

The Illinois Principal

Their Work, Their Challenges, Their Impact



THE CHICAGO PUBLIC EDUCATION FUND



What Do Principals Do?

The Illinois School Code charges principals and assistant principals with “administrative responsibilities and instructional leadership” for planning, operating, and evaluating educational programs in their schools. It goes on to identify a principal’s primary responsibility as improving instruction and maintaining “a positive education and learning climate.”¹

Extensive national research points to four leadership behaviors of principals who meet this responsibility:²

1. Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers.
2. Building a productive school climate.
3. Facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities.
4. Managing teams and resources strategically.

In turn, these behaviors rely upon principals’ considerable skillsets in building relationships, coaching instruction, and managing organizations.

Data shows the impact of principals. Teachers in schools with a Strong or Very Strong 5Essentials Effective Leader ranking have higher retention rates on average (87.1%) than teachers in schools with a Weak or Very Weak Effective Leader ranking (86.1%).³ A national study concluded that “it is difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership.”

The remainder of this report details who Illinois principals are, sheds light on their diverse experiences, and proposes how we might better support their leadership in service of Illinois’ students.

About This Report

This report is a combined effort between the Illinois Principals Association (IPA) and The Chicago Public Education Fund (The Fund). IPA is a statewide membership organization with a mission of developing, supporting, and advocating for innovative educational leaders. The Fund is a Chicago-based nonprofit that promotes continuous improvement in Chicago’s public schools by investing in the talented educators who lead them.

Although our approaches and geographic scope differ, IPA and The Fund are united in our effort to foster conditions that allow strong educators to lead their schools effectively. This report thus summarizes data about Illinois principals, offers insight into their role and responsibilities, and highlights real leaders to reinforce the urgent need for greater decision-making autonomy. We encourage readers to thoughtfully consider policy and practice shifts that empower principals, foster effective leadership, and promote educational equity throughout the state.



Students in a school with an effective principal learn 2.9 months more in math and 2.7 months more in reading.⁴



Who Are Illinois Principals?

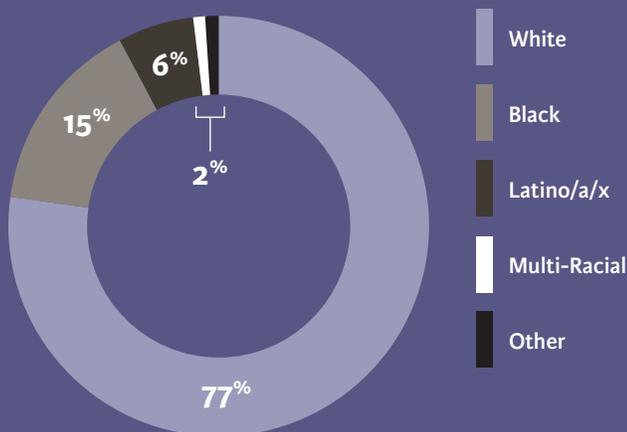
In 2023, there are 3,848 principals leading over 3,800 schools in 864 school districts across Illinois. They manage over 128,000 teachers and serve approximately 1.8 million students in pre-K-12.

The average Illinois principal leads a school with a \$7.6M budget. At first glance, this budget can appear large. Yet, based on state benchmarks, 27% of Illinois districts receive adequate funding that principals can use to meet student needs. These principals are more likely to lead traditionally underserved students and communities.

	Principal Salary	Number of Teacher Full-Time Equivalents	School Budget
High	\$240K	280	\$100.2M
Average	\$108K	34	\$7.6M
Low	\$62K	1	\$183.8K

