

EVOLUTION OF THE PRINCIPALSHIP:

Leaders Explain How the Profession Is Changing Through a Most Difficult Year

November 2021



Part 2 of 3 in the *Leaders We Need Now* series of research briefs that describe principals' perspectives on the future of schooling

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Introduction

Dr. Arjun Taharally¹ clicked the red “leave” button on the screen and closed his eyes. His elementary school in New Jersey had been in online or hybrid learning for nearly a year. The discussions in today’s meeting—like so many others—focused on teachers’ well-being, as their work responsibilities and instruction changed dramatically in 2020–2021.

Dr. Taharally had a similar conversation about his changing role with his supervisor. Being a principal had always been challenging, but 2020–2021 was Taharally’s most difficult time. All of the old tasks of leading schools remained, and so many new tasks were added during the scramble to meet the needs of students and families during a global pandemic, a painful reckoning with racial injustice, and a divisive election year.

On many days, Dr. Taharally felt more like a first responder who was racing on the frontlines to keep his students, staff, and parents mentally and physically healthy than he did the thoughtful, strategic instructional leader that he was trained to be. He wondered whether his principalship would ever return to normal, or whether the principalship had reached a tipping point and would be indelibly changed.

Working in collaboration with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), researchers at WestEd and American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) wanted to find answers to the following questions:

- ◆ How much time did principals work each week, and did that amount of time differ from before 2020–2021;
- ◆ What types of work—as represented by the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (PSEL)—dominated principals’ time in 2020–2021; and
- ◆ What new work responsibilities, if any, emerged for principals in 2020–2021 that differed from those in the PSEL?

This brief answers these three questions and may be helpful to principals, superintendents, staff at state education agencies, and policy advocates. Where appropriate, the brief also compares findings from this study with the results of NAESP’s 10-year study of the principalship in 2018 (Fuller et. al., 2018), prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In spring 2021, 188 elementary school principals (all members of NAESP) participated in focus groups for the [Leaders We Need Now](#) series. During these focus groups, the principals talked about their work and how it had changed. This brief, the second of three in the series, describes changes in the professional lives and responsibilities of principals. The first brief, [Leaders in the Tumult: Schooling Innovations and New Perspectives From a Year Interrupted](#), presented principals’ perspectives on important changes to schooling. The third brief, *Principals on Policy: What Educational Leaders Seek Through Policy*, discusses principals’ ideas for policymakers.

The principals in the focus groups ranged in years of experience and led schools located in large and small districts in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Nearly all of these principals’ schools—like the majority of schools nationally—experienced some school closures in 2020–2021, and a majority of schools had moved to online learning for at least 2 weeks during that time. The Appendix presents more information about the study methodology.

¹ This is a pseudonym.

School Leadership Changes in 2020–2021: History in the Making?

School principals are responsible for the overall operation of schools. Although the principal position has been a mainstay in education for nearly 200 years, the position has evolved over time and in parallel with national socioeconomic changes and aspirations, expanded access to public education, and deepened understanding of school management (Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Kafka, 2009).

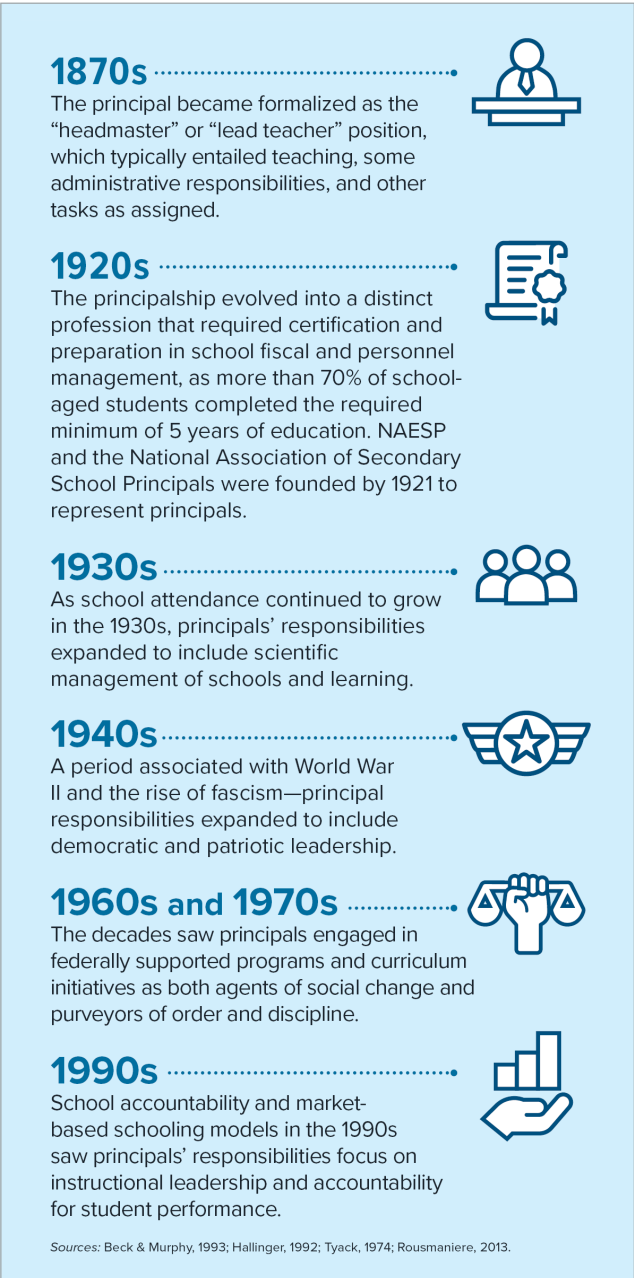
Historians and others point to changes in principals’ responsibilities and performance standards as evidence of such changes over time, and the professional changes reflect social changes or “shocks” in public education (Exhibit 1). As public school participation expanded and educational research advanced, the principalship became a profession, one that now includes the hallmarks of professional standards, certification, representation, and performance evaluation. The responsibilities of principals continue to expand and become more specialized (Beck and Murphy, 1993; Kafka, 2009).

