



Philadelphia Citywide Principal Survey Report

Commissioned by Elevate 215 on behalf of the Philadelphia
Citywide Talent Coalition

July 2026

METHODOLOGY

On behalf of Elevate 215, Embold Research surveyed Philadelphia School District principals to better understand the key motivators and challenges within the role. This research also seeks to better understand the school leadership pipeline and where leaders see the future of their role.



Survey n=135 Philadelphia district and charter school principals from May 1-22, 2026

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Respondents were recruited via email outreach by Elevate 215 and other coalition partners

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The margin of error is 6.6%*

*Based on a population of 341 total district and charter school principals, with a 95% confidence level

SAMPLE OVERVIEW



67% Women
32% Men
1% Non-binary
0% Other



49% Black
39% White
7% Hispanic
4% AAPI
1% Other



1% 18-34
56% 35-49
39% 50-64
3% 65+



58% SDP Public School
42% Philadelphia Charter School



79% Kindergarten-5th grade
64% 6th-8th grade
33% 9th-12th grade



Years of Education Experience in Philadelphia

1% 0-2 years
1% 3-5 years
7% 6-10 years
17% 11-15 years
75% 16 years or more

KEY FINDINGS

01

Principals are dedicated and experienced leaders, not only in education but in Philadelphia specifically

02

There is optimism and satisfaction across many aspects of the role, although experiences vary across principal groups

03

Principals face a wide range of challenges, including staff shortages, workload demands, and limited access to funding

04

Most principals feel they could be better supported in efforts to recruit or retain effective and diverse teaching staff

05

Principals enter school leadership through diverse pathways but share common motivations for taking on the role

06

Most principals have considered leaving, and they generally agree on the incentives to keep them in the role

Key Finding #1:

**Principals are dedicated and experienced leaders,
not only in education but in Philadelphia specifically**

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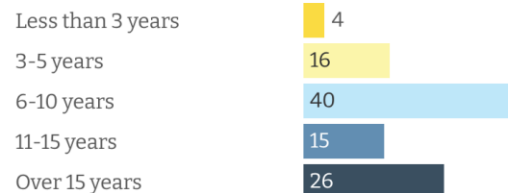
Of the principals surveyed, the vast majority report extended experience in teaching, leadership, and the Philadelphia education space

Virtually all principals (92%) have spent at least 11 years in Philadelphia public education, and large majorities have 6 or more years in either teaching or acting as principal.

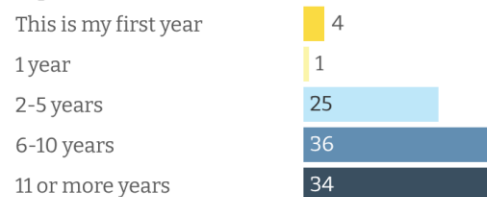


Levels of Experience of Philadelphia Principals

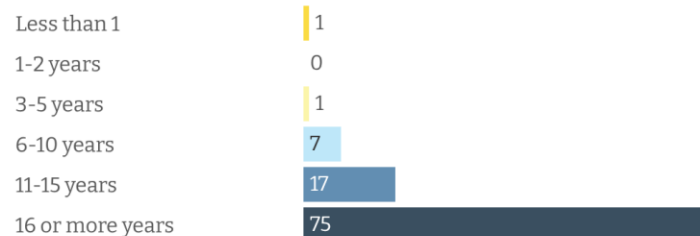
Total years of teaching experience



Total years of principal experience



Total years in Philadelphia education



Key Finding #2:

There is optimism and satisfaction across many aspects of the role, although experiences vary across principal groups

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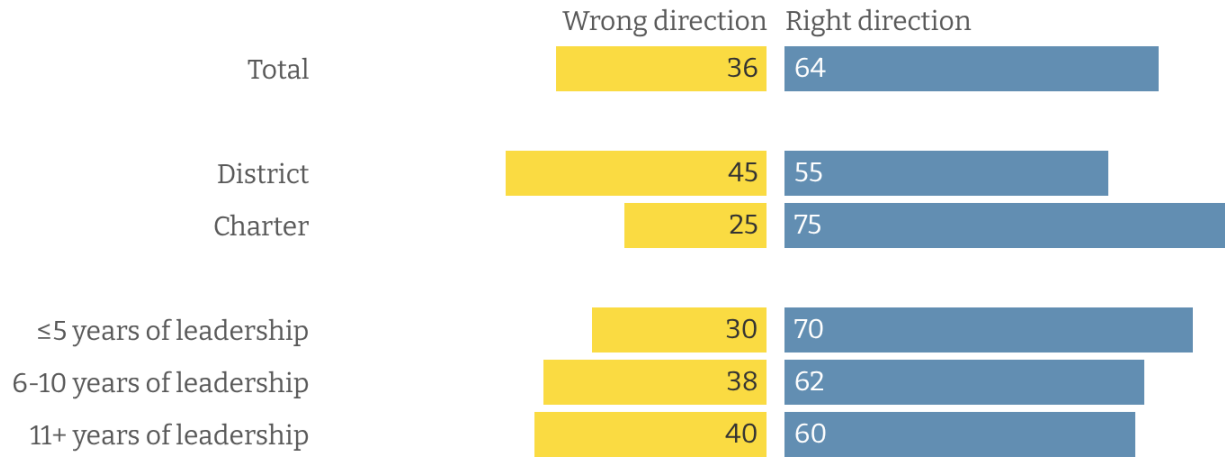
Nearly two-thirds of principals say Philadelphia schools are moving in the right direction.

