

# School Leader Experiences in Tennessee:

*Trends from the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey*

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## Introduction

Each year, nearly one-fifth of principals and one quarter of assistant principals in Tennessee leave their schools, often leading to increased teacher turnover and decreased student achievement.<sup>1</sup> These turnover trends are consistent with trends seen in other states, and there is growing national concern that school leader turnover may increase as the job has generally become [more stressful](#) in the post-pandemic landscape.

Some of these positions are filled by school leaders from other Tennessee school districts or by promotions from assistant principal to principal positions. Otherwise, these positions must be filled by educators who are new to school leadership. During the 2021-22 school year, approximately 6,000 Tennessee teachers held administrative licenses, representing 8% of Tennessee's teachers. While some larger Tennessee districts employ over 500 of these educators, the median district employs 22 educators with leader licenses who are not currently serving in a school leader role. Fewer than a third ever plan on seeking a school leadership position. Taken together, these numbers point to a limited supply of potential future school leaders (defined in this brief as principals and assistant principals) in the state.

School leader responses to the Tennessee Educator Survey provide some insights for building a robust administrator workforce in Tennessee. This brief analyzes school leaders' responses regarding their overall satisfaction with their jobs, perceptions of how well their preparation programs trained them for the job at hand, and their plans to continue in their current roles. The survey asks potential school leaders about their future career plans and asks current school leaders about their preparation for and satisfaction with the job.

<sup>1</sup> Grissom & Rogers, 2019; Grissom, Bartanen, & Mitani, 2019; Rogers & Woo, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022

## Key Findings

- 1** *Over 95% of school leaders agreed that they are satisfied in their job; however, school leaders in the last two years indicated that they feel less appreciated at work and plan on staying in their roles for less time than they did in previous years.*
- 2** *Despite reporting high levels of satisfaction with their preparation programs, many early-career school leaders indicated that their programs did not include key components, including field experience, formal mentorship, and help with job placement.*
- 3** *On average, Tennessee school leaders who reported that the stress and responsibility of their job makes them question staying in their roles indicated they may leave their schools and the school leadership workforce sooner than those who did not.*

This brief uses responses to from the 2020-2023 TES from Tennessee principals, assistant principals, and teachers with administrative licenses. In 2022 just over half (51%) of principals (N=908) and 44% assistant principals (N=999) responded to the TES. We also examine the preparation experiences of early-career school leaders: principals and assistant principals who are in their first three years on the job (N=269). To examine career plans among potential future school leaders, we use responses from 3,243 Tennessee teachers who indicated on the survey that they had an administrative license, representing 32% of individuals with an administrative license in the state. To account for differential response rates across school type, region, and economically disadvantaged students served, we use analytic weighting to produce results that are more representative of public school teachers and school leaders in Tennessee.