In the 2000s, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), and University Council of Education Administration produced national educational leadership standards that describe key responsibilities for educational leaders, including principals. The Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium were created in 2008 and were followed by the PSEL in 2015. Nearly all states have adopted or adapted the national standards—through law or administrative rule—as a blueprint for principal preparation, performance evaluation, and professional learning (McCarthy et al., 2016).

The standards in the PSEL are the most recent standards (Exhibit 2). The PSEL recognizes that principals, assistant principals, teachers, and central office administrators can be “school leaders,” and the standards articulate a common set of responsibilities and language. The PSEL is also intended to be “grounded in the present, [and] they are aspirational, recognizing that the changing world in which educational leaders work today will continue to transform—and the demands and expectations for educational leaders along with it” (CCSSO, 2015, p. 2).

The PSEL expanded the number of standards from 6 to 10, to recognize principals’ expanding role in daily instructional management, educational equity, creation of physically and psychologically safe learning environments, and school supports of whole child development (i.e., academic, social-emotional development) (CCSSO, 2017; Murphy et al., 2017; Farley et al., 2019). The expanded PSEL provides greater details on the specialized work of educational leaders.

Exhibit 1. Evolution of the principalship



If history is an indicator, the principalship will continue to change in response to social, economic, and political changes affecting schools. NAESP and the research team at AIR wondered whether (and if so, how) the significant social, economic, and political changes of 2020–2021 might effect changes in principals’ work responsibilities. Using the PSEL as a blueprint for discussion, the research team asked principals about their priorities and responsibilities during 2020–2021.

Exhibit 2. The professional standards for educational leaders

The research team talked with principals about their responsibilities and priorities in 2020–2021, a period of significant change in education that was punctuated by an international pandemic, racial violence, calls for social justice, political division, and major weather events. The PSEL served as a basis for talking about principals’ responsibilities and priorities because states and local educational agencies use the PSEL as a guideline for principals’ work.

The PSEL covers 10 standards (for the standards document, see <http://www.nbpea.org>):

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|--|---|
| 1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values; | 7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff; |
| 2. Ethics and Professional Norms; | 8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community; |
| 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness; | 9. Operations and Management; and |
| 4. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; | 10. School Improvement. |
| 5. Community of Care and Support for Students; | |
| 6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel; | |

How Principals Used Their Time

How principals used their time during 2020–2021 could reflect externally imposed changes in their work responsibilities as building and community leaders, but some changes may portend permanent changes in responsibilities and priorities in the profession in a postpandemic future.

The 188 principals in the sample reported that (a) they spent an average of 60.5 hours per week at work, in their role as school principal between March 2020 and June 2021, and (b) the amount of time they spent at work waxed and waned depending on school and community conditions.²

The principals also reported that the average number of working hours had not increased in 2020–2021, in comparison with previous years. Seventy-eight percent of the principals who completed the focus group survey reported that the amount of time they spent at work was about the same between 2020 and 2021. The amount of hours that principals reported working aligns with survey research from before that period. Studies from 2016 and 2018 on principals’ time at work found that principals spent about 60 hours at work per week, on average (Lavigne et al., 2016; Sebastian et al., 2018).³ The NAESP 10-year study found that in 2018, principals reported spending 61 hours at work in 2018, up from 56 hours in 2008 (Fuller et al., 2018).

² A short survey asked principals to report the average amount of time per week that they worked as a principal.

³ Researchers commonly use surveys and observations to study how professionals, including principals, spend their time as a means of understanding work responsibilities and priorities. For this study, the researchers first surveyed principals about the average amount of time per week they spent at work between March 2020 and June 2021, and then focus group items asked principals to explain how that time was allocated.

Although the total amount of time spent at work was similar for principals before and during 2020–2021, the nature of their work changed in three ways during that time, according to the focus group participants. First, the majority of principals reported that they were more engaged in frontline services related to COVID-19 responses, such as contact-tracing, instructional planning, enforcing mask policies, providing social-emotional support to students and families, and teaching classes when educators were quarantined.

As one principal said, “[At] the beginning of the year, we were in ‘survival mode,’ and people were sympathetic to it. Parents and fellow administrators in our central office were like, ‘We’re just going to let you try and get your building organized and get it done.’ Well, since we came back [in] the second half of the year, it’s like, ‘Yeah, we understand it’s a pandemic, but. . . .’ So they’re trying to cram in all this in the next few months.”

At the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, principals were responding to urgent needs, and other types of work—such as school improvement planning or administrative reporting—were temporarily deprioritized. As schools began to reopen, the old responsibilities of principals returned with new urgency in a race to eliminate student learning loss and make up for lost time.

Second, work boundaries between home and school became blurry for principals (as it did in other professions). Many principals worked online from home for long periods of time in 2020–2021, so their homes became their offices. Work also expanded into evening hours because e-mail, social media, and phone calls replaced in-school interactions, and principals often felt urgently needed for logistical and emotional support at all hours. Early in 2020, for example, one principal had to remind himself to not check his email after midnight, with the hope that he could get some sleep.

Third, principals reported moving from one urgent task to another while at work, like a smokejumper at a forest fire. Many of the principals reported feeling burned out and exhausted.

One principal said, “Emotionally and physically, it’s definitely taken a toll. Yeah, we can’t continue at this pace. You’re going to have people retiring as soon as they can or getting out of [the principalship]. I mean, just be honest, right? It’s definitely not sustainable. We can do something for 3 months, but we can’t continue at this pace for years.”

The quoted principal and several other principals expressed concerns that frontline work blurred the lines between work and home, and other principals were concerned that the pace of work could not be sustained by themselves or their colleagues.

Same Standards and Priorities but New Demands

Principals, researchers, and policy makers wrote the PSEL (NPBEA, 2015) to reflect the best available research on educational leadership practices (Box 1), and the standards in the PSEL provide a vision for what principals should do (CCSSO, 2017). If the profession is evolving, principals would report that work responsibilities—as represented by the PSEL—or the priorities given to standards have changed.

