

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### Crisis in School Leadership Seen Brewing in California

#### Policy Experts Say State Lacks Comprehensive Human-Resources Policies for Principals

By **Lesli A. Maxwell**

In California, where school budgets are being slashed and achievement remains stubbornly low in many districts, there is mounting concern that the supply of principals is too limited to manage the financial and academic challenges facing public schools.

Complicating matters, the state is at the front end of a wave of principal retirements, as some 40 percent of school leaders are expected to leave their jobs over the next decade. Large numbers of principals are also expected to depart the profession well before retirement age, making the recruitment of replacement talent and the retention of existing talent even more crucial.

But finding the best people to lead schools with a total of 6 million children—especially those serving large numbers of poor and low-achieving children—and creating the working conditions to keep them there, has not been a top priority for California education policymakers, some scholars and researchers say. When it comes to recruiting, training, compensating, and empowering principals to manage their schools effectively, the state's policies are falling short, they contend.

"I think there are real questions about whether the principal workforce in this state is going to have the capacity to do this increasingly complex job and do it in the kind of budget environment that exists here in California," said Susanna Loeb, an education professor at Stanford University, who co-wrote a recent **policy brief** that warns that school leadership in California needs urgent attention.

Said Margaret J. Gaston, the president of the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, in Santa Cruz, Calif.: "We need to shine the same intensity of light on this school leadership issue that we've done on teachers. We know that the quality of teachers is inextricably linked to the quality of principals."

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Over the years, California policymakers have paid sporadic attention to school leaders. In 2003, they created leadership standards meant to guide what is taught in the state's numerous principal-preparation programs. One highly regarded statewide professional-development program established in the 1980s, called the California State Leadership Academy, fell victim to budget cuts in 2003 and has never been fully re-established.

Persuading decisionmakers to focus on school leadership now may be difficult, as the state's fiscal crisis is consuming most of their attention, and money remains too tight to invest in new programs.

But one education expert says the first step is gathering detailed information about who the state's principals are, what kind of training they've had, and how they are distributed across schools.

"We know virtually nothing about this piece of the education workforce," said Ms. Gaston, whose nonprofit Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning is helping to spearhead an effort to put the state's principal workforce in the policy spotlight. "You have to know what you have before you can figure out what needs to be done to improve it."

For example, Ms. Gaston said, no data exist to show whether California's two-tiered system for obtaining an administrator credential makes a difference in the quality and skills of a principal. Under the system, which is somewhat unusual, prospective principals can take a test to earn their credential before they go on to participate in a formal preparation program.

"So we have no idea whether a principal who enters the job this way is doing as well as, better than, or worse than those who've been through a preparation program before they get the job," Ms. Gaston said. "And we have so many administrators who enter the profession this way."

Anecdotally, Ms. Gaston said that principals who enter their jobs through the "test-in" route tend to struggle like teachers who enter the profession with little to no training. And though California has created a longitudinal database for teachers, the data it collects for administrators so far is "limping behind," she said.

And as is often the case with less-experienced teachers, Ms. Gaston expects to find that the least-prepared principals are probably assigned to oversee schools that most need to have accomplished veterans running them. A [detailed report](#) from Ms. Gaston's organization



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**MARGARET GASTON**

President  
Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning

will come out later this year.

### **Stretched Thin**

But without even knowing the fine-grained characteristics of the state's principal corps, Ms. Loeb points to several obstacles in California that have impeded the recruitment of top talent to the job and likely will continue to do so.

For starters, she said, school-based administrators in California are overworked compared with their peers nationally. During the 2006-07 school year—before the state's fiscal crisis forced the layoffs of thousands of teachers and other academic support staff in schools—there were 447 students for every principal or assistant principal, compared with roughly 306 nationally. Losing teachers and staff members to tightening budgets has exacerbated that problem.

"There are just too few adults to help principals do the demanding work that's required of them," Ms. Loeb said. "When the field is stretched that thinly, it's going to make recruitment of new talent very difficult."

Then, when good prospects for the job—many of them members of the state's teacher workforce—see the small pay differential between teachers and administrators, school administration becomes even less appealing, she said. For example, in the 2003-04 school year, principals earned an average of 1.6 times the base salary of teachers.

The state's varied university-based preparation programs also present challenges to grooming the best school leaders, Ms. Loeb said.

Too few of them require their participants to have field-based internships, she said. In a national survey of principals conducted two years ago by Stanford University professor Linda Darling-Hamond, 63 percent of principals nationwide reported having internships as part of their training, compared with just 27 percent in California.

"That has got to change," Ms. Loeb said. "This is a very demanding job in terms of the diversity of the tasks that principals have to do. How can anyone be expected to walk into the job as an instructional leader, an organizational leader, and a budget manager without first having a chance to experience that in their preservice training?"

Jon Schnur, the chief executive officer of New Leaders for New Schools, a nonprofit group based in New York City that recruits and trains promising school leaders and provides them with one year of a medical-school-like residency, said many of the California candidates for his program are drawn to the rich field experience they will get.

New Leaders places its principals in schools in the Oakland Unified School District, as well as in several charter schools in the Bay Area and one in Sacramento.

"They come to us because they feel like they are going to get really intensive training for how to achieve breakthrough gains," Mr. Schnur said. "They don't feel like they can really get that in other programs in the state."

Mr. Schnur said aspiring principals in California also express frustration at the lack of

pathways into the profession.

"You are going to lose out on a lot of the best people for this job if they think the only way they can get there is by going to be an assistant principal for 10 years," he said.

Ms. Loeb, who singles out New Leaders as an exemplary program in her policy brief, also points to Long Beach Unified School District, where officials have created a leadership-development program that carefully identifies internal school leadership talent and provides opportunities to groom aspiring principals.

"We've got models in California that are working on a local level," she said, "but we need to get serious about creating something on a much larger scale."

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