

## RESEARCH REPORT

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# On the Path to Becoming a Chicago Public School Principal



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# Executive Summary

Strong principal leadership is critical for student success.<sup>1</sup> To be a highly effective leader takes a wide range of skills and behaviors. Developing expertise for such a complex and demanding role takes time and effort, and participation in multiple learning opportunities. Studies suggest that the skills leaders learn and the types of experiences they have before becoming a principal are important for their later success.<sup>2</sup> Yet, principals serving in under resourced communities report having less access to pre-service professional learning opportunities on essential topics and fewer supports than aspiring principals in communities with higher resources.<sup>3</sup> Because the principal role is so multifaceted, some new principals may not feel fully prepared to successfully take on all aspects of the job. In this report, we examine the backgrounds, experiences, and supports of Chicago Public School (CPS) principals as they prepared for the principalship.

## WE ASK THREE MAIN QUESTIONS:

- **What do practicing principals think it takes to be a successful school leader?**
- **What critical experiences did principals have prior to taking on the role and where did they learn essential skills?**
- **What skills, experiences, and supports did principals wish they had prior to taking the position?**

The primary goal of the study is to identify where gaps exist so that policymakers and principal preparation programs can better support leadership development and ensure that principals step into the role as prepared as they can to lead successfully. To answer these questions, we interviewed 20 early career school principals in CPS between 2020 and 2021. We asked principals about their backgrounds and the roles they had prior to the principalship, their formal and informal preparation experiences, and the kinds of learning opportunities and skills they wished they had before assuming the role.

## What do practicing principals think it takes to be a successful school leader?

- Principals said it takes a wide range of skills to be successful. The majority said successful leaders need a set of “soft skills,”<sup>4</sup> including both interpersonal or “people” skills as well as intrapersonal or “emotional intelligence” skills. In line with what research says, principals also reported that to be a strong leader takes specific organizational leadership and managerial skills, such as setting a compelling school vision with aligned goals, distributing and sharing leadership with strong leadership teams, communicating high expectations, hiring the right staff, and keeping the school safe.
- Fewer principals in our sample said it takes strong instructional expertise to be a successful school leader. This does not mean that principals undervalued instructional leadership skills, but rather fewer principals thought of instructional expertise as the most important skill

<sup>1</sup> Bryk, et al, 2009; Leithwood, et al, 2010; Grissom, et al., 2021

<sup>2</sup> Grissom et al, 2019; Clark et al, 2009; Bastian & Henry, 2015

<sup>3</sup> Darling-Hammond, Wechsler, Levin, & Tozer, 2022

<sup>4</sup> We use the term “soft” skills because that is the term used by our respondents. However, we prefer the terms “interpersonal” and “intra-

personal” skills instead. This is because the term soft skills may imply a false dichotomy between “soft” and “hard” skills, similar to the false dichotomy between “non-cognitive” and “cognitive” skills. Both types of skills require cognition, whether hard or soft or cognitive or non-cognitive.

for being a successful school leader. This finding could also be a product of the timing of the interviews, with principals prioritizing soft skills while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.

## What critical experiences did principals have prior to taking on the role and where did they learn essential skills?

- Principals did not learn essential skills in one place or in one setting, but through a variety of on-the-job learning experiences – in both education and non-education related positions. Principals who previously served as an assistant principal said that the role best prepared them to lead their own school.
- Interviewees also learned essential skills in formal principal preparatory programs, with the residency or internship experiences being the best “approximator” for the role during their formal preparation.
- Principals also talked about the benefit of forming peer networks while in these programs and the value of having a community of peer leaders to call upon when needing support.

## What skills, experiences, and supports did principals wish they had prior to taking the position?

- Principals identified varying skills they wished they had the opportunity to develop before taking on the role, with some indicating feeling underprepared in certain aspects of the job. Principals called for more pre-service supports and mentoring in areas such as school budgeting and navigating central office systems.

- Because principals’ backgrounds and experiences varied widely, they did not all wish for the same kinds of pre-service developmental learning opportunities, but more individualized mentoring and support.

## Implications for policymakers and practitioners

Principal preparation programs, CPS central office, and partners could consider the following recommendations when providing learning opportunities for aspiring principals to gain essential skills:

- Aspiring principals require a wide range of skills, making it unlikely that a single program can teach all the skills and behaviors good principals need to succeed.
- A “one-size-fits all” approach to training principals may be insufficient, because principals described being underprepared in different areas, rather than the same areas. Instead, our findings suggest the importance of a more tailored approach to supporting prospective school leader development.
- Opportunities for principals to learn soft skills are critical. Principals in this study were very vocal about the need for both inter- and intrapersonal skills.
- The assistant principalship could become a more explicit training ground for new principals as it is an important avenue for aspiring principals to gain hands-on experiences with different components of the principal role.
- Prospective school leaders need and appreciate good mentors and both formal and informal networks of peers. Policymakers and practitioners could consider pairing aspiring principals with principal mentors and building networks of aspiring principals to share their experiences, advice, and issues with each other.

# Introduction

Strong principal leadership is critical to student success.<sup>5</sup> A recent synthesis of research showed that a principal's impact on student achievement is almost as large as a teacher's.<sup>6</sup> Because principals oversee the entire school population, a highly effective principal can increase student learning by about three months for all students in the school.<sup>7</sup> To be a highly effective leader takes a wide range of skills and behaviors. Developing the expertise for such a complex and demanding role takes time and effort, and participation in multiple learning opportunities. Studies suggest that the skills leaders learn and the types of experiences they have before becoming a principal are important for their later success.<sup>8</sup> Yet, principals serving in under resourced communities report having less access to pre-service professional learning opportunities on essential topics and fewer supports than aspiring principals in communities with higher resources.<sup>9</sup> Because the principal role is so multifaceted, some new principals may not feel prepared to successfully take on certain aspects of the job.

This report documents the backgrounds and experiences of early career school leaders as they prepared for the principalship. It also identifies where leadership development gaps exist so that policymakers and principal preparation programs can better support the path to the principalship and ensure that principals step into the role as prepared as they can to lead successfully.

## THIS REPORT IS ORGANIZED BY THREE PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- **What do practicing principals think it takes to be a successful school leader?**
- **What critical experiences did principals have prior to taking on the role? Where did they learn essential skills?**
- **What skills, experiences, and supports did principals wish they had prior to taking the position?**

To answer these questions, we interviewed 20 early career school principals in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) between 2020 and 2021 (**See Appendix A** for more details about the data and methods used for this study). By early career, we mean principals who had been in the role between 3 to 5 years.<sup>10</sup> We asked principals questions about their backgrounds and the roles they had prior to the principalship, what they learned in these previous roles, and how these experiences shaped their career trajectories. In addition, we gathered information about principals' formal and informal preparation experiences, including the types of mentoring, coaching, and other supports they received to help them build skills. Lastly, we inquired about the kinds of learning opportunities and skills principals wished they had before assuming the role.<sup>11</sup>

Leadership matters during times of stability but it becomes vitally important during times of crises. We interviewed principals during the COVID-19 pandemic. They talked about having to be "crisis managers" to help support staff, students, and families during school shutdowns and re-openings.<sup>12</sup> They needed to draw upon a variety of skills and learn new ones "on the fly," to successfully lead and manage during a period of uncertainty. Therefore, this study provides a unique perspective on the types of skills principals needed to draw upon to lead during such an unprecedented time. Note that the timing of our interviews could affect the responses of these principals. Under more normal circumstances they may have noted different priorities and needs.

