

What California Educators Are Saying about School Leadership

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For several years, WestEd's Measure to Learn and Improve (MLI) project team has kept state policy leaders informed about statewide implementation of the California Academic Standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, by summarizing and disseminating survey results from the RAND Corporation's annual American Educator Panel (AEP) surveys of teachers and principals.¹ This brief summarizes recent survey results from California educators related to school site leadership.

How California principals spend their time

In the May 2017 and May 2018 surveys, California principals were asked to indicate how they typically apportion their time. In both years, the responding principals reported spending a larger proportion of their time on internal administrative tasks than on curriculum- and teaching-related tasks; the converse was true for principals in the survey's national sample (see table 1).

Teacher leadership in California

Forty-three percent of responding California teachers indicated in May 2018 that they had a formal leadership role in their school (such as department chair, instructional resource, teacher mentor, leadership team member) during the 2017/18 school year, with leadership more commonly

reported (+17 percentage points) among more experienced teachers (i.e., those with 10 or more years of experience).

California teachers' views of their principals

On the May 2018 surveys, California teachers were asked the extent to which they agreed with various statements about the principal at their current school. Responding to these questions, 78 percent of California teachers agreed that their principal observes teachers teaching, and 77 percent agreed that their principal empowers teachers to make decisions that improve teaching and learning. However, lower proportions of California teachers agreed that their principal clearly defines or helps teachers understand standards for instructional practices (59 percent agreed; 41 percent disagreed) or that (s)he gives teachers specific ideas for how to improve instruction (57 percent agreed, 43 percent disagreed). This type of specific instructional feedback was reportedly less common in California's middle and high schools compared to elementary schools.²

Conclusion

These survey results suggest that California principals may be better at establishing enabling conditions and supportive procedures rather than providing content-specific instructional feedback.

Table 1. Principals' average time apportionment across tasks in 2018 and 2017

Task	2018 California principals percentage (n = 292)	2018 National sample principals percentage (n = 3095)	2017 California principals percentage (n = 380)	2017 National sample principals percentage (n = 4416)
Internal administrative tasks (e.g., HR/personnel issues, regulations, district interactions, reports, school budget)	25.4	22.4	31.7	26.7
Curriculum- and teaching-related tasks (e.g., classroom observations and feedback, mentoring teachers, teaching)	21.0	24.8	23.5	29.3
Student interactions (e.g., discipline, academic guidance)	23.8	22.3	22.8	23.3
Parent interactions (e.g., formal and informal interactions/communications)	13.3	11.4	14.6	13.4
Master scheduling	4.6	5.5	5.3	6.5
Data-related tasks (e.g., reviewing data, data-driven continuous improvement meetings)	10.0	12.5	na	na

Note: Principals were not asked about data-related tasks on the 2017 survey.

Principals generally see themselves as problem solvers working to build and sustain a culture of progress at their sites, and they review various indicators and rely on an array of knowledge resources (including research- and evidence-based practices shared by trusted partners) and apply their own filters to evaluate whether solutions fit their school context (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2019). A key aspect of the principal's role today involves functioning as an instructional manager who can connect resources to secure adequate and stable support around classroom observation practices and site-level professional development, including leading the work of teacher teams (Finkelstein et al., 2018; Stosich, 2016).

References

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Endnotes

1 The RAND Corporation's American Educator Panel (AEP) surveys were originally launched in 2014 and are administered several times a year in more than 20 states. To create the panels, RAND first sampled 2,300 U.S. public schools, stratifying for balance by grade span (primary, middle, high, and combined), school size, poverty status, population density, and geographic region. Educators in California and several other states were over-sampled to afford state-level representativeness. Educators who change schools remain on the panel, and new members are added periodically so the panel remains representative over time. For the May 2018 administration of the AEP surveys, 492 of 879 California teachers (56 percent) and 300 of 1,056 California principals (28 percent) responded. The average margins of error for the results

presented here thus generally range from ± 5 –8 percentage points. Subgroup analyses/cross-tabulations were carried out using the raw/unweighted counts of respondents, who were grouped by grade span (elementary/secondary), by years of experience (less than 10 years versus 10 years or more for teachers, and less than 5 years versus 5 years or more for principals), by subject area (English language arts/math teachers), and by the proportion of English learner students they teach or oversee at their site. Only statistically significant subgroup differences are presented in this brief.

2 Lower proportions of California secondary teachers than elementary teachers agreed that their principal “clearly defines or helps teachers understand standards for instructional practices” (–22 percentage points) or “gives teachers specific ideas for how to improve instruction” (–13 percentage points).

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