There is a notable difference in the intensity of this belief across district and charter school principals. Additionally, newer principals are more optimistic than their experienced colleagues.

EMBOLD research

In general, would you say district and charter schools in Philadelphia are going in the right direction or the wrong direction?

● Wrong direction ● Right direction

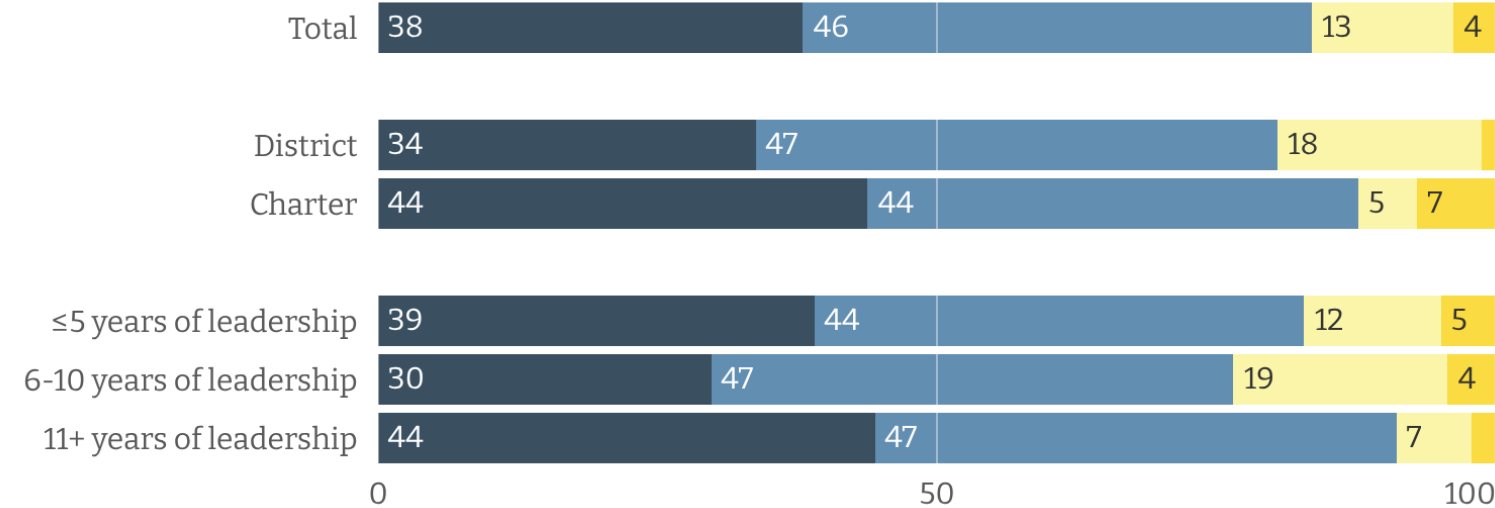


A strong majority of principals are generally satisfied with their current leadership role.

EMBOLD research

In general, how satisfied are you in your current school leadership role?

● Very satisfied ● Somewhat satisfied ● Somewhat unsatisfied ● Very unsatisfied



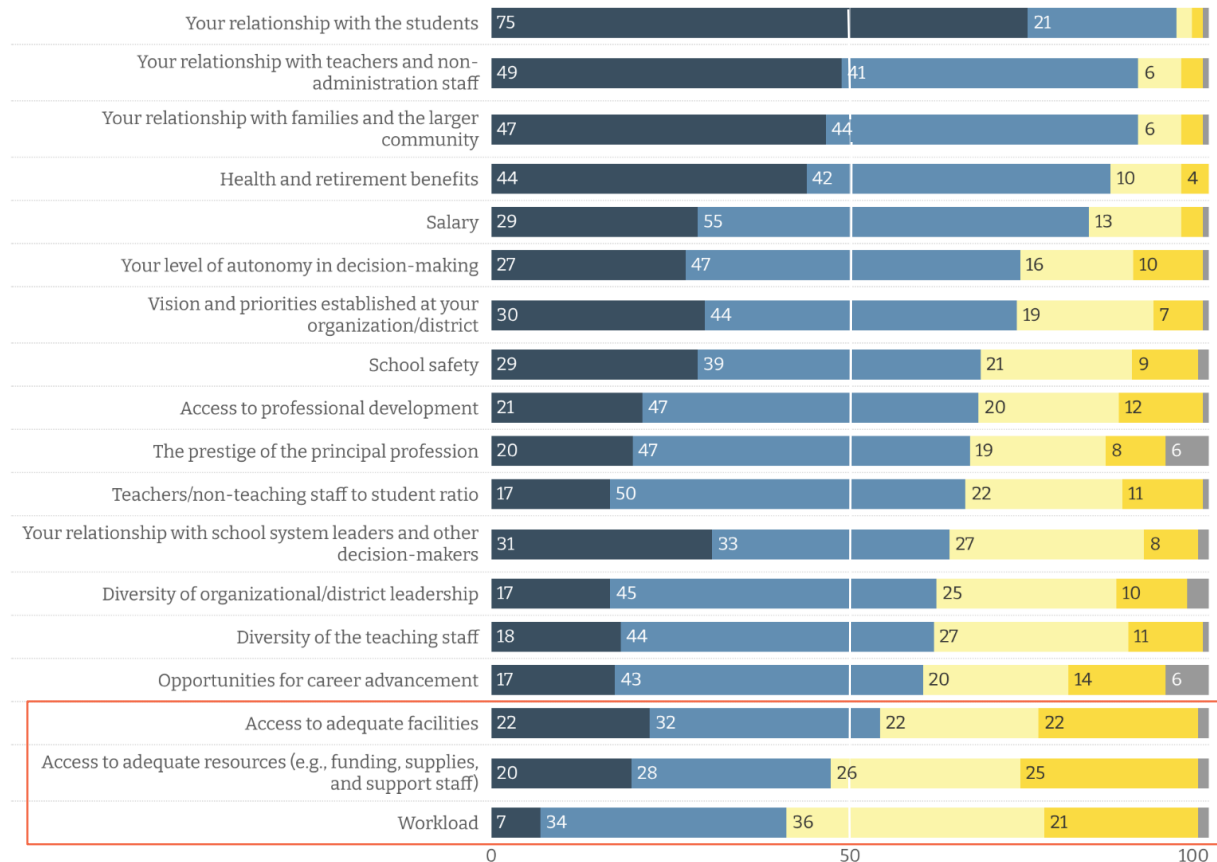
While satisfaction is generally high, there is notable dissatisfaction with sufficient resources and workload



