

**WORKING PAPER #8  
A STUDY OF MICHIGAN'S SCHOOL  
PRINCIPAL SHORTAGE**

**Philip A. Cusick  
June 2002**



**The Education Policy Center  
at Michigan State University**

## **A STUDY OF MICHIGAN'S SCHOOL PRINCIPAL SHORTAGE**

Philip A. Cusick

June 2002

Cusick is Professor and Chair of the Educational Administration Department in the College of Education at Michigan State University. This research was supported by the Michigan Applied Policy Research Funds under the auspices of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University. Any opinions expressed are the author's own, and do not necessarily express the views of the Education Policy Center.

# A Study Of Michigan's School Principal Shortage<sup>1</sup>

Philip A. Cusick  
Michigan State University  
July 2002

## **Introduction**

Fewer Michigan teachers are willing to become principals. Heads of the state's professional associations, superintendents, and principals themselves speak of the declining number of applications. The phenomenon is not limited to Michigan. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, for example, predicts a 10 to 20% percent increase in vacant principal-ships through 2008.<sup>2</sup>

Relying on a survey of school superintendents, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the Educational Research Service reported a shortage of qualified applicants, particularly for secondary principalships.<sup>3</sup> And almost as many report a shortage of applicants for the elementary principalships. When the researchers asked superintendents to explain the shortage, sixty percent attributed it to inadequate compensation, thirty two percent to stress, twenty-seven percent to the time required, and fourteen percent to conflicts between the community and the school. Thirteen percent of the superintendents attributed the shortage to social problems that make it difficult for principals to focus on instruction. In another study, which examined the teacher's side of the issue, Jordan and his colleagues found fewer than half of the Louisiana teachers who hold principal certification willing to consider a principalship.<sup>4</sup> Respondents said the job has too much

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Andrew Pass for his assistance with this study, in particular, with reviewing the relevant literature, and Mary Stephen, whose dissertation research informed the analysis.

<sup>2</sup> U. S. Department of Education. (1995). School principals in the United States: A statistical profile: 1987-88 to 1993-94. Washington, D. C.: U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>3</sup> Education Research Service. (2000). The Principal, keystone of a high achieving school: Attracting and keeping the leaders we need. Alexandria and Reston, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals, and National Association of Secondary School Principals.

<sup>4</sup> Jordan, D. W., McCauley, H. S., & Comeaux, J. B. (1994). The supply and demand trends of public school principals and administrators in southwestern Louisiana: 1993-1997. Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document Reproduction Service, July, 1994.

stress and responsibility. Similarly, Peters and Cusick found that teachers see principals taking on too many additional responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose in this study is to examine this situation in Michigan to see if there is a shortage of applicants, to see what explanations might be given, and if the shortage exists, to see what it might mean for schools. We are dealing only with the shortage of principals. There is no reputed shortage of business managers, curriculum supervisors, or department of education consultants. While there were 100 superintendent vacancies in Michigan in 2002 -- up from about a normal 80 a year — the Michigan Association of School Administrator’s (MASA) executive director attributes the increase to the budget situation, not to any generalized problem with finding superintendents: “They don’t want to deal with the cuts.”<sup>6</sup> One might attribute the shortage to a higher than average number of retirements. But retirements alone should not explain a decline in applicants since the jobs, particularly in secondary schools, have opened up to women and minorities who traditionally were not considered for such positions. So while the number of open positions has increased, the number of potential applicants has also increased.

## **Method**

While widely acknowledged, the extent of the reputed shortage does not lend itself to numerical description. As State Superintendent Watkins says, “Education is a federal issue, state funded and locally controlled,” and Michigan’s 567 school districts post their own jobs and do their own hiring. There is no state tracking of administrative jobs and many go unadvertised and to insiders. Nor do individual school districts maintain a centralized database concerning these hires. For that reason, we investigated the issue by talking to those closest to it: superintendents, directors of human relations, and principals. We reasoned that, even if their knowledge was restricted to their own and neighboring districts, if their answers were consistent with one another and with the national data, then our findings would be reliable.

---

<sup>5</sup> Peters, W., & Cusick, P. A. (1974). The role of secondary principals in small towns. Secondary Education Today, 15(4).

<sup>6</sup> Throughout the essay, quotation marks are used for direct quotations from informants.

We interviewed ten superintendents or human relations directors, ten principals, and one focus group with the administrative team from one school district. In addition, there was a “principal/professor symposium” held at Michigan State University in February of 2001 that brought together administrators and people from university administrator preparation programs, all of whom talked about the situation. Other sources of data include two interview studies undertaken with 25 principals of Michigan secondary schools. One study took place in 1974; the follow up in 2000.<sup>7</sup> These studies were useful when came to examining how the principalship might have changed and to see if the changes explain the fewer applicants. We organize our results around the central questions of our inquiry.

### **Are Fewer People Applying?**

Everyone to whom we talked said, “Yes, there is a shortage of candidates.” The consensus is that the number of candidates for jobs is one half to one third of what it was 10 to 15 years ago. A suburban Detroit principal recounts that last year, his school needed two assistant principals and there were four applicants. And two were unqualified. An urban personnel director says:

In 1989 when we had a principal opening, we had 100 or more openings, and half were qualified. In 1994, we have 30 applicants and 15 were qualified. Now it is 10 or so, maybe five are qualified.

An urban superintendent says:

Yes, there is a shortage. In former times, we would have an opening and we would have 40- 50 applicants, and half were qualified. We would go through and say, “Who is the best fit?” Now we don’t get near that many; the ones we get are less qualified, and we’re worried about filling the slots.