Overall, we found that practicing school principals think it takes a variety of skills to be successful, especially "soft skills." Principals also mentioned needing very specific organizational leadership and managerial skills that are aligned with what research tells us matters for success, such as setting a compelling school vision with aligned goals and keeping the school safe. Principals in this study did not learn these skills in one place or in one setting,

<sup>5</sup> Bryk, et al, 2009; Leithwood, et al, 2010; Grissom, et al., 2021

<sup>6</sup> Grissom, et al., 2021

<sup>7</sup> Grissom, et al, 2021, p. xiii

<sup>8</sup> Grissom et al, 2019; Clark et al, 2009; Bastian & Henry, 2015

<sup>9</sup> Darling-Hammond, Wechsler, Levin, & Tozer, 2022

<sup>10</sup> We chose not to interview principals in their first two years in the role because they were still acclimating to their new positions.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about the research methods, see Appendix A

<sup>12</sup> Grissom & Condon, 2021

but through a variety of on-the-job learning experiences and formal preparatory programs. Many principals noted that two critical hands-on learning experiences – the assistant principalship and the residency – helped prepare them the most for the principalship. Lastly, principals identified several skills they wished they had developed before taking on the role, with many indicating they felt underprepared in certain essential areas. Findings from this study suggest that principal preparation programs, CPS central office, and partners could be even more proactive about providing learning opportunities for aspiring

principals to gain essential skills.

To learn more about the diversity of those rising to the principalship in CPS, the various pathways principals took to get into their positions, and changes over time, see our companion quantitative brief entitled, Landscape of the Principalship in Chicago Public Schools, available here: <https://www.norc.org/PDFs/School%20Leaders/NORC%20Principalship%20Brief%202022%20102.pdf>

Prior to presenting the findings of our own study, in the next several pages we describe efforts to strengthen the principal pipeline, and previous research evidence on this topic.

# Efforts to Strengthen the School Leadership Pipeline

There has been renewed interest in strengthening school leadership pipelines. Given the importance of effective leadership and the demands of the job, policymakers, foundations, and educators have become increasingly aware of the importance of preparing aspiring principals. For example, the Wallace Foundation, a national foundation focusing on improving educational practice and policy, has supported efforts to identify the links between school leadership and student outcomes since the early 2000s.<sup>13</sup> In more recent years, the foundation has supported multiple state and district-level efforts to improve various aspects of school leadership pipelines, including creating stronger partnerships between states, universities, and districts, working to increase the rigor

of principal preparation programs, and efforts to identify and support aspiring and practicing principals.<sup>14</sup>

Over the last decade and a half, the state of Illinois and the city of Chicago have been engaged in local efforts to build stronger leadership preparation experiences and pipelines. The state engaged in a preparation program redesign initiative to improve principal preparation programs, adding more rigorous standards and residency/internship requirements. Locally, CPS has been partnering with the Chicago Public Education Fund (The Fund) and other community partners on a set of initiatives to develop prospective and practicing school leaders. We include links for more information about some of these efforts in Table 1.

**TABLE 1 | State and Local Efforts Aimed at Strengthening the School Leadership Pipeline**

## ILLINOIS STATE LEVEL EFFORTS

**Principal Preparation Program Redesign.** The state of Illinois embarked on an ambitious principal preparation redesign initiative in 2010. The redesign resulted in more rigorous standards for preparation and a new principal endorsement license. The new requirements state that principal preparation programs must:

- Be partnered with a school district around preparation program design and delivery
- Meet Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards<sup>15</sup>
- Offer curricula on student learning and school improvement
- Provide a performance-based internship where prospective principals are exposed to a variety of school leadership situations
- Admit candidates who meet the minimum requirements and go through an in-person interview
- Provide support from faculty and mentor principals

**For more information about the redesign, visit:**

<https://education.illinoisstate.edu/downloads/csep/The%20Illinois%20Story.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/pages/default.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/pages/principal-pipelines.aspx>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7566/urlt/0075311-org-stand.pdf>

**TABLE 1 | State and Local Efforts Aimed at Strengthening the School Leadership Pipeline****LOCAL CHICAGO EFFORTS**

**New Principal Eligibility Policy.** CPS began a new principal candidate screening and assessment policy that was updated in 2021. The new policy makes candidates go through a rigorous eligibility process before being placed into the official principal candidate pool. **For more information see:** <https://www.cps.edu/careers/school-leadership/principal-quality/principal-eligibility/>

**The Chicago Leadership Collaborative (CLC)** is an initiative that was launched in 2011 to create stronger partnerships between CPS and local principal preparation programs. **For more information, visit:** <https://www.cps.edu/careers/school-leadership/principal-quality/principal-pipeline/>

**For more information** on the impact of the CLC initiative, see our companion quantitative brief available here: <https://www.norc.org/PDFs/School%20Leaders/NORC%20Principalship%20Brief%2022%20102.pdf>

**The Fund** has partnered with CPS to provide a series of supports for aspiring and practicing school leaders. These programs include supports for assistant principals and teachers who have indicated they aspire to become principals. Programs are aimed at identifying prospective school leaders early in the pipeline and building their capacity to be strong principals. The Fund also collects data on principals and produces annual “state of the principalship” reports. **For more information, visit:** <https://thefundchicago.org/our-work/programs/>

**GEM Great Expectation Mentoring Program** is a CPS program geared toward further developing and supporting African American male and Latinx school leaders. **For more information, see:** <https://lead.cps.edu/opportunities/great-expectations-mentoring-gem/>

**For the most up-to-date review** of evidence linking comprehensive principal preparation and professional development programs with associated benefits for principals, teachers, and students, see <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/developing-effective-principals-report>



# Prior Research Evidence

**Our research findings substantiated other existing studies and highlight and confirm the difficulty and complexity of the principalship.** Effective principals must possess a wide range of leadership and management skills and behaviors. For this study, we define leadership and management as:

- **Leadership:** The ability to influence people to follow your path and make changes and improvements. For example, this may include setting a compelling school vision and aligned goals, getting buy-in for that vision, supporting teachers' instructional improvement, and modeling professional practice.
- **Management:** The ability to ensure and maintain productive systems and processes. For instance, this may include budgeting, hiring and staffing, scheduling, keeping the school safe, and maintaining facilities.