EMBOLD research

How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of your current school leadership position?

● Very satisfied ● Somewhat satisfied ● Somewhat unsatisfied ● Very unsatisfied ● Not sure



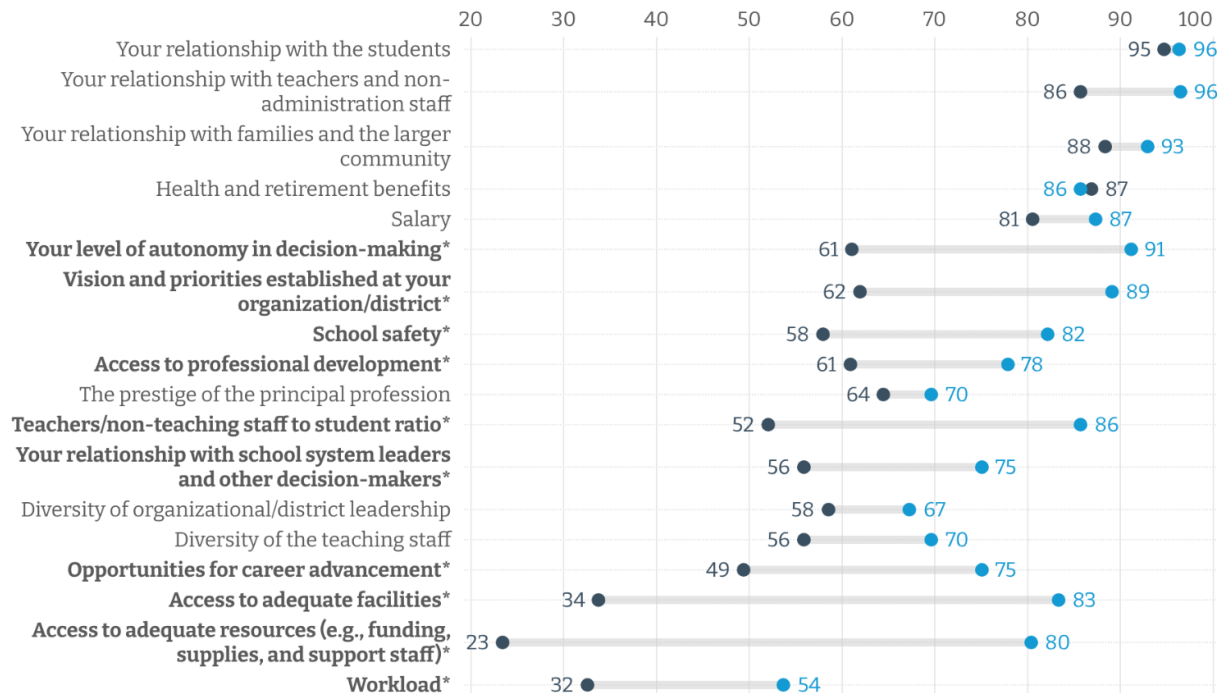
There exists a prominent satisfaction gap between district and charter leaders.

These gaps in satisfaction are the widest when it comes to adequate facilities and resources; however, this gap persists in key areas such as perceived autonomy, workload, and future paths in the profession.

EMBOLD research

How satisfied are you with each of the following aspects of your current school leadership position?