A superintendent says, “Ten years ago we had sixty five to seventy applications; today we get twenty five or so. And the candidates are not as good.” Another superintendent:

---

<sup>7</sup> The 1974 study is reported in Peters and Cusick (1974). The more contemporary study is reported in Stephen, M. (2002). The role of the small town secondary principal. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

“Ten years ago we had 60 applicants, many qualified. Now we get 10 and five of them have not even been teachers.” An association director: “Yes, absolutely, there is a shortage; we’re not getting the applications for the job.” Another: “We had twenty five applicants; two to three of them were qualified.” A superintendent: “As long as I’ve been in education, (the shortage) is the worst I’ve experienced.” Mary Stephen documented similar sentiments in a study of 25 high school principals: “There are two teachers in this building who would make good administrators, but they don’t want to touch it.”<sup>8</sup> The responses were unanimous and consistent. Everyone to whom we talked agreed that fewer people are applying, and among the people applying, fewer are qualified.

Because our respondents were saying that the applicants are not up to what the district had in mind we asked, “What do qualified and unqualified mean?” A suburban personnel director answered,

It takes seven or more years to be a competent teacher and these people are applying for administrative jobs when they have only three. Some of them are not even tenured. We don’t hire the old coach who got along with everybody anymore. We want to see some leadership roles in the schools where they work; the right degrees and internships, and some experience in administration. The applicants don’t have that. There is a set of not very good people in for every job. It’s the same pool and they are not good candidates.

But while everyone said there was a problem, not everyone said that his or her district was having the problem, and well-to-do districts do not seem to have any problems. A superintendent from one such district agreed that there was a shortage, but he was receiving applications from people working in neighboring districts. He went on to note that the districts from which he recruited will have problems replacing the people he hired.

More attractive districts are able to recruit experienced administrators from their neighbors. One superintendent complained that not only did he have to spend time mentoring newer administrators, but as soon as they had a few years experience, they

---

<sup>8</sup> Stephen, p. xxx.

were being drawn off by nearby districts. A principal of a large district recounted that of four assistant principals in his school, only one had as many as five years experience, the rest had one or two. He attributed the situation to the recruitment of experienced assistants by neighboring schools.

There is the matter of whether fewer applicants mean a shortage or merely a relative decline in the memory of our interviewees. We note here that for the administrators to whom we talked, ten to twenty years ago is an important referent; it was then that they entered administration and it was then that administrative jobs attracted up to 100 applicants. Their recollections of that time go like this: The district advertised an administrative job. Forty to fifty people -- many of them qualified -- applied; the superintendent and the board considered the "best fit" and made the decision.

Unsuccessful applicants applied to other over-subscribed openings. Now the situation is in the candidate's rather than the district's favor; it is a seller's rather than a buyer's market.

Our respondents may think that the past surfeit of applicants was normal and the present situation, abnormal, but every other industry has to recruit more actively in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Why should school administration be exempt? One of our informants said as much: "(The shortage) is everywhere. Two years ago, I could not find an English teacher. Did you ever hear of a shortage of English teachers?" We did not. As such, we will suggest that the issue may not be a problem, rather a new reality that requires a more pro-active approach. And indeed, that is what we found. Superintendents and school boards are working harder to recruit and train the people they want. Agreeing that the number of applicants was down but being careful not to use the term "shortage," the personnel director of one of Michigan's middle cities described how his district was adjusting:

For a principalship, we had 15 applicants and 7 were qualified. We had an assistant superintendent for curriculum and 10 of the applicants were qualified. We had three

---

<sup>9</sup> Fields as diverse as nursing, accounting, information technology and politics report the rising challenge of recruiting participants. See, for example, Abramson, P. R., & Clagett, W. (2001). Recruitment and political participation, *Political Research Quarterly*, 54(4), 905-916 or Vest, G. (2001). Closing the recruitment gap: A symposium's findings. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 70(11), 13-17.

grade school principal openings and we had 20 applicants, half internal and half external, several qualified. We are asking for educational leadership experience. (What kind?) Curriculum, instruction, budget, internships. We have teachers who work an hour or more a day with the principal and we pull our applicants from that crew. We don't have trouble getting the applicants who can do building management (and) be instructional leaders. The job is more demanding, but there is no shortage now. And we have 8 teachers signed up for area leadership academies.

So while there is a general agreement about the decline in the number of applicants, we found that the problem is not evenly distributed, some districts are not affected, and some, because their administrators are recruited away, doubly affected. But districts are finding ways to deal with the issue, and as such, it seems less a problem than a new reality. We mentioned above the suburban Detroit school that had four applicants for two assistant positions. But among the four, the principal said that two were qualified and those two took the jobs. Similarly, after a suburban Detroit superintendent agreed, "Yes, there is a shortage," he described what he did to find a principal of his 1000 student high school: "The board raised the salary to \$100,000; the position was advertised around the state; and many well-qualified applicants entered the pool. We hired the person we wanted."

A superintendent of a rural school had already identified a guidance counselor from his former school and when he had an administrative opening in his new district, he recruited that person. In addition to personal efforts, districts are developing administrative internship programs. Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), among them Oakland, Macomb, Wayne, Shiawassee, Kent, St. Clair, and Jackson, create pools of applicants often in cooperation with universities where the prospective administrators are working on masters' degrees in administration. In those cooperating districts, administrators identify promising teachers, provide some release time, and then invite them to participate in some aspects of administration for up to a year. Sometimes the intern does her or his work in her own school, sometimes in a neighboring school or even a neighboring district. Intern programs are run in, to name a few places, Birmingham, Battle Creek, Traverse City, Bloomfield Hills, and Lansing. Internal training of replacement administrators is not limited to Michigan. DeAngelis and Rossi report that

many suburban and fifty percent of urban school districts have such programs.<sup>10</sup>

An additional consideration is that the major source of candidates for the principalship come from the pool of teachers who have masters' degrees in educational administration and/or who participated in school leadership activities. There is no shortage of either. All of Michigan's public and several of the state's private universities offer masters degrees in school administration and none report a decline in enrollment. Further, schools have become training grounds for teachers interested in administration. Michigan's Public Act 25 (1990) encouraged teachers to participate in school governance, and schools across the state now have committees of teachers taking some responsibility for school leadership. Some lead professional development seminars for their colleagues, others collaborate on school improvement teams. Recently, the superintendent of a large northern district filled nine administrative openings by moving teachers from teacher-leadership roles into administration through an internship program. In their first year, the "interns" were provided with continued mentoring. The superintendent considered mentoring important because of what he called, "the aloneness and isolation of the (administrative) job." While he recognized that the practice of removing teacher-leaders from their schools may not be good for the particular schools that lose a teacher-leader, he argued that the district had institutionalized a continuous training program for teacher-leaders as well as for administrators.

