

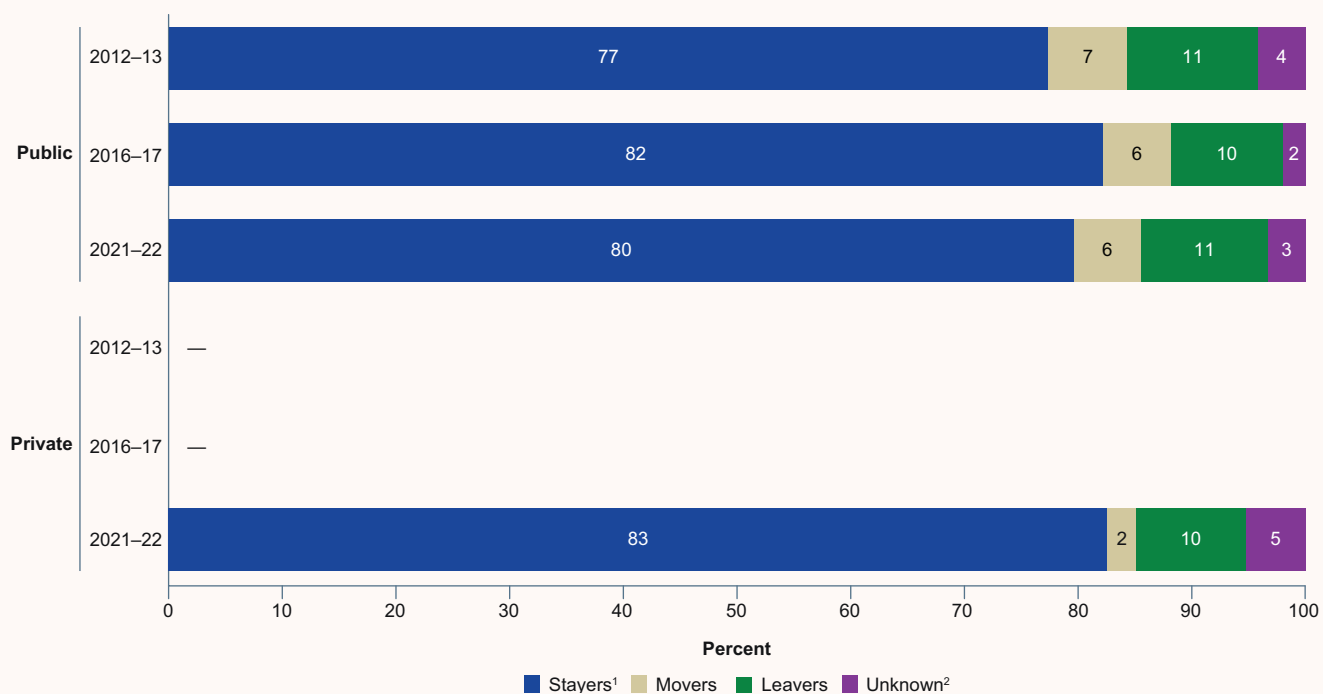
# Principal Turnover: Stayers, Movers, and Leavers

**Among those serving as principals during the 2020–21 school year, 11 percent of public school principals and 10 percent of private school principals had left the profession by the 2021–22 school year. Of these leavers, 63 percent from public schools and 52 percent from private schools were still working in K–12 education in a role other than principal.**

In the United States,<sup>1</sup> 80 percent of public school principals and 83 percent of private school principals in 2020-21 were working in the same position at the same school 1 year later, in school year 2021-22.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, 6 percent of public school principals and 2 percent of private school principals moved to a position as principal at another school, and 11 percent of public school principals and 10 percent of private school principals stopped working as a principal. These three groups are referred to as “stayers,”<sup>3</sup> “movers,” and “leavers,” respectively, in this indicator.<sup>4</sup> Mobility or attrition status refers to a principal’s status as a stayer, mover, or leaver.

**FIGURE 1.**

**Percentage distribution of public and private school principals, by mobility or attrition status: School years 2012–13, 2016–17, and 2021–22**



— Not available.

<sup>1</sup> Includes those who were on leave (e.g., maternity/paternity, military, disability, or sabbatical).

<sup>2</sup> The school reported that the principal had left, but it was unable to report on the current occupational status of the principal.

NOTE: Stayers are principals who stayed in the same position at the same school in the school year reported above as in the previous school year, movers are principals who moved to work as a principal at a different school in the school year reported above, and leavers are principals who were no longer working as a principal in the school year reported above. Figures are plotted based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding in the data labels.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), “Public School Principal Data File,” 2011–12; SASS Principal Follow-up Survey (PFS), “Public School Principal Status Data File,” 2012–13; National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal Data File,” 2015–16 and 2020–21; and NTPS Principal Follow-up Survey (PFS), “Public School Principal Status Data File,” 2016–17 and 2021–22, and “Private School Principal Status Data File,” 2021–22. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2023*, table 212.20; *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 212.20.

