



Research on Socio-Economic Policy

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Improving the calibre of school leadership in South Africa

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School principals matter for children's learning – both anecdotal and international quantitative evidence support this. But policy makers often do not pay sufficient attention to the way good school leadership can improve the quality of education. This policy brief summarises evidence from two quantitative studies by the author on the labour market for school principals in South Africa.¹ In this brief I describe four features of this market: aging and retirement, long tenure, unequal distribution in terms of qualifications and experience, and unreliable indicators of quality. I explain how an understanding of these features can inform and support policy for school principals.

1. Aging and retirement

Internationally, the average age of school principals is increasing and South Africa is no exception in this regard. Where the age profile of principals has been rising, this implies that a large and increasing number of principal replacements are required across schools.

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¹ Wills, G, 'A profile of the labour market for school principals in South Africa: Evidence to inform policy', *Stellenbosch Working Paper Series* No. WP12/2015, www.ekon.sun.ac.za/wpapers/2015/wp122015; Wills, G, 'Investigating the consequences of principal leadership changes for school performance in South Africa', Department of Economics, Stellenbosch University, (unpublished), 2015.

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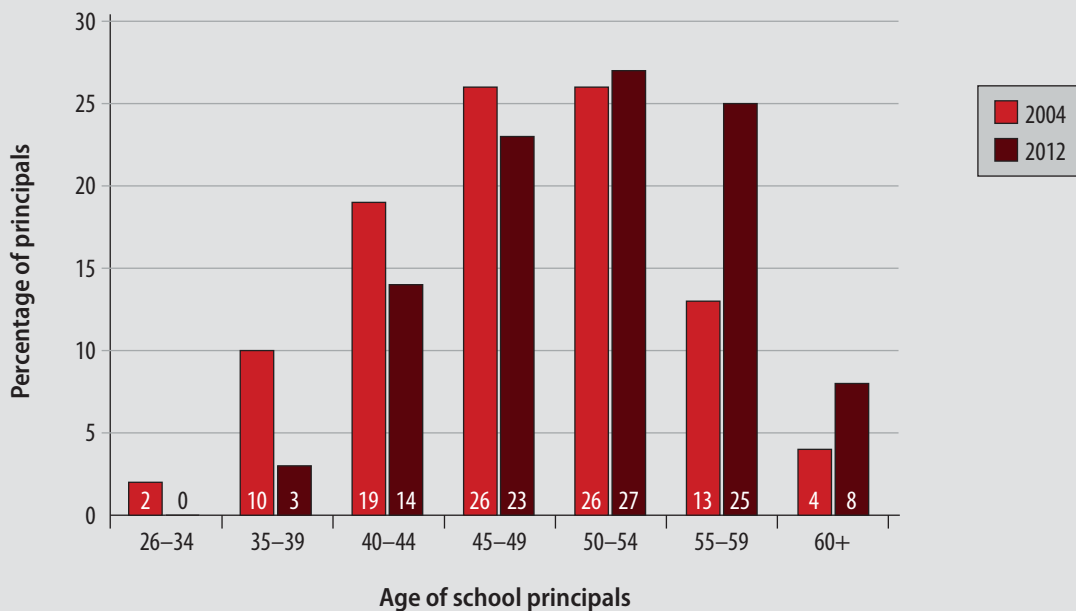


FIGURE 1A: Age distribution of South African school principals in 2004 and 2012

Source: Author's calculations from South African education payroll data (Persal)