● District ● Charter



Numbers above represent % Total Satisfied

*Represents a statistically significant difference

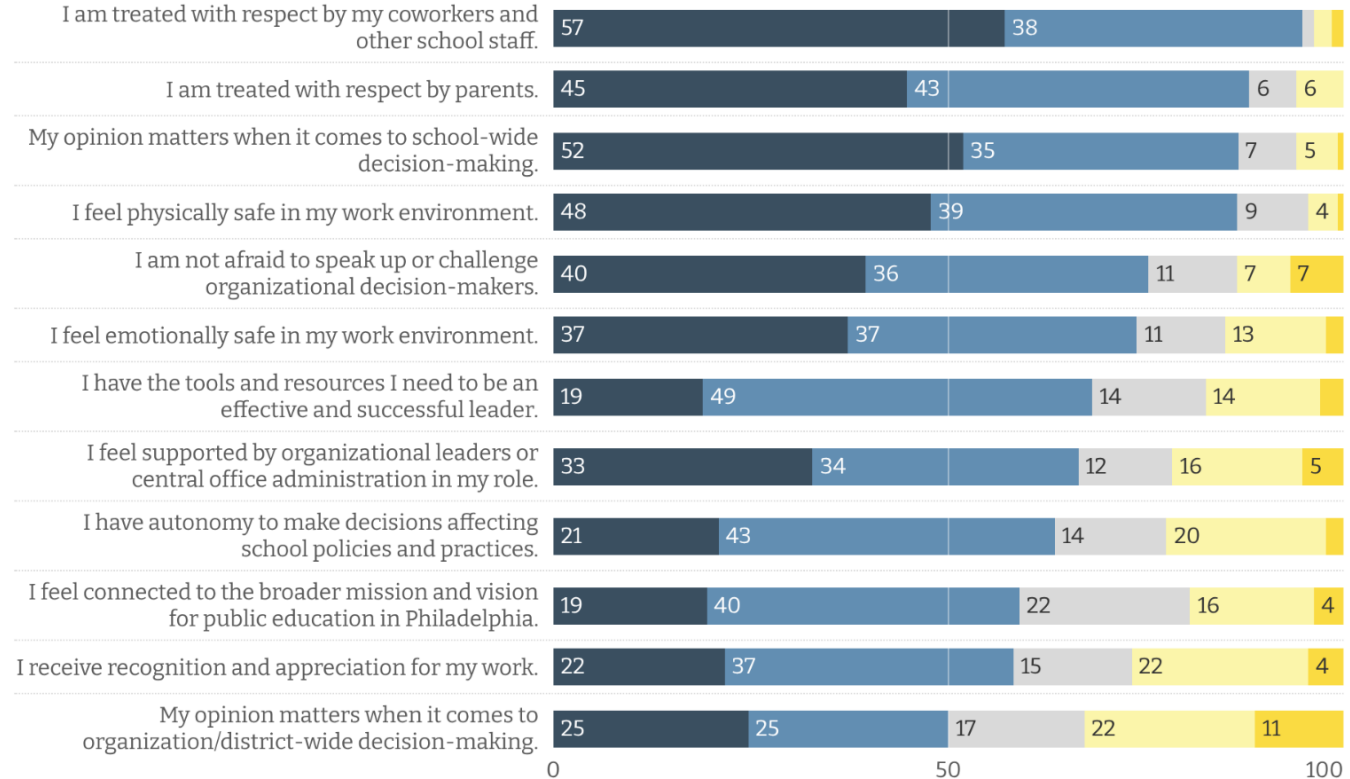


When testing varying statements related to work quality, majorities of Philadelphia principals report positive work environments for them to lead effectively.

EMBOLDresearch

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements: “In my current school leadership position...”

● Strongly agree ● Somewhat agree ● Neither agree nor disagree ● Somewhat disagree ● Strongly disagree



District principals are much less likely to feel heard, recognized, and appreciated as leaders.

Most notably, less than a third of district principals feel that their opinion matters when it comes to organization/district-wide decision-making.

EMBOLD research

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements: "In my current school leadership position..."

	Total	District	Charter
I am treated with respect by my coworkers and other school staff.	95	94	96
I am treated with respect by parents.	88	86	91
My opinion matters when it comes to school-wide decision-making.	87	85	89
I feel physically safe in my work environment.*	87	79	96
I am not afraid to speak up or challenge organizational decision-makers.	75	70	82
I feel emotionally safe in my work environment.	74	69	81
I have the tools and resources I need to be an effective and successful leader.*	68	56	85
I feel supported by organizational leaders or central office administration in my role.*	66	51	88
I have autonomy to make decisions affecting school policies and practices.*	63	51	81
I feel connected to the broader mission and vision for public education in Philadelphia.	59	58	60
I receive recognition and appreciation for my work.*	58	48	72
My opinion matters when it comes to organization/district-wide decision-making.*	50	30	77

Numbers above represent % Total Agree

*Represents a statistically significant difference



Key Finding #3:

**Principals face a wide range of challenges, including
staff shortages, workload demands,
and limited access to funding**

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There is consensus that staff shortages, workload, available funding, and inadequately prepared teachers are significant top challenges.

EMBOLD research

Which of the following would you consider the most significant challenges in your current role? Select up to THREE.

Numbers below represent percentage selected by each respondent group

Statement	Total	District	Charter	5 years of leadership	6-10 years of leadership	11+ years of leadership
Shortage of staff to address student needs	42	42	43	43	38	47
Workload	37	35	39	38	36	38
Available funding for the school	36	47	21	33	43	38
Inadequately prepared teachers	36	32	41	25	32	44
Expectations around student achievement	27	25	30	30	23	27
Management of student behavior	27	19	38	33	36	16
Politicization of education	25	27	21	10	34	27
Implementing new curriculum and pedagogy	16	21	9	13	17	18
Lack of autonomy when making important decisions	14	18	9	13	13	18
Lack of professional growth opportunities	9	12	5	3	11	9
Lack of support from organizational leaders	9	13	4	8	9	16
Inadequate salary or benefits	8	3	16	10	11	4
School safety	8	9	5	3	9	11
Negative interactions with parents	4	5	2	3	9	0
Tension or poor relationships between teachers and administrators	4	5	2	3	4	4
There are no challenges in my current role	1	0	2	3	0	0
Something else (please specify)	11	13	9	15	6	13

Write-in answers
largely focus on
truancy/attendance



In their own words, the most significant challenges principals face center on staffing, resources, and workload.

