School of Education

Challenges and Research Priorities of Louisiana Educators: A Survey of School Leaders

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Key Findings:

- Louisiana schools suffer from a shortage of effective teachers and support staff
- Frequent curriculum changes, pressures from the accountability system, and low salaries lead many experienced teachers to leave the profession
- Changes in the student population, particularly decreasing valuation of schooling; increasing special needs, including mental health; and the lack of autonomy for educators make the work environment of educators difficult

Executive Summary

This report presents results of a survey of school superintendents and principals in Louisiana. The survey was designed to identify challenges and research priorities of school leaders in the state. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of specific challenges in four areas (School Leaders, Teachers and Instructional Staff, Students, and Facilities and Resources) and to explain or comment on the nature of the challenge. More than half of Louisiana superintendents and more than one-quarter of principals responded to this survey. Noteworthy is that **54% of respondents served rural communities.**

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Introduction

Purpose of the Study

According to a recent article in US News and World report, Louisiana ranks very near the bottom in the US with respect to the quality of education offered to its citizens.[1] These rankings are based on a range of indicators, including student performance on standardized tests.

For years the Gallop Poll ranks Louisiana's K12 education system at or near the bottom. However, recent data show positive trends on some test scores. For example, Louisiana 8th graders have led the nation with regard to growth on the mathematics section of the National Assessment of Educational Performance.[2]

Positive trends often reflect the investments policymakers have made in the State's education system. Louisiana is a national leader with regard to the charter school movement, the creation of innovative pathways to teaching, the sophistication of its school and teacher accountability program, and its adoption and implementation of curriculum innovations, to name a few.[3] However, reviews on the impact of the State's K12 initiatives have been mixed.[4] For example, a recent study of the Louisiana school choice voucher program raised questions about the effectiveness of the program and its impact on the education provided to low-income and minority youth.[5] A voice heard far too infrequently in these debates is that of the educators responsible for the day-to-day delivery of the State's education.

Louisiana, like the rest of the country, needs well-prepared principals and educators. The need for quality educators is felt more strongly in rural districts.[6] Districts must invest time, effort, and resources to replace educators and ensure that there are certified professionals leading students. In 2016, this cost could range from $4,400 in a rural district to $18,000 in a large urban district.[7] Louisiana Department of Education reported 5,301 teachers exiting the classroom in 2017-18.[8] A reasonable estimate total cost to the State of Louisiana is approximately $22 million. For this expenditure there is no noticeable improvement in student opportunities for equitable education.

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Methods

The study targeted all principals and superintendents in public schools in Louisiana during the Fall 2019 semester. Charter school principals were contacted based on the availability of

Survey Respondents

Of the 65 superintendents who received the survey, 34 (52.3%) responded. Their average years of experience as a superintendent was 5.2 years, and all worked in public school districts. The type of districts represented by those who provided data on this item is as follows:

District Type	Frequency
Rural	16 (64%)
Suburban	6 (24%)
Urban	2 (8%)
Other (please describe)	1 (4%)
Total	**25**

Of the 1,100 principals who received the survey, 289 (26.3%) responded. Of this number, 278 (98%) worked in public schools. The average years of ex 0 T8(0)Tj10(f)-14(h)-14(n)-13(n)-2(1)-13(2)-1(0)-1(0)-1(e)-1(s)-1(e)-1(d)]TJ.005Tc.2T-.032Tc-11

Survey Respondents Continued

Challenges Related to Principals and School Leaders

Table 1.1 presents superintendent rankings of several issues related to principals and school leaders. The most important challenges address the supply and recruitment of school leaders. The principal accountability program and technology in the schools are the least pressing challenges identified by superintendents.

