

Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviors of Principals in Rural Schools

In 2020–21, the percentage of public school principals who held an education specialist credential as their highest degree was higher in rural areas (28 percent) than in suburban areas (24 percent) and cities (21 percent). In contrast, the percentage of public school principals who held a doctor's or first professional degree as their highest degree was lower in rural areas (8 percent) than in suburban areas (13 percent) and cities (14 percent) but higher than in towns (6 percent).

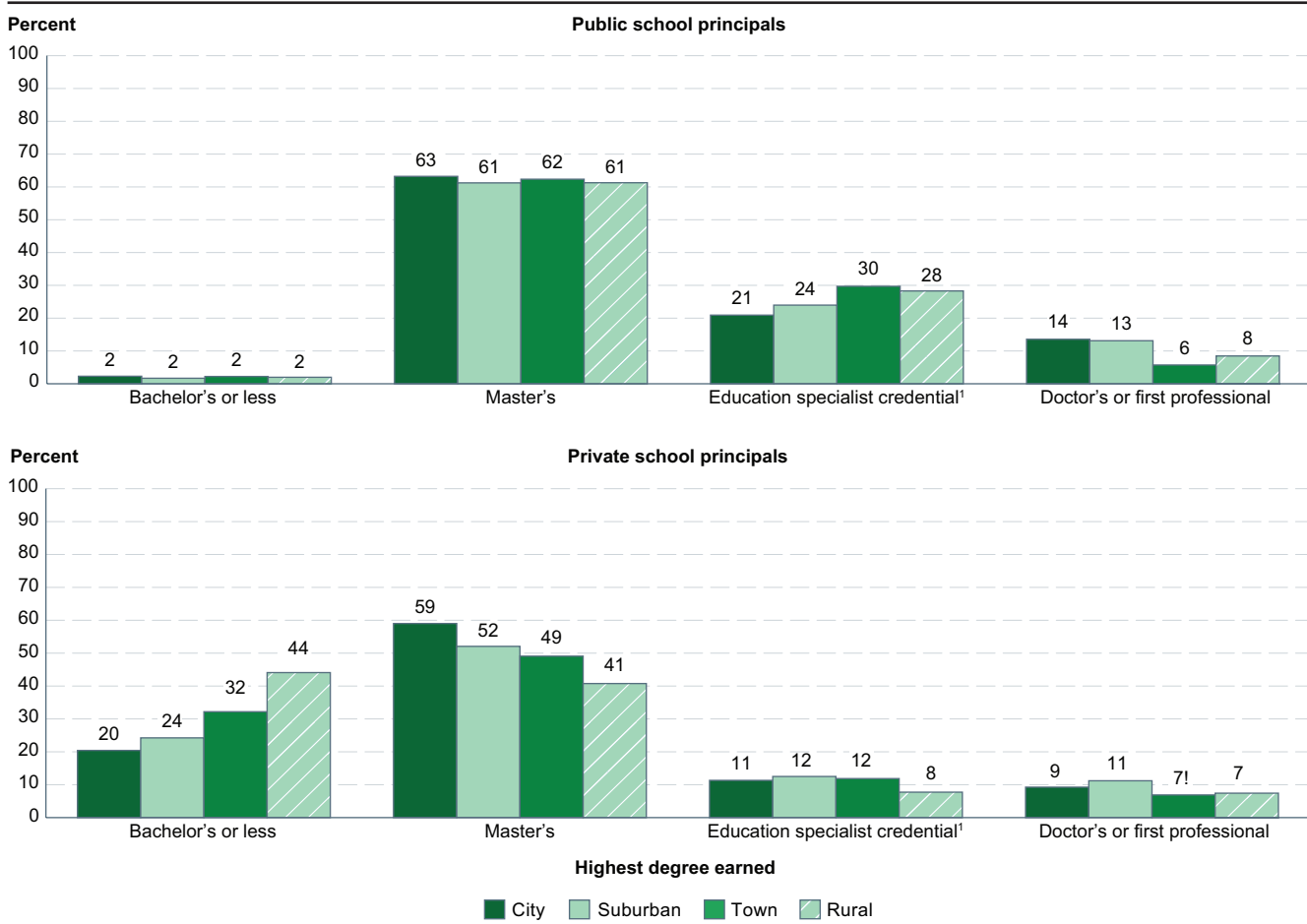
Principal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors may vary by school locale.¹ Because prior research has shown that the characteristics of school principals are associated with student outcomes, including student learning gains and absenteeism, it is important to investigate whether there is variation in principal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors by school locale.^{2,3} Using data from the 2020-21 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS: 2020-21), this indicator explores differences in characteristics of principals, including race/ethnicity, highest degree earned, and years of experience, as well as principal attitudes and behaviors, by school locale. This indicator also makes comparisons between public and private school principals in rural areas.