One school district, large and in suburban Detroit, has identified the problem as the principal being overburdened. So, the Director of Secondary Education assigned an additional administrator to the high school to take care of curriculum. This is a solution practiced by some schools in other states where an associate principal is in charge of the building and operations while the head principal is assigned to instruction.

In sum, everyone to whom we talked said, "Yes, there is a problem." But then our respondents also explained how the problem is being addressed. Perhaps conceptualizing

---

<sup>10</sup> DeAngelis, K. and Rossi, R. (1997). *Programs for aspiring principals: Who participates?* National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

the problem as one of a “shortage” is not apt. Instead, the problem might be one of a decline in applicants and a greater need to recruit pro-actively.

**Is the Pay Too Low?**

But the fact remains that fewer teachers apply for principal positions. So, we asked the next question, “Is school administration a less attractive job than it was in former times?” Actually, we did not have to ask this question, for as soon as the topic was broached, the respondents -- after affirming a shortage -- went into their explanations. There are, according to our sources, several interrelated factors. The first is money and more specifically, the difference in salary between what teachers make and what administrators make. As a respondent told us, “Rational man is economic man and rational/economic teachers do not see an advantage in taking on extra work, extra days, and extra nights for an additional \$10,000 to \$20,000 per year.” Considering that the teachers that administrators would like to recruit into administration are almost at the top of the salary schedule, let us describe some salary differences in the districts we studied (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Salary Differentials Between Teachers and Principals**

	Top Teacher	Plus duty pay	Added days for Administration	Elementary Principal	Middle School Principal	Secondary School Principal
Rural	\$54,000	57,000	Plus 20	55,000	65,000	80,000
Suburban/East	\$80,000	83,000	Plus 45	85,000	90,000	107,000
Suburban/West	\$70,000	73,000	Plus 20	77,000	86,000	90,000
Mid-MI Urban	\$60,000	63,000	Plus 25	70,000	75,000	90,000
Mid-MI Suburban	\$60,000	63,000	Plus 20	78,000	85,000	90,000

Let us briefly expand on the information provided in Table 1. The top pay for a high school principal in the state is \$138,000. But that is an over-the-top sum with high school principals in the districts we visited making from \$80,000 in a smaller rural district to \$115,000 in a 2000-student school in an eastern suburb. There are no reported figures for Detroit, but principals there earn from \$70,000 to \$130,000 depending on years of service

and size of school. More specific to the differences, in one rural district, a top teacher earns up to \$54,000; the elementary principal earns \$55,000, the middle school principal earns \$60,000 the high school principal \$80,000. Elementary principals are paid similarly to high school assistant principals, from \$60,000 in the smaller rural districts to \$90,000+ in the more affluent suburbs. In a suburban Detroit district, top teachers make \$80,000. That same district pays elementary principals from in the \$80s, and high school assistants begin at \$84,000. The high school principal earns \$107,000. In another rural district, a top teacher makes \$55,000. The elementary principal starts at \$60,000; secondary principal at \$74,000. Across the districts we studied, administrators -- on average -- make about \$10,000 to \$25,000 dollars more than teachers. And the difference holds across different salary structures. Administrators seem reasonably well paid relative to the teachers at the top of the schedule. But the money is offset by other matters.

One of those is that that teachers already have opportunities to earn more money in school; indeed, the median amount for extra duties is \$3000. At one time, extra duties were part of teachers' assignment, but in the last two decades, duties have become both voluntary and compensated. In a suburban district of 4700 students, there are 81 extra positions listed in the contract and these positions pay from \$28.62 cents per night for keeping the clock at a junior varsity event to \$5576 a year for coaching the varsity football team. Most of the extra jobs pay between \$3000 to \$5000 a year and there is nothing to prevent a teacher from handling two, even three, of these additional assignments. As one of our informants reflected, "We pay \$85,000 for assistant principals, but top teacher earns \$75,000 and with coaching a couple of sports, that teacher is already making \$85,000."

Even with extra duties, teachers do not earn as much as administrators. But administrators work more days. In one district that we visited, a teacher with one activity is paid \$65,000. She or he would receive to \$75,000 for a vice principal-ship, and up to \$87,000 for a high school principalship. But then she would be on assignment for 210 rather than 191 days. In another district, the teacher works 184 days, the high school

principal works 230 days. In a suburban district, the teachers earn \$65,000. The principal earns \$95,000 but works 210 days rather than the teacher's 185 days. In another district, the teacher earns \$65,800 for 184 days; the principal earns \$88,000 for 230 days. In an urban district, teachers earn \$62,000 for 182 days. Principals in that district earn \$80,000, for 206 days. Teachers at the top-of-the-schedule with extra pay for years and activities do not gain that much financially. Speaking of a top-of-the-scale teacher who just took an administrative job, the superintendent said, "She didn't get any more money. All she did was add four weeks to her year."

Added to extra days is the issue of extra hours. Principals to whom we talked said they earned less per hour and per day than do teachers, for their days are considerably longer. Administrators, particularly those in secondary schools, do not work just days, they work three or four nights a week. High school principals come to school between 5:30 and 7:00 a.m. and stay until the school closes. A suburban superintendent says, "Schools are more complex; for an elementary principal it's three nights a week. For a secondary principal it can be up to six." In the evening, in addition to doing paper work, they attend the student activities, school events and sponsored club meetings that go on until 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. A superintendent laughed when he talked about hiring an administrator who had not been accustomed to working in schools. "This guy came to me on Wednesday and told me he had already worked his 40 hours that week." Principals neither shirk nor resent these extra hours. Even when they complain -- "Do you know how many banquets I have to attend?" -- they do not resent the obligation. The perception among them is that theirs' is a public job, and they regard their presence at events as important to the smooth running of the event. "They see me, they know I'm there, and things go better." "I always sit on the bench at the games. The kids see me, they know I'm there." And the community members expect the principal to be present. One recounted that when he misses an event, a board member reminds him, "The principal of (the other school) was there but not our principal." The principal of a larger school with assistant principals may have it easier. As the principal of a 2100 student school told us, "I have four assistants, so we divide things up. But if I were principal in (a neighboring school) with one assistant who is also the athletic director, I would be having some problems."