1. Staff Quality and Pipeline	“Access to high quality and certified teachers and staff equipped to serve our population.”
2. Financial Resources	“ Lack of funding for staff positions to support ever increasing student needs is the biggest challenge I face as a school leader. The way the funds are distributed and allocated to schools DIFFERENTLY based on arbitrary measures is the most frustrating aspect of my role.”
3. Workload and Burnout	“One of the greatest challenges I face as a school leader is managing the increasing workload without having enough personnel to effectively distribute responsibilities.”



Key Finding #4:

**Most principals feel they could be better supported
in efforts to recruit or retain effective and diverse
teaching staff**

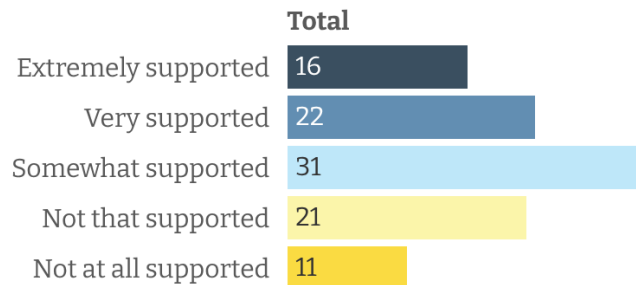
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Few principals feel supported in efforts to recruit or retain effective and diverse teaching staff.

Principals are slightly more likely to feel they have support in retention efforts than in recruitment efforts.

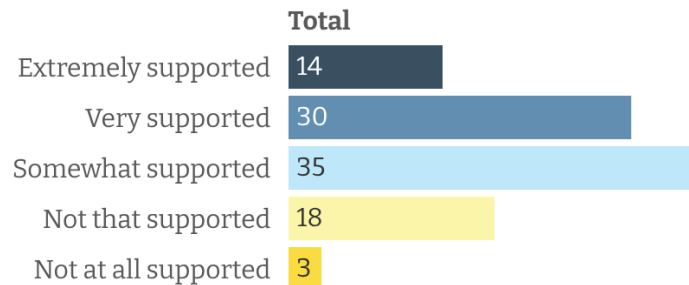
EMBOLDresearch

How supported do you feel in **recruiting** an effective and diverse teaching staff?



EMBOLDresearch

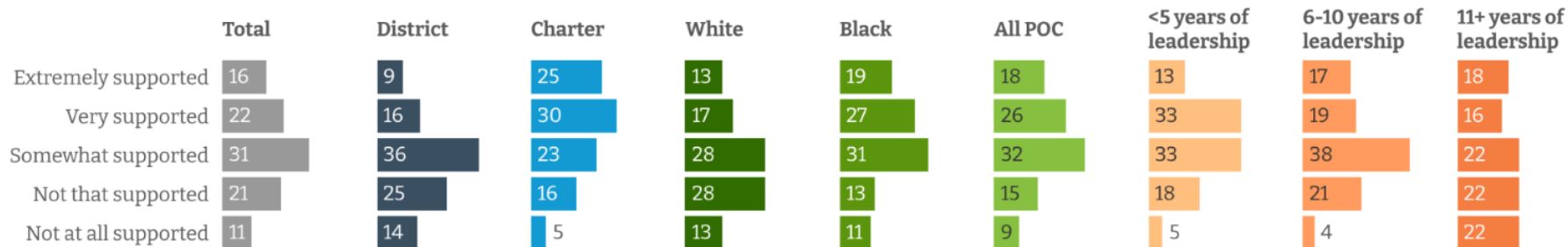
How supported do you feel in **retaining** an effective and diverse teaching staff?



District principals and white principals are less likely to feel supported in staff recruitment efforts.

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How supported do you feel in **recruiting** an effective and diverse teaching staff?

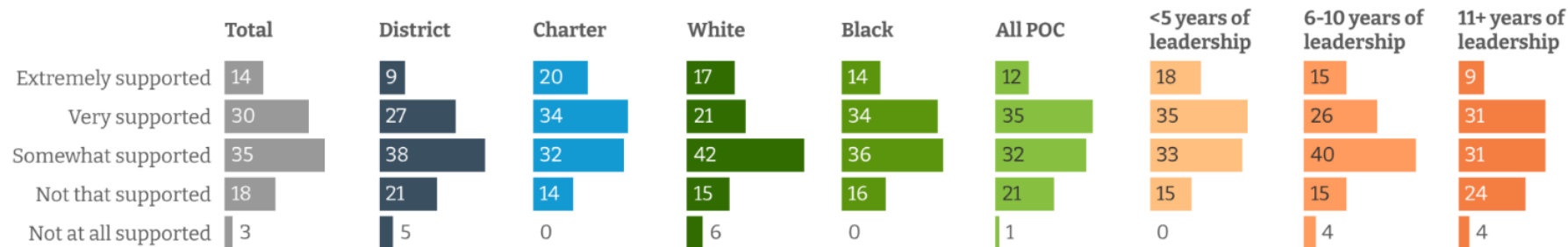


There exist similar differences in perceived support when it comes to retention.

Additionally, the most experienced principals are the least likely to feel supported in retention efforts.

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How supported do you feel in **retaining** an effective and diverse teaching staff?



For principals who don't feel supported in retention and recruitment efforts, insufficient applicant pools and inadequate candidate preparation are seen as the most prominent barriers.

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[If less than "very supported"] What do you consider the biggest barriers to recruiting or retaining an effective and diverse teaching staff at your school? Select up to TWO.