In practice, we know that leadership and management skills and responsibilities often overlap.<sup>16</sup>

In the latest review of the literature conducted in 2021, scholars investigated principal behaviors and skills that have the strongest positive impact on school outcomes.<sup>17</sup> Overall, findings suggest that principals need expertise and skills in three primary domains: **people, organization, and instruction**. We use these three domains as an overarching framework for this report. The following is a high-level summary of this larger review. **For more details, visit:** <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/How-Principals-Affect-Students-and-Schools.pdf>

**Principals must possess certain people skills**, (i.e., relationship-building skills) that are linked to producing positive student and school outcomes, including the ability to:

- Show teachers that they care about them and the whole school community.<sup>18</sup>
- Communicate effectively with staff, students, and families.<sup>19</sup>
- Develop and foster trust among all members of the school community.<sup>20</sup>

The types of **organizational management and leadership skills** that lead to positive outcomes, include the ability to:

- Use data to make decisions and support instructional improvement.<sup>21</sup>
- Set goals and use resources to help the school community meet goals.<sup>22</sup>
- Build a positive and productive school learning environment and climate.<sup>23</sup>
- Empower teachers and build teacher leadership skills.<sup>24</sup>

Principals need a set of **instructional skills** and expertise to be successful school leaders. These skills include the ability to:

- Discern what high-quality instruction looks like and rate teachers' instruction accurately via formal evaluation in ways that clearly identify areas for growth.<sup>25</sup>
- Provide useful feedback, mentoring, and coaching to teachers in a way that supports instructional improvement.<sup>26</sup>
- Provide teachers with high-quality professional development opportunities that are aligned with school and instructional improvement goals.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Algahtani, 2014

<sup>17</sup> Grissom, Egalite & Lindsay, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Brown & Wynn, 2007; Jacobson, et al, 2007; Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016

<sup>19</sup> Jacobson, 2005; Hollingworth et al, 2018; Price, 2012; Gordon & Louis, 2009

<sup>20</sup> Adams, 2013; Hollingworth et al, 2018; Price, 2015, Leithwood, 2013; Tschannen-Moran, 2001, Khalifa, 2012

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, Leithwood, & Strauss, 2010; Hitt et al. 2018; Elfers & Stritikus 2014; Shin, Slater, & Backhoff 2013

<sup>22</sup> Finnigan, 2012; Lorton et al, 2013; Johansen & Hawes 2016

<sup>23</sup> Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Bevel & Mitchell 2012

<sup>24</sup> Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang 2016; Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2010

<sup>25</sup> Grissom & Loeb 2017; Steinberg & Sartain 2015; Taylor & Tyler 2012; Ovando & Ramirez 2007; Grissom, Loeb, & Master 2013

<sup>26</sup> City et al. 2009; Johnson, Uline, & Perez 2011; Garet et al. 2017; Grissom, Loeb, & Master 2013; Huff et al. 2018

<sup>27</sup> Fink & Markholt, 2011; Borko et al. 2003; Garza et al. 2014; Shin, Slater, & Backhoff 2013

Furthermore, few studies have examined the pre-service experiences of school leaders and most are quantitative. We found only one qualitative study that examined principals' views on their pre-service leadership development experiences.<sup>28</sup> That study found that urban school principals identify on-the-job experiences as being significantly more vital to their leadership development than their university credentialing program experiences. However, credentialing programs also provide important avenues for building essential skills needed to be a successful school principal.<sup>29</sup>

**Our study adds to the literature by:**

- Providing an on-the-ground understanding of the types of skills principals think are needed to be successful in this COVID-19 era.
- Presenting descriptions of the types of pre-service leadership development experiences and skills that principals said were helpful in preparing them to lead.
- Highlighting the skills and supports principals wished they had before assuming the role.

<sup>28</sup> Grissom et al, 2019; Clark et al, 2009; Bastian & Henry, 2015

<sup>29</sup> Davis, Leon, & Fultz, 2013

# Principals' Thoughts on Leadership Skills

## What do practicing principals think it takes to be a successful school leader?

*"In your opinion, what does it take to be a successful school leader?"*

*"That's a loaded question!"*

When we posed this question, principals answered by describing the types of skills and behaviors they thought were necessary to be a strong leader. Their answers fell into four primary categories: soft skills, leadership skills, management skills, and instructional skills. In this section of the report, we illustrate how principals described these skills and behaviors and why they thought they were important for achieving success as a school leader.

**Leaders need to have a strong set of "soft skills" (i.e., people skills, social and-emotional skills) including both inter- and intrapersonal skills to be successful (n=17).** This was the number one skill set noted by 17 of the principals we interviewed. As one principal said,

*"...you have to have a set of soft skills that help you connect with people, demonstrate empathy and understanding, building trust."*

These skills reflect principals as both learners themselves and as catalysts for creating positive communities of practice.

To be a strong school leader, principals said it was important to have people skills, or in other words, "interpersonal skills". For example, one principal talked about the importance of building positive relationships to promote change and improvement.

*"Relationships is perhaps the biggest thing ever. To get teachers to change practice, to get teachers to really internalize feedback, it has to be built on relationships."*

### SKILLS NEEDED TO BE A SUCCESSFUL PRINCIPAL

- "Soft Skills" including:
  - Interpersonal skills ("aka" social or people skills) like being able to build trust and relationships
  - Intrapersonal skills ("aka" emotional intelligence skills) including being reflective and managing emotions
- **Organizational Leadership Skills** such as developing staff and creating a clear vision and goals
- **Organizational Management Skills** such as hiring the right people and setting up systems and structures to foster collaboration
- **Instructional Skills** like modeling strong teaching practices and providing teachers with constructive feedback

Principals said that their relationships with teachers were especially important. Leaders need to bring teachers together, while understanding the different personalities of their staff.

The ability to have and show empathy and caring was also an important skill. Furthermore, most principals talked about how essential trust is in being able to build relationships. As one said, *"Trust is built in a series of positive interactions."*

Principals also talked about the importance of communicating effectively with teachers. For instance, one principal said, *"You got to read your audience and you have to captivate them and keep them engaged, and you've got to know how to communicate to them."*

To be able to build these types of social or "people" skills, principals said they also needed to have "emotional intelligence" or in other words, a set of intrapersonal skills. There is a gap in our understanding of whether intrapersonal

skills are empirically linked to greater principal success. However, the principals in our sample said they were vital for being successful school leaders. For example, intrapersonal skills included such things as self-awareness, self-reflection, and the ability to manage emotions to successfully respond in difficult situations. As one principal explained:

*“I think it takes a mirror...looking and being able to acknowledge oneself. I think it takes some window work. Being able to look out, see what your community needs. Then see how, when they look in the window, what they see in you...If you don’t understand how people receive you, then you don’t understand how you could better serve.”*

Another principal put it this way, *“It takes a lot of knowledge of self. Like really understanding who you are.”*

Principals also mentioned the importance of perseverance during difficult times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. One principal described conversations with school faculty during the pandemic:

*“Listen guys, you’re the ones who are talking all the time about perseverance, growth mindset. Okay, well, the kids are looking at you. You know what I mean? So, how are you putting that to the test? What better*

*environment to practice those things than COVID, right?”*

Other intrapersonal skills principals mentioned include being able to adapt to different and ever-changing situations, being vulnerable, and being able to take criticism and learn from it.

