

POLICY & PRACTICE BRIEF

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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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 on **Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)**. First, it offers a definition of CRSL from research and explains why it matters. Second, it presents key findings from the MnPS about declines from 2021 to 2023 in both principals’ self-efficacy in practicing select CRSL activities, and the frequency with which they enact CRSL practices. Lastly, the brief summarizes what we learned from focus group participants related to CRSL and what they need to more regularly enact it.

WHAT IS CRSL AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

This brief draws on the Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) framework developed by Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016). The CRSL framework resulted from an extensive synthesis of literature on “leadership, social justice, culturally relevant schooling, and students/communities of color” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1272), and includes four key components: (1) critical self-reflection, (2) developing culturally responsive teachers, (3) promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments, and (4) engaging students, families, and communities. CRSL matters because it bridges the goal of student equity (or the elimination of racially disparate and predictable outcomes) with concrete, actionable, and interrelated leadership practices. Leadership practices that illustrate these four components can be found on page 42 of the [2023 MnPS report](#).

SURVEY SAYS: PRINCIPALS’ CRSL SELF-EFFICACY AND PRACTICE DECREASED

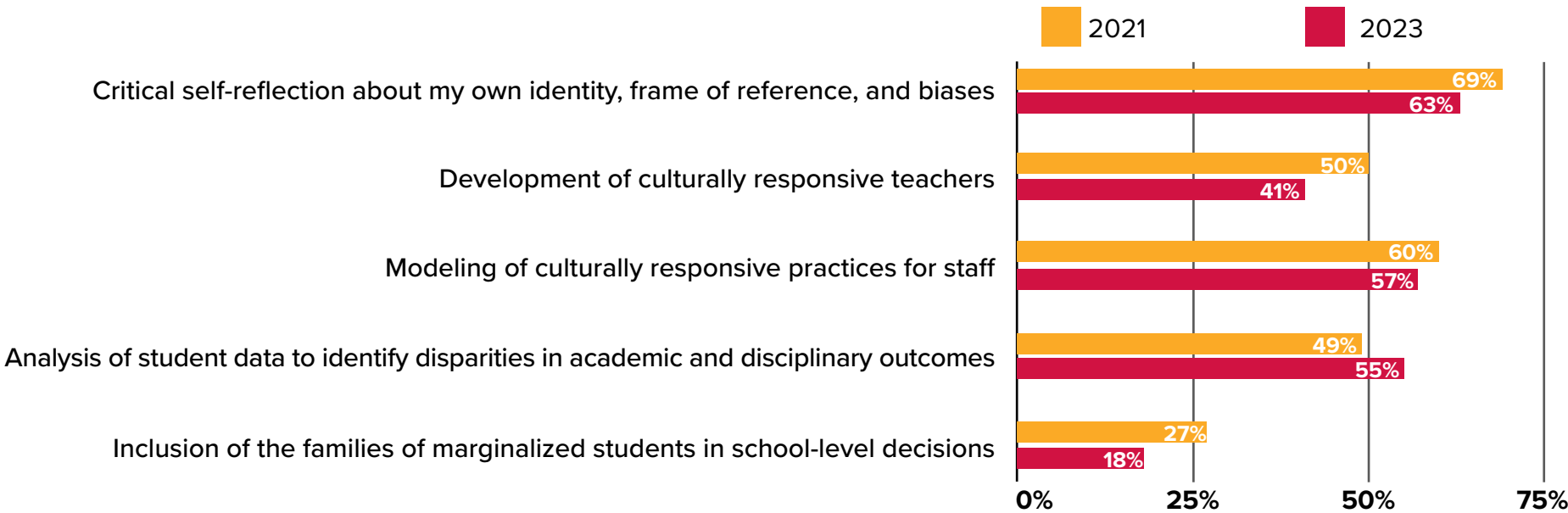
In the 2023 MnPS, principals reported **low self-efficacy in several CRSL-related activities**. The following leadership activities ranked among the bottom quartile of all 49 activities asked about on the survey. The percentage in parentheses represents the percent of respondents who reported having at least “sufficient confidence” in each area:

- Facilitating discussions with staff about race (63%)
- Supporting culturally responsive pedagogy (57%)
- Communicating about race, gender, and culture with families and community (55%)
- Designing culturally responsive curriculum (47%)
- Engaging families in school-level decision-making (44%)
- Creating culturally responsive assessments (34%)

Furthermore, we reported **notable declines in principals’ self-efficacy across leadership activities** between 2021 and 2023 (Kemper et al., 2024). Among the CRSL-related activities listed at left, principals’ self-efficacy increased in only one (supporting culturally responsive pedagogy). Particularly concerning was a massive decrease of 17 percentage points in the percent of principals sufficiently confident in engaging families in school level decision making, which fell from 62% to 44% from 2021 to 2023.

Also notable were **decreases in the percentage of principals engaging in CRSL activities on a monthly or more basis** between 2021 and 2023 (see Figure 1). Of the 5 CRSL practices that were asked about in both years, engagement in all but one (analysis of student data to identify disparities in academic and disciplinary outcomes) decreased.