All principals in the study said that the PSEL represented school leadership responsibilities and priorities in 2020–2021. With the standards displayed on their screens during the focus group interviews,⁴ the principals said that all 10 standards represented the work of school-level leadership and the priorities that they sought to address. One

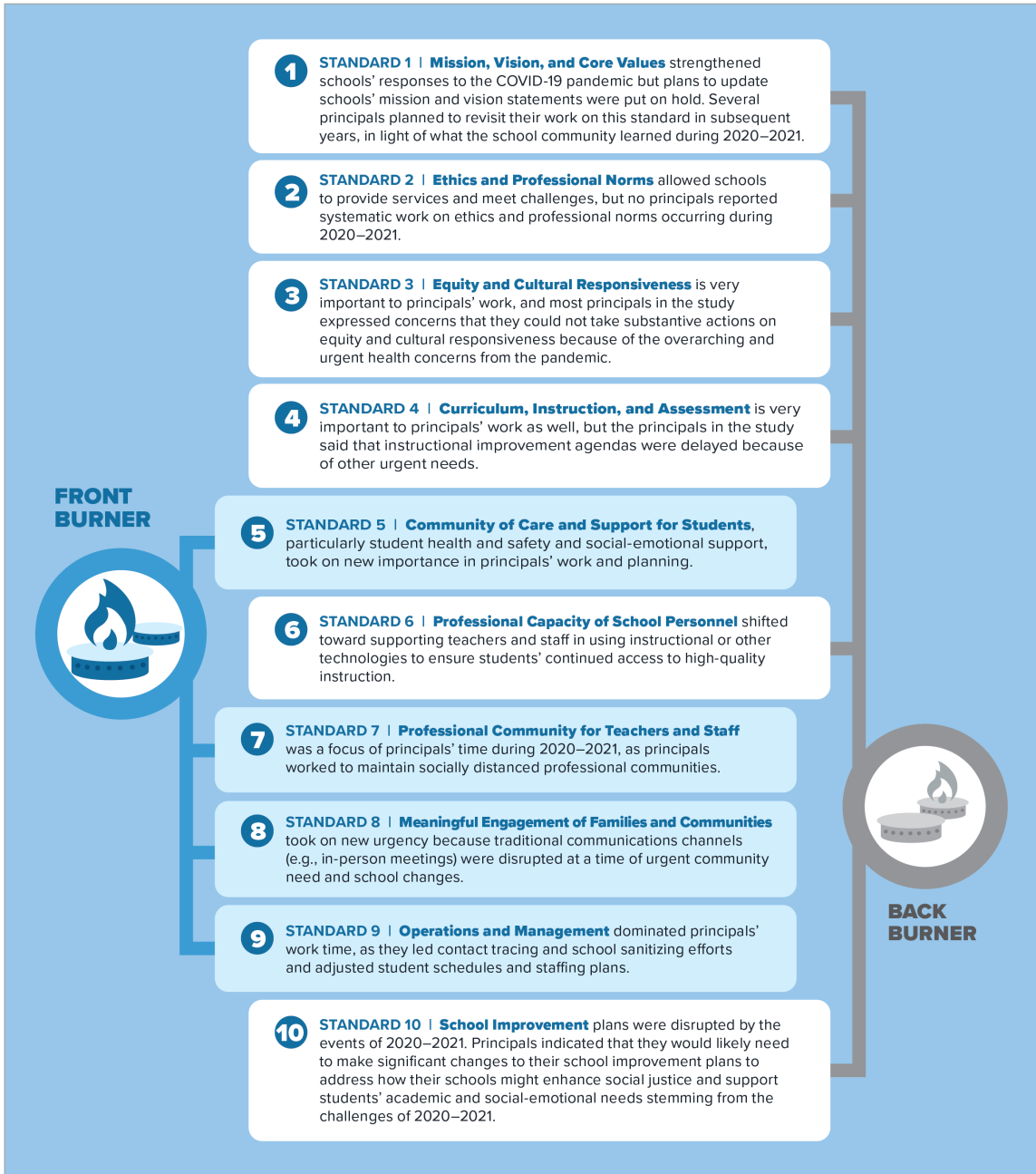
4 All 36 focus groups were conducted via live online video.

principal summed it up by saying, “All of the standards are a priority. I can’t see one that isn’t important to my work of leading this school.”

However, principals spent more time in 2020–2021 on some standards and less time on others. In focus groups, the principals likened the standards to pots on a stove. All of the pots were priorities for their work, but during 2020–2021, some of the pots had to be placed on the front burners because they required more time and attention, and other pots had to be moved to the back burners to simmer.

The research team asked principals to speak about each of the 10 standards in the PSEL in reference to demands on their work time, and the principals spoke about front-burner and back-burner standards (Exhibit 3)— all of which are summarized here.

Exhibit 3. The leadership standards demanding principals’ time and attention in 2020–2021



Standard 1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values

Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.

The **Mission, Vision, and Core Values** standard describes principals' central role in creating a common understanding about the "why" of schooling among teachers, students, and others. Organizational mission statements drive activities in schools and communicate what the school will and will not do.

The principals said that established mission, vision, and core values helped carry the school through challenging times, even when educators were not together. Many principals remarked that planned changes to their schools' mission and/or vision statements were put on hold in 2020–2021.

A principal commented, "We wanted to just pause, because I didn't want to add anything more to my staff's plate. And so, one of the things that we were really working on was really rewriting our vision, mission, those kinds of things. And we haven't completed that and that's really been set on the side burner for now."

As the quote indicates, the principal deprioritized rewriting the mission and vision statement because teachers and staff were too busy.

Several principals said that 2020–2021 highlighted the need to revise current statements about mission, vision, and core values. The principals provided two reasons for revisiting the mission, vision, and core values statements: (a) concern that the school had drifted from its core mission by engaging in healthcare support and other work, and (b) the need to rethink mission, vision, and core values to reflect new awareness about schools' roles in social justice, equity, and community support.

Standard 2. Ethics and Professional Norms

Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

The **Ethics and Professional Norms** standard addresses principals' roles in establishing productive and professional relationships that are conducive to student success (NBPEA, 2015). The standard also calls on principals to act with transparency and integrity, in ways that are guided by a moral compass (CCSSO, 2017).

The principals said that already established ethics and professional norms buoyed schools through 2020–2021. The principals said that they had little time to connect with peers or school teams to process changes in professional norms or ethical dilemmas in their work. Instead, principals said that they relied on established norms and educator professionalism to complete work.