Table 1.1
Challenges Related to Principals and School Leaders: Superintendent Rankings

	1 (Top Challenge) Pct N	2 Pct N	3 Pct N	4 Pct N	5 Pct N	6 Pct N	7 Pct N	8 (Least Pressing Challenge) Pct N	TOTAL
Leadership effectiveness of principals	18.18% 4	13.64% 3	22.73% 5	9.09% 2	18.18% 4	9.09% 2	9.09% 2	0.00% 0	22
Supply of qualified principals	18.75% 3	31.25% 5	6.25% 1	18.75% 3	12.50% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	12.50% 2	16
Technology in schools and classrooms	15.00% 3	0.00% 0	10.00% 2	5.00% 1	5.00% 1	5.00% 1	20.00% 4	40.00% 8	20
Recruitment of qualified principals	7.14% 1	7.14% 1	28.57% 4	7.14% 1	14.29% 2	14.29% 2	21.43% 3	0.00% 0	14
Retention of effective principals	5.88% 1	5.88% 1	5.88% 1	11.76%	11.76%	29.41%	23.53%	5.88%	17
Readiness levels of new principals	6.25% 1	31.25% 5	12.50% 2	31.25%	12.50%	0.00%	6.25%	0.00%	16
Principal evaluation and accountability program	5.88% 1	5.88% 1	11.76% 2	11.76%	11.76%	23.53%	11.76%	17.65%	17
Professional development for principals	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	25.00% 4	6.25%	18.18%	31.25%	6.25%	12.50%	16

Challenges Related to Principals and School Leaders

Superintendents were asked to comment on the rankings they provided for school leaders (Table 1.2). They noted that principals are frequently taken away from instructional leadership, but that they are a key and pivotal player in educational processes. Included in the issue of their time are state mandates regarding observations and other activities. These superintendents also noted the difficulty of recruiting principals for rural schools.

Table 1.2

Challenges Related to Principals and School Leaders: Superintendent Comments
The challenges listed in the question are indicative of the primary issues we face.
It is very hard to encourage qualified, talented people to come to a rural district that is failing. Therefore as a district we must do something above and beyond what other districts are doing to train personnel.
Like teachers, it's difficult to retain qualified school leaders in rural school districts.
Our school district has many qualified principals. However, the nature of the job and challenging accountability limit the amount of time principals have to devote to instructional leadership.
Our district provides monthly PD for principals; however, a long-term mentorship--especially in the infancy of their careers--is desperately needed.
We have a shortage of people with experience who want to apply for principal positions. Many of the applicants have limited experience in the classroom and have not served as assistant principal. They have the qualifications but do not have much background experience.
Principals are THE most important members of the district. This, without a doubt, is why we've made so much growth in the last 4 years....Our principals are much stronger today than they were 5 years ago.
Too many other requirements outside the classroom take away from assisting teachers in the classroom.

Challenges Related to Principals and School Leaders

The views of superintendents are echoed by principals, who address demands on their time that take away from instructional leadership (see Table 5.1.2). Similarly, they note

Challenges Related to Teachers and Instructional Staff

Superintendent and principal rankings of challenges associated with teachers and instructional staff are presented in Tables 2.1.1 and 2.1.2. Both groups of leaders identify the supply and recruitment of qualified teachers as their greatest priorities in this category. These are followed by the readiness levels of new teachers and the overall issue of instructional effectiveness. Teacher accountability and technology in the classroom ranked among the least important challenges.

Table 2.1.1
Challenges Related to Teachers and Instructional Staff:
Superintendent Rankings

	1 (Top Challenge) Pct N	2 Pct N	3 Pct N	4 Pct N	5 Pct N	6 Pct N	7 Pct N	8 (Least Pressing Challenge) Pct N	TOTAL
Supply of qualified teachers	77.78% 14	0.00% 0	5.56% 1	5.56% 1	0.00% 0	11.11% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	18
Recruitment of qualified teachers	15.00% 3	50.00% 10	10.00% 2	10.00% 2	5.00% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	10.00% 2	20
Instructional effectiveness of teachers	10.53% 2	15.79% 3	5.26% 1	21.05% 4	10.53% 2	15.79% 3	21.05% 4	0.00% 0	19
Readiness levels of new teachers	5.26% 1	10.53% 2	21.05% 4	36.84% 7	21.05% 4	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19
Teacher evaluation and accountability program	5.56% 1	0.00% 0	11.11% 2	5.56% 1	16.67% 3	11.11% 2	27.78% 5	22.22% 4	18
Retention of effective teachers	0.00% 0	16.67% 3	38.89% 7	16.67% 3	11.11% 2	5.56% 1	11.11% 2	0.00% 0	18
Professional development for teachers	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	11.76% 2	5.88% 1	23.53% 4	35.29% 6	11.76% 2	11.76% 2	17
Technology in classrooms	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	10.53% 2	5.26% 1	5.26% 1	15.79% 3	26.32% 5	36.84% 7	19

