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A Shortage of School Principals: Fact or Fiction?

The Myth: There Is a School Principal Shortage

Quantitative analysis reveals that school principal shortages are not the norm. The Center's analysis of 83 public school districts thought to be suffering from school principal shortages in ten regions throughout the country found:

- The average district receives 17 applicants for each principal position, a modest decline of perhaps two applicants per position over seven years.
- Nearly two-thirds of human resource directors report little difficulty finding principals.
- In most regional labor markets studied, increased numbers of applicants in some districts are offset by decreases or no change in others.
- Rural educators, who receive the lowest number of applicants per position, are largely unconcerned about a principal shortage.

Summary

For many years, there have been widespread claims of a shortage of school principals. Among other areas, the press has reported shortages in St. Louis, Indianapolis, California, and New York.

However, these claims of a shortage are largely anecdotal. Quantitative analysis by the Center on Reinventing Public Education reveals that there are far more candidates certified to be principals than there are principal vacancies to fill. The real problem is that principals are unevenly distributed among schools and districts. As a result, high poverty, high challenge, low paying schools attract the fewest candidates. Rather than increasing the supply of school principals, policymakers should focus on the real problem of attracting principals to undesirable schools.

Perceptions of a principal shortage persist not only because of an inequitable distribution of applicants, but also because superintendents are not finding the type of principals they want. The disconnect between the hiring criteria of human resource directors, who rely primarily on teaching experience when selecting candidates, and superintendents, who desire leadership qualities, seems to be the core of the problem. Human resource directors and superintendents must align hiring criteria in order to recruit qualified school principals.

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Problem #1: Distribution of School Principals

Although data reveal that there are enough principals to go around, specific districts and schools experience difficulty attracting principals. Some districts receive as many as 40 applicants for each principal opening, while others receive fewer than four. About one third of districts receive less than six applicants per vacancy, another one third receive between seven and 20 applicants, and the remaining one third receive 21 or more.

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Not surprisingly, districts with the fewest applicants are typically those with high poverty, higher concentrations of poor and minority students, low per-pupil expenditures, and low principal salaries. In each region, there are schools and districts that applicants avoid, as candidates flock to the more desirable districts within the larger labor market.

Problem #2: Communication Between HR Directors and Superintendents

The perception of a school principal shortage is perpetuated by the fact that school district superintendents are not finding the type of principals they want. A majority of superintendents rank leadership experience as the most important experience needed by a principal. Only 1/3 of superintendents point to teaching experience as a highly significant qualification for principals and 1/5 cite a background in curriculum as important.

However, evidence reveals a major disconnect between what superintendents want in new school principals and the selection criteria used by human resource directors. HR Directors primarily seek substantial years of teaching experience in candidates and, as a result, principals now average 14 years teaching experience.

With more pressure to hire quality candidates, it appears that human resource directors have defaulted to traditional criteria: candidates with substantial teaching experience, license or credentials as a principal, and/or experience as a building administrator. Candidates who meet these criteria are normally older, some close to retirement age, meaning that they will shortly need to be replaced. In short, HR Directors default to traditional criteria as a proxy for the leadership experience that superintendents seek.

Recommendations

Because the perceived shortage problem is actually one of distribution and poor leadership skills, reforms aimed at increasing the principal supply pool are inadequate. These efforts do not attack the real problems earlier mentioned. Instead, the Center's report recommends the following:

1. Policymakers should create financial incentives to attract candidates to less desirable districts and schools.
2. Human resource directors should align their screening/hiring criteria with the skills sought by superintendents.
3. School districts should consider redefining the principal position and its necessary qualifications, experimenting with alternative leadership arrangements.

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