## KEY FINDINGS

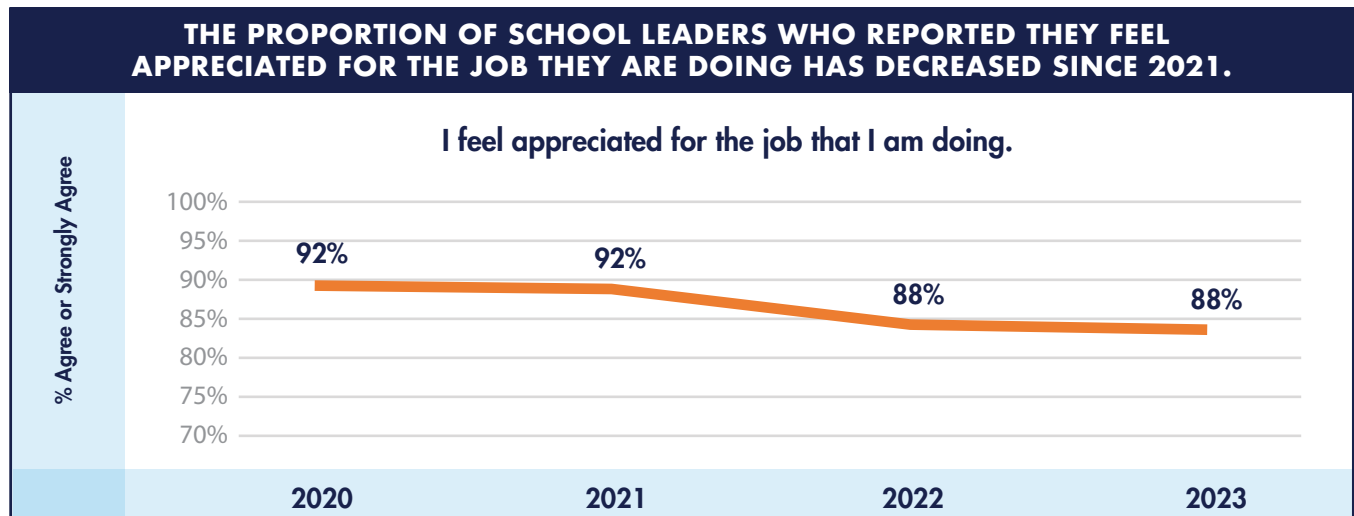


### KEY FINDING 1

**Over 95% of school leaders agreed that they are satisfied in their job; however, school leaders in the last two years indicated that they feel less appreciated at work and plan on staying in their roles for less time than they did in previous years.**

School leaders who are more satisfied with their jobs are less likely to leave their schools,<sup>2</sup> and over 95% of Tennessee school leaders agreed or strongly agreed that they are satisfied in their jobs. Despite these high reported levels of satisfaction, school leaders indicated that they feel less appreciated for the job they are doing than in previous years. As Figure 1 shows, in 2020 and 2021, 92% of Tennessee school leaders agreed or strongly agreed that they felt appreciated for the job they are doing, but in 2022, the percentage of school leaders who reported feeling appreciated dropped to 88%, a decline of four points that sustained through 2023.