Challenges Related to Teachers and Instructional Staff

Principals' comments related to teachers and instructional staff are presented in Tables 2.2.2 (Teacher Performance Issues) and 2.2.3 (Teacher Supply Issues). Teacher performance issues are related to the readiness levels of new teachers, the ability and willingness of teachers to adapt to state mandated curriculum changes, and the general challenge of classroom management. Challenges with regard to the supply of teachers are related to the decline in the number of candidates entering the teaching profession, the quality of training offered by alternative certification programs, and the rate at which experienced teachers are leaving the profession. This latter challenge, according to principals, stems from pressures related to the account-ability program, frequent mandates from the state, and demographic changes in student populations.

Table 2.2.2

Challenges Related to Teachers and Instructional Staff

Principals' responses regarding research priorities for teachers and instructional staff were coded into five categories (Table 2.3.2). The most prominent category is research related to teacher instructional effectiveness. Items addressed in this category include differentiating instruction, data use, motivating students, research-based strategies, etc. The next most prominent category is related to professional development for teachers. Comments in this category addressed the effectiveness of PD and training needs.

Challenges Related to Students

Table 3.1.2
Challenges with Respect to Students: Principal Rankings

	1 (Most Important) Pct N	2 Pct N	3 Pct N	4 Pct N	5 Pct N	6 Pct N	7(Least Important) Pct N	TOTAL
Student Academic Achievement	34.78% 96	25.36% 70	19.57% 54	9.78% 27	5.80% 16	2.90% 8	1.81% 5	276
Student Discipline	16.67% 46	18.12% 50	19.57% 54	17.75% 49	16.30% 45	6.16% 17	5.43% 15	276
Student Attendance	20.29% 56	13.77% 38	18.12% 50	20.29% 56	18.12% 50	6.52% 18	2.90% 8	276
Student Mobility	2.90% 8	5.80% 16	5.43% 15	10.87% 30	19.57% 54	36.59% 101	18.84% 52	276
Student Health	3.62% 10	4.35% 12	2.17% 6	7.25% 20	14.13% 39	28.26% 78	40.22% 111	276
Student Engagement	9.42% 26	19.57% 54	22.46% 62	18.12% 50	11.23% 31	10.87% 30	8.33% 23	276
Student Accountability Program	12.32% 34	13.04% 36	12.68% 35	15.94% 44	14.86% 41	8.70% 24	22.46% 62	276

Superintendents stated that the value placed by students and parents on education is a significant challenge (Table 3.2.1). Among principals, the most comments in this category related to student and parent engagement (Table 3.2.2). Coupled with changes in demographics, administrators indicated significant issues with engagement of students and parents. These issues manifested themselves in attendance problems, behavior problems, etc. Related to this is a significant increase in mental health issues among students, and state policies which focus largely on test scores, with little accountability for parents and students.

Table 3.2.1

Comments on Challenges Related to Students: Superintendents
A culture of very low expectations.
The accountability system is not designed for small school districts with a majority of minority students. It is inequitable.
Violence from home and community brought into the school by students at the high school level. This is a high priority issue that is faced primarily by 3 schools.

Challenges Related to Physical Facilities and Resources

The most common response to research priorities in this category by principals (no response from superintendents) addressed funding for physical improvements (Table 4.3.1). Other responses addressed the need for research related to the link of physical facilities and educational processes, strategies for raising funds, and funding equity issues. A theme running through the responses was the possible links among the physical condition of the school, staff shortage issues in the face of growing enrollments, and financial pressures stemming

Other Challenges Faced by Superintendents and Principals

Few superintendents responded to the request for research priorities in this area. Among principals, research priorities focused on school management and student issues (Table 5.2.1). The former included teacher and staff morale and effectiveness, increasing parental engagement, and effective use of school data. Student priorities focused on strategies for addressing the needs of students and promoting student engagement.

Table 5.2.1
Research Priorities Related to Other Challenges:
Principals

Challenges	Freq	Typical Comments
School management	16 (48.5%)	Priorities included teacher and staff morale and effectiveness, parent engagement, and using data
Student issues	13 (39.4%)	Priorities included students with special needs and student engagement
Academic strategies	4 (12.1%)	Priorities included development of assessments and