In 2020-21, in both public and private schools, the percentage of female principals in rural areas was lower than in suburban areas and cities. The percentage of female public school principals in rural areas (50 percent) was lower than in suburban areas (58 percent) and cities

(62 percent). Similarly, in private schools, the percentage of female principals in rural areas (52 percent) was also lower than in cities (66 percent) and suburban areas (67 percent).

In both public and private schools, the percentage of principals who were White was higher in rural areas than in suburban areas and cities. Similar to the racial/ethnic composition of students (see [Children in Rural Areas and Their Family Characteristics](#)), the percentage of public school principals who were White was higher in rural areas (89 percent) than in suburban areas (78 percent) and cities (61 percent). In contrast, the percentages of public school principals who were Black and Hispanic were lower in rural areas (5 and 4 percent, respectively) than in suburban areas and cities. Similar to public schools, the percentage of private school principals who were White was higher in rural areas (94 percent) than in suburban areas (81 percent) and cities (76 percent).

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of principals in public and private schools, by school control, highest degree earned, and school locale: School year 2020–21



! Interpret data with caution. The coefficient of variation (CV) for this estimate is between 30 and 50 percent.

¹ At least 1 year beyond the master's degree level.

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), "Public School Principal and Private School Principal Data Files," 2020–21, and *Characteristics of Public and Private Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States: Results From the 2020–21 National Teacher and Principal Survey—First Look*, table 3.

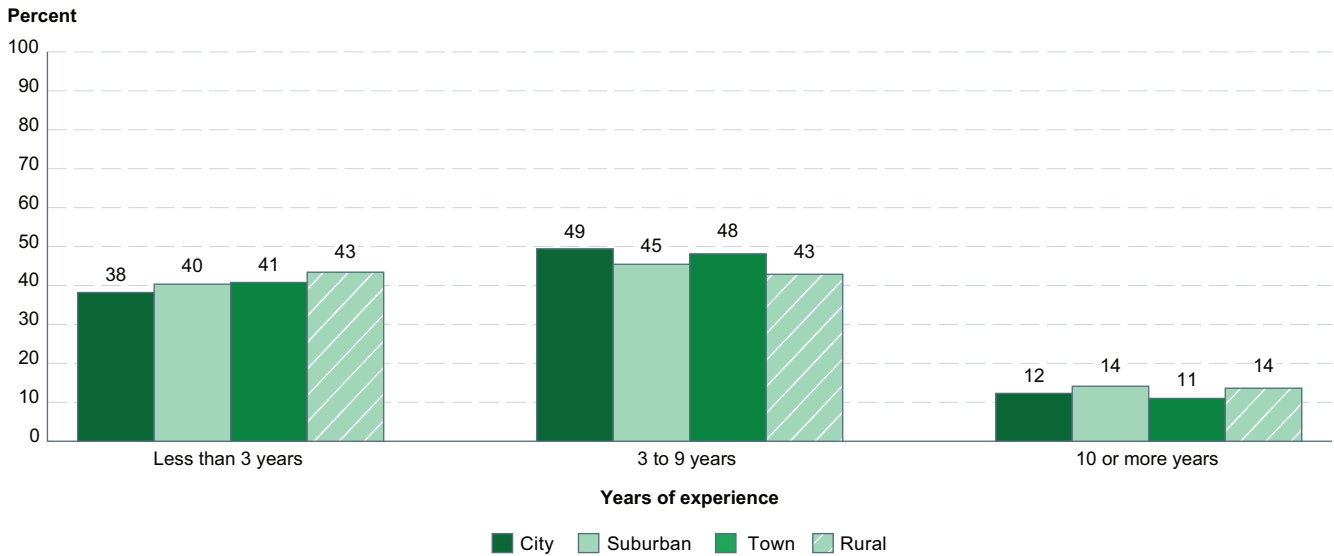
In 2020–21, public school principals in rural areas generally had higher degree levels than did private school principals in rural areas. The percentages of principals in rural areas whose highest degree was a master's degree or education specialist credential were higher for those in public schools (61 and 28 percent, respectively) than for those in private schools (41 and 8 percent, respectively). In contrast, the percentage of principals in rural areas whose highest degree was a bachelor's degree or lower was higher for those in private schools (44 percent) than for those in public schools (2 percent).