In **Figure A**, we summarize the different types of inter- and intrapersonal skills principals said were important for being a successful school leader.

**Principals need to maintain an organizational leadership and management perspective (n=16).** In addition to soft skills, most principals talked about critical organizational leadership and management skills that call for taking a systems-level or “big picture” perspective. In **Table 2**, we summarize the skills principals said were needed to be successful and provide illustrative quotes to show how principals envisioned these skills operating in successful school environments.

Principals said that the types of skills described above, in addition to the people skills, contributed to improving the culture and climate in their schools. Also, principals talked about needing to keep the school facilities and operations running smoothly, productively, and safely.

**FIGURE A | Inter- and Intrapersonal Skills Needed to be Strong Leaders**

**INTERPERSONAL “PEOPLE OR SOCIAL” SKILLS**

- The ability to build **relationships and connect with people**
- The ability to garner and generate **trust** among all members of the school community
- The ability to have and express **empathy and caring**
- The ability to build productive and healthy **relationships**
- The ability to **communicate** effectively and be **transparent**
- The ability to foster and maintain **positive learning climates and cultures** in school

**INTRAPERSONAL “EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE” SKILLS**

- The ability to have **self knowledge & awareness**
- The ability to be able to **reflect** on one’s leadership practice
- The ability to have a **growth mindset**
- The ability to be able to **self-regulate**
- The ability to have a “**tough skin**” and be able to **take and learn from criticism**
- The ability to **adapt** and/or **pivot**
- The ability to **be patient**
- The ability to have **determination**
- The ability to have **perseverance**

**TABLE 2 | Organizational Leadership and Management Skills Needed to be Strong Leaders**

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT SKILLS	ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES
<p><b>Developing staff:</b> Having the capacity to develop all staff in the building so that they have what they need to succeed.</p>	<p><i>"You have to be a leader, like building the capacity of the individuals around you. My first year, I was the only person in the building with a Type 75. By the end of this year, I'll have four, right, because I was really intentional about if I don't build leaders inside of my school, we're going to stay the same."</i></p> <p><i>"[You have to] Understand your staff and how to differentiate the support for them, knowing that one size does not fit all. And how you support. It's just a very differentiated approach ... to know what makes this person move versus what makes this person move."</i></p>
<p><b>Distributing and sharing leadership with strong leadership teams:</b> Being able to effectively share and distribute leadership responsibilities in a meaningful way with leadership teams.</p>	<p><i>"Another piece that I think is really important is strategy. Really being able to think through where you want the school to go and make that plan with the staff. It really is a lot of the collaboration and distributive leadership. It does not come down to what I say or what I want."</i></p> <p><i>"There has not been a decision that I have made without the input of my team."</i></p>
<p><b>Communicating and maintaining high expectations:</b> Having high expectations and "putting all students first."</p>	<p><i>"It's also having those high expectations and when people don't meet the expectations, you know, that difficult conversation has to be made."</i></p>
<p><b>Communicating a clear vision and goals:</b> Being able to articulate a clear vision aligned with the school's goals and having coherent plans to work towards those goals.</p>	<p><i>"Really the vision and the mission. I'm looking at where we are going, and how do we get there? Really looking at like where do we want to be in four years? What do we need to do for our students? How do we improve over time? How do we do that realistically?"</i></p> <p><i>"Communicate your vision and mission in a way that brings everything together... As a principal, my job is to bring everything together and show how all those pieces fit together in order to move our school forward."</i></p>
<p><b>Recruiting and hiring the right people:</b> Being able to recruit and hire strong teachers and staff and making sure the right people are in the right roles</p>	<p><i>"Getting the right people on the bus, using and developing their skills wisely, and helping them work together well."</i></p> <p><i>"The hiring staff that I had before kind of taught me to canvas your team and know where you have to fill the holes and know the experience you need in each of those holes to kind of like make the team work better."</i></p>
<p><b>Facilitating collaboration across teams:</b> Being able to create systems and structures that support collaboration across teams and ensuring everyone in the school is working well together.</p>	<p><i>"We have to collaborate. We have to trust one another, and we have to be vulnerable. And the teachers need a safe place to really practice what we are asking them to try."</i></p> <p><i>"I think that you need to be able to manage different personalities and get them all to be part of the decision-making process and part of the team."</i></p> <p><i>"I'm really about being a part of effective teams. That's where I think we really maximize our capacity and our effectiveness."</i></p>

Only a handful of leaders talked about the importance of having strong instructional skills to support teacher instructional improvement (n=6). Having strong instructional experience and expertise was also emphasized by six of the principals.<sup>30</sup> For two principals, this skill was mainly to help build credibility among teachers, but for the others we interviewed, it was more related to their ability to help teachers, give constructive feedback, model new methods, and provide hands-on assistance.

Here are a few ways principals described why having instructional skills was important to being a successful school leader:

*"You need to have some really sound instructional strategies, practices, because that's – if you can not deliver a lesson – as a teacher, it's really hard to move instruction."*

*"I think you have to be instructional. The improvements that we made, I know we would not have made if I was not an instructional resource for my teachers. That's being in their classrooms, providing them with*

*feedback, and really having a good grasp on cycles of improvement to be able to move our school forward."*

*"I definitely, truly believe, to be a principal, you really need some teaching experience to really relate to your teachers and to be able to empathize with them when they are struggling about a particular concept."*

While only six principals reported needing strong instructional skills to be a successful school leader, it does not mean that principals undervalued instructional leadership skills. Rather, this finding may indicate that fewer principals thought of their own instructional expertise as the most important skill for being a successful school leader. This finding could also be a product of the timing of the interviews, with principals prioritizing soft skills at a time when they were engaged in helping staff, students, and families navigate the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, principals did not talk about any of the above skills in isolation. In fact, the majority of principals mentioned needing to have skills in multiple areas in order to be a successful school leader.

<sup>30</sup> We have wondered whether more principals might have emphasized this skill set pre-Covid. The pandemic changed conditions within schools dramatically, perhaps requiring more "people skills" than needed under normal conditions.

## Connections to the Literature

The three domains cited in the literature review section, people, organization, and instruction, overlap well with what principals in our sample said they need to be successful. **Figure B** maps our interview data themes to the three domains proposed in the summary of literature.

