4TH ANNUAL PRINCIPALS' ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Strategic Data

Introduction

Principals are more optimistic this year than last. Even though they continue to report being challenged by inadequate funding, insufficient student readiness, and confusion about implementation of the Common Core, they are also quick to demonstrate appreciation for their teachers' commitment to their students and their professional development efforts. There is little doubt that public schools struggle with insufficient funding, and the general lack of resources impacts everything. However, each year principals and teachers greet their students with the intention of providing a year's worth of meaningful learning experiences.

Most of the issues that permeate K-12 education have a common element – change. Even when it is being made for the "right" reasons such as improved learning outcomes, change can be difficult to navigate. The rate of change in public schools has accelerated and it influences issues across the board including teacher effectiveness, technology, curriculum, assessment, and accountability.

This year 539 principals responded to the survey. Each year the survey is designed to be representative of schools across the country. This means that each year the survey results are comparable in the number and type of schools represented (elementary, middle-and high-school) and their geographic distribution.

Common Core Implementation

Unquestionably, the primary issue dominating K-12 schools in most states this year is the implementation of the Common Core standards. 73.5 percent of respondents are in districts that have adopted the Common Core.

Despite the political pushback that dominates the news, the majority of districts have either implemented the standards or are in the process of implementing them. 36.4 percent of the principals reported that the transition had already occurred. 59.3 percent responded that the implementation was ongoing and only 4.3 percent said they are still in the planning stages.

Status of Implementation	Count	Percentage
Still planning for it	17	4.3%
Doing it now	235	59.3%
It's already done	144	36.4%

In previous years as the deadline for Common Core implementation approached, principals expressed anxiety around the testing and assessment component as well as its effect on teacher evaluations and the impact on changing instructional practices. Since political pushback on the Common Core has increased over the last year, the survey included a question to determine the amount of concern still felt in the districts. 35.9 percent of principals said they were less concerned about the implementation than they were last year. 34.3 percent maintain they feel the same amount of concern as last year. 29.8 percent report an increase in concern.

Throughout the survey, principals reveal their preoccupation with Common Core on issues that range from increasing expectations of students and teachers to assessments and online testing. Although 46.2 percent of respondents reported that Common Core was controversial in their district, no correlation was found between the principals who feel greater concern this year and the states where the standards are experiencing political challenges.
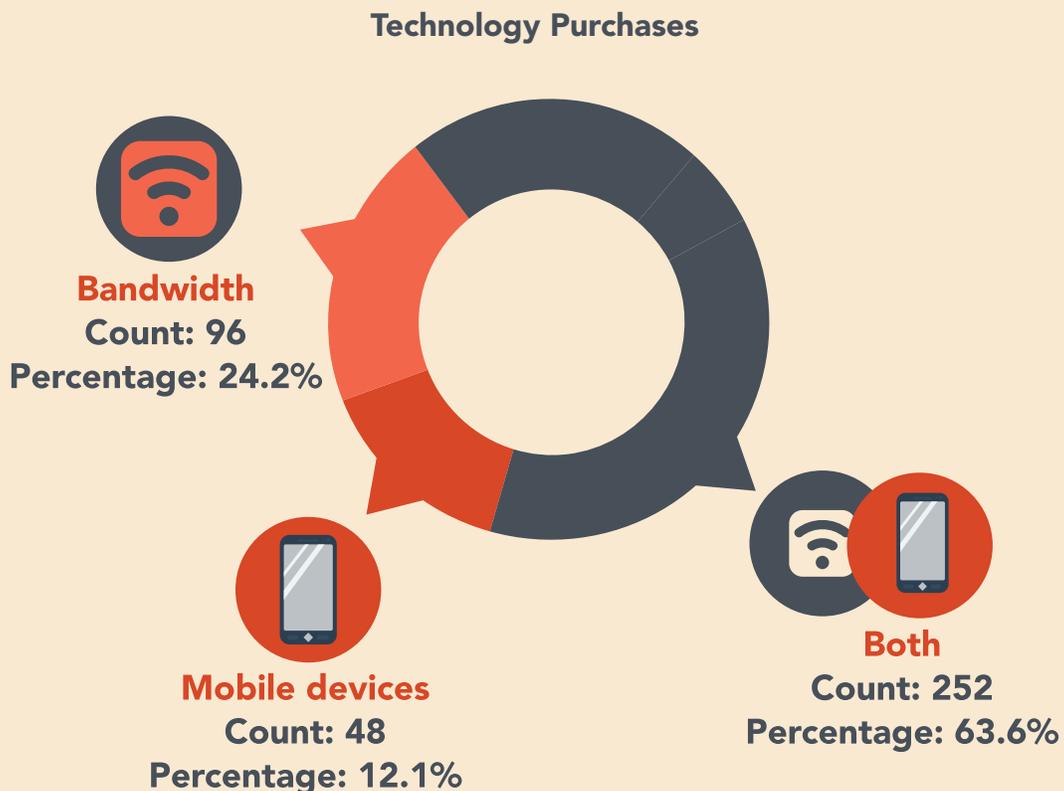
In a follow-up question, only 10.7 percent of principals cited political reasons for the controversy in their district. The greatest source of Common Core controversy for principals is their parent community (19.4 percent), which may or may not reflect political drivers. Unclear implementation (15.3 percent) is the second most cited reason for controversy, followed by the rate of change (10.2 percent).

