

Trends in Principal Perceptions of Autonomy

Youjin Chung

ABOUT THIS SNAPSHOT

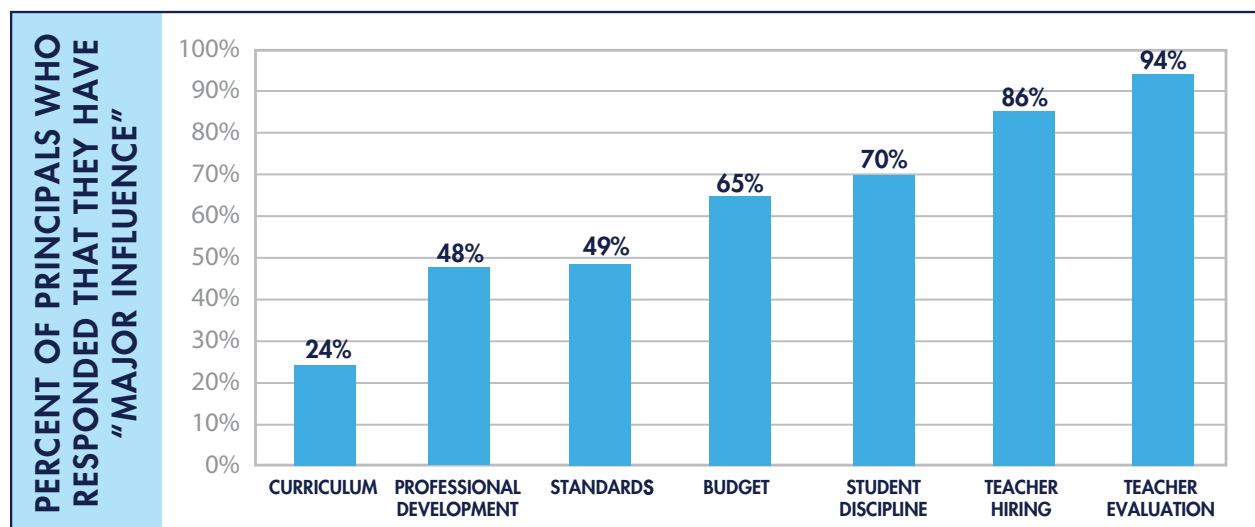
This snapshot examines trends in principal autonomy – or how much influence principals feel they have over school-level decisions. Using 2018 survey responses, we look at how autonomous Tennessee principals feel in general, where they feel they have influence in school-based decisions, and the types of schools in which principals feel most autonomous.

These trends matter because principals play a critical role in school success, so their ability to influence school decisions is essential. For example, previous TERA research shows that more effective principals in Tennessee retain effective teachers at greater rates and lead schools with higher student growth and greater levels of teacher satisfaction (Grissom et al., 2018; Grissom & Bartanen, in press). Further, principals who feel they have more influence over school-based decisions also tend to be more satisfied, which could have implications for future mobility plans.

When it comes to school-based decisions, principals report having the most influence over teacher hiring and evaluation.

Ninety percent of responding principals indicate that they have “moderate influence” or “major influence” in most of their school decisions. This pattern is consistent across all aspects of school decision-making (e.g., student discipline, school budget, teacher evaluation and hiring).