Comparing the 2021-22<sup>5</sup> mobility or attrition status of public school principals with that of private school principals,

- a higher percentage of private school principals were stayers (83 vs. 80 percent); and
- a higher percentage of public school principals were movers (6 vs. 2 percent).

The percentage of public school principals who were leavers was not measurably different from the percentage of private school principals who were leavers.

For public school principals, data on mobility or attrition status are also available for 2012-13 and 2016-17. The percentage of public school principals who were stayers in 2021-22 was 2 percentage points higher than in 2012-13 but 3 percentage points lower than in 2016-17. The percentage of public school principals who were leavers in 2021-22 was 1 percentage point higher than in 2016-17.

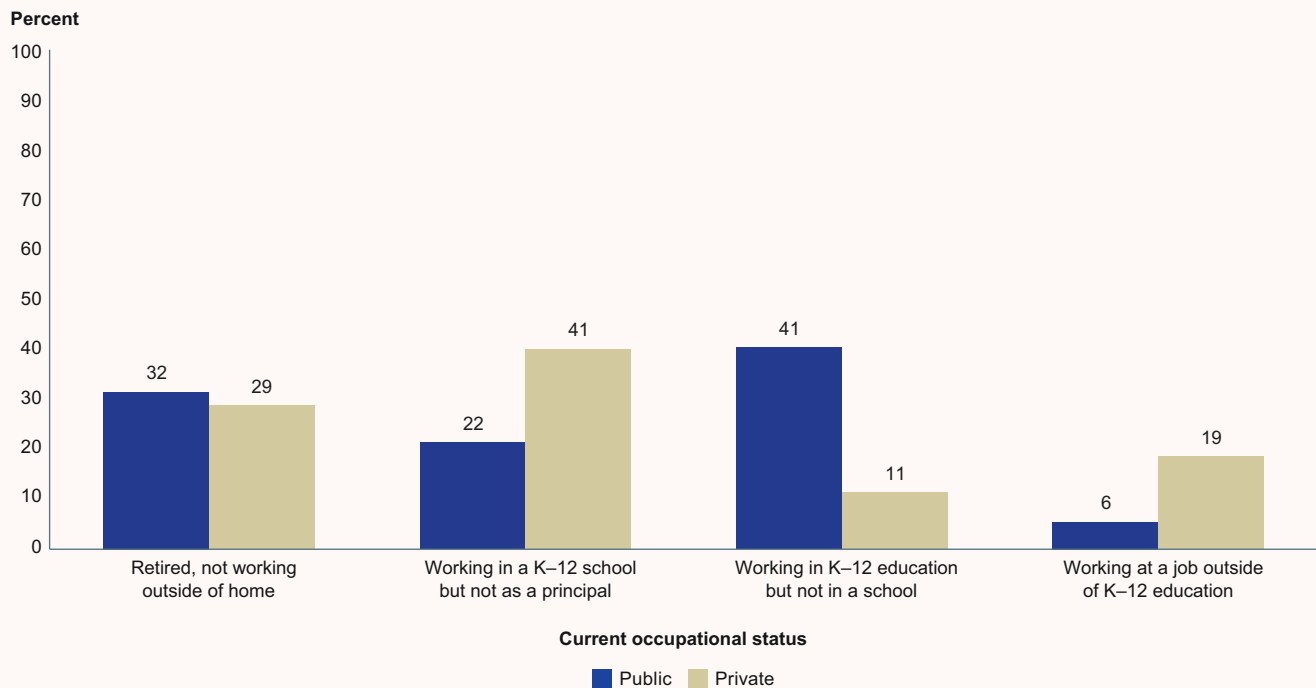
### New Occupational Status for Movers and Leavers

Principals who stayed in the profession but moved to a new school may or may not have been working in a school with the same control (public or private) as the prior year. Among principals who were movers in 2021-22,

- 81 percent of public school movers were known to have moved to another public school (including 51 percent who stayed in the same district);<sup>6</sup> and
- 74 percent of private school movers were known to have moved to another private school.

**FIGURE 2.**

#### Percentage distribution of public and private school principals who were leavers, by current occupational status: School year 2021–22



NOTE: Leavers are principals in 2020–21 who were no longer working as a principal in 2021–22. K–12 refers to kindergarten through grade 12. Figures are plotted based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding in the data labels.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal Data File,” 2020–21; and NTPS Principal Follow-up Survey (PFS), “Public School Principal Status Data File” and “Private School Principal Status Data File,” 2021–22. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2023*, table 212.30.