Ranking at less than 10.0 percent each, teachers who oppose the standards, concern about Common Core content, instructional rigor, and assessments round out the principals' list of concerns.

For those districts not implementing Common Core standards, 57.3 percent are revising their standards to incorporate college and career readiness standards as outlined by the U.S. Department of Education. These standards are intended to help ensure that all American students graduate from high school ready for college or careers, and are an attempt to respond to the 40.0 percent of new college students who require remedial classes.

Technology

Sufficient access to technology that supports curriculum and instruction continues to be a primary concern for public school principals. 56.8 percent of them report that the implementation of Common Core is driving their technology purchases. Online testing consortiums PARCC and Smarter Balanced require secure, simultaneous online testing. When asked if they were more focused on increasing bandwidth or acquiring mobile devices, 63.6 percent of principals responded they were purchasing both.

Technology Purchases

Bandwidth
Count: 96
Percentage: 24.2%

Mobile devices
Count: 48
Percentage: 12.1%

Both
Count: 252
Percentage: 63.6%

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The survey next asked principals if they had sufficient bandwidth to provide secure online testing. 53.6 percent of respondents reported affirmatively that they have sufficient bandwidth. However, 23.8 percent said they do not have appropriate bandwidth levels for online testing and 22.6 percent of principals are not sure how they will meet the testing requirements.

Bandwidth Level	Count	Percentage
Yes	289	53.6%
No	128	23.8%
Not sure how we will meet the requirements	122	22.6%

A continuing technology trend, from this year's study, is teachers utilizing online tools for professional development and collaboration. Three quarters of teachers, 76.4 percent, are accessing online collaboration and professional tools. 48.2 percent of teachers are using both school and personal technology to access services and tools while 42.9 percent are using primarily school technology.

Concern about protecting student privacy from the encroachment of big data is also an issue for principals. More than 90.7 percent of districts report having written policies protecting student data. When asked if they have any concerns about the loss of student privacy or network security as teachers and students download apps, 54.7 percent of principals are not concerned while 45.3 percent have security concerns about their networks and protecting student data.

The Role Of Apps

There are now thousands of education apps available through both the Apple and Google app stores, and they are playing a more prominent role in the classroom. Respondents were asked who decided which apps would be used in the classroom. Technology coordinators and teachers are usually the ones who choose specific apps, whether they are curriculum related or productivity tools.

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Who Selects the Apps

Roles	Count	Percentage
Teachers	163	30.2%
Principal	74	13.7%
Tech Coordinator	167	31.0%
Students	2	0.4%
Parents	0	0.0%
Any of the above	133	24.7%

When asked how they assess the educational value of an individual app, 52.1 percent of principals responded that they listen to recommendations from curriculum specialists, other educators, or administrators. The second largest group of 30.8 percent, leave it to the teacher to decide while a small minority of principals determine which apps will be used at their schools.