Working nights has personal costs to the principal's family. One reported that his daughter hid his shoes in the hope that he would stay home in the evening. Another attributed the problems he was having with his own 4 year-old to the fact that he had to be out so many nights. One respondent blamed himself for the untimely death of a colleague because he had told that colleague that he had to be at the night events in order to do his principal job.

The fact that administrators work more days and hours is a major part of their explanation for the decline in applicants. The female vice principal of a 1750 student high school, recounting her days that begin with meetings at 7 a.m. and end with the last activity, advised a group of would-be administrators: "If you have a young family, I would advise you not to apply for the job." Then she recounted her own 12-hour days, night work, and impromptu meetings. She noted too that while she has, by contract, three weeks summer vacation, her superintendent just sent her a note saying that a school-student court case has been scheduled to begin on July 22<sup>nd</sup> and she should reserve that time for the case. After a racial incident at an away-basketball game in another district, the superintendent required that every away event be attended by a high school administrator. A reasonable move by the superintendent, but with 20 intermural sports teams, each of the school's four administrators will be out several more nights each month.

But a bigger deterrent to applicants, according to our sources, is that so many teachers are in dual career situations. One has to calculate the teacher-administrator salary differential relative to the teacher's family income combined with family responsibilities. A teacher married to another professional may not be as attracted to the extra \$10,000 to \$25,000 per year when it is accompanied by extra days, nights, responsibilities, and stress. A critical issue is the matter of child rearing. Teachers have their own children and take seriously the advice they give to parents about spending time with them. As several respondents explained: "[Teachers] don't want the nights and weekends, they want a life. . . . They want to stay home and raise their own kids and not be out every night with other peoples' kids." Some superintendents told us that several of their female teachers are asking to go part time so that they can stay home more with their children: "The market is

open to women but they don't want the jobs; they want to stay home with the kids.”

There are additional obstacles. Proposal A connected funding to student numbers, and more students require more teachers, not higher paid administrators. As one superintendent said, “More money for administrators would cause a backlash in the communities, it's politically untenable.” Before moving on to further reasons, let us itemize some of the random but related explanations that we heard for the decline in applications:

[Teachers] don't live in town. . . . They drive long distances and don't want to return to school at night, or come on weekends. . . . They heard all the stuff about changing careers, exploring your options, fulfilling yourself and they want to go do it. . . . They want to try something new. They're in their forties, they want their downtime. . . . [they] don't want to work all the time. . . . Gen X does not have the self-sacrificing attitude. . . . Single women are the pool but administration is a life; they [women] have a life; they want a job. . . . The teachers just don't want to do it. . . . Teachers don't like the confrontation; and they see administrative jobs as confrontational.

But before moving on to what our respondents listed as the most important reason for the decline, let us consider another twist on income differential. One superintendent pointed out that when he moved from teaching to administration in 1974, his salary went from \$9,000 to \$15,000, a 66% increase. Today a similar move in his district would result in a 13-15% increase, which he said is not enough to make up for the extra days and extra pressure on the family. His solution is to hire younger people for whom the pay differential is significant. As an example, a smaller district in southern Michigan needed a principal of its 400-student high school. To fill the slot, the Board hired a fifth year teacher from another district who had the masters degree in administration, had chaired a North Central Association evaluation, coached two sports, and was then making \$35,000. His first year salary as principal is \$68,000; in the second year, he will be making \$76,000. The increases gave his wife the opportunity to give up her teaching job and stay home with their children. Perhaps the hiring district would have preferred someone with more experience, but the almost-30 year-old principal is working out fine. Going back 30 years, we would find another time when the school population was expanding, new schools were being build every month, older teachers were retiring, and younger people

were being called on to fill administrative slots. In 1968, the youngest Class A high school principal in Michigan — in Madison Heights High — was 26 years old. And many were not much older. Hiring younger people for whom the pay differential is significant may be a solution. It worked in the early 1970s; it appears to be working now.

We have talked about explaining the decline with a combination of money, time, and teachers' family situations. We talked also about some strategies districts are using to fill slots, and about the possibility of opening up jobs to younger people. But we have not mentioned is that teachers' salaries, professional respect, social status, and general satisfaction with their job also have increased over the years, and it may be that fewer teachers feel that they have to move to administration to improve their professional situation. There are opportunities for mobility other than climbing the administrative ladder and our respondents affirmed this. Teachers can become teacher-leaders within their schools; they can apply for National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification as an accomplished teacher; they can become a mentor for a new teacher or supervise student teachers. As one of our respondents said, "Specialization has grown at the teacher and specialist level, and at the central office level, so (teachers) who want to move have options other than administration." Added up, there are several reasons why - according to our respondents -- fewer qualified teachers are applying for principal positions.