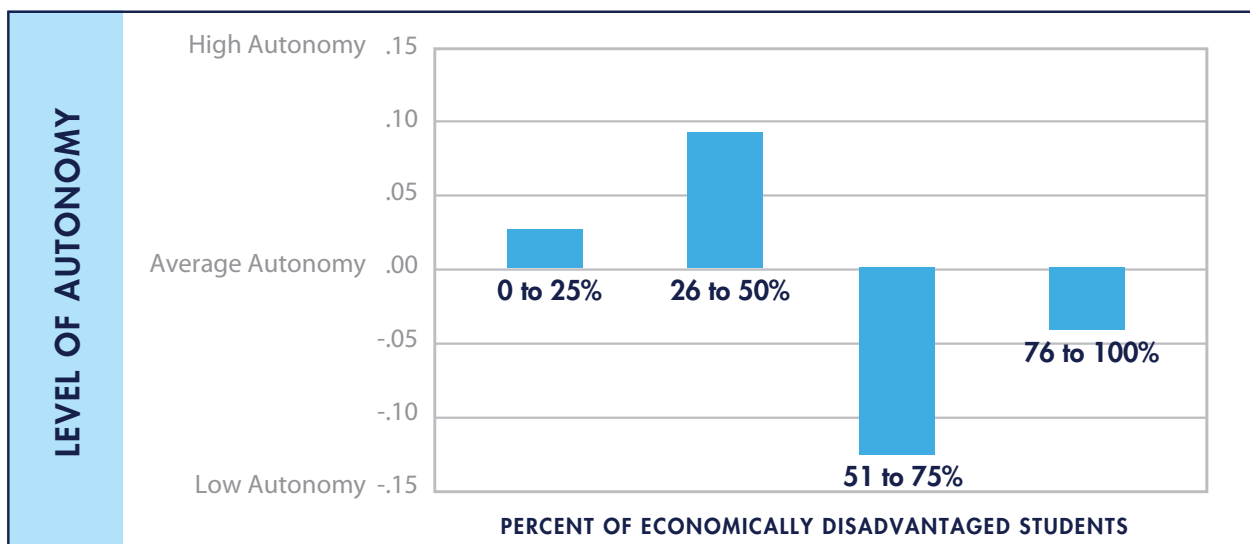
Among seven areas of influence in school-level decision-making, 94% of principals feel that they have major influence over teacher evaluation, and 86% feel this way about teacher hiring. Principals feel that have less influence over standards (49%) and curriculum (24%), which may not be surprising since those are decisions typically made at the state and district levels.





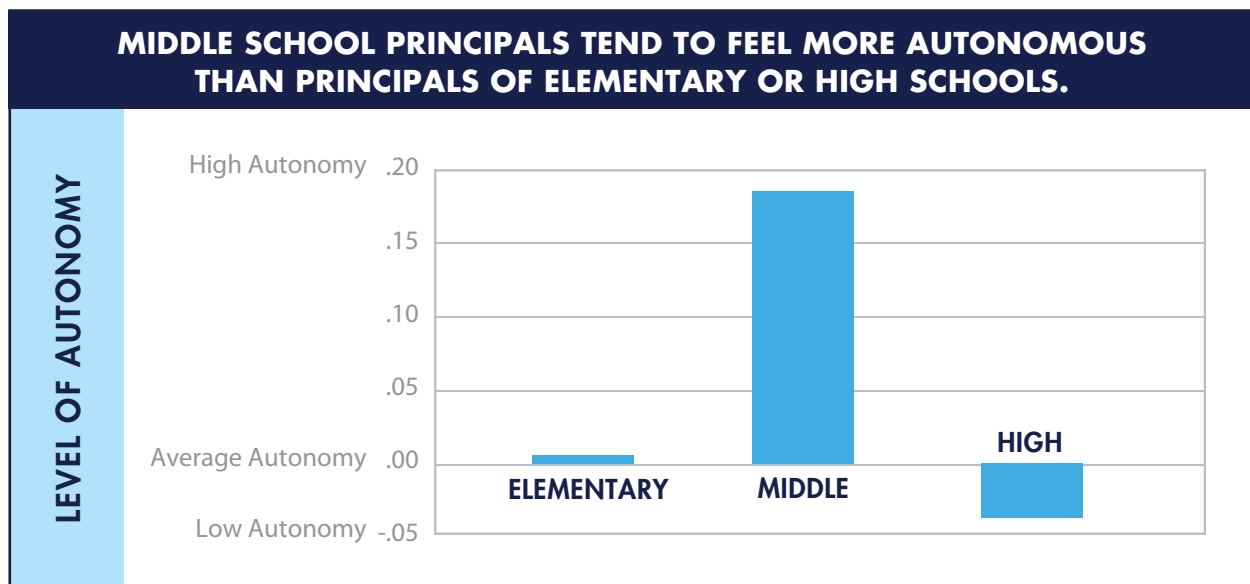
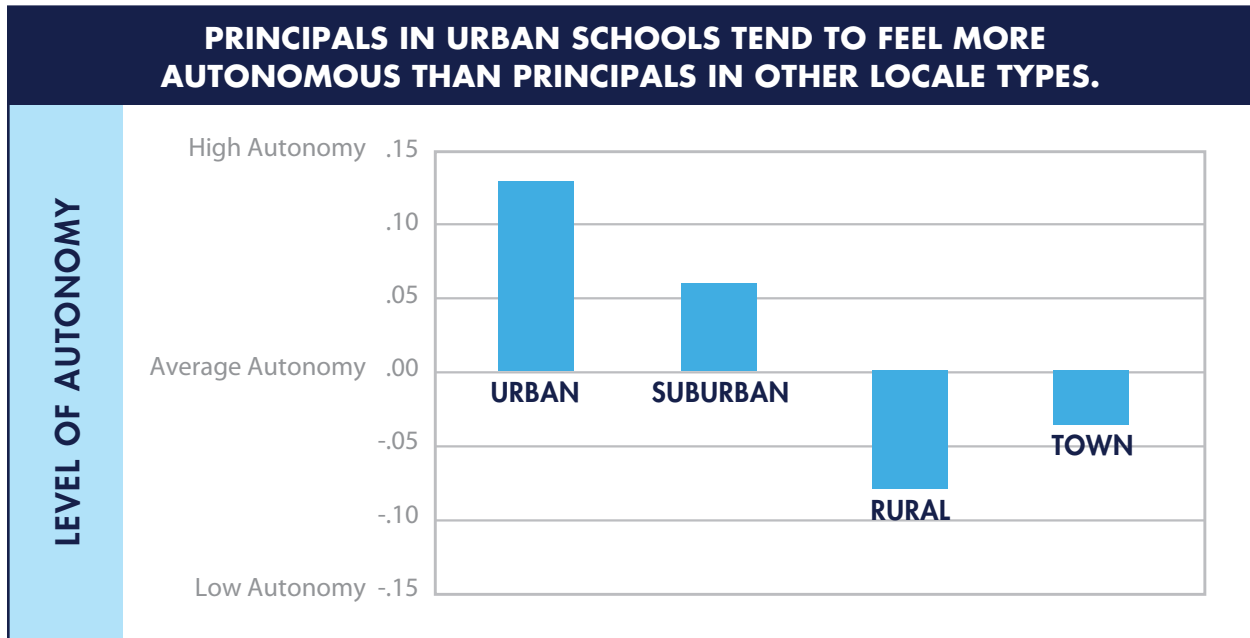
Principals in low-poverty schools tend to report greater feelings of autonomy than those in high-poverty schools.