**FIGURE 1**

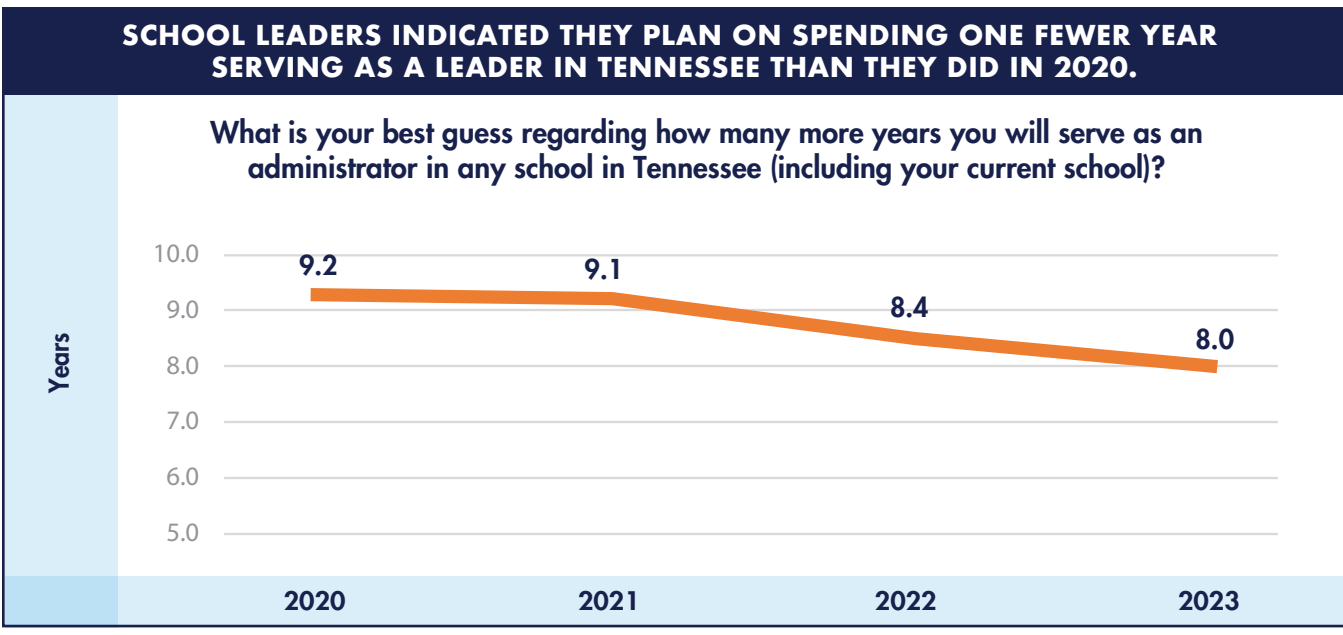


<sup>2</sup> Snodgrass Rangel, 2018

Potential school leaders—or those teachers who hold administrative licenses but have never been a principal or an assistant principal—expressed similar sentiments about school leadership positions. The survey asked an open-ended question to teachers with administrative licenses who reported that they do not plan on becoming a school leader why they decided not to pursue a leadership role. They pointed to the stress and time-intensiveness of the role, with some saying that school leaders “hold the weight of the world on their shoulders” and that becoming a school leader “would take too much time [the respondent] would otherwise spend with [their] young family.” Others cited the “harsh” climate around schools, in which school leaders “have to be politicians,” especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, current school leaders indicated that they plan on spending fewer years in Tennessee schools than in the past. As shown in Figure 2, the average Tennessee school leader said they plan on spending over one fewer year serving as a leader in Tennessee than they did in 2020, down to an average of eight years. Responses to this question were similar to 2020 during the 2018 (9.1 years) and 2019 (9.5 years) administrations of the survey.