	Total	District	Charter	White	Black	All BIPOC	5 years or less	6-10 years	11 or more years
Insufficient applicant pool	67	64	75	77	59	58	65	68	68
Inadequate preparation before entering the classroom	53	57	43	36	67	67	61	44	55
Uncompetitive salary and benefits	31	26	43	41	26	25	35	38	23
Inadequate mentorship or support structures	15	13	18	13	21	17	13	12	19
Limited autonomy over hiring decisions	13	18	4	5	26	21	13	18	6
Lack of organizational commitment to diversity in hiring	9	11	4	5	8	10	9	6	13
Limited career advancement opportunities while remaining in the classroom	7	7	7	5	8	8	4	6	6
Something else (please specify)	11	10	14	18	8	6	13	12	10



Write-in answers largely focus on difficult or extended onboarding processes. Some also mention a lack of funding.

Key Finding #5:

Principals enter school leadership through diverse pathways but share common motivations for taking on the role

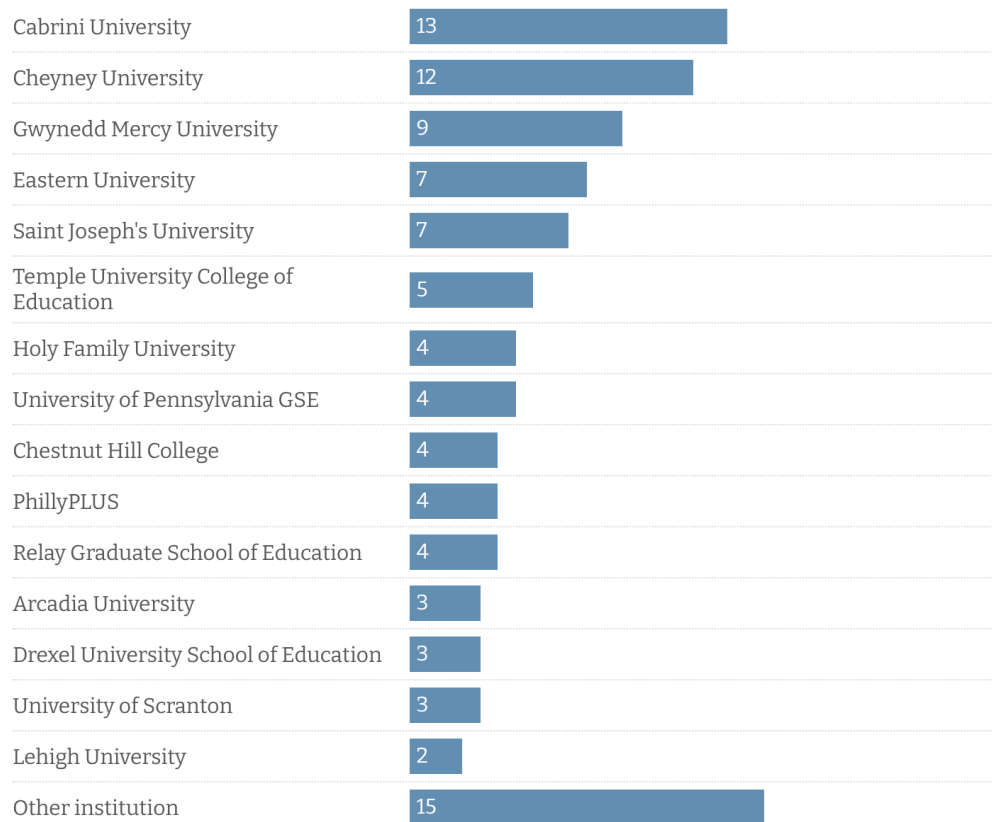
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Principals have pursued their PA certification through a variety of institutions, with the most common being Cabrini and Cheyney Universities



EMBOLD research

At what institution did you attain administrative certification?



Represents percentage of both options selected from a pre-determined list and respondent write-in. Institutions that were identified less than three times are counted within the category of "Other institution."

Pathways to leadership are highly varied.

Leaders are roughly divided among those who found their role through recruitment, promotion, or seeking leadership independently.

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Which of the following best describes your pathway to becoming a school leader?

	Total	District	Charter	White	Black	All BIPOC
I was promoted from within my school or organization	34	28	42	35	31	33
I was recruited or encouraged by a mentor or supervisor to pursue leadership	30	35	24	33	27	29
I sought out leadership independently through a formal preparation program	25	27	24	23	27	26
I entered through an alternative or non-traditional pathway (e.g., emergency certification, fellowship program)	7	7	7	6	10	8
I transitioned from a leadership role outside of a public school environment	2	1	2	2	2	1
Other (please specify)	2	3	2	2	3	3



Principals are highly unified in their motivation to seek a leadership role to make a positive impact.

A notable proportion of principals of color and district principal also report being highly motivated by a personal connection to the Philadelphia community.

EMBOLDresearch

Which of the following factors were most influential in your decision to become a school leader? Please select up to THREE.

	Total	District	Charter	White	Black	All BIPOC
Wanting to make a positive social impact on the community	65	60	71	63	66	66
Wanting to work in a school environment/context beyond a teaching role	35	27	47	37	32	36
Wanting to improve social, racial, or economic justice	34	37	29	21	39	41
Inspired by a peer or mentor to pursue school leadership	34	35	33	35	32	33
Personal connection to the Philadelphia community (e.g., grew up here, attended Philly schools)	33	47	15	15	44	46
Wanting a leadership role in the education space	32	27	38	48	23	21
Wanting more influence in school policies and practices	32	29	35	35	31	28
Pursuing career advancement and professional development opportunities	21	21	20	21	21	21
Inspired by a friend or family member who was or is a school leader	15	19	11	10	23	20
Increased salary	13	11	16	19	10	9
Access to health and retirement benefits	0	0	0	0	0	0



Principals identify a range of significant barriers to becoming a school leader, with Charter school principals more likely to be aligned on key barriers like cost and balancing workload

At the same time, nearly a quarter of principals report not experiencing any significant barriers to leadership.