### **Is There Too Much To Do?**

We have not yet addressed the main reason our respondents nominated for the decline in applications: that the job is more demanding and less attractive. The principalship was always demanding. Researchers recorded the busy, active, full, constantly interrupted and interrupting nature of the position. Crowson and Porter-Gehrie, for example, wrote that

a typical principal is approached throughout each day by teachers and students, is at the beck and call of central office personnel, is infrequent consultation with janitors, clerks, assistant principals and counselors, is often on the telephone with fellow principals, and is additionally available to parents, social workers, teacher aides,

attendance and security officers, cafeteria workers, reading consultants, nurses, psychologists, and many others.<sup>11</sup>

Current research reports similar busyness. Principals, according to Beck and Murphy operate at “a nexus, a web of complex and overlapping relationships,” and describe their jobs as filled with variety, brevity, fragmentation, overlapping verbal interactions, constant interruptions, and constant demands that one do two or more things at once.<sup>12</sup> They conclude that principals are too busy and cram too many things into too little time and space. Mary Stephen, herself a principal, reported in her interviews with 25 of her peers that the problem is that “principals see themselves as carrying the burden of responsibility for everything that occurs within the school and there are too many things going on in the school.” Or, as one put it, “You’re a problem solver from the minute you walk in until the minute you leave. Everything is a problem.”<sup>13</sup> These results resonated with comments from our respondents. A rural principal told us that he comes to school at 5:30 a.m. to do his paperwork. After school starts, it’s “putting out fires. When the people are here, you’re with the people. The day just takes me away.” “Principals are too busy; have too much to do, more responsibility and less authority. More to do means more pressure.” As one principal said of his 13 years running a large school, “Two thousand kids, 200 staff, 120 of them teachers. I never knew what was going to happen when I walked in the door. And if I saw a gathering of kids in the cafeteria, before I even asked what they were doing, my stomach would knot up.”

We need to point out that the principals to whom we talked are proud of their positions. They see themselves as advocates for students, advocates for good education, and community supporters. They like students, like their interactive and public jobs, like the busyness, prestige, and visibility that comes with being principal. They are in their peak professional years and see themselves as doing work that is very interesting and important.

---

<sup>11</sup> Crowson, R.L., & Porter-Gehrie C. (1980). The discretionary behavior of principals in large city high schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *16*(1), 45-69. Quotation on p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> Beck, L. G., & Murphy, J. (1993). *Understanding the principalship: Metaphorical themes from 1920-1990*. New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen, p. 269.

But the principals to whom we spoke accepted their jobs to help kids and to improve instruction. Now they find themselves burdened with increasing and often conflicting responsibilities that pull their attention away from students, teaching, and learning. Among the conflict-generating elements cited most often were mandates concerning special education, school improvement, annual reports, accountability, core curriculum, student safety, gender and equity issues, mission statements, goals and outcomes, staff development, building level decision making, curriculum alignment, student achievement, MEAP and other tests, and accreditation. “You are just inundated. You can never go home. You never catch up. It never ends. Something is always popping up.”<sup>14</sup> Or as another principal put it, “The demands are such that I can’t get out of the office. My sleeping schedule is 10:00 p.m. to 2:30 a.m.”

Some are dismayed at how much the school has become the recipient for whatever agency or legislature wants to do for young people. A principal in suburban Detroit gave an example. One of his current problems is with immunization for students who are recent immigrants to the country, whose parents do not speak English, and who have to comply with PA 368, which requires that “any child enrolling in a Michigan school for the first time must be adequately immunized.” Some of his students’ immunizations had expired, the local clinics did not have the serum to do the inoculating, and the students had to leave school. A small issue, but as he pointed out, something else the school has to watch for. Then he recounted the legislative mandate to deliver a “high school diploma for WWII vets.” No one would suggest that it is a bad idea, but to him it is just one more thing that the school has to do: “There is no limit to the number of things the state throws into the schools and each one of them increases the administrative burden.”

Lest there is some confusion about the number of things that the state throws to the schools, let us cite two studies by Michigan then-superintendents, Wayne Peters and Diane Scheerhorn who added up 25 years of state efforts to improve Michigan schools and found 289 separate, laws, mandates, executive orders, and requirements put out by

---

<sup>14</sup> Stephen, p. 296.

governors, legislators, attorney generals, and the Michigan Department of Education.<sup>15</sup> For a few examples: Common Goals of Michigan Education (1971), Michigan Life Role Competencies (1978), Individual Goals and objectives (1979), The Blueprint for Action (1984), Standards of Quality (1985), Employability Skills and Student Portfolios (1987), Goals 2000 (1988), Public Act 25 (1990) (which included core curriculum, annual reports, and building accreditation), Curriculum Frameworks (1993), PA 335 and 339 which connected student outcomes to school accreditation (1993), Proposal A (1994), Summary Accreditation Status and Inter-district choice (1995), Charter and Public School Academies (1995), Michigan Curricular Frameworks (1996), Michigan Merit award Program (1999), The Center for Educational Performance and Information and the Office of School Excellence, and the Michigan Accountability Task Force (2000). And the Legislature has just passed a “School Safety Act” that will add to the principals’ responsibilities. Special education is cited as a particular problem: “There used to be three pages of rules about 504. Now there are 15.” Mary Stephen found among her principals that special education “demands an inordinate amount of administrative time and for the small town secondary principal with limited financial and personnel resources. Implementing and overseeing the specifics of individual cases can be overwhelming.”<sup>16</sup>

An urban principal laid out his duties for us. Among the 33 are: responsibility for the building; supervising of 87 teachers and 1575 students; supervising for sixty support staff; managing curriculum, budget, and accreditation; articulating the school’s work with district curricular goals and guides; promoting equity; supervising events; creating and supporting mentoring programs; handling public relations; reviewing discipline procedures; supervising the halls; participating in the United Way campaign; monitoring at risk programs; participating in commencement; working with community stakeholders; overseeing teacher training programs; acting as liaison for state and

---

<sup>15</sup> See Peters, W. L. (1997). The effects of state bureaucratic reform efforts on the role of the local superintendent and the structure of local public schools. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Department of Educational Administration, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI and Scheerhorn, D. M. (1995). The effects of state bureaucratic reform efforts on the role of the local superintendent and the structure of local public schools. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Department of Educational Administration, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen, p. 271.

federal programs; and implementing technology. We note that several of their duties -- monitoring state and federal programs, attending to affirmative action, coordinating the curriculum with district and state goals, monitoring tests, and implementing technology -- have come only recently. We note too that several of the above have come as part of recent federal and state mandates. Which explains the perception of the director of an administrative association: "Principals are supposed to be instructional leaders but they have no time for that." And while it can be pointed out that, while principals often have secretaries and assistants, they are ultimately held responsible for anything that happens in their schools. If something goes wrong, they cannot say, "Someone else was supposed to do that." Or "I didn't know." Or "I wasn't there."