**FIGURE 2**



# 2

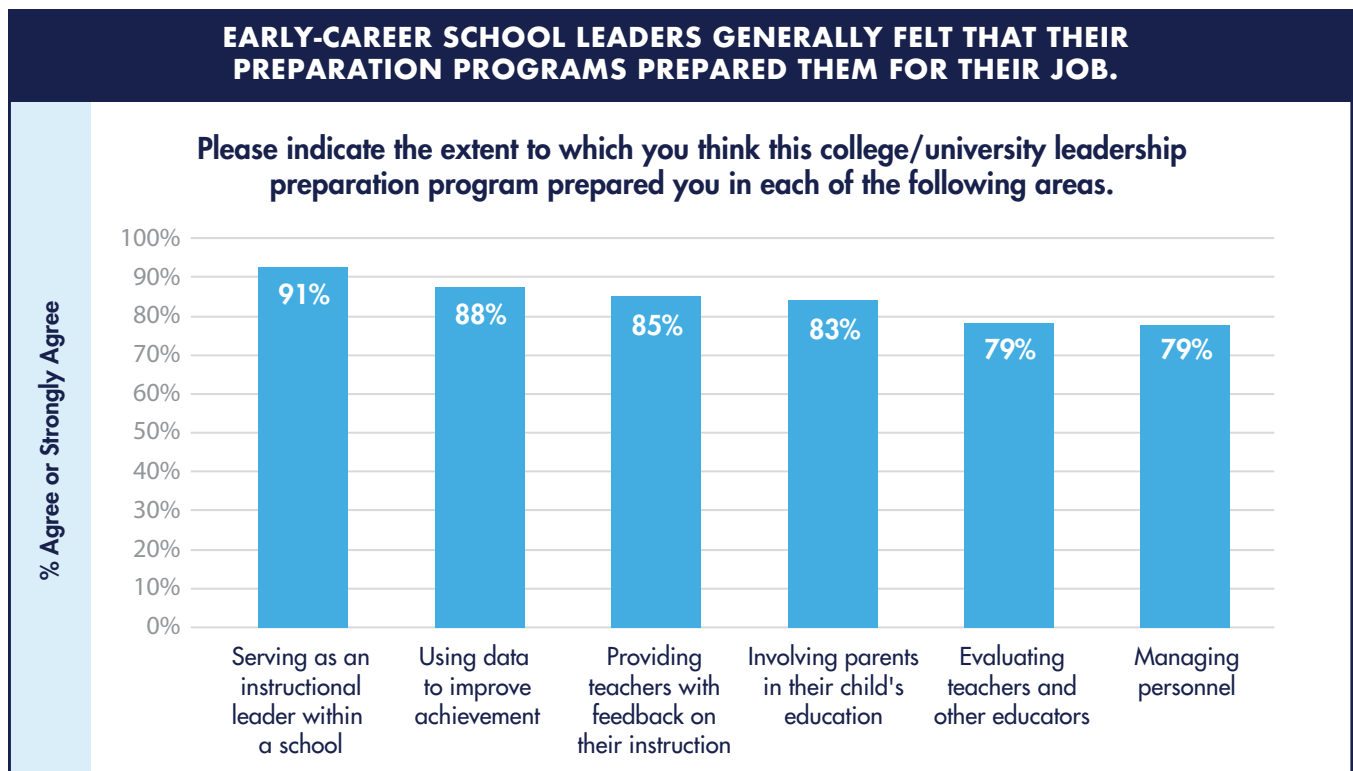
## KEY FINDING 2

**Despite reporting that their preparation programs generally prepared them for the job, many early-career school leaders indicated that their programs did not include key components, including field experience, formal mentorship, and help with job placement.**

Experts recognize that effective leadership preparation programs include a few key components. Those include rich field experiences, mentorship opportunities, and connections between the program and the school districts where leaders will eventually be placed.<sup>3</sup> There is some evidence that quality principal professional development is linked to lower levels of turnover.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 3 shows that over 90% of early-career school leaders—those in their first three years of service—felt prepared to serve as an instructional leader in their school, that their programs were academically rigorous, or that they would choose the program again for leadership preparation. However, over 20% of early-career principals did not agree that their program prepared them for managing personnel or evaluating teachers—two critical aspects of effective school leadership.