Several principals noted that 2020–2021 raised ethical dilemmas that divided schools. These dilemmas became focal points for principals' work, and many of the dilemmas went unresolved or undiscussed because of time constraints. For example, several principals commented that they were addressing conflicts with community and staff members about mask mandates, responses to racial violence, calls for schools to make statements about social justice, and political division that came up in classrooms. These and other local political issues divided school staff and community members, to the point where one principal said, "I don't feel like I know my staff anymore."

Several principals talked about mediating conflicts associated with these hot button issues, but confided that the dilemmas sparking conflict remain unresolved.

Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

The **Equity and Cultural Responsiveness** standard addresses principals’ daily work as advocates for students to participate in appropriately challenging instruction that builds on and respects prior learning and cultures. The standard also reflects principals’ roles in creating safe workplaces and inclusive schools.

Equity and cultural responsiveness were top concerns among principals during 2020–2021, especially as the national conversation on racial justice swelled, but the principals had no time to substantively address equity and cultural responsiveness. Most principals expressed frustration that more substantive actions on equity and cultural responsiveness could not be addressed because of the overarching and urgent health concerns from the COVID-19 pandemic in their communities.

The principals said that the pandemic, policy violence, and hate crimes highlighted schools’ roles in creating more socially just communities. First, students living in poverty and students of color were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and faced new limitations when attempting to get to school or access virtual learning. Second, many principals said that the national conversation about racism divided some communities and prompted educators to question their beliefs about whether or how schools may have contributed to such inequities. As one Minnesota principal said, “Most of our faculty are White, and we serve a mainly Black community. So, when [the George Floyd murder] occurred, we looked at ourselves and questioned ourselves.”

Although some principals’ awareness of and concerns about equity were heightened, most principals had not launched professional learning, curriculum review, equity audits, or other efforts to improve equitable access to services, eliminate nondiscriminatory practices, or promote culturally responsive instruction, or they had put related programs or plans on hold because of

- ◆ **The need to listen:** Some principals resisted taking immediate actions on fundamental changes to schools because educators felt the need to listen to the national and local dialogue around equity, social justice, and political differences and to understand the experiences of others: “At first, we wanted to immediately take action, which is what we usually do. But then some of us questioned that and thought we needed to be more intentional. We need to listen and have an empathetic outlook to see what people were experiencing as parents and kids.”
- ◆ **The lack of bandwidth:** In part, principals did not launch major equity initiatives because schools were engaged in so many other, urgent changes and lacked bandwidth for more actions: “We’ve really tried to keep our focus on equity and cultural responsiveness, but that has been pushed back for other priorities in this year. In my district, we tried to keep that at the forefront of the conversation, but our initiatives were occurring simultaneously with the pandemic.”

A majority of principals planned to launch new, substantive efforts to examine and address inequities after a period of time and reflection. A few principals began to enact new plans to address equity and culturally responsive educational practices, for example,

- ◆ **Professional development** to examine biases, student inequity, and inclusion by analyzing student data, curricula materials, and instructional practices for inclusivity. One principal said, “We’ve already started to reexamine the curriculum, talking a little bit about just books in our libraries. What do those look like? Do they represent all of our students on our campus?”
- ◆ **Ensuring students have equitable access** to technology, food sources, and social supports during the pandemic.
- ◆ **Viewing schooling through an “equity lens”** to evaluate school activities from the perspective of inclusion.

Standard 4. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
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The **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment** standard focuses on principals’ engagement with teachers in curriculum, instruction, and assessment planning and provision. Research shows that principals’ roles as instructional leaders and managers are important to student performance and teacher retention (Grissom et al., 2021).

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment continues to be a priority for principals in the study, but their work as instructional leaders has shifted to providing continuity of service under new and challenging conditions. Nearly all principals focused on minimum instructional delivery rather than advancing curriculum rigor and coherence or focusing on assessment. As one principal explained, “We push a lot of interdisciplinary instruction in our school. . . . And over the past few years, we’ve been pushing STEM instruction and all of that’s about [teacher] collaboration. With the pandemic, we’ve put some things on hold [and] had to change the direction of what we’re doing.” This principal and most of the other principals said that they continue to act as instructional leaders by engaging with teachers in making decisions about instructional technology, learning management, and other technical issues.

A majority of principals reported that they will restart curriculum, instructional, and assessment improvement agendas and add to instructional improvement agendas after the worst of 2020–2021 is over. For example, one principal described how teacher teams began meeting via Zoom to select a new reading curriculum and how excited she and her team were to begin talking again about instructional issues: “A lot of [curriculum adoption] all had to be on pause because we were just struggling every day.”

Standard 5. Community of Care and Support for Students

Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.

The **Community of Care and Support for Students** standard refers to principals' work in creating safe, inclusive, and caring learning conditions in schools.

As students and communities became more fractured during 2020–2021, this standard became an urgent, front-burner priority for principals. Because school closures and social distancing disrupted the routines and daily face-to-face interactions that had long been the keys to nurturing a caring and inclusive community, student well-being overtook academic success as a priority for educational leaders.

As one principal said, “We have kids who are really struggling, and we do not have the adequate staff to address the social-emotional needs of our students. We have one social worker in my building with 340 kids and it’s not enough. . . . We are just woefully understaffed in that area.”

Principals were already beginning to prioritize social-emotional support for students before 2020–2021. In 2018, less than 2 years before COVID-19 disrupted schooling around the globe, the NAESP 10-year survey of principals found that their top-ranked concern was addressing the increase of students with emotional problems, suggesting that principals' responsibilities were already beginning to shift away from a focus on student academics to a more dual focus on student well-being from social-emotional standpoints. “In fact, respondents identified a number of student-related issues as being of moderate, high, and extreme concern[s]. Among those issues identified were the management of student behavior, student mental health issues, absenteeism, lack of effective adult supervision at home, and student poverty” (Fuller et. al., 2018, p. viii).

Standard 6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel

Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

The **Professional Capacity of School Personnel** standard addresses principals' work in providing educator professional development and supporting professional learning programs. Nearly all principals indicated that they spent little time advancing the Professional Capacity of School Personnel standard during 2020–2021. This standard addresses the role of school leaders in supporting educators' growth in their abilities to support student learning. For example, a principal said, “We had a school professional development plan, but we couldn't act on it because . . . we needed to pivot to online and hybrid [learning].”