EMBOLD research

Thinking back to your journey to becoming a school leader, which of the following were significant barriers you faced along the way? Please select up to THREE.

	Total	District	Charter
Cost of principal certification or graduate programs	28	19	40
Balancing preparation requirements with existing teaching responsibilities	21	17	25
Family or personal obligations	20	20	20
Racial, gender, or other identity-based barriers	18	23	11
Lack of mentorship or support from existing leaders	17	15	20
Limited access to leadership development opportunities	17	19	15
Lack of exposure to the principal role	12	11	13
Not seeing yourself represented in school leadership	12	15	7
Unclear or inconsistent pathway to advancement	11	13	7
Navigating credentialing or bureaucratic requirements	8	9	7
Lack of encouragement or recognition of leadership potential	5	5	4
School or organizational culture that discourages aspiring leaders	5	5	4
Geographic limitations on program availability	1	1	0
Other (please specify)	2	1	2
None — I did not face significant barriers	24	25	22



Key Finding #6:

Most principals have considered leaving, and they generally agree on the incentives to keep them in the role

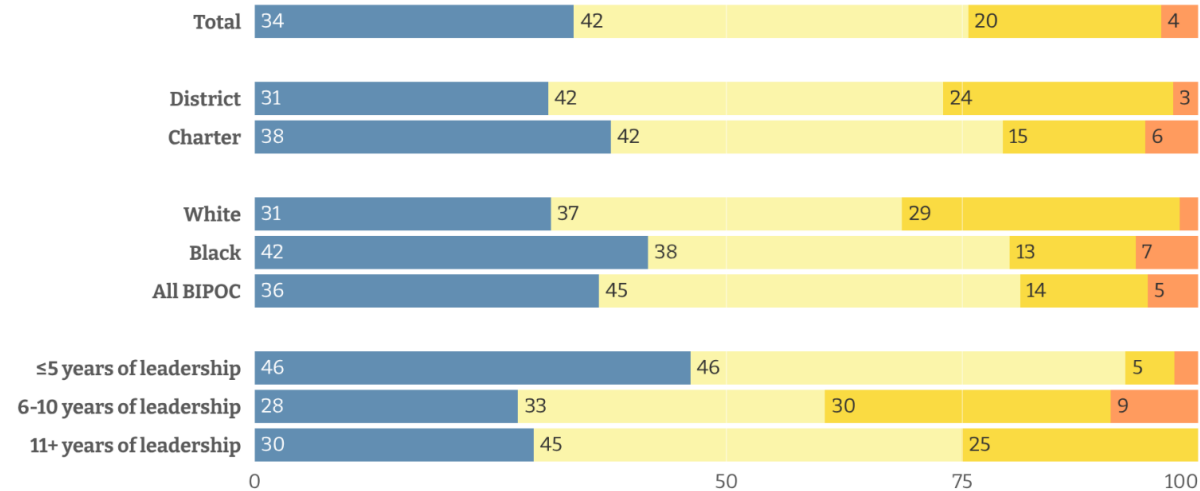
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Two-thirds of principals have considered leaving their role.

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Have you ever considered leaving your current leadership position?

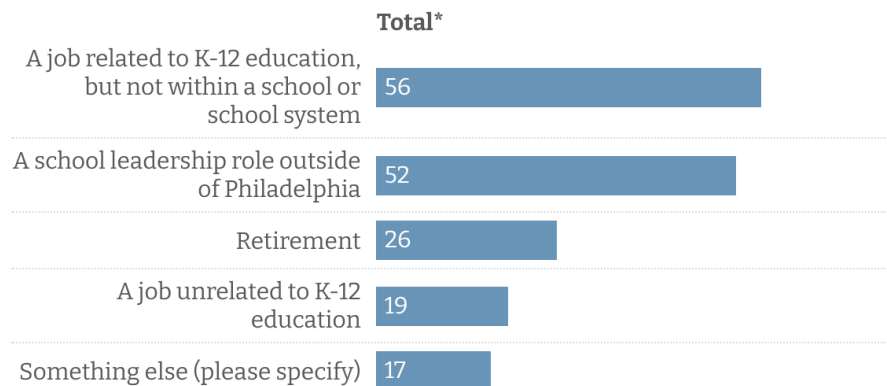
- No, I have never considered leaving
- I have considered leaving, but have not taken any action to pursue other opportunities
- I have considered leaving and have taken steps to pursue other opportunities
- I have considered leaving and I'm already planning to leave



Among those who have thought about leaving, there is a strong desire to continue working within the broader education space.

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Which of the following would you consider pursuing if you decide to leave your current leadership in Philadelphia? Select all that apply.



**Only shown to respondents who indicated they have considered leaving their current leadership role to some extent*

From the 17% who propose another path:

1. Seeking further promotion or higher leadership position
2. Shift to central office role
3. Leadership coaching



Principals are aligned on top incentive priorities, but there are key differences in secondary priorities across school type and years of experience.

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Please select and rank the top FIVE incentives, activities, or conditions that would make you consider extending your service as a Philadelphia school leader.