Figure 1. Percent of principals enacting 5 CRSL practices on a monthly or more basis, 2021 and 2023 (MnPS)



ARE CHANGES IN THE FREQUENCY OF CRSL PRACTICES CONSISTENT ACROSS GROUPS?

Although there was an overall decline between 2021 and 2023 in the percentage of principals enacting most CRSL practices on a monthly or more basis, the extent of decline was not consistent across principal demographic groups (see Figure 2). Highlighted below are between-group differences in declines approaching or exceeding ten percentage points.

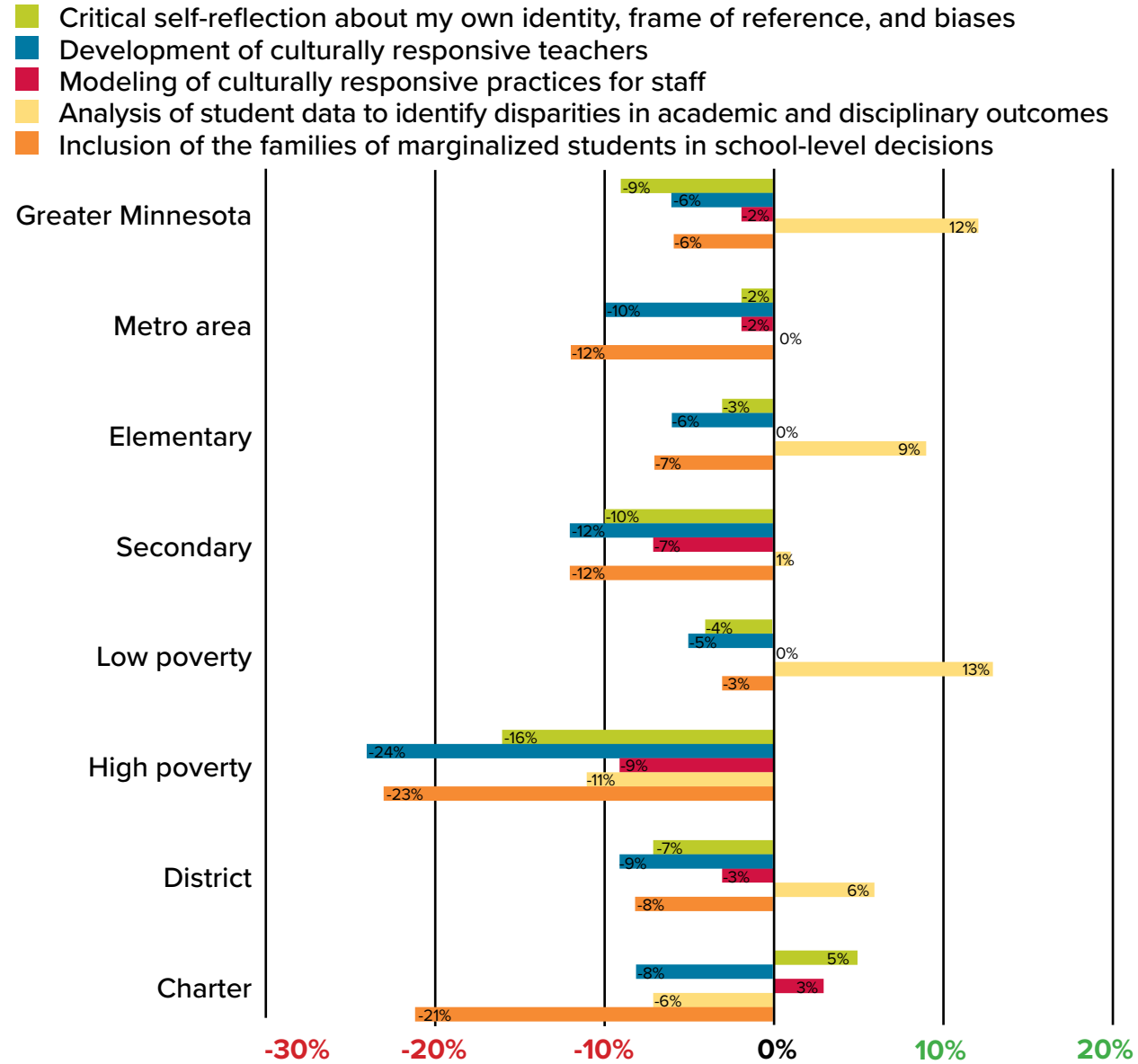
- Principals in **high-poverty schools**¹ reported far greater decreases in monthly engagement in *development of culturally responsive teachers* (-24%), *critical self-reflection about my own identity, frame of reference, and biases* (-16%) and *inclusion of families in school-level decisions* (-23%) from 2021 to 2023 compared to principals in **low-poverty schools** (-5%, -4%, -3% respectively).
- Principals in **charter schools** reported much greater decreases in monthly engagement in *inclusion of the families of marginalized students in school-level decisions* (-21%) from 2021 to 2023 compared to principals in **district schools** (-8%).
- Oppositely, principals in **district schools** were 7 percentage points less likely to report monthly engagement in *critical self-reflection about my own identity, frame of reference, and biases* in 2023 than in 2021, whereas principals in **charter schools** were 5 percentage points more likely to report monthly engagement in that practice in 2023 than in 2021.