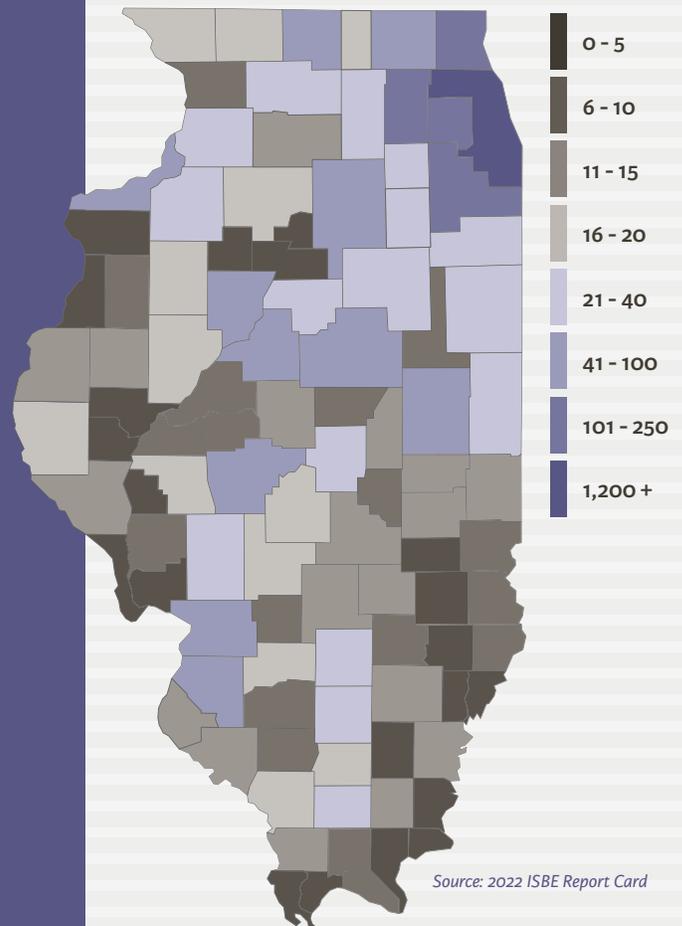
Sources: IPA Salary and Benefits Study; 2022 ISBE Class Size Report; 2022 ISBE Report Card

Principal Ethnicity



Source: IPA Effective and Sustained Principals for Every Illinois Community Report

Number of Schools by Illinois County



Source: 2022 ISBE Report Card

	Student Enrollment	Percentage of Low-Income Students
High	4,479	100%
Average	478	50%
Low	25	2%

Source: 2022 ISBE Report Card

How Do Principals Engage Their Communities?

Building a productive school climate and managing relationships with school communities varies from district to district and from school to school. Even within the same district, each school environment is different. Principals can only thrive when they have the autonomy to respond to differences in partnership with their teachers, students, and families.

When granted autonomy, principals serve among local decision-makers to meet community needs. In Elk Grove Village, Elk Grove High School Principal Dr. Paul Kelly and his team cultivate relationships with local officials, build industry partnerships to boost the local economy, and provide services for students in unincorporated areas of the school's attendance zone. Dr. Kelly said, "Being a principal, I get to impact my students, the adults that work with me, and the whole community."

Community engagement can be personal, too. At Marsh Elementary School in Chicago, Principal Jose Torres hosts students' caregivers for coffee to build trust, to proactively address their concerns, and to improve the school. "I always tell parents, 'The school belongs to you,'" said Torres. "Once parents feel that ownership, we can invest in the pride they feel in their school and community."



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”

Principal Jose Torres*

** Jose Torres was a principal for 13 years, before being promoted to Deputy Chief in August of 2023.*

What Challenges Do Principals Face?

Illinois school systems are diverse in their types, sizes, regions, and designs. Thus, no two principals will face the exact same challenges. Data suggests three general categories of needs: adequate funding, predictable staffing, and relief from mandates.

In IPA's most recent statewide principal survey, inadequate resources were principals' most cited concerns; 31.8% reported a need for higher compensation and 26.2% cited a need for increased school funding generally. Just behind, 25.1% of principals stated support for students' social-emotional learning, including staffing, was their top need, and 22.2% cited less compliance.⁵

To better understand the implications of these findings, principals shared their experiences with funding, staffing, and mandate challenges.



“

We need to invest in these kids now because what we do now will determine their future.

”

Principal Tron Young

Challenge 1

Inadequate Funding

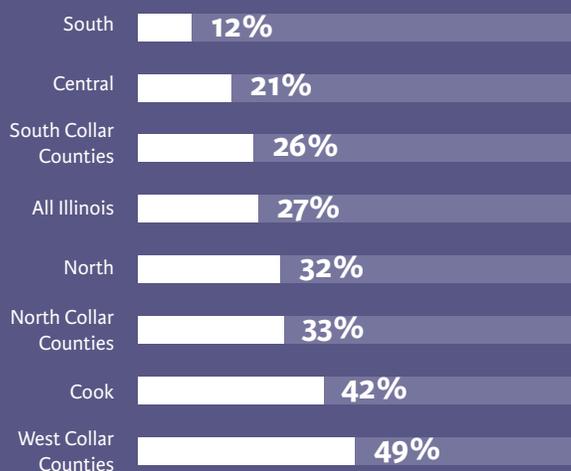


Principals manage financial resources to meet student, instructional, and community needs. Inadequate funding is a major challenge for Illinois principals, with only 19% of districts funded according to the state's definition of adequacy.