Who Asseses the Value of the Apps?	Count	Percentage
Leave it to the teacher to decide	166	30.8%
Listen to recommendations from curriculum specialists, other educators, or administrators	281	52.1%
I decide which apps will be used in my school	14	2.6%
Other	78	14.5%

Funding

In last year's Principals' Assessment report, the consensus was that after a three-year decline, funding cuts had bottomed out and principals were hopeful that their budgets would begin to improve. This year, however, principals note that inadequate funding and lack of resources are still critical issues. In fact, 73.8 percent of principals say that funding is not any better this year even though they hoped for more. Only 26.2 percent reported that their funding situation had improved compared to last year. Principals were also divided on expectations that funding would improve for next school year. The majority of principals, 58.3 percent, are not expecting improvement while 41.7 percent are more optimistic.

Early Childhood Education

For the last two years, we have asked principals whether or not they have or are planning to add a preschool program. The importance of good early childhood education as a prerequisite for student readiness is becoming more widely believed. Strong early education can narrow the skills gap often seen in less-advantaged students and help increase their readiness for appropriate grade-level work.

56.0 percent of principals report they already have a preschool program (slightly up from last year). 35.1 percent of districts are not considering it. Another 8.9 percent of districts are considering the addition of preschool to their K-12 programs. In a follow-up question, 46.4 percent of principals reported that their preschool enrollments were expanding, while 53.6 percent answered no to this question.
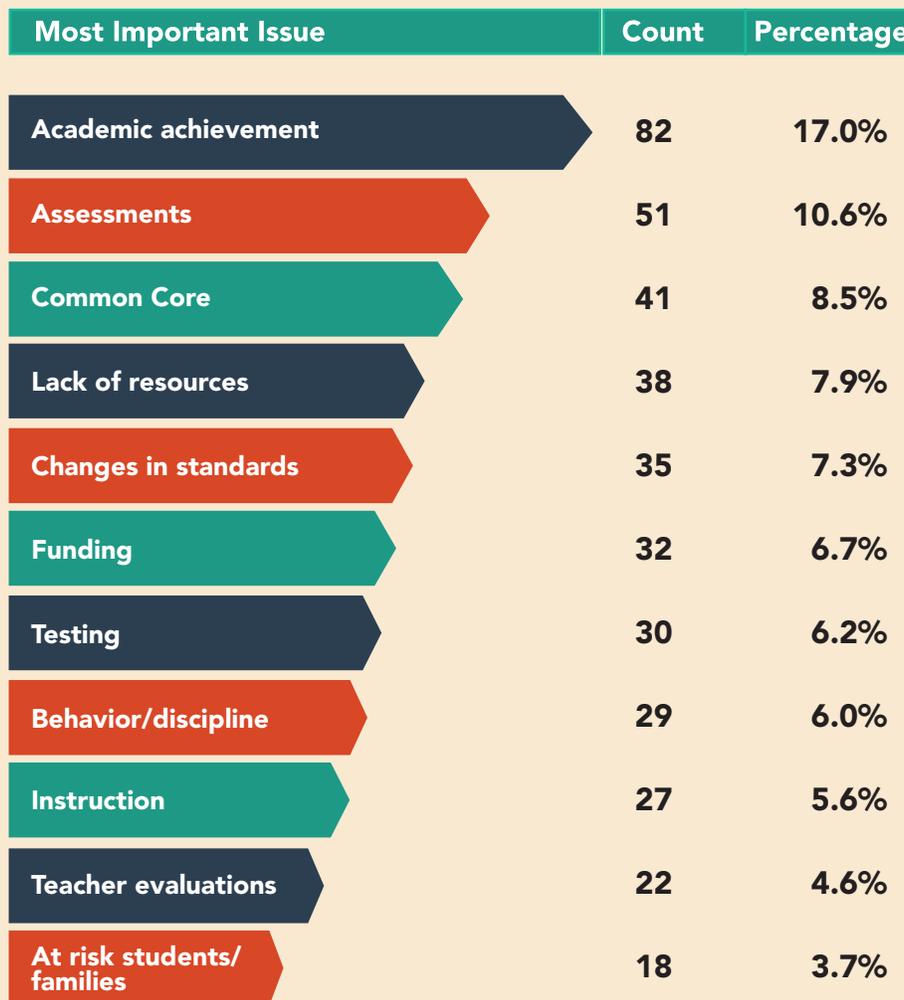
Primary Concerns