**FIGURE 3**

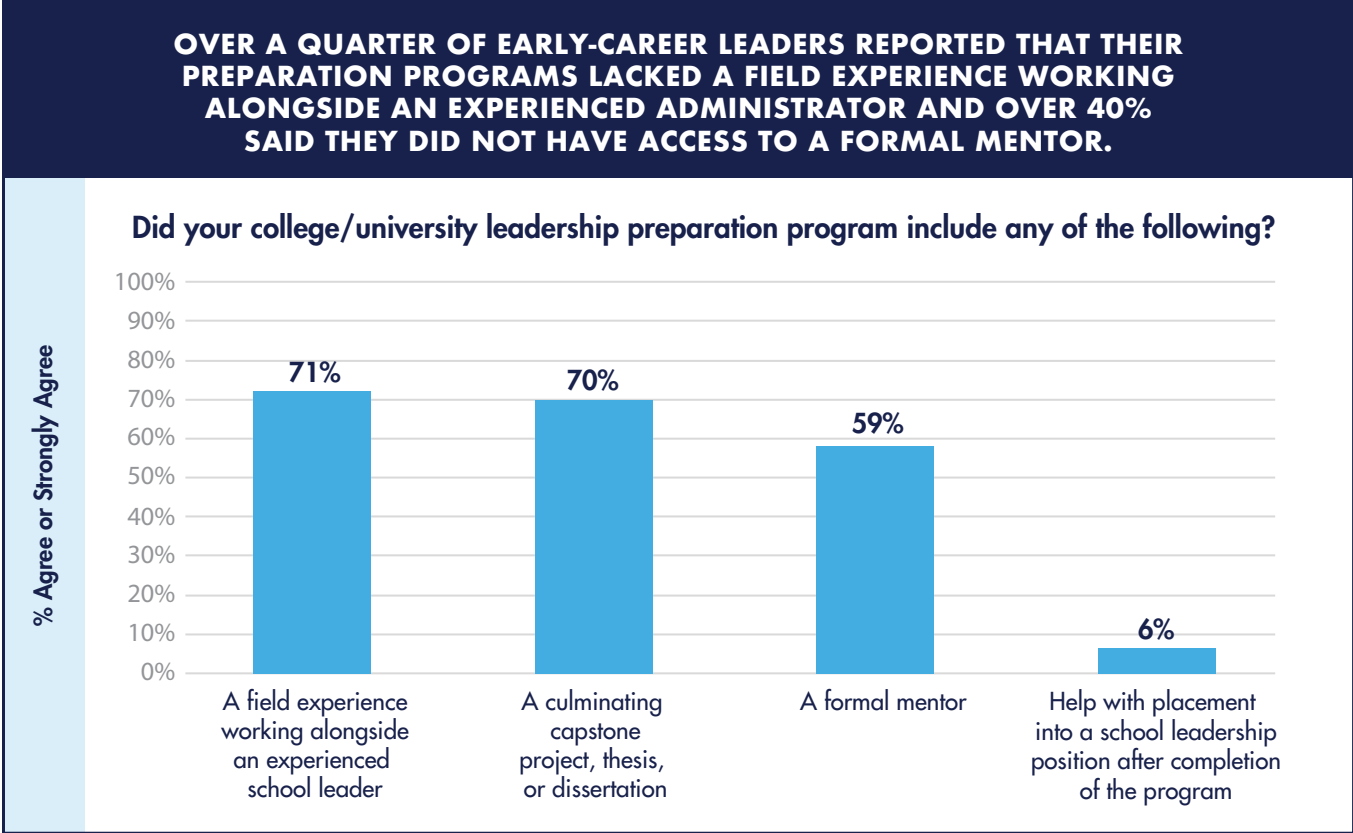


<sup>3</sup> The Wallace Foundation, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Snodgrass Rangel, 2018; Jacob, Goddard, Kim, Miller, & Goddard, 2015

Further, as Figure 4 shows, over a quarter of early-career school leaders reported their preparation programs were missing key components, including a field experience working alongside an experienced school leader, and another 40% indicated their program did not provide them with a formal mentor. Only 6% of early-career school leaders reported that their preparation program helped them with placement into a school leadership position.<sup>5</sup>

**FIGURE 4**



<sup>5</sup> This finding may be partially explained by the amount of time between when an educator earns administrative licensure and when they begin their first administrative job. The average early-career school leader indicated they held an administrative license for nearly four years before being promoted into school leadership.

# 3

## KEY FINDING 3

**On average, Tennessee school leaders who reported that the stress and responsibility of their job makes them question staying in their roles indicated they may leave their schools and the workforce altogether sooner than those who did not.**

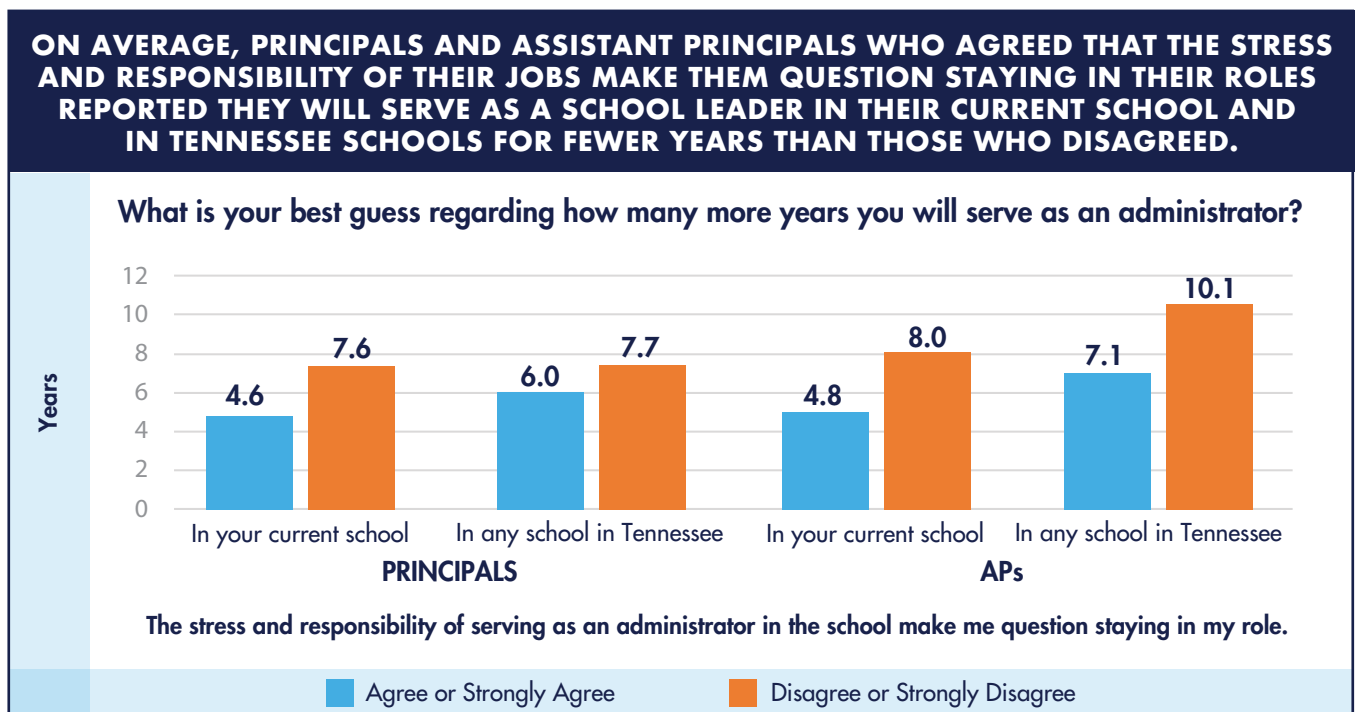
Nearly 40% of school leaders either agreed or strongly agreed that the stress and responsibility of their jobs make them question staying in their roles. Principals were about 10 percentage points more likely to agree with that statement than assistant principals.