Principals who left the profession may have transitioned to a different role in the field of kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) education (inside or outside of a school setting). In 2021-22, some 63 percent of public school principal leavers and 52 percent of private school principal leavers remained in the field of K-12 education. More specifically,

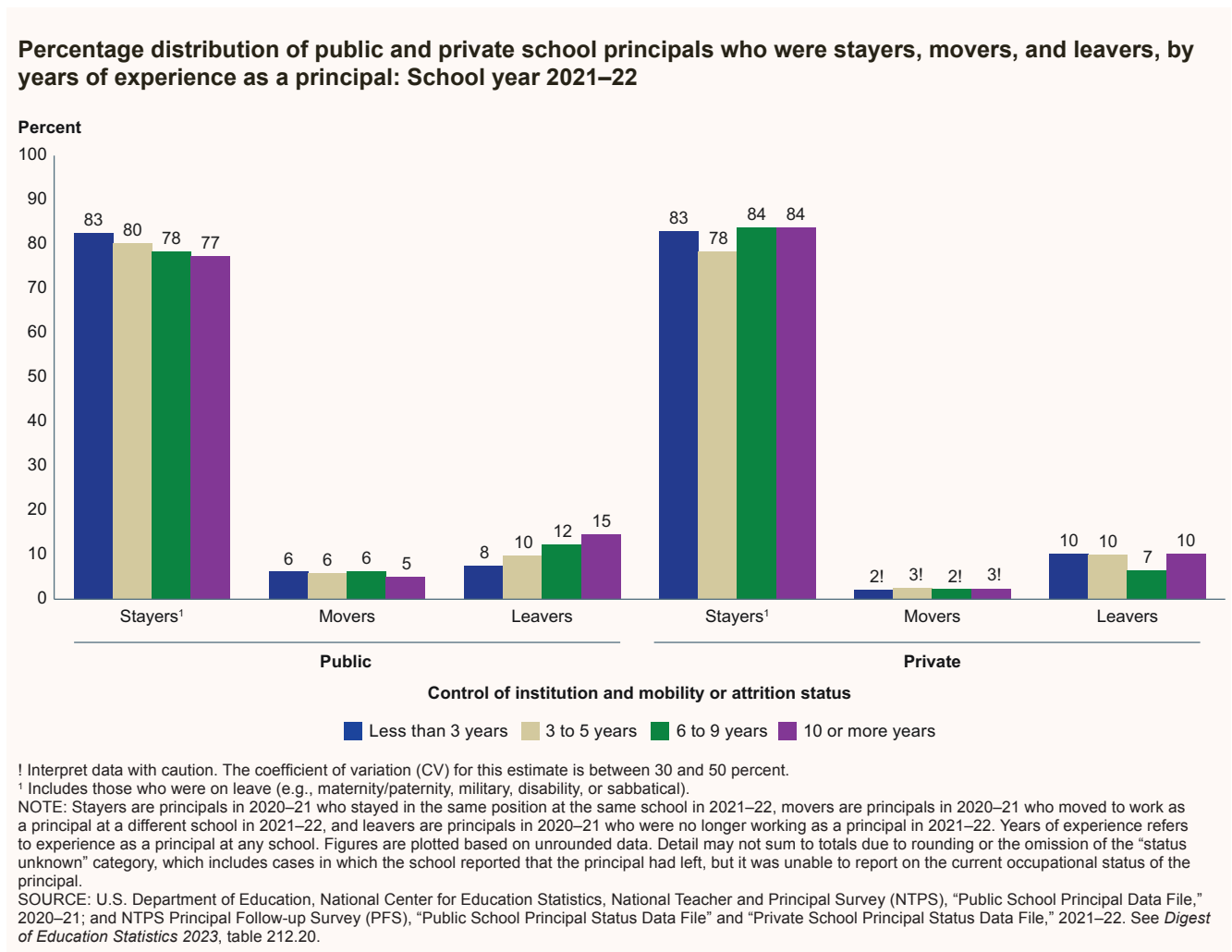
- a higher percentage of leavers from private schools than of those from public schools were still working in a K-12 school but not as a principal (41 and 22 percent, respectively); and
- a higher percentage of leavers from public schools than of those from private schools were still working in K-12 education but not in a school (41 and 11 percent, respectively).

The remainder of leavers with known status in 2021-22 had left the field of K-12 education, either by retiring or by taking a job in another field. Comparing public and private school leavers,

- there was no measurable difference in the percentage who retired (32 percent from public schools and 29 percent from private schools); and
- a lower percentage of leavers from public schools than of leavers from private schools were working at a job outside of K-12 education (6 percent and 19 percent, respectively).

### Mobility or Attrition Status by Principal Characteristics<sup>7</sup>

FIGURE 3.