The general lack of resources whether it be funding, teachers and staff, technology, professional development, or limitations of the curriculum are noted in multiple places in this year's survey. Lack of staff, changes in how teachers are evaluated, insufficient student readiness, the implementation of Common Core, and other concerns contribute to the difficulty of creating an effective educational environment in today's schools.

Primary Concerns	Count	Percentage
Inadequate funding	110	20.4%
Insufficient student readiness	101	18.7%
Other	92	17.1%
Confusion about Common Core implementation	66	12.2%
Economic fragility of families	54	10.0%
Inadequate professional development	46	8.5%
Poor teacher morale	29	5.4%
Lack of technology	22	4.1%
Lack of district support	19	3.5%

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When asked to identify their single-most important issue this year, the top two principals' responses aligned precisely with the same issues cited in the 2013 survey: academic achievement and assessments. Changing standards, lack of resources, and Common Core implementation all make an appearance on this year's list of critical issues for principals just as they did last year.

Most Important Issue	Count	Percentage
Academic achievement	82	17.0%
Assessments	51	10.6%
Common Core	41	8.5%
Lack of resources	38	7.9%
Changes in standards	35	7.3%
Funding	32	6.7%
Testing	30	6.2%
Behavior/discipline	29	6.0%
Instruction	27	5.6%
Teacher evaluations	22	4.6%
At risk students/families	18	3.7%

The one exception to this list is mandates. There were not enough principals who mentioned mandates, unfunded or otherwise, on this year's survey to earn a spot on the chart. One explanation for this might be wider acceptance of the implementation of Common Core standards as some states are now in their third year of transitioning to the new standards.

Critical Issues

The issues of testing and assessments are a recurring theme in this year's survey. Educators believe in the value of formative assessment, which can shape ongoing instruction. The goal to embed formative assessment into the curriculum so that regular review of student progress becomes an integral part of ongoing instruction is one that many educators welcome. The problem is with the summative assessments – specifically the number of standardized tests that are taking place in most districts. They are no longer reserved for end-of-grade tests, but are conducted throughout the year.

Thinking about and planning for the standardized tests contribute to both student and teacher apprehension. The loss of instructional time because of the tests is a concern for principals, classroom teachers and parents. Also, there is still general concern about the role and value of standardized testing in today's schools. Although the tests generate data about student progress, questions remain about how accurately the tests measure student achievement.

All of the issues mentioned above have a significant impact on teacher effectiveness and student readiness for achievement. Further, these issues impact teacher morale, which has been a critical issue for the last several years. One of the areas of improvement in this year's report is in the area of teacher morale. The following table compares how principals regard their teachers' morale this year compared to last.