In 2017, Illinois adopted Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) to direct more state funds to under-resourced Illinois schools. In the 2023-24 school year, the median district was funded at 83% of its adequacy target. Districts in Southern Illinois are most likely to be below their target, but there is no broad region in which a majority of districts meet the state definition of adequate resources.⁶ While the 2024 EBF budget saw a \$350 million increase, the gaps in funding will take many years to close, and principals working to provide more support face significant challenges.

Principal Tron Young leads Joseph Arthur Middle School in O'Fallon, a downstate district that receives only 86% of the funding needed to serve students adequately. “That means making choices about what resources or staff are most necessary, while fully-funded districts don't have to make those decisions,” Young said. This includes reallocating instructional resources to provide students with social-emotional supports following pandemic-related remote learning.

Percentage of Districts with Adequate Funding by Locale



Source: FY24 ISBE EBF Calculation

Challenge 2

Staffing Shortages



Principals most influence students by fostering strong learning climates that elevate and improve teacher leadership. Principals must have the staff they need to employ this critical lever. The average Illinois teacher retention rate is 86.3%, but it is under 80% for 14% of schools. Moreover, even at an 86.3% retention rate, principals in an average school might expect to hire five teachers each year. School staffing shortages are thus a significant challenge for principals.

Average Teacher Retention Rate Across Illinois Schools

86.3%

Source: 2022 ISBE Report Card

According to the 2020-21 National Teacher and Principal Survey, Illinois principals found it difficult or were unable to fill many vacancies: 61% of English as a Second Language or bilingual vacancies, 52% of Special Education vacancies, and 56% of Computer Science vacancies.⁷ Time spent on hiring and staffing inevitably crowds out opportunities to interact with students, parents, and support instructional work.

Shortages are particularly severe in positions that serve traditionally underserved students, perpetuating equity issues. Chicago Academy Elementary School Principal Joyce Pae consistently faces this challenge. “Whenever a diverse learner teacher leaves, we do not have the staff to cover it,” she said. “Students served by these staff most need support and are always the hardest hit by these shortages.”

Challenge 3

Mandates



Principals desire more time to foster a healthy learning environment in schools and to coach teachers for meaningful instruction in classrooms. Principals reported spending about as much time on internal administrative tasks as on curriculum (29.1%) and teaching-related tasks (29%) in the 2020-21 school year.⁸



“

There are only so many hours in a day, and I need to focus on instructional leadership.

”

Principal Cris Edwards

The Illinois School Code currently contains over 40 instructional mandates; the state added four new mandates in 2023.⁹ Principals must also provide nearly 50 mandated trainings annually or biannually.¹⁰ Collectively, these mandates use precious time and resources—some require principals to use school or district budget resources. Combined with adequate funding challenges, these mandates unduly burden principals.

Principal Cris Edwards of Richland County Elementary School in the downstate community of Olney has seen mandates grow over her 17 years in school leadership. While she supports state efforts to improve instruction—indeed, she was involved in the development of Illinois’ new literacy plan—she worries that schools may not have the resources to implement these changes. “All these things are worthwhile,” she said, “but there are only so many hours in a day, and I need to focus on instructional leadership.”

What Attracts and Keeps Principals in Their Roles?

Leading a school is a demanding job. Nationwide, half of middle and high school principals are considering a career change or retirement.¹¹ Yet principals, including Illinois principals, overwhelmingly report satisfaction in their roles, especially in aspects related to relationships with parents and the community (96%) and with teachers and teachers' unions (90%).¹² To keep them satisfied and in their roles, Illinois principals need policies that allow them to more effectively engage in the most important aspects of their jobs.

93.7%

of Illinois principals agreed with the statement:

"I am generally satisfied with being principal at this school."



Source: 2020-21 National Teacher and Principal Survey



Autonomy



Principals' vision for academic success propels nearly all their daily work. As leaders, principals value the flexibility to fulfill their responsibilities in a way that reinforces their vision and supports their unique communities. Illinois principals have varying degrees of autonomy, but some districts have programs that provide additional flexibility to tenured principals.



"I'm happy when I feel like I have the ability to do right by my students and staff in a way that's responsive to my own school community."

Principal Charles Anderson

Charles Anderson, principal of Michele Clark Academic Prep Magnet High School in Chicago, is motivated by the district's Independent School Principals (ISP) program, which reduces district oversight and enables his creativity to flourish. "Before I was in ISP, some of the restrictions stifled my creativity," Anderson said. Yet through ISP, he and his faculty developed a unique, community-centered culture marked by meeting students' diverse needs and leveraging local resources.

Autonomy is key to Anderson's satisfaction as a principal. He said, "For me, I'm happy when I feel like I have the ability to do right by my students and staff in a way that's responsive to my own school community."