The urban principal who generated this list has three assistants, each of whom has a similar list. One assistant is in charge of discipline for half the students; managing the crisis team; lunch tickets; supervision of the health clinic; academic, visual, and hearing testing; the honor society; coordinator of senior class; hall supervision; evaluating one fourth of the teachers; senior awards; special education; homecoming; professional development; the school handbook; senior awards; the school improvement committee; alternative programs; parent support groups; and scheduling. In a rural school with one fifth as many students, the principal is in charge of the safe and orderly environment, evaluation, athletics, parking lots, bus loading, discipline, scheduling, staff development, staff meetings, attendance, state reports, student count, curriculum, handbook, policy, budget, conferences, graduation, grades and progress reports, lunch and hall supervision. The press on time led the state secondary principal's association (MASSP) to reduce its annual convention from three days to two because as the association's director said, "(Principals) can't be gone for three days, two is the limit."

There is also the matter of paperwork. Principals are responsible for central office, state reports, and surveys, many having to do with protected classes. They have to document school needs and they have to record conferences with teachers and students. They also have to write up the required four visitations and two formal evaluations for first and third year teachers. One of our respondents had 15 of those teachers, which meant 90

separate reports. The sum of it all can be overwhelming.

What's the problem? Fifteen-hour days; night games, girls' games, more events, travel, buses, coaches, the parents -- a few of them are out of control and 5% are impossible. And there are rules for everything that there did not used to be rules about: pagers, cell phones, porn on the Internet, weapons, zero tolerance.

We may illuminate the matter of administrator busyness with some figures. Michigan has 97,168 teachers, and 9,088 counselors, librarians, supervisors, and media specialists. In addition to these professionals, there are 39,271 non-professionals, such as aides, guards, custodians, and food service people. To supervise these 145,527 professionals and non-professionals, there are 8,169 line administrators, superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals. In effect, Michigan schools have one line administrator for every 17.6 people who work in the schools, and these numbers do not include the students. That is a lopsided ratio by any standard. And it would be more lopsided if we calculated the number of people relative to the number of in-school administrators.

For the people to whom we talked, the role of the principal has expanded beyond what is reasonable. As the executive director of an administrative association says, "Our approach has always been, tell us what you want done, and we'll do it, but now it's 10-15 hours a day and you're always giving." As Mary Stephen found,

Every principal interviewed identified time as the issue that is central to most of the conflict they experience, resulting largely from the continually increasing demands related to fulfilling the role expectations. . . . they also cite stress, related health problems, dealing with unpleasantness, feelings of never being able to accomplish everything that needs to be done, and damage to both professional and personal relationships.<sup>17</sup>

As another told us, "The job is untenable and the pay is too low." Two respected and long time former principals, one with 12 and one with 13 years experience, asked their districts for a non-paid semester sabbatical. Both were refused. They quit, forcing their districts to find replacements. And both expressed their tiredness with the stress, in effect

---

<sup>17</sup> Stephen, p. 272.

agreeing with a former principal/ superintendent, now negotiator who said:

The job (of administrator) is not palatable. . . . (The superintendent) expects the principals to manage the work force, and teachers don't want to do that. And the whole instructional leader thing is in their face. There are more misbehaving kids; decades of anti-authoritarian media has convinced students that to oppose order is socially approved. . . . And the special ed kids are out of control. . . . A band teacher who had disciplined a special education student ended up having that student get up at a public concert, yell at her to (expletive), stalk her, telling her he would get her. And the school suspended the student for three days, only to have the board members defend him. We have a lot of . . . people claiming to raise their children, but they are not doing it. And the nonsense you have to put up with from medicated children. The superintendent says that the principals have to "manage the building," but PA 25, and PA 337 and 339, say teachers have to participate. When? Between 4:30 and 6:30 p.m. when only 20% are willing to come. And look at (the principal) whose kids did well on the MEAPs and then the Treasury Department accused her school of cheating; then they backed off but she was never cleared. What a bummer. Who needs it?

Another issue is the limits that laws have placed on the way administrators treat – what they consider to be -- small issues among students. The matter goes back to the Supreme Court's 1972 ruling, *Gross v. Lopez* that ordered schools to treat discipline with due process instead of in a more personal and perhaps idiosyncratic manner.<sup>18</sup> Since then, the restrictions on principals have increased.

Ten years ago, when I started, some kids in the hall got into an argument, had a fistfight and one says, "I'm going to kill you." You'd send them home for three days and they would cool off and come back. Now, legal authorities must be called; a full investigation must take place; the incident is reported to the superintendent, to the state. Reports must be written, meetings held, a recommendation for expulsion may be made and -- depending on the parents' response -- the case may wind up in court. What took the principal 15 minutes when I started this job, now takes hours over a period of days, weeks, or even months.

They regard the rules as reducing their professional discretion. As one said bluntly:

In the old days, if one kid was picking on another, I'd grab him and say, "You keep

---

<sup>18</sup> The case ordered that schools "recognize a student's legitimate entitlement to public education as a property (and liberty) interest protected by the due process clause," and ordered that schools may not penalize students for misconduct without "fundamentally fair procedures to determine whether misconduct has occurred" *Gross v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975).

that up and I'll kick your ass.” It would end. But nothing is a kid thing anymore. Now I have to call the parents, then the police; we have a hearing, the Board gets in it; we go through the procedures, recommend suspension for the kid. And then the Board doesn't back their own policy decision.

Let us repeat that the principals to whom we talked enjoy their jobs, their centrality in their communities, the interaction with teachers, parents, and students, the activity and busyness. With the exception (often repeated) of some special education students who are allowed to claim their sometimes-rule-breaking is a function of their disability, the people to whom we talked do not see the regulations as wrong-headed or harmful.