Importantly, most groups reported increased practice in the *analysis of student data to identify disparities in academic and disciplinary outcomes*. However, principals in **high-poverty schools** were 11 percentage points *less likely* to engage in this practice in 2023 than in 2021, whereas principals in **low-poverty schools** were 13 percentage points more likely to engage in it. Other notable differences included the following:

- **Greater Minnesota** principals reported a far greater increase in monthly student data analysis (+12%) compared to **metro area** principals (+0.2%) from 2021 to 2023.
- **Elementary principals** reported a greater increase in monthly student data analysis (+9%) than **secondary principals** (+1%) between 2021 and 2023.
- Principals from **district schools** reported an increase in monthly student data analysis of 6 percentage points, whereas principals from **charter schools** reported a decrease of 7 percentage points from 2021 to 2023.

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 2. Changes in the percentage of principals reporting monthly enactment of CRSL practices from 2021 to 2023, across subgroups (MnPS)



WHY DID CRSL SELF-EFFICACY AND FREQUENCY DECLINE?

We asked focus group participants why they thought there had been a decline in CRSL self-efficacy and a decline in the frequency with which CRSL was being practiced. Principals shared their own hypotheses, but these responses did not necessarily reflect principals’ personal experiences with CRSL. Responses included: (1) a lack of time due to an increase in managerial tasks and/or focus on new mandates like non-exclusionary discipline (NED) and the Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act; (2) a belief that CRSL practices had become more embedded in school practices, making them less visible; (3) a perception that CRSL practices were no longer a top priority, especially since the pandemic ended; and (4) a recognition that school leaders may lack some understanding of how to implement CRSL, or “don’t know as much as we thought we did,” in one leader’s words. One suggestion was that declines were likely rooted in a lack of confidence in activities like engaging families from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Yet principals shared that CRSL continued to be a priority to them, as evidenced by—for example—the hiring of student success coaches who engage in culturally responsive practices or ongoing critical self-reflection.

The last two years have been non-exclusionary and READ Act. Those are the only two things I’ve been able to focus on since the new [legislation] came through.

I wouldn’t say that [CRSL] isn’t a priority, but it’s not one of the top initiatives that we’re working on right now. So, we do provide different avenues to include culturally responsiveness in our schools, but it’s not one of those where we’re putting in the necessary time to do it the right way. I think it’s just enough to keep everyone in the loop a little bit, but it’s definitely not where we need it to be to be effective.

WHAT DO PRINCIPALS NEED TO INCREASE CRSL SELF-EFFICACY AND PRACTICE?

We convened focus groups to learn more about what principals need to improve their self-efficacy and practice in specific CRSL domains, asking the following questions.

- What do principals need to have challenging conversations about race, gender, and culture?
- What do principals need to better engage families in decision-making?

Complementary to survey findings, the following key supports were identified by principals as needed for having conversations about race, gender, and culture: (1) protection from legal action against culturally-responsive and gender-affirming leadership practices, (2) alignment between districts’ strategic plans, equity policies, and principal actions, and (3) the backing and support of principal supervisors.

What the support looks like is [when district office] actions match what we say we’re gonna do, [when] we stay aligned to our strategic plan, our equity policy, our vision and mission. And when families have gone to the school board or the superintendent, the response I get from [the] assistant sup and the sup is, ‘We’ve got your back. Let’s talk about this.’

Although most principals did not identify things they needed to engage families in decision-making, *per se*, they did identify things they needed to better engage families, generally. These things included (1) more time to plan and make adjustments to their school schedules along with (2) more money to hire staff who could work directly with families.

PROMISING CRSL PRACTICES SHARED BY PRINCIPALS

- Co-planning school events with families
- Building relationships with families of color and community leaders of color at locations within their community contexts
- Hiring diverse staff

CONCLUSION

Principals who participated in the focus groups provided more insight about the decline in leaders’ CRSL self-efficacy and frequency with which CRSL behaviors were practiced. As was the case generally in their MnPS responses, leaders reported needing more time and resources to better engage in CRSL practices. Principals also wanted greater district- and state-level backing or protection for engaging in CRSL practices that some vocal community members opposed. There may, however, be other reasons for the decline in self-efficacy and frequency of practice of CRSL behaviors as evidenced by stark differences in the frequency of practice between principal demographic groups, such as between principals leading high- and low-poverty schools, and between principals leading charter schools and district schools. Additional analysis may be needed to further understand these differences. To learn more about how to support school leaders in enacting CRSL and other critical leadership practices, please see our Policy & Practice Guides for [state policymakers and leaders](#), [district leaders and school boards](#), and [principal preparation and professional development providers](#).

REFERENCES

Khalifa, M. A., Gooden, M. A., & Davis, J. E. (2016). Culturally responsive school leadership: A synthesis of the literature. *Review of educational research*, 86(4), 1272-1311.

Kemper, S., Pekel, K., Evenson, A., Seabrook, R., Fynewever, N., & Zhao, Q. (2024). Report of findings from the second biennial Minnesota Principals Survey. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota.

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