

POLICY & PRACTICE BRIEF

PRINCIPAL ATTITUDES ABOUT STATE POLICYMAKING IN MINNESOTA

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SERIES OVERVIEW

The [Minnesota Principals Survey \(MnPS\)](#) was developed to “elevate principal voice” in Minnesota education policy and better understand the working conditions, concerns, and needs of Minnesota school leaders. The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota conducted the second biennial MnPS in Fall 2023, with nearly 1,000 responses from school leaders across the state.

CAREI conducted a series of follow-up focus groups in Summer 2024 to better understand school leaders’ experiences and ideas. A total of 36 school leaders participated in one of seven focus groups on the following topics: 1) Addressing student mental health challenges; 2) Addressing staff mental health challenges; 3) Communicating about race, gender, and culture with families and community; 4) Engaging families in school-level decision-making; 5) Establishing a robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS); 6) Leaders of color perceptions and experiences; and 7) Recent state policy changes.

Our [Policy & Practice Briefs](#) summarize survey and focus group findings on these topics, with an emphasis on what school leaders tell us they need. Please reference the companion Policy & Practice Guides, where we translate findings into research-aligned recommendations for three audiences: 1) [state policymakers and leaders](#), 2) [district leaders and school boards](#), and 3) [principal preparation and professional development providers](#).

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief summarizes MnPS and follow-up focus group findings related to **state policy changes** made during the 2023 and 2024 legislative sessions that directly affect K-12 schools. First, it offers a rationale for why principal voice matters in state policymaking. Next, it presents key findings and analysis from the MnPS about principal

involvement in policy influence. Lastly, it summarizes principals’ reactions to recent state-level policy changes, and closes with what participants told us they need for their perspectives to be included in state policy decisions.

WHY DOES PRINCIPAL VOICE MATTER IN STATE POLICYMAKING?

Principals are ultimately responsible for implementing much of K-12 education policy designed and enacted by state governments. Principals have school-level knowledge and understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing their schools. Without principal voice (i.e., contextual knowledge and expertise), policies, although well intended, may be less likely to achieve desired education outcomes.

SURVEY SAYS: MINNESOTA PRINCIPALS SEEK POLICY INFLUENCE

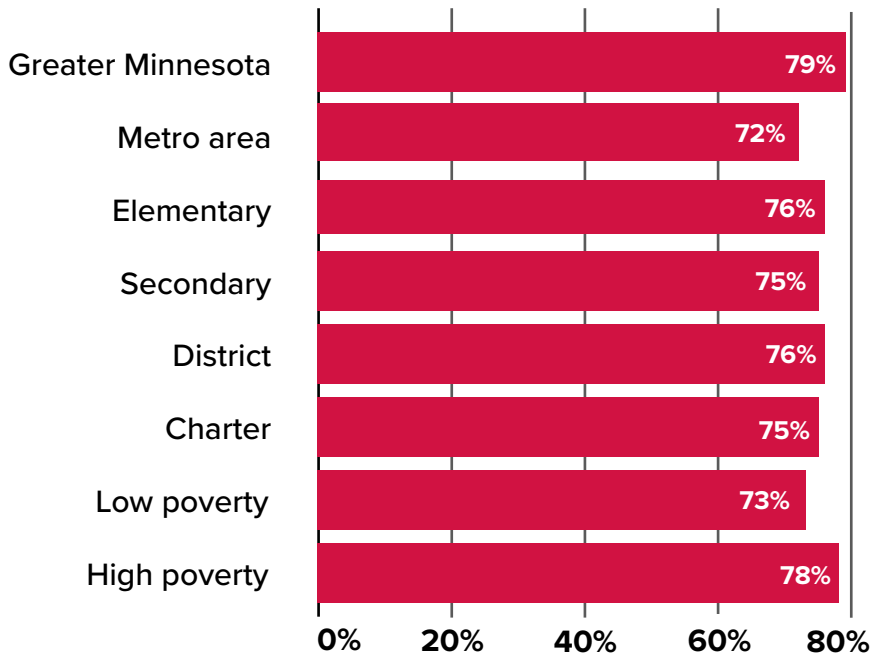
The 2023 MnPS revealed that most principals have sought to influence state policy in at least one way over the past two years, but principals desire greater influence. In fact, the percentage of principals indicating they desired greater influence over state policy rose from 70% to 76% from 2021 to 2023.

IS THE DESIRE FOR POLICY INFLUENCE SIMILAR ACROSS GROUPS?

In subsequent survey analyses, we found that the desire for state policy influence was strong across various geographic and demographic school contexts, exceeding 70% for all principal subgroups examined (see Figure 1, next page). Both principals in Greater Minnesota and principals of high-poverty¹ schools reported a slightly greater desire for policy influence than principals from the other demographic groups.