But this paper is not about the principalship per se; it is about what makes the job less appealing to potential candidates. And our respondents -- to a person -- said that the increased expectations and increased demands from parents, who want and expect individual attention to their children, and legislators who want test scores increased and the gap between high and low test scores reduced, have made the job less appealing to teachers who see what principals do and decide they – the teachers – do not want to do it.

Our respondents often told stories to illustrate what teachers see and do not like. Consider one such story. A boy was passing out nude photos of a female student. The principal suspended the boy under the rules that require students to respect one another. The boy's father got a lawyer, and the lawyer argued that, in one letter, the principal said the suspension would end on Friday, the 18<sup>th</sup> of the month, and a second letter saying that the suspension would end on Monday, the 21<sup>st</sup> when school started. The lawyer argued that the discrepancy in dates made the suspension invalid or at least warranted its reduction. On the advice of the superintendent, the suspension was reduced. The principal had to explain all this to the boy's teachers who were sending home his homework, and the teachers, seeing what the principal had to deal with, said they wanted nothing to do with his job. In a premier southeast Michigan high school, even a vice principal said, “I see what my principal does and I don't want to do it.”

Lawyerly abuse is one thing. Parental abuse another. In an urban area, the highly regarded and now-former principal told an illustrative story. A mother had not picked up

her child from school. The principal called the mother and the mother had yelled at the principal, telling her that she was tired, had taken a Tylenol, and gone to bed. And she wanted the principal to stop bothering her. When the mother at last showed up at 6:30 p.m. --- it was a Friday evening – she

went off on me again about how hard she had worked the previous night and how she had taken a pill to get some sleep and she was cussing me out for disturbing her. And I had to sit there and listen that at 6:30 p.m. on a Friday when I wanted to go home and see my own family. You're a sitting duck; you don't feel protected. Teachers see the abuse you take from parents and say, "I don't see how you take it."

That same woman had earlier threatened a teacher, later threatened the principal who explained how she had complained repeatedly to central office about the threat and finally found a superintendent who had a restraining order issued. That principal cited several of the conflicts she gets in over child custody cases in a neighborhood of single mothers:

This woman sat in my office and introduced the man she was with as her husband and the kids' father. A week later, no one had picked up the children, so I put them in my car and took them home. On the way, we met the man who had been introduced as the father, and the kids got right out and into his car. I went back to school and the mother was there with another man, saying the man I had given the children to was not their father; rather the man with her was the father, and I had no right to give them over to the first man she said was the father. I had a bad day until we straightened that one out.

That principal, from an urban area, added that central office people are afraid of parents and in cases of conflict do not support her and that the state legislature has a "west Michigan mentality and has no idea what we deal with." Custody questions are not limited to poor schools. A principal in an area of houses costing hundreds of thousands of dollars recounted a similar issue of not knowing which parent had custody rights and being asked why she released the child to the actual father when the mother had been given custody. "At the end of that day, all I wanted to do was go away and be with my own family." Which again illustrates our point that conflicting community expectations, unreasonable parents, increased regulations, expand principal responsibilities and reduce their discretion. Particularly galling is the lack of parental support in some quarters:

They want their kids to learn but they don't want to help them, they want them to behave, but they don't want to help you make them behave. They want their kids to be good citizens, but they don't want to model good behavior. One mother told me she was upset that her daughter was starting to run around, but this woman had three kids by different men and she wasn't married to any of them.

According to that person, the reaction from teachers whom she would like to encourage into administration is, "I can't take the abuse you take," and "I don't see how you do it." "I don't want it." Another elementary principal cited a case of changes in rules that put administrators in conflicting situations. A six year-old child whose mother works is left in the care of the family's 16 year-old girl. The neighbors say that the child is unsupervised and the child says his sister hits him. The principal is obligated by law to report the issue to the family independent agency. But the principal knows that when she does that, the mother will no longer work with the school and may take the child and leave the area. The principals to whom we talked tell these stories not to generalize to all parents, but to illustrate their frustration. They see themselves as being the on-site expert, of knowing what to do, wanting to act in the child's best interest, and caught in conflicting situations, often with parents seeking special favors for their children, and as often from state agencies who see schools as not doing enough to solve social problems. A superintendent commented:

People are more critical. They expect the school to respond to them personally and, if the school doesn't, they have choice and charter and their kid's foundation grant. And the state? They never help us, never ask us, never seek our advice; they just tell us. And they always assume the school is guilty of something, the tenure law 503 (special education), the processes one has to go through over suspension and expulsion, everything is geared to protecting the individual. The school is always on the defensive. We're always being second-guessed.

Reflecting on the fact that increased demands from parents make the job less attractive, a principal said:

What do (parents) want from the school? Everything. And they expect to get it. And why don't teachers want the (principal's) job? Because your neck is out there all the time. It's Thanksgiving and you're the turkey and there are 100 axes. There's no

support. The district will sacrifice you rather than take a black eye from a parent.

On the other hand and regarding the number of increased responsibilities, one suburban principal separated how he sees his job from how teachers see his job: “The job makes more sense to me than it does to teachers, more sense from behind the desk than in front of the desk.” He explained further that, while the state has been increasing its expectations and sending confusing signals, he thinks the state is beginning to get its tests, standards, expectations and funding together in a helpful and coherent way. “It took (the state) some time, but it’s all starting to make sense. Teachers don’t see that; they see the job as unmanageable and are less interested.”

It all may be beginning to make sense but with the exception of the one cited, not to the people to whom we talked. They regard the aggregated demands of the job as overwhelming and contradictory. Even that last cited principal added, “every four or five months, I start to (show the pressure) and the teachers see that and tell me to take some time away.” The biggest contradiction is posed by the reform thinking epitomized in President Bush’s No Child Left Behind legislation, which calls for reducing the discrepancy between the scores of students who do well and the scores of students who do poorly.<sup>19</sup> Our respondents agree with Newmann and his colleagues that student achievement is related to program coherence and principal leadership is the key to program coherence: “principal leadership is a critical factor in determining whether a school moves forward to improve learning opportunities for students”.<sup>20</sup>

At the heart of school leadership is instructional leadership, which requires that principals be knowledgeable about pedagogy, curricular standards and benchmarks, effective instructional design and delivery, assessment and data analysis, and the most current research in all of these areas.<sup>21</sup>

And they accept the sanctions laid out in President Bush’s legislation:

---

<sup>19</sup> PL 107-110. See <http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA02/index.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Newmann, F. M., Smith, B. A., Allensworth, E., & Bryk, A. S. (2001). Instructional program coherence: What is it and why it should guide school improvement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23(4), 297-321. Quotations on p. 307.

