NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

ISSUE BRIEF

Public and Private School Principals: Are There Too Few Women?

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Nearly all principals serve first as teachers.[1] Women comprise well over half of the teaching workforce but hold fewer than half of all school principalships.[2] In the 1984–85 school year, women accounted for about 68 percent of the public school teaching workforce,[3] but for only about 21 percent of public school principalships.[4] Has this disparity persisted, or has the gap narrowed? Is the public school experience the same as or different from the private school experience? Is the experience the same at different school levels? Data now available from the National Center for Education Statistics' 1987–88 and 1990–91 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) can be used to address these and related questions about the proportions of school principals who are women.

Have the proportions of public and private school women principals changed?

Women are increasingly holding public school principalships. From the 1984–85 school year to the 1990–91 school year, the proportion of women public school principals increased from about 21 percent to 30 percent (table 1). This amounts to a 43 percent increase over the 6-year time period.[5]

In private schools, the proportion of women principals remained about the same in the 1987–88 and 1990–91 school years. Approximately half of all principals were women in those years.

The increase in the proportion of public school women principals for the 1990–91 school year, coupled with the static proportion of private school women principals for the 1987–88 and 1990–91 school years, may indicate that the public–private gap is beginning to close. However, the 1990–91 school year data show that there are still relatively more women principals in private schools than in public schools.

Despite the gains in the public sector, and the relatively high proportion of women principals in the private sector, the proportion of women principals is much smaller than the proportion of women teachers. In both the 1987–88 and 1990–91 school years, and in both public and private schools, the proportion of women teachers was higher than the proportion of women principals.

Table 1. Percentage of public and private school women principals and teachers: 1984–85, 1987–88, 1990–91

	Public	Private
Principals		
1984–85	21.4	--
1987–88	24.6	52.2
1990–91	30.0	51.3
Teachers		
1984–85	68.2	--
1987–88	70.5	78.2
1990–91	71.9	77.1

--Data not available.

SOURCE: American Association of School Administrators, Survey of Women and Racial Minorities in School Administration. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Public School Survey, 1985; Schools and Staffing Survey, 1987–88 and 1990–91.

Did the proportion of women principals in elementary, secondary, and combined[6] schools change between the 1987–88 and 1990–91 school years?

Between the 1987–88 and 1990–91 school years, the increase in the proportion of women public school principals that was evident overall (table 1), occurred in

elementary and combined schools alone (table 2). In elementary schools the increase was from about 30 percent to 37 percent, and in combined schools the increase was from about 22 percent to 31 percent. In secondary schools there was no change from the 1987–88 school year to the 1990–91 school year. The proportion of women principals remained at about 10 percent, which was lower than the proportion in either elementary or combined schools.

Table 2. Percentage of public and private school women principals and teachers, by level of school: 1987–88 and 1990–91

	Principals		Teachers	
	87–88	90–91	87–88	90–91
Public				
Elementary	30.0	36.5	82.8	83.2
Secondary	9.4	11.0	52.1	53.2
Combined	21.6	31.2	66.6	68.3
Private				
Elementary	65.1	65.7	88.9	88.6
Secondary	32.3	28.9	58.6	53.3
Combined	28.2	32.7	73.2	74.7

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1987–88 and 1990–91.

In private schools, the proportion of women principals did not increase from the 1987–88 school year to the 1990–91 school year in any of the three types of schools: elementary, secondary, or combined. It remained at about two–thirds for the elementary level and approximately one–third for both the secondary and combined schools.

Even though there was no increase in these proportions for private schools, the proportion of private elementary and secondary school women principals in the 1990–91 school year was still larger than the corresponding proportion of public school women principals.

In both public and private schools, at all three school levels, and in both the 1987–88 and 1990–91 school years, the proportion of women principals was smaller than their proportion as teachers. For example, in the 1990–91 school year, in public secondary schools, about half of all teachers were women, compared with approximately one–tenth of all principals.

Discussion

These data suggest a number of questions for educational research. Principals are often identified as key figures in determining the quality of a school. They have traditionally come from the teaching ranks. Why are there so few women principals given their proportion in the teaching profession? Why are there larger proportions of women principals in private schools than in public schools? Are there policies and practices used in developing and selecting school leaders that account for these disparities? Do schools with women principals differ in any significant ways from schools with men principals?

Such questions are not answerable by the data alone. However, data such as those used here and gathered in SASS can help guide research and track changes that occur over time in the schools, and among teachers and principals.

[1]Hammer, C.H., and Rohr, C.L. *Teaching, Administrative, and Other Work Experience of Public School Principals.* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 93–452.

[2]Choy, S.P., Henke, R.R., Alt, M.N., Medrich, E.A., and Bobbitt, S.A. *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1990–91.* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 93–146.

[3]Hammer, C.H., and Batcher, M.K. *The 1985 Public School Survey: Early Tabulations.* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, November 1986.

[4]Jones, E.H., and Montenegro, X.P. *Women and Minorities in School Administration.* Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators, December 1985.

[5]During this same time period, there was a small increase in the percentage of the public school teaching workforce who were women (68 percent in 1984–85, 71 percent in 1987–88, and 72 percent in 1990–91).

[6]A combined school has grades higher than the 8th and lower than the 7th.

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This *Issue Brief* was prepared by Charles H. Hammer, NCES, and Carol L. Rohr, Pinkerton Computer Consultants, Inc. To obtain standard errors or definitions of terms for this *Issue Brief*, or to obtain additional information about the Schools and Staffing Survey, contact Charles H. Hammer (202) 219–1330. To order additional copies of this *Issue Brief* or other NCES publications, call 1–800–424–1616.