Teacher Morale 2013

Better	36.9%
Worse	40.8%
About the same	22.4%

Teacher Morale 2014

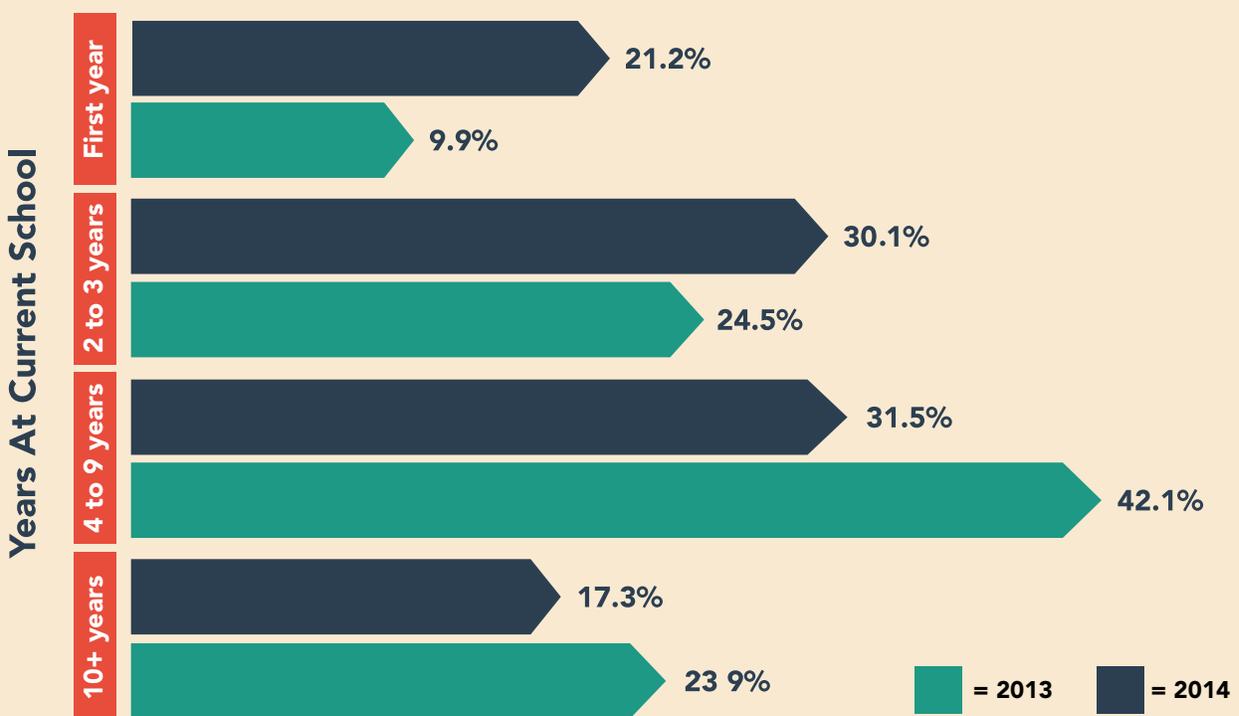|	
Better	41.6%
Worse	26.5%
About the same	31.9%

Positive shifts can be seen in the number of principals rating teacher morale as higher this year and fewer principals who regard the situation as worse than the previous year. Uncertainty about how new teacher evaluations will be tied to student achievement, particularly in districts where Common Core implementation has been difficult, is a factor in teacher morale. 41.6 percent of principals rate their teacher's morale as higher than last year.

Limited resources put extra burdens on teachers, but morale has improved despite that. Smaller budgets have resulted in the elimination of many staff positions, including media specialists and teacher aides. Fewer teachers mean larger class sizes. Increased expectations and lack of appropriate support is a formula for stress, burnout, and early retirement – all important contributors to morale.

Student readiness to learn and academic achievement are influenced by more than just what happens in classrooms. Teachers are understandably concerned by how their evaluations will be impacted by students who struggle with language, instructional deficits, economic factors, and more rigorous curriculum standards. Many states, such as New York, Kansas, Missouri, Oregon, and Maryland, are delaying the inclusion of test results in teacher evaluations for two years. It is likely that some accommodation for student readiness must be developed because not all students are sufficiently ready for grade-level work.