Incentive	Overall Rank	District	Charter	Considered Leaving	Has not considered leaving
Increased funding for your school	1	1	2	1	1
Salary increases	2	3	1	2	2
Reduced workload	3	2	3	3	3
Retention bonuses	4	5	5	4	6
Increased teaching positions allocated	5	4	11	5	9
Increased support staff positions allocated	6	6	10	6	7
Coaching and mentoring support	7	12	4	7	4
Robust mental health resources	8	7	9	9	5
Revised workday schedule	9	8	8	8	10
Policies to increase teacher hiring/retention	10	11	7	11	8
Professional development opportunities	11	13	6	10	11
Policies to increase non-teaching staff hiring/retention	12	9	13	13	12
Greater authority to hire/organize staff	13	10	15	12	15
Housing-related interventions	14	14	12	14	13
Identity-based affinity groups or PLCs	15	15	14	15	14

Rank based on adjusted average weighted score

Scoring: Rank 1 = 5pts, Rank 2 = 4pts, Rank 3 = 3pts, Rank 4 = 2pts, Rank 5 = 1pt, Non-selection = 0pts

Primary advice for policymakers: listen, respond to, and respect school principals.

Many principals report feeling excluded from and undervalued in key policy conversations about bettering student experiences and outcomes:

“One piece of advice I would give policymakers is to listen directly to school leaders who are doing the work every day. If Philadelphia wants to attract, support, and retain high-quality school leaders, policymakers must **create conditions where leaders feel valued, protected, and supported, not just held accountable.**”

“Talk with us. Listen to us. Collaborate with us.”

Principals also commonly cite inadequate resources for school programs and leadership pipelines as a priority issue:

“**Allocate funds and resources** so students can receive appropriate programming and interventions.”

“One piece of advice I would give policymakers is to **invest intentionally in mentorship, leadership pipelines, and professional growth** opportunities, especially for leaders of color”



CONCLUSION

Philadelphia's principals are motivated and broadly satisfied, but a persistent district–charter divide on perceptions of areas, including autonomy, recognition, and support shapes how they experience the role and whether they see a future in it.

Principals are united by purpose but strained by workload and resources—the two pressures most tied to thoughts of leaving. With two-thirds of principals thinking about leaving their role, retention hinges on relief, not just recognition.

Across school type, experience level, and background, Philadelphia principals demonstrate consensus for greater support for recruiting and retaining effective, diverse teaching staff.

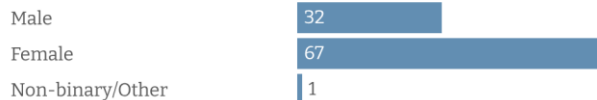
APPENDIX

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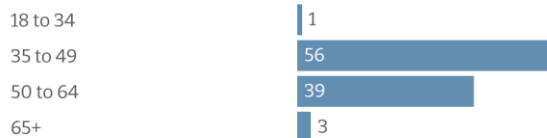
Demographic Composition of Sample

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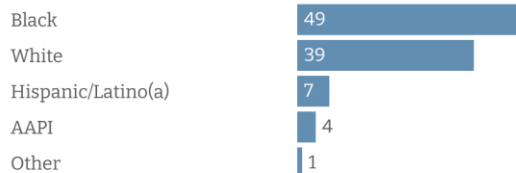
Gender



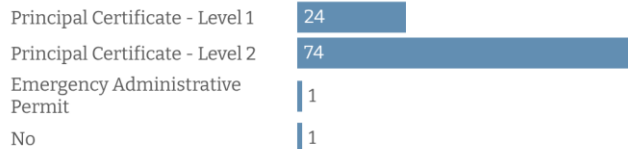
Age



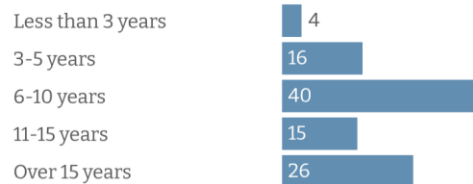
Race/Ethnicity



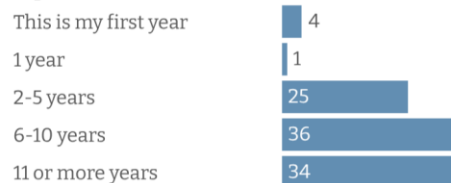
PA Principal Certificate Status



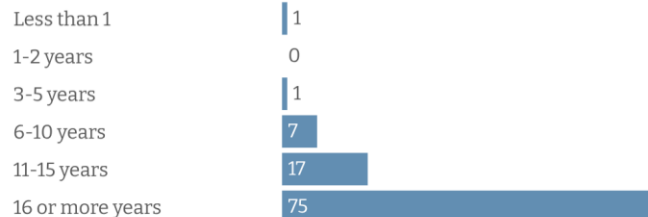
Total years of teaching experience



Total years of principal experience



Total years in Philadelphia education



School Type Composition of Sample

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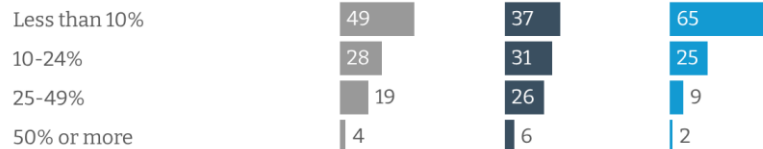
Students Eligible for Free/Reduced-price Lunch



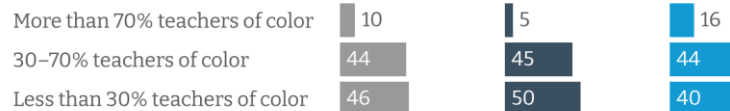
Students with IEPs



ELL Students



Teachers of Color



Grades Served