Support



Autonomy is important, but no one can do their job alone. Principals rely on their school districts and peers to provide the support and resources required to promote strong instruction and a safe, effective learning environment. That support is thus critical to principal satisfaction and retention.

Raúl Gastón, principal at Jefferson Middle School in Villa Park, counts on his district to help him implement new ideas and initiatives. He also receives support from the seven other principals in his district. The group holds weekly calls to discuss issues at their schools and to determine how best to request help from the district.

Ultimately, the district's support signals respect for and confidence in Gastón as a leader, which contributes to his school's positive culture and instills pride in his students. "Every year, we try to improve something in the building," he said, "something that sends a message that we're all in this together. These types of support encourage me to continue in my role."

Validation



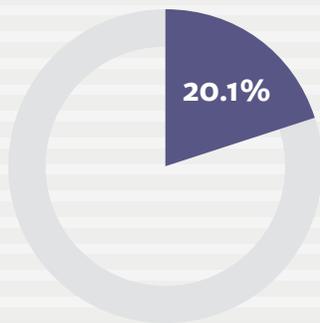
Principals find deep gratification in successful instructional leadership and student learning. Ensuring they have ample time to invest in these practices is key to principal satisfaction.

Like a majority of principals, Principal Shaun Grant of South Elementary School in Chillicothe is a former teacher. As such, he seizes every opportunity to observe teachers and students throughout the day. "In the classroom, at lunch, at recess, wherever—I love having the opportunity to interact with the kids," he said.

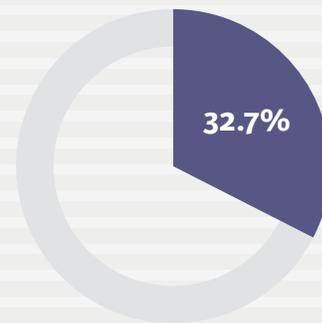
Grant acknowledges that emergencies and administrative duties can interfere with this practice. This was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, when operational challenges demanded significant time and attention from principals. Even so, Grant knows the students are his why. "The hugs and smiles I get, and the kids wanting to be in school every day, are the greatest rewards I get from this role."

Potential Risks

While the vast majority of Illinois principals are satisfied with their roles, they have a demanding job often marked by negative pressures.



"I sometimes think about transferring to another school."



"I don't have as much enthusiasm now as when I began this job."



Source: 2020-21 National Teacher and Principal Survey

Conclusion

School leaders must be able to act urgently to meet their students' demonstrated and emerging needs. We know that no two school communities are alike. As the instructional and cultural leaders of schools, principals are best positioned to support students. To do that job well, principals require resources and autonomy.

While the pandemic created new challenges for principals, it also highlighted and exacerbated existing problems around inadequate funding, staffing, and autonomy. Through policy change, we can address principals' long-standing challenges while continuing to support and celebrate them in their roles.

As policymakers and advocates look to support education at this crucial time, school leaders' needs must be part of the conversation. This report aims to elevate the principal experience by sharing their responsibilities, challenges, and impact through data and stories. IPA and The Fund look forward to continuing to center principals in the 2023-24 school year and beyond.

Acknowledgements

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Empowering principals is crucial to the future of 1.8 million Illinois students.

Endnotes

- 1 Illinois School Code, Chapter 105, Illinois Compiled Statutes § 5/10-21.4a. <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs4.asp?Doc-Name=010500050HArt%2E+10&ActID=1005&ChapterID=17&SeqStart=63600000&SeqEnd=90300000>
- 2 Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (February 2021) "How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research." Wallace Foundation. <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/how-principals-affect-students-and-schools-a-systematic-synthesis-of-two-decades-of-research.aspx>
- 3 Analysis of data from the 2022 ISBE Report Card.
- 4 Grissom, et al. (February 2021).
- 5 Illinois Principals Association (February 2023). "Salary, Benefit, Career Planning, and Job Satisfaction Study, 2022-2023." <https://www.ilprincipals.org/salary-study/>
- 6 Among all Illinois districts, the median adequacy ratio, for fiscal year 2023-24, was 83%. It ranges from 62% to 376%. It is below 75% for over 200 districts and is at 95% or above for over 270 districts. Source: FY24 ISBE EBF Calculation.
- 7 National Center for Education Statistics. "NTPS State Dashboard: Illinois." <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/ntpsdashboard/Dashboard/IL>
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Illinois State Board of Education. "Illinois Instructional Mandates: 2023-24 School Year." <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/IL-Mandated-Units-of-Study.pdf>
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- 11 National Association of Secondary School Principals. "NASSP's Survey of America's School Leaders and High School Students." <https://survey.nassp.org/2022/>
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