Principals said they relied, instead, on existing professional expertise and creativity to navigate schools through 2020–2021. For example, a principal said, “They [teachers and staff] are amazing professionals. I have never been more proud to associate myself with a team of professionals who are incredibly dedicated and figuring out what to do to reach those kids.” The principals did not believe that they advanced the capacities of educators in 2020–2021, but they did organize professional development for educators. Several principals noted that the professional development was disconnected from most teachers' individual professional learning plans and goals. Instead, much

of the professional development principals organized in 2020–2021 focused on learning to use and making the most of new distance learning apps (e.g., Zoom, Slack, Blackboard, and SeeSaw).

One principal commented, “We all thought we were tech savvy until we weren’t! Then we learned this whole new world of communicating and staying connected with students, and figuring out Google classroom and how it can work with pre-K students. It’s been a very long learning process.”

Principals’ focus on relying on existing capacities and building teachers’ technology capabilities, and to a lesser extent building their cultural responsiveness, reflected a significant shift from just 3 years earlier. In 2018, a majority of principals said that teacher evaluation and development were key areas of concern for them (Fuller et al., 2018). In the focus groups for this study, principals did not mention teacher evaluation. Instead, they discussed teacher development in the context of learning new skills, rather than building on teachers’ strengths, as part of a continuum of learning and development as a professional.

Standard 7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff	Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
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The **Professional Community for Teachers and Staff** standard pertains to principals’ roles in creating and maintaining conditions conducive to educators’ work and learning. A majority of principals said that this standard was on the front burner during 2020–2021. Professional communities among faculty and staff provide educators with a home base, build bonds, support continued learning, and help faculty and staff solve problems together (Kruse et al., 1994).

Most principals reported spending more time maintaining or repairing professional communities, which were disrupted in 2020–2021 by social distancing requirements, managing increased demands on teacher time (e.g., taking care of children at home), and addressing political divisions among staff.

As one principal said, “When you social distance, you lose the natural connections that happen among staff, based on best practices, and so we need to foster an environment that creates professional community again.”

This principal’s quote captures the sentiments of many principals—that their work to (a) support professional communities and (b) build and maintain a sense of staff togetherness and purpose amid a disruptive school year, took priority during 2020–2021.

As principals talked about their work to foster professional community, a few also mentioned the need to extend empathy and care to colleagues and to work with teams of educators to talk transparently about their experiences and feelings. The principals spoke about colleagues’ fatigue, anxiety, and grief that separated professional communities and about the need to provide teams with time to express feelings and garner support from each other.

Principals became concerned about keeping up their teachers’ morale through professional community, which was especially challenging when the ways through which principals promoted staff connections in the past no longer worked because of social distancing requirements.

Standard 8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Communities

Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

The **Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community** standard pertains to principals' work in assuring that mutually beneficial partnerships exist between schools, families, and communities. The standard took on a new urgency among principals during 2020–2021. Meaningful engagement of families and communities is characterized by mutual trust, support, and engagement (NBPEA, 2015). Schools, families, and community organizations that work together have the potential to support whole child development, which includes social, emotional, academic, health, and other developmental supports that schools alone cannot provide. Principals can bridge the gap between schools and communities by setting conditions for mutually beneficial partnerships (Hong, 2017; CCSSO, 2017).

All principals in the study said that engagement with families was more important in 2020–2021 than ever before because many students learned from home and many of their families experienced health and economic changes. Principals said that they spent more time communicating with families than they had done in the past.

One principal said, "I think . . . families [felt] so isolated. So trying to connect and let them know that we're still here [became a focus of my work]. That's always been my goal, and to really increase the community engagement and help everyone to feel very connected and part of us as a school. And so we do a lot of different things in terms of that, but when we shut down, it was now what? How do we do this? And how do we keep them connected? So it's been difficult to do."

Principals also noted that they had to rethink and improve family communication strategies as educators coordinated online learning with families. This was particularly true for younger students, and some families became hard to reach as their health and financial situations changed. Principals and other educators made extra efforts to reach families and students, particularly students who stopped coming to school either virtually or in-person.

Principals in the study also reported forging new partnerships with community-based organizations and government agencies during 2020–2021. For example, one principal said, "We [principals] work closely, almost daily now, with our regional health departments to coordinate contact tracing and health services." Other principals commented that educators supplemented health and mental health services as professionals in those agencies became overwhelmed. Principals provided examples of new outreach efforts to improve mutual understanding about racial injustices, socioeconomic challenges, and health concerns and to meet community food and health needs. Several principals mentioned convening community listening sessions around race, food distribution services, improved internet services, and COVID-19 testing.

Standard 9. Operations and Management

Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

The **Operations and Management** standard addresses principals' roles in school safety, transportation logistics, technology, the movement of students and staff at schools (e.g., entering and leaving buildings), custodial services, financial management, food services, heating and ventilation systems in schools, and building accessibility (CCSSO, 2017). This standard occupied the majority of principals' time in 2020–2021, much more so than during a typical school year.

Social distancing requirements and contact tracing forced principals to rethink and rework nearly all operations and management routines to keep students and staff healthy and to comply with state guidelines. As one principal pointed out, "My reality is that operations and management sucks up all my time." Another said, "We don't even broach curriculum. I don't have time to broach curriculum. I'm just trying to keep everything operationally consistent and keep people calm." Overall, nearly all principals viewed operations and management as a primary responsibility in 2020–2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nearly all principals noted that operations and management continued to dominate their time because states and/or district requirements and national health guidelines changed continually during 2020–2021. Many principals said that they spent time planning and replanning school operations as social distancing requirements changed. Even seemingly incremental shifts—like changing minimal social distancing from 6 to 3 feet—prompted principals to convene planning meetings, check for compliance, and support changes.

Standard 10. School Improvement

Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

The **School Improvement** standard reflects principals' responsibilities for advancing organizational improvement and service agendas. Historically, school principals have been accountable for planning and enacting school improvement efforts, as reflected in the tenth standard. As instructional managers and change advocates, principals plan and support school improvement to better serve students (CCSSO, 2017).