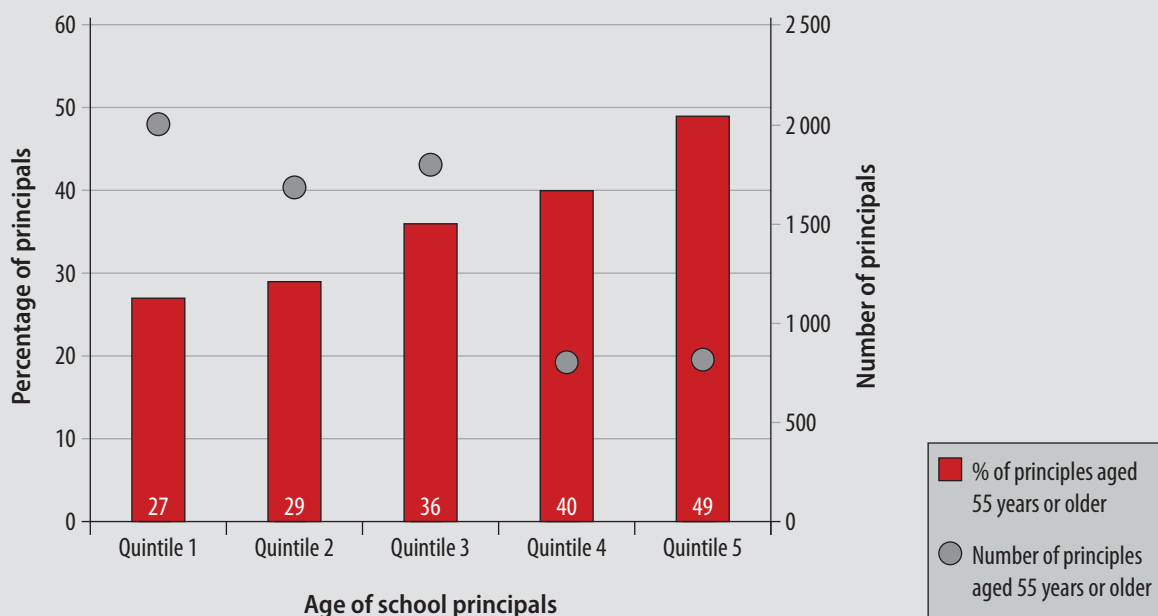


FIGURE 1B: South African school principals in 2012 aged 55 or older, by school wealth

Sources: Author's calculations from South African education payroll data (Persal) and EMIS (education management information system) masterlist.

Note: Quintiles 1 to 3 schools are non-fee-paying, quintiles 4 to 5 are fee-paying.

In 2004, 17% of South Africa's school principals were aged 55 or older. By 2012 this had risen to 33% (see Figure 1a). In my research I estimated that if the principals who make up this one third all retired at 60, as many as 7000 replacements would be needed between 2012 and 2017. There are just over 24,000 public schools in South Africa. Between 2004 and 2008, about 350 to 500 principals per year were replaced for retirement reasons. But at least 1000 principal retirements per year are expected for the next ten years.

Proportionately more principals are retiring in the wealthier schools (quintiles 4 and 5) than in the poorer schools (quintiles 1 to 3). But there are many more of the latter, so the absolute demand for principal replacements is highest in the poorest schools, as Figure 1b shows. The demand for replacement principals is particularly high in the primary and intermediate schools, comprising over 60% of all anticipated principal replacements for retirement reasons between 2012 and 2017.

The retirement of principals clearly poses challenges for education planners but it also provides an opportunity to improve the calibre of school leadership through the right appointments.

2. Long tenure

Although large numbers of principals are retiring, generally there is not much mobility in the labour market for principals. This means that most principals remain in the same job for many years. Of the roughly 8% of principal turnover per year calculated between 2008 and 2012, three quarters were principals leaving public education rather than moving to different jobs in the sector. Low levels of mobility can also be seen in promotion patterns, where well over half of newly appointed principals are promoted from lower ranks within the same school. Very few principals move to another province. In fact, less than 3% of all principal moves are moves from one province to another.

3. Unequal distribution

A defining feature of South Africa's labour market for principals is that principals are unequally distributed across schools in terms of qualifications and experience. The poorer schools typically have less qualified and less experienced principals. Figure 2 shows the big differences between principals' qualifications in wealthier and poorer schools. In part this pattern of inequality is the after-effect of apartheid policies. But it is also the effect of better qualified principals continuing to seek and accept posts in the wealthier schools. This is probably for a variety of reasons: their own personal preferences, the schools' preferences, and differences between the poorer and wealthier schools' appointment processes. In the poorest (quintile 1) schools, principal positions can be attained on average three years earlier than in quintile 4 and 5 schools.

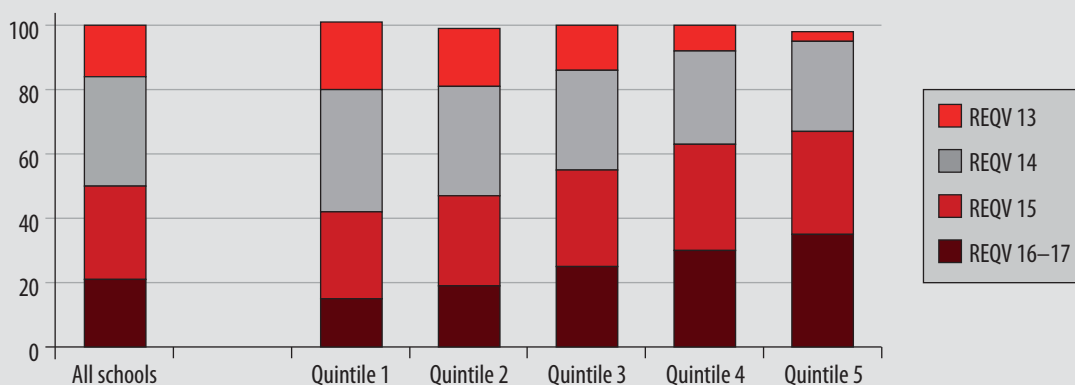


FIGURE 2: Principal qualifications (REQV), 2012

Sources: Author's calculations from South African education payroll data (Persal) and EMIS (education management information system) masterlist

Note: Quintiles 1 to 3 schools are non-fee-paying, quintiles 4 to 5 are fee-paying.