In 2020–21, the most commonly held highest degree for public school principals in rural areas was a master's degree (61 percent). The percentage of public school principals who held an education specialist credential as their highest degree was higher in rural areas (28 percent) than in suburban areas (24 percent) and

cities (21 percent). In contrast, the percentage of public school principals who held a doctor's or first professional degree as their highest degree was lower in rural areas (8 percent) than in suburban areas (13 percent) and cities (14 percent) but higher than in towns (6 percent).

Unlike public school principals in rural areas, for whom a master's degree was the most commonly held highest degree, the most commonly held highest degree for private school principals in rural areas was a bachelor's degree or lower (44 percent). A higher percentage of private school principals in rural areas held a bachelor's degree or lower (44 percent) than in suburban areas (24 percent) and cities (20 percent). In contrast, the percentage of private school principals who held a master's degree as their highest degree was lower in rural areas (41 percent) than in suburban areas (52 percent) and cities (59 percent).

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of principals in public schools, by reported years of experience as principal at current school and school locale: School year 2020–21

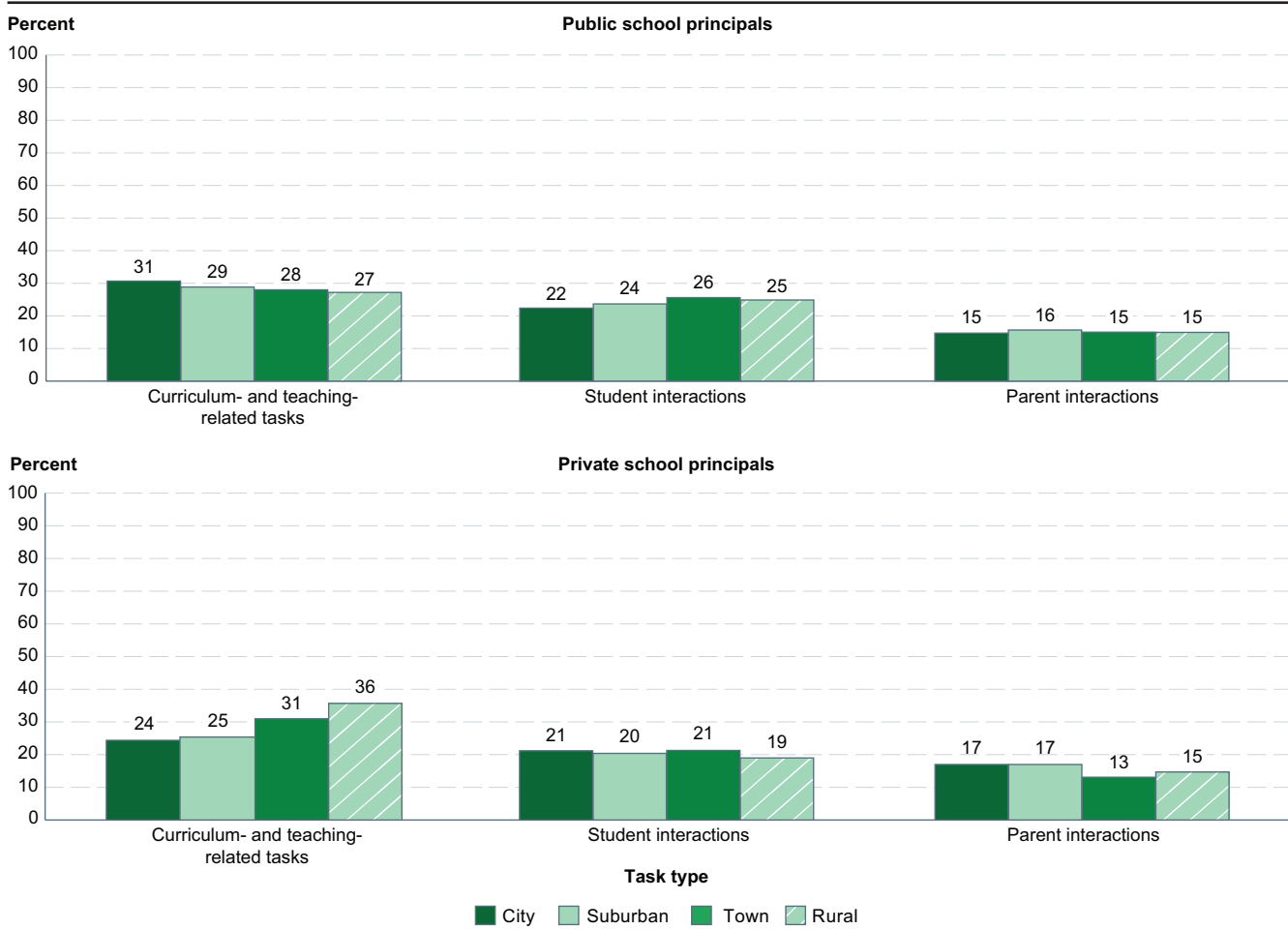


NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), "Public School Principal and Private School Principal Data Files," 2020–21, and *Characteristics of Public and Private Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States: Results From the 2020–21 National Teacher and Principal Survey—First Look*, table 6.

In 2020-21, for both public and private schools, the percentage of principals with fewer than 3 years of experience as principal at their current school was higher in rural areas than in cities. For example, the percentage of public school principals with fewer than 3 years of

experience was 43 percent in rural areas, compared with 38 percent in cities. In contrast, the percentage of public school principals with 3 to 9 years of experience was lower in rural areas (43 percent) than in towns (48 percent) and cities (49 percent).

Figure 3. Average percentage of time per school year spent by principals in public and private schools on school-related tasks, by school control, selected task type, and school locale: School year 2020–21