Principals put school improvement plans on hold during 2020–2021. Nearly all principals said that they did not advance school improvement plans, and many principals said that they did not discuss school improvement plans with central office administrators during 2020–2021, for example:

One principal from Wisconsin said, "My teachers are starting to hurt from the workload and just from personal issues, including family members or friends who have died, so I think the school improvement piece, we'll get there when we get there. Right now I need to take care of my people."

As the quote indicates, principals put school improvement plans on hold to save staff bandwidth for managing other changes during 2020–2021. Doing so left time for principals to focus on the foundational aspects of schools, such as instructional delivery and program continuity.

Principals also noted that they could not just dust off the previous school improvement plan, especially after school conditions allowed for in-person learning. The events of 2020–2021 surfaced questions and concerns about students'

mental health and academic performance and about school systems' roles in contributing to injustice. Principals in the study expressed the need to incorporate into school improvement plans the learnings and challenges experienced during 2020–2021.

Standards 1–10: A Summary of the Shifts

In summary, the principals in the study tended to verify current roles and responsibilities—as represented by the PSEL—in their work through 2020–2021. Although principals considered all standards to be priorities, work in certain standards monopolized their time. Meeting each standard to a high degree was always a difficult balance, but operations and management, instructional delivery, and attending to a community of care for both students and staff took precedence among principals during 2020–2021—especially because of urgent needs among students and families.

Evolving Responsibilities of the Principalship, According to Principals

Principals identified two new areas of work that they believed were not fully represented in the PSEL standards. Many of the principals recognized that their roles had expanded to include

1. Crisis management, which is the ability to manage change through uncertain, emergency conditions, and
2. Communications management—through multiple social media channels—among families and communities within a highly politicized environment.

Many of the principals believed that these two aspects would remain at the forefront of their work for the foreseeable future. Several principals commented that they were not well-prepared to take on these two new roles.

Crisis Management

Dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity is a challenge for leaders in any complex organization, and principals manage large and small crises each day. According to the principals, the events of 2020–2021—as well as contradictory and/or changing guidance—magnified the uncertainties and escalated issues to a new, community-wide scale.

A principal said, “I think you’ve got to find a way to plan for the unknown. You’ve got to be able to pivot and that’s the only way you survive the school year. You just need to have multiple planes ready to go at any time.”

An Ohio principal was concerned that crisis management could press principals to leave: “Your school needs to know where we are headed and how we are getting there. And then what we do when we hit speed bumps, obviously COVID is a really big one. And that goes to the same thing with our districts is as a principal, we’ve got to know that every financial decision, every staffing decision—now all those decisions—are aligned to our vision. And if it’s not, and we’re just every time a new situation pumps up, we’re making a random decision. It leads to chaos and principals leave.”

As these three principals and other principals noted, leaders had to manage through crises. Although school leadership is often about problem-solving, the principals noted that 2020–2021 posed unanticipated problems at a magnitude greater than before, and educational systems were not fully prepared to respond.

Now that the problems facing schools are known, the principals want to be better prepared to respond during community-wide emergencies in the future. Since the schools were integral to health, economic and emergency services through the pandemic, principals and other educators might receive crisis management training and become more integrated with emergency response plans in the community.

Social Media Communications Management

Principals noted that media management had become an important part of their daily routines, and expertise on this front became more important in 2020–2021 than in the past. The principals used multiple communications channels—including social media and websites—and other ways of communication to participate in community discussions about schools and policies; monitor community response; and quickly reach students and community members. Managing social media became a key aspect of principals' work for which they had not been trained.

A Wisconsin principal noted, "My superintendent expects me to monitor social media every day and post at least once a day—just to keep up with the online stuff."

Another principal said, "It's like we have to be our own communications department. I'm on multiple platforms to try to see what the parents are saying, what the kids are doing, just to get ahead of it."

These and other principals noted that they had to work on multiple communications platforms to clarify leadership messages and proactively address concerns about school requirements, curriculum, and instruction.

Principals noted social media management became essential because schools—and their positions—had become more politicized in 2020–2021. The principals related heightened politicization to a deterioration of trust and relationships in states and the nation, as exhibited by protests against COVID-19 health policies.

A principal said, "I think the biggest challenge for me in leading this school this year has been relationships, and how divided opinion seems to be. . . . There's not a feel of community anymore, or a sense that 'I can disagree with you but I can accept [a decision] for the greater good and we'll go down this path.' I think now, people are so divided in their opinion, and people are unwilling to accept any compromise about what's going on."

Principals noted that (a) political differences in local communities rose to a fever pitch and (b) social media contributed to escalating tensions. Principals had to participate in social media as a way to address misinformation and mediate conflicts that affected their schools. As one principal noted previously, community members voiced different opinions without actually communicating together to reach a common ground.

The principal position has always been political because principals are, in part, leaders of school communities and, therefore, have to broker relationships and engender trust (Rousmaniere, 2013; Matthews & Crow, 2003). Principals in the study said that they were being called on to broker communications with political acumen to heal deeper differences at the community level. They spent considerable amounts of time on social media management—a task few were trained to do well—while putting other priorities on the back burner.

Implications for Principals' Work and Support and for the Principal Pipeline

The *Leaders We Need Now* study team asked 188 elementary school principals from 43 states about changes to their professional responsibilities during 2020–2021, a period of shocking social and economic changes that affected schools and communities. NAESP asked the research team to listen closely to principals because, historically, societal changes have led to an evolution in the profession. Understanding changes may help principals, superintendents, and others provide better support to principals, through changes in principal preparation, professional learning, and supervision or by reconfiguring or redistributing work responsibilities.

Principals reported that, in 2020–2021, they were not working more hours, but their professional responsibilities and the distribution of responsibilities had changed. The elementary principals said that they

- ◆ Worked 60.5 hours per week, on average, which aligns with the average number of hours worked per week reported by principals in past studies;
- ◆ Engaged in frontline student learning support and coordinated community supports with other agencies;
- ◆ Struggled to balance work and homelife boundaries, as they worked from home;
- ◆ Reconfigured work responsibilities—as represented by the PSEL—to address urgent leadership needs in schools, while back-burnering other work that is considered vital to student achievement, educational equity, and teacher support;
 - The principals reported spending more time on *operations and management; meaningful engagement of families and communities; professional community for teachers and staff; and community of care and support for students* standards.
 - The principals reported spending less time on *curriculum, instruction, and assessment; equity and cultural responsiveness; professional capacity of school personnel; school improvement; mission, vision, and core values; and ethics and professional norms* standards.
- ◆ Expanded responsibilities to include crisis management and social media management, tasks for which they felt inadequately trained and are not represented in the PSEL.

