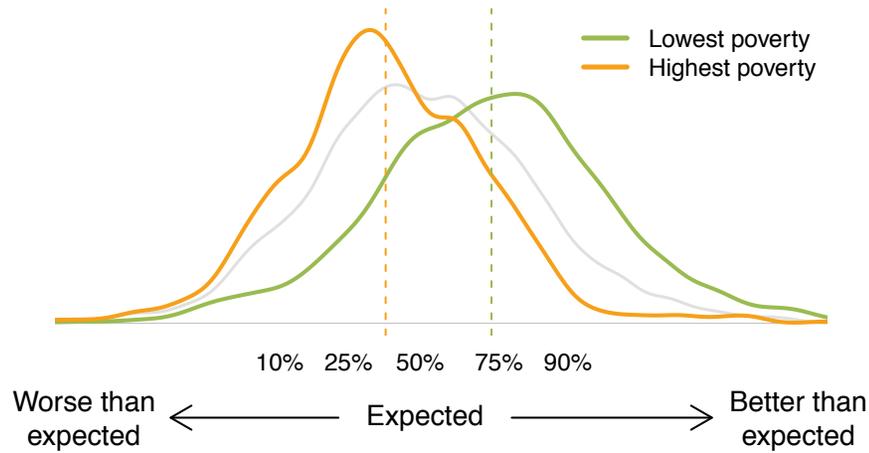
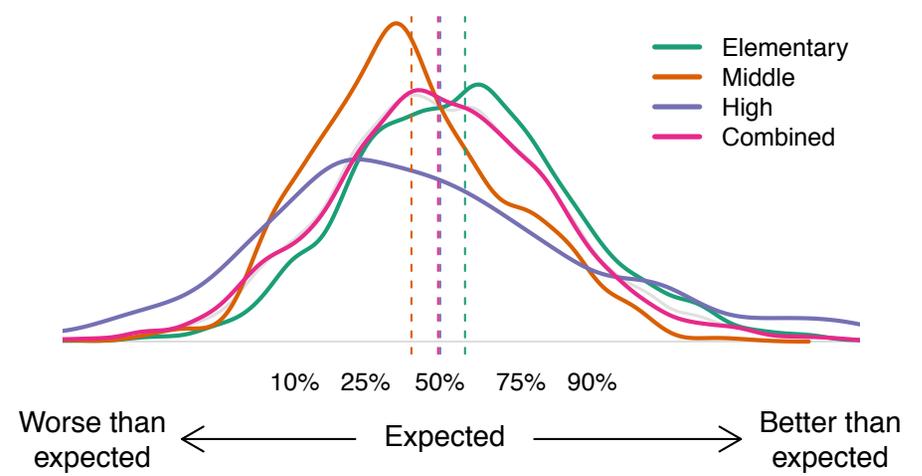


Figure 13 includes the overall distribution (in gray) and overlays the distribution for schools in the top and bottom quartiles of poverty. Here again, we see gaps in performance, even when we adjust for the mix of students and use seven years of data. The gap here translates into 3.6 months of school—as if students in schools with large shares of low-income families are released for summer every March.

Figure 14. Elementary Schools Appear Most Effective



Finally, perhaps consistent with Washington’s broader turnover patterns, we find that elementary schools are doing better than expected, and secondary schools—especially middle schools—are doing worse than expected.

Implications

The preceding description of Washington's principal workforce underscores the non-monolithic nature of the state's principals: principals work in very different organizations, turnover rates are higher in the most challenging assignments, and, some of those same assignments appear to be places that struggle with performance.

The non-monolithic nature of the workforce raises the question of whether it is time to think more creatively about a specialized and intentional approach to supporting leaders in Washington's most challenging settings, rather than treating preparation as a set of experiences that can be generalized. District leaders might also become more aggressive about growing their own best teacher leaders, providing a challenging hiring process with in-school experiences to test leader abilities prior to hiring, and providing ongoing coaching and mentoring once principal staff are hired.

Moreover, although chronic leader turnover is certainly a problem for any organization, some districts might use leadership turnover as an opportunity to develop new leaders to meet the new demands being asked of them, especially for the most challenging schools. As the role of the principal continues to shift under new policies such as teacher and principal evaluation and Common Core, it is vitally important that we target supports in areas where leaders currently struggle, and seek new leaders with promising talents and skillsets to give them a solid start, especially in the most challenging school settings.

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