On average, principals in schools where more than 40% of students are economically disadvantaged were three percentage points more likely to agree with the statement than those in schools with fewer than 15% economically disadvantaged students. The gap is larger for assistant principals—a nine percentage point difference. Elementary and middle school leaders were respectively four and seven percentage points more likely to agree that the stress and responsibility of the job make them question staying in their role than high school leaders.

On average, school leaders who agreed that the stress and responsibility of serving as a leader make them question staying in their role had different retention plans than those who did not agree. The principals who agreed were 10 percentage points less likely to report that they plan to work as a school leader in the next academic year than those who disagreed. The difference for assistant principals was larger at 13 percentage points.

Additionally, as Figure 5 shows, principals who agreed that the stress and responsibility of serving as a school leader make them question staying in their role reported they plan to stay in their current school for about three fewer years and in any school for 1.7 fewer years than those who disagreed. The difference was three years among assistant principals. Digging a little deeper, principals and assistant principals who agreed that the stress and responsibility of serving as a school leader make them question staying in their roles were 20

**FIGURE 5**



# CONCLUSION

School leaders' responses to the 2023 Tennessee Educator Survey show that they are largely satisfied with their positions, but responses from administrators and teachers indicate that the job has become more stressful and less attractive, particularly since the onset of the pandemic. School leaders reported feeling less appreciated for their work over time and that they plan to stay on the job for fewer years than in the past—especially school leaders for whom the stress and responsibility of the job has made them question their future in the role. These patterns could be the source of some school leadership turnover, which can be disruptive for the most disadvantaged schools and students.

However, the supply of potential new leaders may be constrained due to increasing demands and stresses on the job. Many districts employ only a small number of licensed school leaders, and few of those licensed school leaders plan to apply for school leadership positions in the future. When asked why they do not plan to become a school leader, many of those potential school leaders pointed to same high levels of stress and responsibility that current school leaders reported.

Potential school leaders also need to be well-prepared for the demands of school leadership to ease their transition into the job and prepare them for long-term success. Tennessee preparation programs earn high marks from early-career school leaders and an overwhelming majority responded that their preparation programs prepared them for numerous key aspects of the job. However, over a quarter also reported that their programs were missing key components that strong preparation programs should possess.

These patterns in survey responses point to a potentially growing problem in hiring and retaining school leaders in Tennessee. Improving working conditions, preparation, and the overall environment for school leaders could be focus areas that help alleviate these issues.

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