Recognizing that the principalship changed in 2020–2021, principals raised concerns about the work and professional supports.

Implications for Principals' Work

The findings from this study have ramifications for the work responsibilities of elementary school principals—now and in the future. From a historical perspective, the principal position has expanded to include more responsibilities, as schools serve more students than they did in the past. The focus groups indicated that the position expanded again, through 2020–2021, and shifted principals' foci and responsibilities.

New demands left principals with little time to focus on anything other than urgent problems and needs to the detriment of other responsibilities. The principals noted that they focused on frontline responses to urgent needs rather than orchestrating changes and distributing leadership. One principal reflected that she needed to return to

her role as a school leader: “I have to be a fire chief, rather than a firefighter.” In other words, this principal sought to establish new routines that allowed her to set agendas and orchestrate improvement.

As the principals discussed these changes to their work, a few principals wondered whether work had become untenable. For example, a national survey of principals from the Learning Policy Institute indicated that 42% of principals considered leaving the profession in 2021–2022 (Levin et al., 2020). Researchers and policy advocates have noted that the elementary principalship may require some reconfiguration and specialization to be more manageable. The following might be considered:

- ◆ **Distribute leadership to assistant principals and teacher-leaders:** Assistant principals or other specialized staff could take on some work responsibilities, and in some schools principals spoke about the importance of many leaders pulling together during 2020–2021. Many elementary school principals, however, do not have assistant principals who can share administrative responsibilities, and many reported that they did not have access to counselors and mental health professionals to support them. For example, several principals sought funding for assistant principal positions, counselors, nurses, and other specialists to support their work, and several principals sought ideas from communications or marketing firms to support their management of social media.
- ◆ **Reconfigure the job:** Central office administrators or intermediary organizations might take on certain school-level administrative responsibilities to free up principals to engage in leadership practices that matter most to students and communities (see Grissom et al., 2021).

School district administrators would need to work with principals to recreate job descriptions that are feasible for principals to accomplish.

Second, principals expressed concerns that community members, legislators, and central office administrators would expect school-level leaders to make up for lost time as schools reopen. Although school and staff improvement agendas were placed on hold in 2020–2021, principals cautioned that the agendas could not be simply dusted off and restarted. They also told us that losses experienced by some school systems—like student learning progress—could not be quickly remedied. The principals were concerned that educators would be accountable for catching students and systems up, after a 2-year disruption and at a time when educators were experiencing loss and exhaustion.

Principals also questioned whether school systems and improvement agendas should be dusted off again. The disruptions of 2020–2021 raised awareness and prompted learning that, the principals said, raised questions about equity and inclusiveness that needed to be addressed through system rethinking. For example, several principals planned to revisit mission statements to be more inclusive of schools’ work for equity and social justice, and several principals planned to launch curriculum, instruction, and assessment efforts to improve cultural responsiveness and examine cultural representation. These principals planned to launch deeper systems thinking efforts as schools get their footing again, and they believed these efforts will last several years.

Implications for Principals’ Support and for the Principal Pipeline

Additional responsibilities and what principals are able to attend to have implications for supporting the “principal pipeline.” The principal pipeline includes preparation, hiring, professional development, performance evaluation, and working conditions for the school leadership workforce (Gates et al., 2020; George W. Bush Institute, 2016; Manna, 2021).

As one principal said, “I had a few teacher-leaders say [to me] before the pandemic, ‘Wow, I want to get into the pipeline and become what you all are doing.’ [Now] they’re like, ‘Wow, I do not want to do what you’re doing. Let’s see what other job I can find. Something has to be out there.’”

Another principal said, “I think we have to get rid of the superhuman myth that goes with the principalship, that the principalship means that we somehow put on capes every day when we get to work. . . . I’ve been doing this job for 25 years and I get it. But I see a lot of my newer principal colleagues just on trying to understand the role and all of the different hats that you wear and trying to balance and juggle all of those different tasks and to do it successfully. I think that’s going to be a challenge going forward.”

The principals cited the need for important improvements to preparation, professional learning, and district-level support. The principals mentioned that they needed more opportunities to learn how to

- ◆ Provide or improve their social-emotional support for teachers, families, and students experiencing trauma;
- ◆ Manage stress and engage in self-care under conditions of uncertainty;
- ◆ Work with community members and government agencies on crisis management;
- ◆ Build school and community partnerships based on trust, understanding, and mutual support; and
- ◆ Use social media to effectively and proactively communicate, particularly across multiple platforms.

The principals noted that the changing principalship and related learning needs had implications for principal preparation, professional development, and supervision. The elementary school principals noted implications for the following:

- ◆ District systems supports are needed to improve principal supervision, open access to leadership professional learning, and increase principal autonomy when needed.
- ◆ Principal supervisors can be sources of support and feedback for principals, and supervisors can provide important and personal supports for principals.
- ◆ Principal professional learning and coaching can address principals’ learning needs, particularly specialized learning and advanced recognition late into their careers;
- ◆ Principal preparation can address new and important content and extend social supports into the early years of new principals’ work in schools.

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Appendix: About Our Methods

The Joyce Foundation and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) Foundation provided financial support for staff at WestEd and the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to conduct this research study. The Joyce Foundation and NAESP Foundation funded the project to explore how schools and principalship changed through the 2020–2021 school year because policies and professional learning may need to change as well. The goal of the research project was to listen to practitioners, identify common themes, and provide a narrative based on principals' perspectives.

NAESP is a member organization that represents approximately 17,000 elementary school administrators in the United States. The research team sought to conduct focus groups with member principals of NAESP via a geographic distribution by state.

AIR researchers pursued a three-step process for convening the sample (Exhibit A.1):

1. The research team identified a sample pool of 5,452 current principals from among the approximately 17,000 members of NAESP. This sample was identified based on proportional geographic representation across states.
2. The research team invited the 5,452 identified principals to (a) respond to a brief online survey designed to collect demographic information that supplemented extant data from NAESP and (b) select a convenient date and time for the focus groups.

