



PRINCIPAL PRIORITIES MEMO

STUDY CONTEXT AND LEARNING QUESTIONS

The responsibilities of K-12 public school principals have expanded exponentially within modern U.S. public school systems. Educational researchers have suggested that principals spend more time on building and maintaining relationships than any other function during the workday, and that their roles as both administrative managers, instructional leaders, and community leaders may sometimes conflict. However, there are few published insights surrounding the ways in which K-12 principals support, prioritize, and make decisions concerning math education.

This study elevated community insights from K-12 public school principals around math education in the context of their broader school management priorities and explored decision-making on different aspects of K-12 math education. Principals who enter their role with a science or math background may prioritize mathematics education differently. However, very little is known about how K-12 principals at any grade level think about their math programs within the multiple priorities that they manage in their building. Furthermore, there is little research on a principal's role in influencing decisions that are made within a school around math priorities (e.g., core and supplemental curriculum, professional learning, assessment, and other supports). There is also limited empirical data on priorities or influences of K-12 principals at different grade levels or those working in historically underserved communities.



Learning Question 1:

How does math education fit within the broader priorities and demands on K-12 public school principals' time and resources?

Learning Question 2:

How do K-12 public school principals view their roles in leading or influencing decisions related to math education in their schools?

Learning Question 3:

Where do K-12 public school principals' priorities and decision-making capacities around math education intersect or diverge across different grade levels? How do these capacities intersect or diverge within schools that serve children and families from historically underserved communities?

METHODOLOGY

In October, ResultsLab invited principals in the K-12 Practitioner Panels to participate in 30-minute Microsoft Teams interviews. Participants in the K-12 Practitioner Panels must have >51% Black/African American and Hispanic/Latinx students or have >51% of their students qualify for free or reduced lunch. After fielding an interest survey to establish a pool of potential interviewees, ResultsLab selected participants after considering distribution of participant demographics, school demographics, and professional experience. Priority was given to educators from Gates Foundation priority states (Washington, California, Texas, Florida, and New York), but educators were not excluded from the study based on their state of residence.

Eight principals participated in the study. Six identified as women and two identified as men. Three of the participants reside in Gates states (California = 2, Texas = 1) and the remaining five reside in Alabama, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, and Tennessee. Three participants are elementary school principals, three are middle school principals, and two are high school principals. Six out of eight principals work at schools where 51+% of their students qualify for free or reduced lunch, with three out of eight principals describing their community as “rural,” three describing their area as “suburban,” and three describing their community as “urban.”

INSIGHTS



Learning Question:

How does math education fit within the broader priorities and demands on K-12 public school principals' time and resources?

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“It's OK in society for people to say they're not good at math, but it's a stigma to say they're not good at reading.”

- Elementary School Principal

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Although there were few explicit comments from principals concerning their personal allocation of time and effort towards math, a common theme emerging from many interviewee comments was a

perceived imbalance between math and other subjects (especially reading) in district policies and teacher focus. For some principals with prior math educator backgrounds, this was an issue of personal importance as much as professional concern, with a few principals recounting regular engagement in math teacher observations and coaching support in addition to their broader school leadership responsibilities.



Learning Question:

How do K-12 public school principals view their roles in leading or influencing decisions related to math education in their schools?

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“Our job is to hire good people and give them what they need to get the job done and trust that they have the expertise to be able to do it without us interfering.

So when the teachers say, Hey, I need this, and [if] it meets our bounds of making our school to successfully achieve our goals, we get it for them.”

- High School Principal
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Our principal interviewees described their leadership and influence over math education in terms of various forms of advocacy. For example, a number of principals at multiple grade levels emphasized the importance of advocating for positive math attitudes and teacher buy-in for math education strategies during teacher hiring, coaching, and evaluation interactions. Additionally, many principals commented on their efforts to connect their teachers with external professional development and training opportunities specific to math (e.g., training conferences) and advocating for district funding and support to make this possible.

Finally, several principals commented on their own personal involvement in math-related decision-making contexts, such as serving on district math committees, advocating to district leadership / boards for improved curriculum resources, and pushing for additional math department staffing where feasible.



Learning Question:

Where do K-12 public school principals' priorities and decision-making capacities around math education intersect or diverge across different grade levels? How do these capacities intersect or diverge within schools that serve children and families from historically underserved communities?

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"Somebody likened Math to a stepchild, and I feel like even that statement is a pause for equity.

I'm very concerned about lack of access, [and] lack of motivation, especially for our most fragile students ... [But] I feel like everybody can learn complicated mathematics if we have the mindset and the right tools to provide to the students."

- Elementary School Principal

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Intersecting themes emerging across different grade levels included particular concerns with serving the needs of English Language Learners (ELL) in communities with higher proportions of migrant and multi-national families. One principal noted the tension between special controls or oversight (from state or local authorities) on under-performing schools restricting principal and the need for teacher autonomy around curriculum, programming, hiring, and other elements of educational delivery to meet a student population that typically comes to school with even greater needs (higher proportions of ELL and IEP students) than wealthier neighboring communities. Other principal interviewees from multiple grade levels emphasized how critical it is to hire and retain teachers who believe that all children can learn math, even if the local labor marketplace makes finding qualified teacher candidates more challenging than elsewhere.

Although there were few, if any, striking divergences in responses across grade levels, a few middle- and high-school level principals noted ongoing concerns with alignment of math curriculum between school levels, as well as the potential negative impacts of district-level social promotion policies that may result in greater disparities in math skills with age than in other subject areas.

ADDITIONAL TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As with many of our Community Insights studies and group engagements, all of the principals interviewed for this study demonstrated a strong passion for math education and a desire to connect

with their professional peers to support the advancement of math education both locally and on a broader scale. While we aspire for our Community Insights Network panels to provide some of the networking support and engagement desired by this cohort of educational leaders, we recognize that the educational needs and aspirations expressed by our interviewees may far exceed the capacity of any single online community or resource.

We look forward to opportunities in the coming year to expand outlets for educational practitioners to voice their aspirations and exchange solutions to systemic and emergent challenges in the math education space.