**FIGURE B | What Skills Are Needed to be a Successful School Leader?**

SKILLS AND BEHAVIORS THAT ARE EMPIRICALLY LINKED TO POSITIVE STUDENT AND SCHOOL OUTCOMES	PRINCIPALS IN OUR SAMPLE SAID THESE SKILLS ARE NEEDED TO BE SUCCESSFUL
<p><b>People:</b> Having a set of strong human development and relationship skills. In particular, the literature shows that principals who demonstrate that they care, communicate well, and build trust are more likely to have positive impacts on school and student outcomes.</p>	<p>➔ <b>“Soft” skills</b></p>
<p><b>Organization:</b> Being able to build a productive school climate. To do this, it takes a set of strong people skills mentioned above as well as the ability to facilitate collaboration by instituting and supporting professional learning communities. The literature also supports creating goals and strategic thinking.</p>	<p>➔ <b>Leadership skills</b></p>
<p><b>Organization:</b> Managing personnel and resources strategically and making sure the school is safe and organized. Other management skills linked to improving outcomes include being able to use data and allocate resources to help support goals</p>	<p>➔ <b>Management skills</b></p>
<p><b>Instruction:</b> Being able to help teachers improve their classroom instruction by observing, evaluating, and talking with them in constructive and meaningful ways. Providing teachers with opportunities to engage in professional learning, mentoring, and coaching to motivate them to make changes towards improvement.</p>	<p>➔ <b>Instructional skills</b></p>

# Critical Experiences and Essential Skills

## What critical experiences did principals have prior to taking on the role? Where did they learn essential skills?

Principals enter the role with different backgrounds, skills, and leadership development experiences. Not all leaders are effectively prepared or have the right set of leadership skills to create optimal teaching and learning environments. In this section, we highlight the types of experiences principals in our sample had prior to entering the principalship. We identify the skills they learned along the way, as well as the development opportunities and supports they received that they believe helped prepare them for the role.

**School leaders learn essential people, organizational, and instructional skills through a variety of ways and across multiple educational and non-educational contexts.** We asked principals to tell us about the types of positions, roles, and responsibilities they held before becoming a principal and what types of essential skills they learned in these positions. They stated that they learned essential skills for the principalship, primarily through two different avenues:

- **On-the-job experiences**, both within education related roles and via positions in other job sectors
- **Formal principal preparation programs** including classes and training opportunities such as internships and residencies

### ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCES

Principals described a variety of on-the-job experiences, both in education and non-education related roles, where they gained essential skills. Overall, principals valued roles where they were able to manage and lead groups of staff, take ownership over organization-wide projects or initiatives, look at and use data to identify needs, coach and support colleagues, and get a macro-level view of how

### BACKGROUND EXPERIENCES OF THE PRINCIPALS

- All 20 principals we interviewed are former teachers. They taught from as few as three years to as many as 17 years before they became principals. The median CPS principal has approximately 8-9 years of experience as a teacher (based on 2018-19 principal survey data).
- 17 served as assistant principals (APs), which is consistent with survey results showing that about 86% of CPS principals previously served as APs (based on a 2018-19 principal survey).
- 15 served in other leadership roles prior to becoming principals (e.g., grade level or subject area team lead, department chair/head, dean, coach)
- 9 had jobs outside of education where they learned leadership and management skills

organizational systems work. **Table 3** provides a summary of the types of skills learned in different roles.

In these previous roles, principals talked about being able to practice adapting their leadership styles to different teacher and staff needs and learning how to build trust with teachers, parents, and other staff in the school. For example, 17 out of our 20 principals had served as an assistant principal and six of them described the assistant principalship as being the most helpful for preparing them for the role. Principals talked about the shift in working within smaller teams to thinking more broadly about being a change agent. As one principal explained:

*“When I was an AP, or becoming an AP, I was like, ‘How can I be more of a change agent systemically?’ Like, ‘How can I help operate on a more global theme beyond teacher meetings?’ Like, ‘How can I see myself in a different space with a different group of people making change, or executing change on a broader scale?’”*



**TABLE 3 | Summary of Skills Principals Learned On-the-Job**

SKILLS LEARNED	DESCRIPTION OF ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
<b>Supporting teachers instructionally</b> (i.e., via literacy lead, instructional coach, team lead, assistant principalship)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leading teachers through instructional improvement cycles</li> <li>• Using assessments and protocols to guide instructional conversations</li> <li>• Giving constructive feedback on other teachers’ instruction</li> <li>• Supporting teachers’ reflective practice</li> <li>• Collaboratively working on aligning curriculum and assessments</li> </ul>
<b>Examining and using data to make decisions</b> (i.e., via data strategist, assistant principalship)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using data to identify areas for school improvement</li> <li>• Using technology to help support data use for planning</li> </ul>
<b>Leading and supporting school teams</b> (i.e., via team lead)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitating and running meetings, including creating effective meeting agendas, taking notes, and disseminating information</li> <li>• Examining and using data to identify needs and make collective decisions</li> </ul>
<b>Thinking organizationally and seeing the “big picture”</b> (i.e., via coaching, scheduler, programmer, and assistant principalship)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working through change or turnaround processes</li> <li>• Creating and overseeing school class and testing schedules</li> </ul>
<b>Managing personnel</b> (i.e., via dean, manager, assistant principalship)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivating individuals and teams</li> <li>• Holding people accountable</li> <li>• Layering in support structures</li> </ul>
<b>Improving the culture and climate of the school</b> (i.e., via dean, assistant principalship)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning assemblies</li> <li>• Overseeing student discipline and supporting discipline/security teams</li> <li>• Supporting and overseeing behavioral health team and school-wide social emotional learning initiatives</li> <li>• Engaging with families to help support the school</li> </ul>

Principals described learning a wide range of skills during their time as assistant principals, including instructional skills (via coaching teachers, using formative assessments to guide instruction, using REACH as a learning tool), and organizational management skills (via scheduling, day-to-day operations), and organizational leadership and people skills (via gaining trust with teachers through classroom observations, leading family and community engagement efforts). For example, principals said:

*“I would say being an assistant principal was the most beneficial [experience] in terms of understanding school dynamics and really having an understanding of what the work looks like, the challenges that occur on a day-to-day basis.”*

*“I was able to really own work... I don’t know what it’s like to be in the principal’s chair, but I know what it’s like to manage many projects at once and have a long-term vision and plan for each, with training and development and mindset issues that I’ve got to navigate through.”*

*“I was put in a position where I was leading a lot of things that I normally would be co-leading or even getting coached to lead...And so my AP experience was everything. I essentially, by six months in, was probably doing most of the principal role.”*

**Fifteen principals said they learned different types of organizational leadership and management skills by leading school-based teams (i.e., the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), or grade-level or subject-area teams).** Principals remarked upon the importance of their experiences being on teams where responsibilities were distributed and shared and where they were able to learn how to lead teams of adults. For example, one principal said:

*“One of the roles that I took on was team lead for the middle school team. I was given the autonomy to work with that team, to meet with that team. (Facilitating) our grade-band meetings was one of the things that I was responsible for. Any decisions that we decided upon, I was the one who facilitated the conversation, who brought the issues to the team, and then we would decide on what strategies or what resources we would implement...That was pretty useful leading a team of adults, and also being able to coach and support my colleagues.”*

By serving in these types of leadership positions, principals learned how to facilitate effective meetings by developing agendas, taking meeting minutes, and creating action plans. They also learned how to explore data to better understand how students are doing, and collectively strategize and make decisions. For example, principals explained:

*[Via leading an attendance team] “I was the one doing the agendas, coming up with taking notes, making sure that information was disseminated, following up, that kind of stuff.”*

