School Leader
OVERVIEW
2022

THE CHICAGO PUBLIC EDUCATION FUND
The Chicago Public Education Fund (The Fund) is a nonprofit organization that improves Chicago’s public schools by investing in the talented educators who lead them. For more than 20 years, we have worked with our educator, district, nonprofit, and philanthropic partners to elevate strong school leadership in our city.

On a yearly basis, we assemble and share basic statistics about Chicago’s public school leaders — principals and assistant principals. In addition to demographic information, this overview provides insight into job histories, turnover, and retention rates.

These data illustrate the state of the principalship and the principal pipeline in Chicago. The Fund and our partners use these data regularly to advance our pipeline, in-role support, and retention efforts.

Chicago principals’ unique level of autonomy empowers them to make strategic decisions for successful school management. This includes hiring teachers and staff, developing operating budgets, and establishing schoolwide goals that meet their communities’ needs and ensure strong student outcomes.

Several Fund team members contributed to this report, including Alexis Ayala, Ashton Yurk, Chris LeSuer, Naureen Kheraj, and Patricia Mota. We would also like to thank Dr. Allison Tingwall, Dr. Michele Fernandes, and Devin Swartley in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Department of Principal Quality for their help and comments.
Principal leadership significantly impacts services schools provide to students and to the community. Strong principals collaborate with teachers, young people, and families. Together, they create safe, positive learning environments and foster student success.

Chicago principals are largely chosen by their school’s community through Local School Councils (LSCs) or other boards. Communities focus on selecting leaders whose lived and professional experiences match the school’s needs.
Principal Retention Decreased in 2022

Following three consecutive years of growth, principal retention reached 94% in 2021 but dropped to 85% in 2022, remaining relatively high. Nationwide, principal retention averaged 80% per year, and was 82% in 2017. For example, principal retention in Philadelphia ranged from 70% to 86% between 2008 and 2016. Yet Chicago’s retention remains higher despite the decline in 2022. Since Chicago’s retention increased during 2020 and 2021, a decrease from 2021 to 2022 was expected; principals tended to “hold” planned transitions during the peak of the pandemic.

Principals Leave for Different Reasons

Principals leave their roles most often when they retire or resign from the district. Of the 76 principals who left the role in 2022, 27 (36%) resigned and 28 (37%) retired. Only 21% of departures were retirements over 2017-2021.

Many Principals who Leave their Role Remain within the District

In 2022, four principals (5%) became principal at another school and 12 (16%) received a promotion to a Central Office or Network Office leadership position. Of these, eight took positions as a Network or Deputy Chief. As with retirements, principal departures due to promotions were higher (16%) in 2022 than in 2017 through 2021 (11%). This suggests the pandemic may have delayed some of these promotions. Identifying such dynamics around turnover can help inform succession planning for principals.
There are 536 assistant principals (APs) in Chicago’s district-managed schools. APs also serve in charter schools, but their data is reported and tracked differently. Principals trust their APs to implement and improve school curriculum, to support the professional growth of teachers, and to manage instructional leadership teams. Since 2020, the number of APs has increased by 22 (4.3%). At the same time, the number of schools without an AP has increased by five. In 2022-23, 68 elementary schools (16%) and nine high schools (11%) do not have an AP.
A critical next step for leadership

A Pathway to Leading

For many school leaders, the AP role is a critical stepping stone toward the principalship. The majority of current principals in district-operated schools have AP experience, often immediately prior to their current role. Of the 63 principals who started their new role from April 2022 to September 2022, 50 (79%) came to this role from an AP position. Of these former APs, 21 (33%) became the principal at the same school they were an AP. Another 29 (46%) came from an AP position at another school. In addition, eight new principals (13%) came to their role as an experienced principal from another CPS school.

ENDNOTES

1. Staffing data, including school staff size, principal and AP demographics, principal turnover and retention, and prior roles of new principals are available for district-operated schools only.

2. We calculate principal turnover for a given school year as the total number of new principals between the dates of July 1st and June 30th of that school year. The count does not include Administrators-in-Charge (AICs) or Acting Principals with 2 months or less of service or interruptions due to leave.