Principals are more likely to report feelings of autonomy in schools where fewer than 50% of students are economically disadvantaged. This pattern is most pronounced when comparing the middle two quartiles – or schools in which 26-50% of students are economically disadvantaged compared to schools in which this range is 51-75%. Further, this finding is consistent with related TERA research which demonstrated that principals seem to be less satisfied at schools serving more students in poverty.



Principal autonomy varies by school level and locale type.

Feelings of principal autonomy also differ when we look at school level and locale type.¹ Specifically, principals in urban schools tend to feel more autonomous than those in suburban or rural schools. Additionally, principals who lead middle schools report the greatest feelings of autonomy than principals of elementary or high schools.



¹ To see those patterns, we conducted a factor analysis of all seven principal autonomy questions in the 2018 Tennessee Educator Survey. We examined whether those questions are strongly associated with autonomy and found that the questions measure an overall sense of principal autonomy. Then, based on the factor analysis, we created a standardized principal autonomy index that summarizes Tennessee principals' survey responses on autonomy. On this scale, principals with average-level autonomy are placed at 0. Principals with higher autonomy than the average have positive values, whereas those with lower autonomy than the average have negative values.



NEXT STEPS FOR RESEARCH

Results from this snapshot show that there is variation when it comes to feelings of principal autonomy in Tennessee, which is important since autonomy is closely linked to satisfaction and plans for future mobility. Upcoming TERA research will explore factors that help to explain the trends of principal autonomy and look more deeply at how reported feelings of autonomy relate to outcomes, such as student achievement and principal turnover.

REFERENCES

Grissom, J. A., & Bartanen, B. (in press). Strategic retention: Principal effectiveness and teacher turnover in multiple-measure teacher evaluation systems. *American Educational Research Journal*.

Grissom, J. A., Blissett, R. S., & Mitani, H. (2018). Evaluating school principals: Supervisor ratings of principal practice and principal job performance. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 40(3), 446-472.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Tennessee Educator Survey is an annual joint effort by the Tennessee Department of Education and the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) to gather information about schools across the state. Open to all teachers, administrators, and certified staff, the survey is a way for educators to provide feedback about what's working and where improvements can be made in areas like school climate, educator evaluation, and other state initiatives. Survey responses directly inform state research and decision-making processes and are a tool for schools and districts to inform their practice.

In a series of survey snapshots, TERA will provide a broad look at responses and trends from the 2018 survey in several key areas relating to educators in Tennessee. Topics include job satisfaction, hiring patterns, growth and professional learning, educator evaluation, aspects of school support roles (assistant principals and instructional coaches), and more.