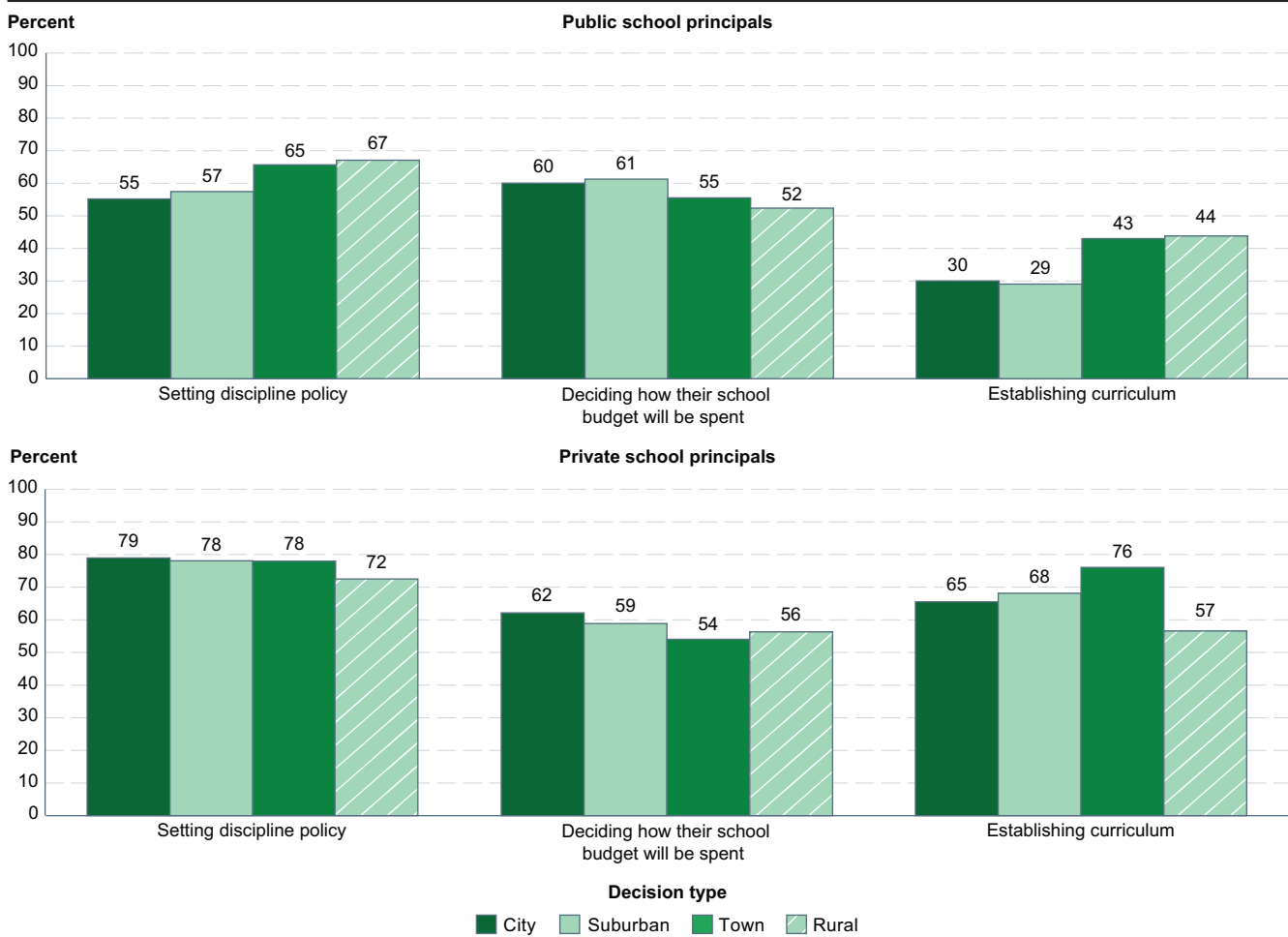


NOTE: Detail may not sum to 100 because of time spent on “other” tasks. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal and Private School Principal Data Files,” 2020–21, and *Characteristics of Public and Private Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States: Results From the 2020–21 National Teacher and Principal Survey—First Look*, table 5.

In 2020–21, public school principals in rural areas reported spending fewer hours per week on school-related activities than did those in cities. Specifically, public school principals in rural areas reported spending 57 hours per week on school-related activities, compared with 60 hours reported by those in cities. Differences by locale also existed for public school principals in how they reported spending their time during the school year. For example, public school principals in rural areas reported spending a lower percentage of their time on curriculum- and teaching-related tasks (about 27 percent of their time) than did those in suburban areas (about 29 percent of their time) and cities (about 31 percent of their time). In contrast, public school principals in rural areas reported spending a higher percentage of their time on student interactions (about 25 percent of their time) than did those in suburban areas (about 24 percent of their time) and cities (about 22 percent of their time).