*“And so I was the team leader for [my] grade. And our main focus was a data driven instruction cycle... using, you know, different types of assessments and protocols to have our meetings be more structured, instead of just kind of teacher talk.”*

**Principals who worked in non-education related roles also said these experiences taught them how to work in teams and manage groups of adults.** Roles included managing multiple restaurant franchise locations, or holding other positions in the restaurant industry, working in state politics, serving in church leadership, and being a

fitness trainer. Principals described the types of things they learned in these roles:

*“I’ve worked every job at a restaurant, like busboy, waiter, bartending, washing dishes, just being able to think on the fly, just like not to be rattled.”*

*“[Through managing restaurants] I had to coach people on how to do their jobs...motivate them to do their job and do it well took a fair amount of strategy and reflection and planning... And really learning how to hold people accountable.”*

Five principals also talked about previous education and non-education related roles where they needed to think about the “big picture” and how organizational systems operate, which proved valuable once in the principalship. These principals were in positions that required them to take a “macro” level perspective, including programmers, schedulers (people who create the school and/or testing schedules), government workers, and data specialists. For instance, principals stated:

*“...if you’ve worked in a corporate job, and are used to a corporate culture, I think it’s a tremendous...advantage because you have some understanding about organizational systems, organizational management.”*

*“[My position as a scheduler/programmer] allowed me to look at systems across the school that impact not just one classroom, but like how all these different departments and grade levels intersect. And what does it mean to plan with students in mind?”*

*“I learned a fair amount about how those systems worked and how capital accumulates and how it’s leveraged to get done within obviously a very political system when you’re working in government.” [former government worker]*

**Out of the 20 principals we interviewed, six had formalized roles where they were tasked with helping to support other teachers instructionally in teacher teams.** These roles included literacy lead, instructional coach, or subject area/team lead. Principals who had formalized roles talked about how these experiences provided them with opportunities to work directly with teachers on helping them improve their instruction:

*“That particular position really inspired my love for working with teachers and really being a part of their change process in improving practice in the classroom.” [Literacy Lead]*

*“So it was a great experience giving people feedback, allowing people to come in and see my practice, helping them to plan, helping them to reflect on their own practice to improve.” [Instructional Coach]*

*“I was basically going around and helping teachers to better gauge the curriculum to present to students, giving them some strategies and some levers on how to really help to engage students with math and science.” [Subject area team lead]*

By having these instructional leadership positions, prospective school leaders learned the importance of adult learning, of connecting curriculum to instructional strategies, and of devising and using more instructionally sensitive assessments. Only three principals, however, talked about their own teaching experience and how it shaped their instructional leadership expertise. They talked about the importance of having strong pedagogical skills to be able to model good practice for their teachers and provide constructive feedback.

## FORMAL PREPARATORY EXPERIENCES

**Formal principal preparation programs provided important avenues for principals to learn essential organization, people, and instruction skills, especially the residency or internship experience.** Formal leadership preparation programs included coursework, residencies or internships, and mentoring and coaching provided as part of the program. Principals also discussed the importance of developing peer networks via formal preparation program experiences. For example, principals discussed the value of having a cohort of peers who “speak the same language” and are there for support when challenges arise. During interviews, we asked each principal to describe their preparation program experiences, what they learned, and which aspects of the program helped prepare them most and least for the principal role. Ten out of the 20 principals in the study were part of the Chicago Leadership Collaborative and

had a residency experience where they were mentored by a resident principal. Five of those principals talked about their residencies as being the most helpful in preparing them for the principalship. In fact, some said it was the best “approximator” for the role. Principals described their residency experiences in the following ways:

*“Doing the residency...I had come straight from the classroom, and so really the experience of watching a principal reflecting on their moves and their strategy at the school level, but also having to do the work. Being given tasks and roles in the school as a leader was really the most dynamic.”*

*“Seeing every aspect of my principal’s work and my assistant principal, and every emotion they went through that year, every success, every failure, every frustration, every blowup, every Local School Council (LSC) meeting, all of that I got to experience... And I left that experience thinking, this is what I missed out on in the certificate program.”*

*“The residency model for a principal is just invaluable. You really are in the seats. And I’m sure it depends on the site and the mentor and so on, but it really prepares you for what you’re going to experience as closely as it can be. You still are not fully prepared, you know, to do the work by no means. I don’t think anyone is. But I think that resembles the experience the best it possibly can.”*

We heard a range of opinions and responses about the different principal preparation programs. In general, principals expressed gratitude that they got to practice leading in school environments during their residency or internship and got to learn from practicing school principals. Principals were generally more critical of some classes they had to take during their programs. For example, one principal remarked, “Half the classes in the preparation program were unhelpful.” Principals mentioned specific classes that were both more and less helpful than others. **Table 4** provides an overview of the different components of formal preparation programs that principals said were helpful or unhelpful in preparing them for the role.

**TABLE 4 | Principal Preparation Program Components That Did or Did Not Help Prepare for the Role**

PROGRAM COMPONENTS	HELPED PREPARE FOR ROLE	DID NOT HELP PREPARE FOR ROLE
<b>Residency or Internship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building instructional leadership capacity</li> <li>• Gaining hands-on experiences</li> <li>• An involved and consistent mentor principal with urban principal experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentors who were unengaged or not actively supporting and developing candidates</li> </ul>
<b>Classes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applicable topics, especially instructional leadership and children’s development</li> <li>• Taught by current or former urban school leaders</li> <li>• Project-based hands-on classes with simulated exercises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taught by faculty without any urban experience</li> <li>• Theory-based classes without real-world application</li> <li>• Inauthentic or irrelevant assignments</li> </ul>
<b>Other Program Features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tools and resources (e.g., a corrective instruction tool to help teachers improve their instruction, observation tools like the Charlotte Danielson Framework)</li> <li>• Support on how to prepare to meet CPS eligibility and content exams</li> <li>• Help finding a position post-graduation</li> <li>• Continued mentoring or coaching post-graduation</li> <li>• Cohort models and building peer networks</li> <li>• Flexible program hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not exploring how to lead an underperforming school</li> </ul>

# Gaps in Leadership Development

## What skills, experiences, and supports did principals wish they had prior to taking the position?

Although principals talked about the critical learning experiences leading up to their principalship, several said they felt underprepared in different areas when they stepped into the role. Only five principals said they felt fully prepared to take on the role, while eight said that they felt underprepared in specific areas. Another five said they did not feel prepared to become a principal after they completed their preparation program and sought other types of leadership development opportunities and roles before they applied to be a principal. Two principals, however, said they felt like nothing could have adequately prepared them. As one principal commented, *“I don’t think anything prepares you for this role until you’re doing it.”*

Other principals emphasized the complexity of the role and all the various skillsets needed to be successful, making it difficult to feel fully prepared in all areas. For example:

*“People recognize that we’re in this weird space of being an executive but also being the logistics-in-operations expert. And then don’t forget we’re the instructional leader, and we’re the person who has to deal with the discipline of everyone in our buildings and interacting with parents. All of those different layers and levers, it’s a job that’s like none other.”*

*“There’s so many competencies that you need. You know, you have climate and culture. You have school operations. You have instruction, right? And then you have community engagement. And those just take so many different skill sets.”*

Given the complexity of the role most principals said they could have used more support or training in different areas. We asked principals, *“Knowing what you know now, what supports/experiences do you wish you would have had in your journey to becoming a principal?”* Principals wished they had more opportunities to develop specific skillsets, along with more mentoring and support. Because principals’ backgrounds and experiences varied

widely, they did not all wish for the same things. **Figure C** summarizes the types of skills principals said they wished they were able to develop or learn before they became principals.