4. Unreliable indicators

Internationally, qualifications and experience are typically the main criteria used to recruit principals and determine their pay. However, much of the evidence suggests that these indicators are not the best identifiers of good quality principals.² South Africa is no exception in this regard. Combining education administrative data for the years 2008, 2010 and 2012, I created a longitudinal dataset of over 4500 schools, their principals and matriculation results. Using this data, I investigated whether principals' credentials are useful indicators of quality in South Africa.³ By comparing the REQV levels or years of service of different principals in the same schools across different years, I was able to assess whether higher principal qualifications lead to improved matric results.

I found no positive relationship between REQV levels or years of service and matric results as measured by average mathematics scores and the percentage pass rate in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) in quintile 1 to 3 schools.⁴ In quintile 4 and 5 schools, principals' REQV levels had a small positive effect on average mathematics scores but not on a school's pass rate in the NSC. Principals' years of service were also unrelated to school performance in quintile 4 and 5 schools.

These findings do not imply that school principals do not matter for school performance. Rather, the value they bring to schools is not signalled through their credentials as captured in the South African education payroll system. REQV levels are not accurate measures of qualifications, so I would not want to conclude that principals' educational qualifications are not important. What is clear, however, is that the REQV level system that informs hiring decisions and salaries is not an effective identifier of principal quality, especially in quintile 1 to 3 schools. This is an important finding with implications for the design of recruitment and remuneration policies, which are currently closely tied to the REQV level system.

The relative educational qualifications value (REQV) system

The REQV system is used in the education payroll data to identify teachers' qualifications. This is a value ranking on a scale of 10 to 17, determined mainly by the number of full-time professional or academic years of study at an approved university, university of technology or college of education. It also takes into account the level of school education attained. Higher rankings are assigned to more advanced qualifications, with implications for promotions, the permanence of contracts and salary levels. The minimum requirement for a permanent teaching post is an REQV of 13 – a Grade 12 qualification plus three years of relevant training, including a year of training as a teacher.

5. Policy recommendations

In a sector characterised by low levels of mobility and high levels of tenure, policies should aim to improve the initial match of principals to schools while developing existing principals over their length of tenure. Where the current REQV level system and years of service are poor identifiers of quality, policies for selecting principals and rewarding performance should extend beyond credentials as measured in the education payroll to identify expertise and skills that may be better identifiers of quality.

2 Hanushek, E.A., 'The single salary schedule and other issues of teacher pay', *Peabody Journal of Education*, 82, 4, 2007, pp. 574–86; Clark, D., Martorell, P., and Rockoff, J., 'School principals and school performance', *CALDER Working Paper Series No. 38*, Washington, D.C.: CALDER Urban Institute, 2009.

3 Wills, 'A profile of the labour market'.

4 Since the aim of the study was to assess whether credentials signal ability, I intentionally did not control for unobserved principal ability in the estimations.

My findings strongly support proposals in the National Development Plan (NDP)⁵ to improve the calibre of school leadership through:

- *competency assessment* to improve the principal appointment process, which could increase the value of candidates' expertise and skills in the selection process rather than depending on qualifications alone and, especially when managed by an independent third party, could alleviate the problem of politically organised interest groups exerting undue influence in the appointment process, and
- *a better performance management system* for school principals.

To achieve the desired outcomes, such policies must be based on empirical research. The findings of my study suggest three recommendations for improving school leadership beyond those identified in the NDP:

- *District support for schools in managing leadership successions.* Districts should engage with schools in managing leadership successions and, at the very least, plan in advance for principal retirements. Leadership changes appear to have bad short to medium term effects on learning outcomes in South African schools.⁶ Policy should allow for hand-over periods where the outgoing principal coaches the newly appointed principal in the school's systems and procedures to support a smoother transition.
- *Attracting good principals to no-fee schools.* Incentives should be offered to attract better principals to poorer and under-performing schools where the demand for replacements of retiring principals is high. This should include attracting principals to primary schools in this group, whose staffing needs may be overlooked as less important than those of secondary schools.
- *Training for school governing bodies in identifying good candidates.* Currently school governing bodies play an important role in interviewing applicants for a principal's post and making recommendations on the best candidate. However, they may need increased training and support to make a wise choice.

The urgent need to implement policies to support the right appointments of new principals cannot be emphasised enough in light of the large number of principal replacements anticipated in the coming years. With each principal placement, the leadership trajectory of the average school is established for almost a decade. Evidence based policy making has a strong role to play in getting this right.

5 National Planning Commission, *National Development Plan 2030: Our Future – Make it Work*, Pretoria: NPC, 2012.

6 Wills, 'Investigating the consequences'.