For private school principals in 2020–21, those in rural areas reported spending fewer hours per week on school-related activities than did those in all other locales. Specifically, private school principals in rural areas reported spending 48 hours per week on school-related activities, compared with 53 hours reported by those in towns and 57 hours each reported by those in cities and suburban areas. Like public school principals, there were some differences by locale in how private school principals reported spending their time during the school year. Specifically, private school principals in rural areas reported spending a higher percentage of their time on curriculum- and teaching-related tasks (about 36 percent of their time) than did those in suburban areas (about 25 percent of their time) and cities (about 24 percent of their time). In contrast, private school principals in rural areas reported spending a lower percentage of their time on parent interactions (about 15 percent of their time) than did those in suburban areas and cities (about 17 percent of their time each).

Figure 4. Percentage of principals in public and private schools who thought they had a major influence on decisions concerning various activities at their school, by school control, selected decision type, and school locale: School year 2020–21



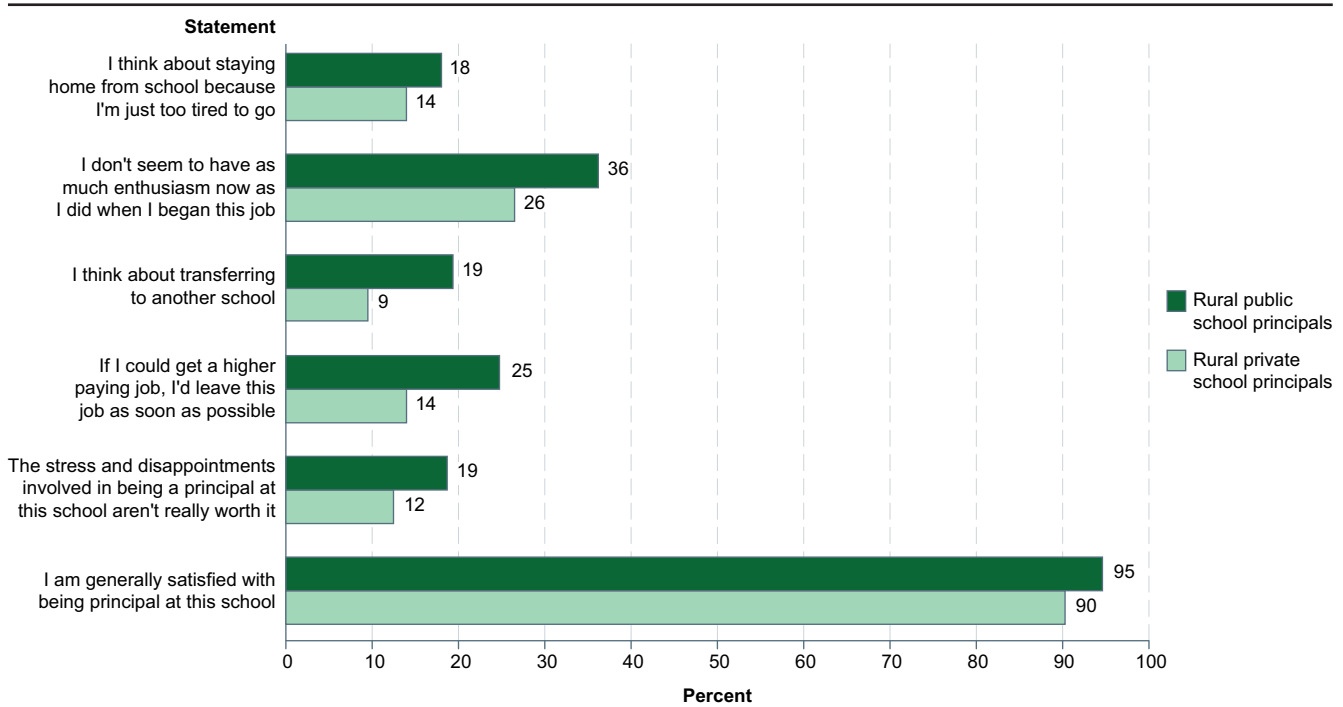
NOTE: Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal and Private School Principal Data Files,” 2020–21, and *Characteristics of Public and Private Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States: Results From the 2020–21 National Teacher and Principal Survey—First Look*, table 7.