Principals wished for a wide range of skill building opportunities and experiences. They included more general leadership learning opportunities so they could develop their skills, more support around how to find principal positions, as well as more opportunities to learn about the CPS central office system and how to navigate it. For example, principals mentioned specific tasks they struggled with during their first year as principal, and therefore wished they had better pre-service training, mentoring, or coaching to help them with these tasks. One principal struggled with articulating a school vision the first year, saying that prospective school leaders could use *“more focus on the vision and the purpose.”* Another mentioned wanting to be mentored on how to run effective meetings, saying:

*“And so, I wish there was more of a mentality of my colleagues of, like, anybody in your building can be a principal someday, and look at them that way and pull them behind the curtain sometimes and say, so let’s talk about this meeting you’re about to run.”*

Three other principals wanted more support with budgeting before becoming a principal. One principal said,

*“Budgeting is one area that I would have enjoyed having more experience with because even as an AP, my principal did all the budgeting, and so I did not have that experience coming into the principalship.”*

Two principals talked about wishing they had experience working with outside vendors and community organizations prior to becoming a principal. One explained it this way:

*“Navigating community partners is another area that, just those outside vendors, or outside organizations that you’re with. Like not really knowing because we have close to 15 at [school name]. Of course, in order to ensure their efficiency, it requires meetings. It’s like those things can sometimes pull you away from*

**FIGURE C | Skills Principals Wished They Had Developed Prior to Taking on the Role**

PEOPLE SKILLS	ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT SKILLS	INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS	NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building relationships and trust with staff, parents, and community members</li> <li>• Having difficult conversations with teachers and parents</li> <li>• Building relationships and working with the teachers’s union</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving school culture and climate</li> <li>• Creating buy-in for the school’s vision</li> <li>• Creating strategic plans and tracking milestones</li> <li>• Creating and managing a school budget</li> <li>• Fundraising</li> <li>• Aligning teachers’ schedules so they can collaborate</li> <li>• Planning and running effective meetings</li> <li>• Analyzing data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluating teachers and providing constructive feedback</li> <li>• Supporting teacher collaboration and professional learning communities (PLCs) for instructional improvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Figuring out CPS central office systems, including who to call when these are human resource issues, ethics violations, or budgeting questions</li> </ul>

*being in the classrooms and things of that nature. It’s like just strategically planning those meetings and/or strategically planning how they will support your school would be helpful.”*

Six principals specifically wished for more mentoring for prospective school leaders in general to help them learn how to avoid potential obstacles and pitfalls they may encounter in the role and ways to avoid making mistakes. Another said it would be helpful to have a mentor show them how to best communicate and “sell” a message to the school community. In other words, principals in our study thought it would be valuable to have a mentor take them “behind the curtain” to show them the ins and outs of what it is like being a principal.

Principals also noted that navigating the principal role in CPS can be challenging and sometimes politicized, and that networking and rapport building are key functions of the role that are often not discussed. Another principal thought it would be helpful to have more training on how to navigate the CPS management and data reporting systems, saying:

*“I definitely think that CPS should just have trainings for APs and principals on how to work all of the components of all the systems that you need to know how to use and how to navigate. Something as simple as putting an incident report inside of the [management/data system]. It’s just assumed that you know how to do it, and you don’t, you know?”*

**Novice principals will not have learned everything they need to know about the job, nor will they have gained every skill they need before they assume the role.** New principals still need access to a range of leadership learning opportunities and ongoing professional development. To help support early career principal learning and development, interviewees said new principals could benefit from greater succession planning and strengthening of the early career mentoring program. One principal, for example, introduced the idea of a multi-session leadership succession or transitional period to meet with the outgoing principal and leadership staff to learn more about the schools’ budget, staffing, and schedule as they begin their tenure. This principal explained:

*“Well, I definitely think more than a three-hour transitional meeting would be great...maybe, you know, a good, three weeks would be great of being able to look at the budget, look at staffing...helping to kind of navigate things...I think that would be beneficial, especially for someone new to the work, not knowing where to really look to find information.”*

Other principals said strengthening pre-service and first year principal mentoring programs and supports would be beneficial. As one principal succinctly put it,

*“I definitely think the mentoring program could be strengthened a little bit. Being a principal can be a very lonely job.”* Another principal said it would be beneficial to have “a strong mentor or coach, and really it not being so formal.” In **Table 5**, we present findings from the 2019-20 Principal Engagement Survey that asked principals to report on the types of skills new principals tend to struggle with during their first years on the job. These findings align well with the types of skills and supports principals in our study said they wished they had on the road to becoming a principal.

## What Do New Principals Tend to Struggle With?

The “*wished-for*” supports described in this section of the report align with what a broader pool of CPS principals identified as areas of struggle for new principals (Table 5). On the 2019-20 Principal Engagement Survey, CPS principals highlighted the importance of developing essential management skills for new principals. Three-quarters of respondents (76%) said that new principals tended to struggle with “*managing and prioritizing their own*” time, while about half (52%) agreed that new principals often had a difficult time “*allocating resources and managing the school budget*”. Survey respondents also indicated that new principals might need help developing essential soft skills. More than half (52%) of respondents said that new principals often struggled with “*confronting low expectations and conducting difficult conversations with teachers,*” while 38% said that new principals might not excel in “*engaging in courageous conversations about diversity.*”

**TABLE 5 | Aspects of the Principal Role New Principals Tend to Struggle With**

WHAT ASPECTS OF THE PRINCIPAL ROLE DO NEW PRINCIPALS TEND TO STRUGGLE WITH?	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS
Managing and prioritizing their own time	76%
Confronting low expectations and conducting difficult conversations with teachers	59%
Allocating resources and managing the school budget	52%
Engaging in courageous conversations about diversity	38%
Building relationships with key community leaders	34%
Reflecting on their personal leadership and improvement	29%
Engaging families	28%
Developing a Continuous Improvement Work Plan and maintaining a focus on results	28%
Observing and evaluating staff	27%
Developing a code of conduct and managing student and adult behavior expectations	27%
Using data to assess student achievement, school performance and to inform decision making	25%
Creating a culture that supports social emotional learning	25%
Developing and leading instructional teams	24%
Hiring and retaining staff	20%
Implementing professional learning	18%
Implementing a curricular scope and sequence	16%
Reviewing instructional practices	16%
Ensuring the school learning environment is safe, clean and orderly	9%
Other	7%

**Note:** This data is pulled from the 2020 Principal Engagement Survey from the Chicago Public Education Fund, which was administered to all CPS principals (including charter school principals) and had a 60% response rate. Principals were asked to choose all responses to the question that were applicable, and 384 principals responded to this question.