3. The research team convened 1-hour, online focus groups with 188 principals from NAESP. A total of 36 focus groups were conducted. Individuals completing focus groups received a \$25 electronic gift card. Fifty-eight percent of survey completers also attended focus groups.

Exhibit A.1. Process for convening the sample

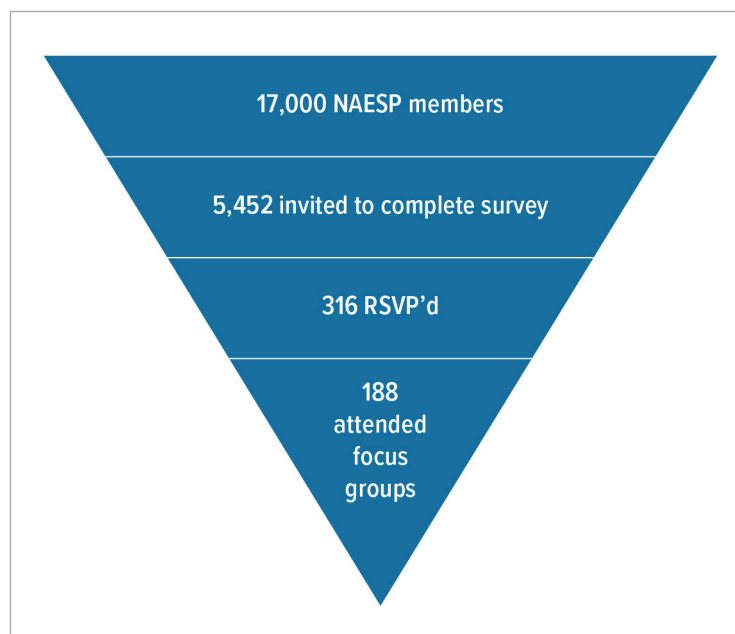


Exhibit A.2 presents the demographic information of the sample. State location is provided by NAESP's member database, and the demographic data of principals are self-reported via the survey.

Findings should be understood to represent the ideas, experiences, and perspectives of only the principals included in the study. The sampling method, response rate, and self-selection of survey respondents and focus group participants place limited generalizability on the results of the research.

Furthermore, the reader should not consider findings applicable to secondary schools, because middle and high school principals are not represented in the data. Similarly, perspectives from assistant principals and teachers are not included in the data. Although focus group data are geographically distributed, not all states are represented, and the sample includes a higher percentage of rural principals than the national average.

Exhibit A.2. Focus group principal demographics

Geographic distribution: 43 states (not included: Delaware, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, and South Carolina)

NAESP zones* representation: NAESP zones help to organize member services

Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 4	Zone 5	Zone 6	Zone 7	Zone 8	Zone 9
9%	11%	13%	12%	10%	8%	12%	13%	13%

Urbanicity

City	Suburban	Town	Rural
9%	29%	25%	38%

Principal self-reported race

Non-Hispanic/White	African-American	Latinx or Hispanic	East Asian or Asian	Middle Eastern	Native American	Other
84%	8%	3%	1%	>1%	>1%	3%

Principal self-reported gender

Female	Male	Other
63%	36%	0%

Years of experience as principal in the current school

0–3 years	4–7 years	8–12 years	13–16 years	≥ 17 years
28%	34%	26%	7%	4%

Years of experience as principal, regardless of school

0–3 years	4–7 years	8–12 years	13–16 years	≥ 17 years
14%	24%	28%	16%	17%

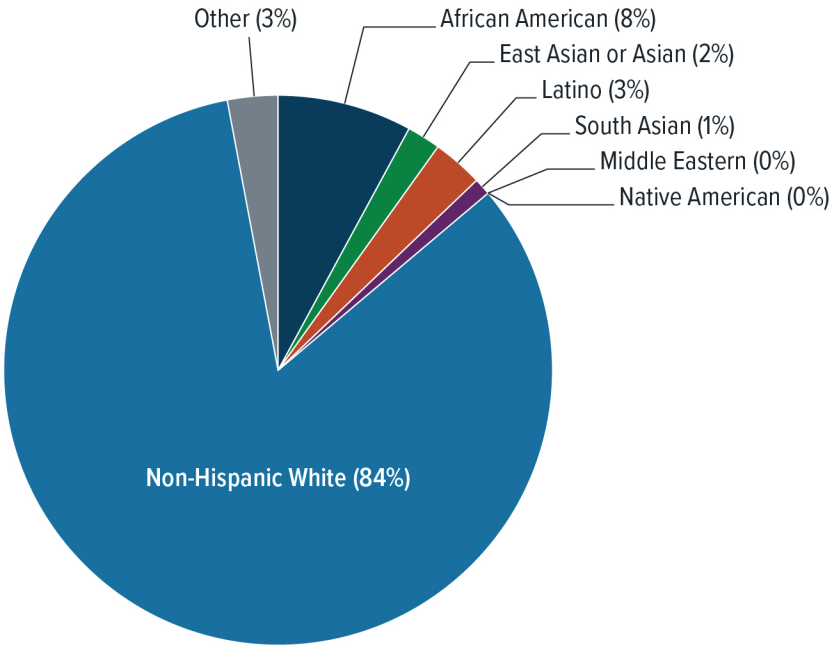
*For the states in each zone, see <https://www.naesp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NAESP-Zone-Map-2021.pdf>.

A total of 36 focus groups were convened. Focus groups were scheduled at various dates and times between March 2021 and May 2021. Focus group questions were prepared with input from NAESP and the Joyce Foundation. Three researchers led each focus group discussion. All focus group members participated in focus group discussions, but not all focus group members responded to each question.

Focus group discussions were transcribed and coded using Atlas.ti. Coding proceeded to build grounded themes through a comparative method. Themes were then categorized by school changes, changes to the principal profession, and policy recommendations. Quotes presented in each brief are associated with each theme, and the higher thematic categories are addressed by each of the three briefs.

Based on the demographic information of principals in the focus groups, the sample includes more female principals (63%) than the national average, more non-Hispanic White principals than the national average (Exhibit A.3), and more new principals (28% with less than 3 years of experience) than the national average.

Exhibit A.3. Demographics of principals in the focus groups



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