In 2020–21, higher percentages of public school principals in rural areas reported thinking they had a major influence on certain decisions concerning various activities at their school than did those in cities and suburban areas. Specifically, higher percentages of public school principals in rural areas thought they had a major influence on setting discipline policy (67 percent) and establishing curriculum (44 percent) than did those in suburban areas (57 and 29 percent, respectively) and cities (55 and 30 percent, respectively). In contrast, a lower percentage of public school principals in rural areas thought they had a major influence on deciding how their

school budget would be spent (52 percent) than did those in cities (60 percent) and suburban areas (61 percent).

Unlike public school principals, a lower percentage of private school principals in rural areas reported thinking they had a major influence establishing curriculum (57 percent) than did those in cities (65 percent), suburban areas (68 percent) and towns (76 percent). There were no measurable differences between the percentages of private school principals in rural areas and of those in other locales who thought they had a major influence on setting discipline policy and deciding how their school budget would be spent.

Figure 5. Percentage of principals in rural areas who agreed with statements about their position as principal, by school control: School year 2020–21



NOTE: Response options included “strongly disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” “somewhat agree,” and “strongly agree.” Principals who reported “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” were considered to have reported that they “agreed” with different statements. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal and Private School Principal Data Files,” 2020–21, and *Characteristics of Public and Private Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States: Results From the 2020–21 National Teacher and Principal Survey—First Look*, table 8.

Compared with public school principals in rural areas, private school principals in rural areas reported earning a lower annual salary and working fewer hours per week, and there were some differences in how they viewed their position as a principal as well. Specifically, private school principals in rural areas reported earning a lower annual salary (\$63,600) and working fewer hours per week (48 hours) than did public school principals in rural areas (\$90,700 and 57 hours, respectively). A lower percentage of private school principals than of public school principals in rural areas agreed that “the stress and disappointments involved in being principal

at this school aren’t really worth it” (12 vs. 19 percent).⁴ Similarly, a lower percentage of private school principals than of public school principals in rural areas agreed that (1) “If I could get a higher paying job, I’d leave this job as soon as possible” (14 vs. 25 percent); (2) “I think about transferring to another school” (9 vs. 19 percent); and (3) “I don’t seem to have as much enthusiasm now as I did when I began this job” (26 vs. 36 percent). There were no measurable differences between public and private school principals in rural areas who expressed that they were “generally satisfied with being principal at this school” (95 and 90 percent, respectively).

Endnotes:

¹ Please visit NCES’s [Education Across America website](#) for the definition of locale.

² Bastian, K.C., and Henry, G.T. (2015). The Apprentice: Pathways to the Principalship and Student Achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 51(4): 600–639. Retrieved October 18, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X14562213>.

³ Bartanen, B. (2020). Principal Quality and Student Attendance. *Educational Researcher*, 49(2): 101–113. Retrieved October 18, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19898702>.

⁴ Response options included “strongly disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” “somewhat agree,” and “strongly agree.” Principals who reported “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” were considered to have reported that they “agreed” with the statement.

Reference tables: NTPS First Look, tables 1–8

Related indicators and resources: [Characteristics of Public and Private School Principals](#) [*Condition of Education*]

Glossary: Bachelor’s degree; Doctor’s degree; Education specialist/professional diploma; Locale codes; Master’s degree; Private school; Public school or institution; Racial/ethnic group