# Implications

The answers to our three research questions, described throughout this report, raise many important questions regarding the identification of potential principals, their preparation and selection, and the on-going supports they may find useful throughout their careers. Here, rather than summarizing our research findings, we identify what we think are the most important questions to consider as we strive to improve the process. Some of our interview subjects had relatively smooth and linear trajectories – classroom teacher, grade or subject level leader, assistant principal, then principal. Yet others had non-linear pathways – jobs outside of education, non-traditional preparation programs, and relatively brief experiences as APs. Successful principals took either route.

**Given the complexity and multidimensionality of the job, how is it possible for aspiring principals to learn all that they need to know to succeed?** It seems unlikely that a single program can teach such a range of skills and behaviors that good principals need to succeed. Therefore, a “one-size-fits all” approach would be insufficient. Instead, our findings suggest a more tailored approach to supporting prospective school leader development. As noted in the *Efforts to Strengthen the School Leadership Pipeline* section above, these proposed ideas could be incorporated within the multiple efforts that are already underway to support aspiring and practicing CPS principals.

- The system might create or adopt a competency framework, utilizing The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) standards for example, to help identify the critical skillsets and behaviors for prospective principals. While preparation programs use these standards to map to their program requirements, it could also be helpful for hiring decision makers, community partners, and central office staff in thinking about the types of experiences and skillsets prospective leaders may have gained on-the-job. A broader framework, for example, might also include rubrics for judging “readiness” to take on the principalship in particular areas, then additional categories such as “developing,” “proficient,” and “exemplary.” This

framework could also provide the opportunity to weave together the district’s emphasis on cultural competencies and culturally relevant, equity focused leadership.

- Could the school district create a “portfolio” approach to principal preparation, development, certification, and eligibility? Rather than relying solely on courses taken and passed, exams, and eligibility essays and interviews, could other types of evidence demonstrate that candidates have acquired and practiced needed skills and behaviors?
- Could leadership development opportunities be more tailored to fit individual leadership development needs – perhaps creating a series of modules or trainings that prospective principals could take before they become a principal – for example trainings on school budgeting and navigating the CPS system?
- Could some leadership and management skills be recognized by a “badge” system? For example, if a teacher demonstrated strong instructional skills in the classroom or as an instructional coach, perhaps that accomplishment could be recognized with a badge that carries weight toward principal certification.

**Soft skills may be difficult to define, and the measurement of soft skills remains controversial.** Yet this and other research demonstrate consistently their importance for both young people and adults. The principals in this study were very vocal about the need for both inter- and intrapersonal skills.

- Guided by available resources, the system could use a consensus process to describe the soft skills needed by principals and include them in the competencies framework described above. The process should include multiple stakeholders including principals, teachers, system leadership as well as educational and psychological researchers.
- A measurement system will be needed. It could rely on multiple sources of information, including self-evaluations, peer evaluations, and other techniques, including surveys already available.

- The district could simultaneously pilot alternative frameworks and measures using a developmental evaluation approach to determine the most useful and easy-to-implement approaches.

**The assistant principalship could become a more explicit training ground for new principals.**

- APs who aspire to the principalship should be able to experience all the components of the principal's job and not be assigned a single set of duties. Principals could share leadership responsibilities with APs to help them gain more experience. Large high schools with many APs could have those (who aspire to the principalship) rotate job responsibilities.
- For aspiring principals, the AP job could be a more explicit training ground, with shared leadership responsibilities.

**Prospective school leaders need and appreciate good mentors and both formal and informal networks of peers.**

- Network chiefs could ensure that prospective principals are connected formally with mentors who are actively engaged in supporting their leadership development.

As mentioned above, even principals who appear secure in their roles will benefit from mentorship. These more experienced principals may mentor newer principals and assistant principals. The role of the network chief could also evolve into a supportive rather than authoritative one, making sure that principals and assistant principals are in regular contact with more experienced people ready to provide advice.

- In addition to having mentors, prospective school principals and principals appear to benefit from networks of peers. Peer networks provide opportunities to share experiences, sound out new ideas, and debate the various pros and cons of new policies. They also provide open "space" to discuss instructional approaches, parent and community relationships, and teacher development, as well as identifying and supporting the next generation of school leaders. Networks may be geographical or focused on a specific topic (e.g., college readiness). They may also be "affinity" groups based on the race/ethnicity or gender of principals or of their student bodies. In any case, these are safe spaces where prospective principals and current principals build trust with colleagues and share opinions without fear of reprisals.

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# Appendix A

## Data and Methods

For this study, our team interviewed 20 early career practicing school principals in CPS neighborhood schools between 2020 and 2021. To identify potential respondents, we narrowed the full sample of CPS principals in district-run schools in the 2018-19 school year (n=559) down to only those who had been in their roles between 1 and 3 years (n=159). Since our recruitment and interview timeline did not align exactly with the data available, sample principals had between 2 and 5 years of experience when we interviewed them. We wanted to learn from principals with varying backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, we purposely selected principals serving in (1) both elementary and high schools, (2), different parts of the city and across different networks, (3) schools with varying climates and student performance outcomes, based on a combined survey (*My Voice My School*) and student test score index, and (4) schools serving different student populations, including race/ethnicity, while prioritizing schools serving students in areas of the city that have been historically marginalized.

We began recruiting principals in the summer of 2020, first sending them an introductory email and then following up with more information about participation and scheduling. We reached out to a total of 47 principals to ask if they would participate in the study. Some principals we reached out to did not respond to our request or follow-up emails, and we had one principal who declined to participate. We reached out to more elementary school principals than high school principals to reflect the greater proportion of elementary schools in CPS compared to high schools. Our final sample included 12 elementary school and eight high school principals. We also purposely selected principals who had been a part of the Chicago Leadership Collaborative (n=10).

Each interview lasted between 60 and 75 minutes and took place over Zoom due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We asked principals to tell us about:

- Their backgrounds and key education and non-education related roles prior to becoming principals
- In what ways they benefitted from these roles and experiences in helping prepare them for the principalship
- Their formal preparation program experiences, including what they learned during their classes and residencies/internship experiences
- Their general impressions of their preparation program and whether and how the experience prepared them for the role
- Other formal or informal experiences that helped them develop essential skills
- Their perspectives and opinions about what it takes to be a successful principal
- The types of supports or experiences they wished they had prior to becoming principals

We used NVivo, a qualitative software program, to analyze and code the interviews. We first created an initial codebook based on the research and protocol questions. We added additional relevant codes that emerged from the data. After coding, we summarized what we learned in memos, checking and cross-checking each other's understanding of the data. Lastly, we searched for broader patterns, relationships, and themes in the data and compared our findings with the broader literature base on what it takes to be a successful school leader.

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