1. Here, high-poverty schools are defined as schools in the top two quartiles of all Minnesota public schools in terms of the percentage of students eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch, effectively schools with 35% of the student body eligible for FRPL or higher. Low-poverty schools are those in the bottom two quartiles, effectively schools with less than 35% of the student body eligible for FRPL.

Figure 1. Percentage of principals agreeing or somewhat agreeing that they want greater influence over state policy, across subgroups, 2023 (MnPS)



WHAT MOTIVATES PRINCIPALS TO INFLUENCE STATE POLICY?

Focus group participants shared that policy matters to them. Not only would they like legislators to understand how policies affect their day-to-day work, they would like to have influence in the policy development process. They expressed frustration with having to implement several new policies (i.e., mandates) at once and shared that the implementation timelines were both daunting and overwhelming for reasons related to limited resources (e.g., staff and funding). Regarding specific policies (i.e., limits on recess detention, K-3 suspension, and other forms of exclusionary discipline) and more stringent teacher licensing rules, some principals felt that their hands were being tied or their decision making options were being taken away.

“I joined this focus group because I know policy matters. And [legislators] making decisions... need to know that what they do matters and it has implications in our day-to-day, minute-by-minute work.”

“We almost never take recess away from elementary aged kids. It’s cutting our nose off to spite our face. Little children need to run around and move, right? But to be told you absolutely can never do it is ridiculous. [It is] very, very frustrating to have our hands so tied.”

HOW DID PRINCIPALS REACT TO RECENT LEGISLATIVE CHANGES?

Like survey respondents, focus group participants had mixed reactions about the changes coming out of the 2023 legislative session. Several participants expressed agreement with three policies in particular: the Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act, new Ethnic Studies requirement, and non-exclusionary discipline policy. However, principals had more negative responses about new policies than positive ones, being primarily concerned about not having the capacity to implement them and potential legal consequences.

“I don’t have quite as positive thoughts about perhaps the depth of understanding of what it takes to [implement the policies] in a whole state and the amount of funding [needed]. My positive thoughts turn a little sour at that. I know some teachers from [Central Minnesota city] met with maybe the lead author of that [legislation] and they walked away with their mind blown about what that person had no idea about.”

“I have talked to lawyers more in the last year and a half than ever in my entire career. We spent tens of thousands of dollars on lawyers last year because every one of these little bit of accountability pieces means you have to make sure or you could be sued. Make sure or you could lose your license.”

WHAT CHANGES DO PRINCIPALS WANT TO SEE IN STATE POLICY?

Focus group participants requested **fewer policies to implement**. They expressed concern about having sufficient staff and funding to implement policies like the READ Act as well as the non-exclusionary discipline and K-3 suspension policies. They wanted **adequate funding attached to these policies** and believed that funding would assist them in having the flexibility to make decisions about how to best implement them. In addition, they communicated needing **support in staffing their schools** and viewed current licensure laws as barriers to retaining staff. Furthermore, principals perceived **accountability pressures** as having contributed to the exodus of educators from the profession.

“You know we have a hard time...finding teachers, but beyond teachers, really anybody else to do the work...I think we were short 70 some paraprofessionals in our district last year.”

“There is some loss of trust between education and the communities, or something. And that is why we’re losing people. For every bit of accountability that is there, for every little legislated ‘You must do this to be accountable because we don’t trust you,’ that’s one more reason that a teacher has to cover their own [expletive]. That’s one more reason where a teacher goes, ‘Well, I could be fired if I don’t do this right.’”

WHAT DO PRINCIPALS NEED FOR THEIR VOICES TO BE HEARD?

Responses from both focus group participants and the MnPS indicated that principals wanted their voices to be heard by state-level policymakers. In order to advocate for their schools, they needed legislators to **understand their day-to-day realities** and felt their leadership was diminished when mandated to implement policies with limited resources, staff, and decision making autonomy. Principals who participated in the focus groups expressed a **need to be trusted** as professionals and also **to be partners in the development of education policy**.

“If they’re going to make educational legislation, if they’re going to make policy changes that are going to impact schools, they have to actually spend some time in schools and be there and see it, right? Get a chair thrown at you once in a while, and see how you feel about suspensions.”

CONCLUSION

As indicated in the 2023 MnPS and follow-up focus groups, Minnesota principals felt overwhelmed at having to implement multiple new policies that came out of the 2023 legislative session. They did not think they had sufficient guidance, resources, or staff capacity to implement them effectively. They also felt that they needed to have more influence in the policy making process to ensure that their schools’ needs were understood and therefore better addressed. To learn more about how to support school leaders in their advocacy efforts, please see our Policy & Practice Guides for [state policymakers and leaders](#), [district leaders and school boards](#), and [principal preparation and professional development providers](#).

REFERENCES

Brogan, D., Pekel, K., Kemper, S., Seabrook, R., Carter, C., & Stanley, D. (2023). The Minnesota Principals Survey Policy & Practice Brief: Mental Health. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota.

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