<sup>21</sup> Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, p. 308.

Schools (receiving Title I funds) that fail to meet (expectations) must take corrective actions including replacing school staff, implementing a new curriculum, decreasing management authority . . . (and) state takeover of operations, major restructuring, students transferring to a higher performing public school, etc.<sup>22</sup>

So the problem is not reform, the logic of reform, or the place of the principal in reform. The problem is that there is little coherence between the suggested reforms and the more immediate tasks of running the school, monitoring the students, and attending to parents, whom our respondents say are less interested in test scores than in the way the school treats their child. “The parents come to conferences and they have two questions: ‘Does this teacher like my kid?’ and ‘Do I like this teacher?’” In a school with some of the highest MEAP scores in the state, the principal “spends most of my time with parents attending to their questions and requests.” In an urban junior high, the principal says, “The parents want their kid to do a little better than they did. If that means staying in high school longer, that’s what they want.” An urban district, administrators say, “What the parents want is their kid to have a good experience.” “What do the parents want? They want to know the kid is treated well.” A superintendent put the principal expectations plainly: “The community wants the halls clean, the kids in order, the grounds picked up, the place running smoothly.”

All of which means principals have to choose between spending time on instruction or spending time on with community, parents, and students. According to our respondents, they chose the latter: “When it comes to a choice between assisting a teacher and dealing with the student, the choice is always to assist the student.” And even those that accept the logic are critical of the way it is operationalized.

I’ve had teachers work on things that turned out to not of any value. . . . because the whole program changed. Now it’s changed again. . . . We put all this time and energy into MEAP testing and we get back useless data. . . . I have so much trouble justifying the energy and money that goes into (MEAP) and what we get in return. There should be a connection between testing and what they kids are going to be expected to do. . . . Students had to read three passages about being a victim and them

---

<sup>22</sup> Education Commission of the States. (2002). “No State Left Behind”: The Challenges and Opportunities of ESEA 2001. Boulder, CO: ECS, p. 19.

write their piece about being a victim. Two hours. I asked a question at a state focus group. “When have any of you ever had to write about being a victim of your employer?”

And some say they cannot implement the reforms that they are charged with implementing.

When that door gets shut and that classroom starts the teachers have to make the decision. . . . and I could show you how we have increased student achievement, but there is still some crap going on. . . . I don’t know what some of those teachers are teaching. Do I have control? Yes and no. I think I have control because kids know my expectations. But teachers close their doors and do whatever they want.<sup>23</sup>

President Bush and the state authorities want no child left behind. The community wants a clean, orderly and smooth running organization, and the parents – armed by their child’s foundation grant, choice and charter -- want their children treated well. Principals are in the middle. Attend to the building management and the parents or lose students. Attend to scores or lose your job, or see the school closed or reconstituted. For the purposes of this paper, the overlapping --sometimes-conflicting -- obligations make the job more burdensome and less appealing to teachers who might otherwise apply.

## **Conclusion**

Our topic was the decline in the number of people willing to become principals. Our sample was small but their responses were consistent with one another and consistent with larger and national studies. Consistency is an indicant of reliability, and reliability is an indicant of validity. Even with a small sample, we believe that our findings are reasonably accurate. So let us summarize.

Is there is decline in the number of applications for the principal-ship? Yes. Does that mean an absence of people available and willing to take the positions? No, but it means school boards and superintendents have to be more creative and diligent in their efforts to attract and retain good people. And from what we learned, they are doing that.

---

<sup>23</sup> Stephen, p. 292.

But even with their increased efforts, there are fewer applicants. For that, our respondents provide three overlapping explanations. First, administrators work more days and more hours in a day, and the pay differential is not sufficient to attract teachers who are already in dual income and child rearing situations. Second, teachers are better paid, better treated, and more satisfied with their positions than they were in former times. Not only have their pay and opportunities for extra income increased, they have opportunities for job-mobility and job-enlargement inside their teaching positions. Third is the increased pressure, including increased time demands, placed on principals by governments (state and federal), by parents, and by the inconsistencies among the demands. Potential applicants see that principals are in more demanding, more difficult and less attractive positions and so they decline to apply. With all of that in mind, let us make four suggestions.

1. School districts have to invest more in finding, training, and keeping administrators. Increasing the pay differential will help but not that much for senior teachers. Younger people may be the answer. Districts should be encouraged to work with intermediate districts and area universities in identifying and recruiting principals. Administrative internships, run in conjunction with university degree programs, are an important part of the effort.
2. Perhaps Michigan – the only state that does not require administrative certification – might empower some panel to examine the aggregated expectations to see if principals can realistically do what is asked. And rather than simply lobbing new expectations (with accompanying threats) at and onto the principalship, that panel might consider the possibilities and limits of the position.
3. Whatever happens, university preparation programs have to be oriented to the new expectations. Principals simply have to know more to do their jobs and universities selling administrative degrees should take steps to make sure the knowledge is available and applicable. This will mean making sure that faculty in higher education are aware of the changing nature of the job.

4. It may be that a different organizational structure be considered for schools. While management of the organization should not be separated from curricular leadership, the sum of the expectations thrust upon the principal seems, from this and other studies, to be becoming excessive. Perhaps the principalship should be added to the list of elements examined by educational researchers.



**The Education Policy Center  
At Michigan State University**

**201 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824-1034 tel 517-355-4494 fax 517-432-6202 [www.epc.msu.edu](http://www.epc.msu.edu) [epc@msu.edu](mailto:epc@msu.edu)**