Assistant Principal Feelings of Preparedness to Step into the Principalship

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About this snapshot

School districts across Tennessee hire an average of about 200 new principals each year, and over 70 percent of the new hires have previously served as assistant principals (APs) (Grissom et al., 2019). Given their role in principal pipelines, we must better understand the labor pool and preparedness of assistant principals. In the 2019 Tennessee Educator Survey, we asked assistant principals about their experience as a school administrator and how prepared they are to become a principal.

Of 1,920 APs in Tennessee during the 2018-2019 school year, about 53% of them responded to the survey. Over 64% of the AP respondents have more than three years of school administration experience, and 14% are first-year school administrators. Respondents were generally representative of all APs in terms of race, gender, and school level and demographics.

Overall, most assistant principals in Tennessee feel prepared to become a principal.

Nine out of ten APs who responded to the survey agree or strongly agree that they feel prepared to become a principal – though only four out of ten APs strongly agree. As Tennessee works to improve its principal pipelines, we believe it is important to understand experiences of APs who feel strongly prepared to become a principal compared to those who feel less prepared. In the following sections, we focus on APs who strongly agree that they feel prepared to become a principal.

"I feel prepared to become a principal"

- Strongly disagree: 1%
- Disagree: 11%
- Agree: 48%
- Strongly agree: 40%
More experienced assistant principals are more likely to report feeling strongly prepared to become a principal.

Almost half of APs with more than three years of administrator experience strongly agree that they feel prepared to become a principal, whereas only 17% of first-year APs do.

APs also report different levels of preparedness for a principal role based on the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in their current school. More APs feel strongly prepared to become a principal in schools with 0-25% free and reduced lunch (FRL) students (44%) than in schools with 76-100% FRL students (35%).

Assistant principals with more influence over instructional and operational decisions are more likely to feel strongly prepared to become a principal.

APs who feel strongly prepared to become a principal are also more likely to report that they have “moderate influence” or “major influence” over budgeting, building curriculum, setting standards, determining teacher professional development programs, and teacher hiring. However, APs with more influence in teacher evaluation and school discipline do not report feeling more prepared.
This finding is especially interesting given that APs do not report having much influence over instructional and operational responsibilities, but they do over teacher evaluation and school discipline. For example, 97% of APs report that they have moderate or major influence over teacher evaluation and 84% say they do over school discipline. However, only 52% of APs report that they have a moderate or major influence over building curriculum and even fewer (41%) say they do over budgeting.

Reported influence over school decisions does not systematically vary by their years of administrator experience. That is, more experienced APs do not necessarily have more influence over certain types of school decisions.

Assistant principals who regularly interact with their principal and receive leadership opportunities and encouragement are more likely to feel strongly prepared to become a principal.

APs who report that they have more frequent one-on-one interactions with their current principal are more likely report feeling strongly prepared to become a principal than those who do not. Almost half of APs who had weekly one-on-one meetings with their principal report feeling strongly prepared to become a principal compared to just one-third of those who never had a one-on-one meeting with their principal.
For APs who strongly agreed that their current principal creates opportunities to build school leadership skills, 55% of them report feeling strongly prepared to become a principal. For those who strongly disagreed and disagreed that their principal provides leadership opportunities, only 18% of them report feeling strongly prepared.

Of APs who feel encouraged by their current principal, 43% indicate they feel strongly prepared to become a principal. For APs who are not encouraged by their principal, only 28% of them feel strongly prepared to become a principal.

Next steps

Most APs in Tennessee feel prepared to become a principal, but the strength of their feelings of preparedness varies based on the length and types of administrator experience. In particular, APs who have influence over instructional and operational decisions feel strongly prepared to become a principal. APs’ relationship with their principal is also tied to their feelings of preparedness for a principal role.

Future TERA research will look closely at how reported APs’ feelings of preparedness relate to Tennessee’s principal pipelines and provide guidance to district leaders on improving AP’s preparedness for a principal role.
References