Change in Principals' Leadership Experience

One significant change we find this year is in the length of time that principals have been at their current schools. In last year's survey, 44.0 percent of principals indicated that they were somewhat or very likely to retire in the upcoming three years. In this year's survey, we see the beginning of that shift. Here are the year-over-year comparisons:

Years At Current School

First year
- 21.2% (2014)
- 9.9% (2013)

2 to 3 years
- 30.1% (2014)
- 24.5% (2013)

4 to 9 years
- 31.5% (2014)
- 42.1% (2013)

10+ years
- 17.3% (2014)
- 23 9% (2013)

= 2013　　= 2014

The number of principals in their first year at their current school has more than doubled since last year. And, while there is an increase in principals in their 2nd and 3rd year, there are significantly fewer principals who have been at their schools for four years or more. These numbers do not necessarily reflect an overall decrease in principals' total experience.

However, the impact of shorter duration at their current schools can impact everything from teacher recruitment to how limited resources are deployed to meet the school's needs. Changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment often follow a change in principals.

Change in leadership is one more aspect of the changes that districts are experiencing. For education reformers who believe that classrooms in 2014 differ little from classrooms at the turn of the 20th century, it is important to note that while change in education may appear slow, the actual rate of change in some districts can be overwhelming.

This data suggests an interesting question. Is the rate of principal retirement accelerating? The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) helps provide insight here. The most recent data from NCES on the movement of principals comes from their 2012-2013 survey.

They organized public school principals into three categories: those who remained at their current school (stayers); moved to another school in the district (movers); or those who left (leavers).

Public K-12 Principals 2012-2013

77.0%
69,320
Stayers

12.0%
10,270
Leavers

7.0%
6,230
Movers

For those who left their school in 2012-2013:

- 37.6% (3,860) retired

- 24.6% (2,530) remained in schools but not as a principal

- 29.9% (3,070) remained in K-12 but not at a school

- 6.9% (710) left K-12

In next year's survey, we will ask principals the question again and compare the 2013-2014 NCES statistics to those collected here. Whether or not principals are retiring at an accelerated pace should then become clearer. There are anecdotal indications that teachers and administrators are feeling increasingly burdened with responsibilities that are not matched by resources or funding – to the point of leaving the profession. Next year's survey will address this issue more specifically.

Positive Trends

Principals noted a number of positive trends that made them more optimistic about their schools this year. 12.6 percent of principals see the change in standards as a positive not a negative shift. Paired with that, principals see better instruction and increased rigor of the curriculum as a positive outcome. Also, many view 1:1 mobile device initiatives as a positive trend. Even with the many challenges teachers face, principals value the quality and commitment of their teachers and are encouraged by other small pockets of positive activity as seen in the following table.

Positive Trends	Percentage
Positive change in standards	12.6%
1:1 technology	12.6%
Teacher quality & commitment	12.2%
Better instruction/increased curriculum rigor	11.0%
Increased student achievement	7.5%
Commitment to professional development	5.7%
Increased family involvement	4.3%
Higher expectations of students	4.3%
Increased resources	4.1%
Data-driven instruction	3.1%
Better teacher evaluation tools	2.2%

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Conclusion

K-12 principals are gaining experience in managing change in their schools. Shifting expectations for what is taught and how it is taught are active conversations in every school whether they are implementing the Common Core standards or not. The role of technology in teaching and learning still preoccupies administrators as they search for the best devices, the strongest level of bandwidth, and the digital curriculum that will best serve their students. One of the ongoing trends is teachers searching out professional development opportunities online while looking for ways to collaborate with other teachers.

Expectations about accountability for students and teachers are also shifting. Even in non-Common Core states, there are new benchmarks for student achievement and new evaluation methods for teachers. These principals' voices are important. Each year they provide a snapshot of what is happening in schools across the country. As we transition into a better understanding of what constitutes 21st century skills and fostering a life-long commitment to learning, principals provide a window on how millions of teachers and students live that out in classrooms every day.

We thank all the principals who responded to our survey.

About Annie Galvin Teich

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About MCH Strategic Data

MCH Strategic Data (www.mchdata.com) is a U.S. based compiler of comprehensive K-12 and early childhood marketing databases. MCH provides email, direct mail, telemarketing, online, social media, and geospatial marketing solutions focused on more than five million K-12 educators. For more information, contact Lynn Schear, Director of Sales, at 800-776-6373 or lynns@mchdata.com.

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