Principals at different points in their careers may exhibit different propensities for mobility or attrition. The data show some differences in stayer and leaver status by years of experience<sup>8</sup> for public school principals but not for private school principals. For example, at public schools,

- the percentage of stayers was higher for principals with less than 3 years of experience as a principal (83 percent) than for principals with 10 or more years of experience (77 percent); and
- the percentage of leavers was higher for principals with 10 or more years of experience as a principal (15 percent) than for principals with less than 3 years of experience (8 percent).

However, there was no measurable difference in the percentages of public school principals who were movers in 2021-22 by years of experience as a principal.

Few differences were observed in mobility or attrition status for public school principals by other principal characteristics, including educational attainment, sex,<sup>9</sup> and race/ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> Specifically,

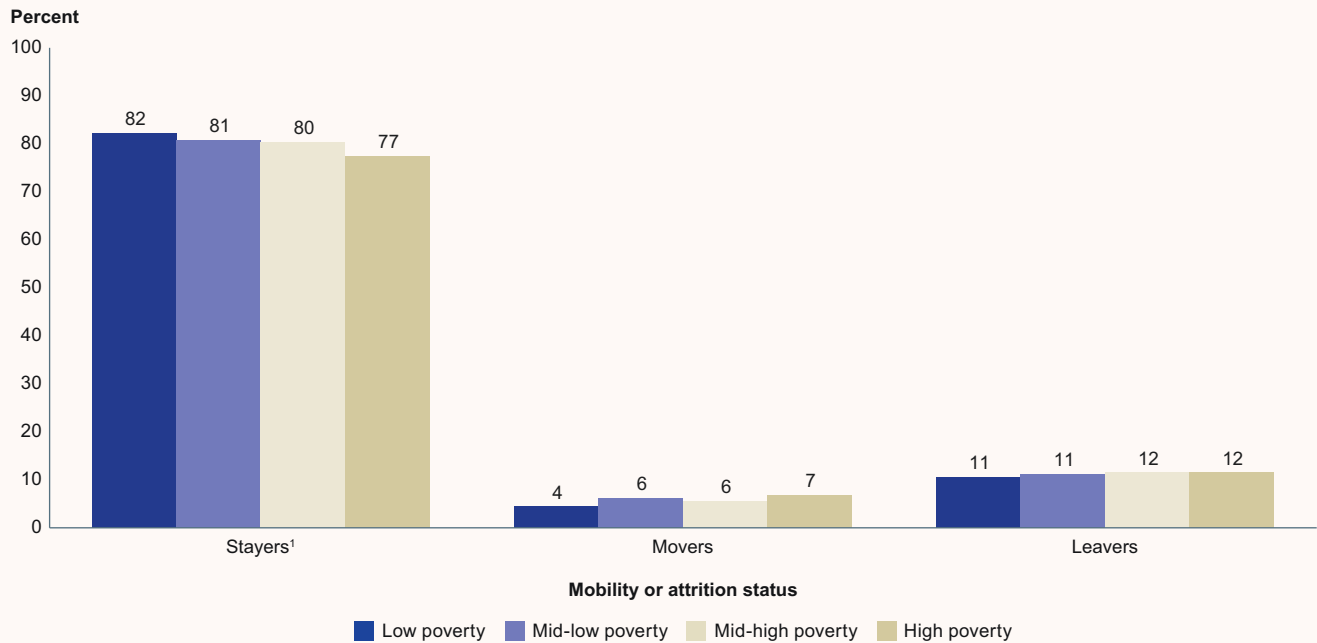
- the percentage of movers was higher for those with doctor's (7 percent) and master's (6 percent) degrees than for those with education specialist (5 percent) or bachelor's (4 percent) degrees;
- the percentage of leavers was higher for male principals (12 percent) than for female principals (10 percent); and
- the percentage of stayers was higher for Asian principals (85 percent) than for principals of Two or more races (70 percent).

### ***Mobility or Attrition Status by School Characteristics<sup>11</sup>***

Few differences were observed in the mobility or attrition status of principals by the racial/ethnic composition of students in the school in which they worked in the 2020-21 school year. In this indicator, racial/ethnic composition is categorized based on whether students of color made up less than 10 percent, 10 to less than 25 percent, 25 to less than 50 percent, 50 to less than 75 percent, 75 to less than 90 percent, or 90 percent or more of students in the school.<sup>12</sup> To the extent that differences existed for public and private schools, they tended to be between principals from schools in which students of color made up less than 10 percent of enrollment and principals from schools with higher percentages of students of color. For example, the percentage of public school principals who were movers was lower in schools where less than 10 percent of students were students of color (3 percent) than in schools with other racial/ethnic compositions (ranging from 5 to 8 percent).

FIGURE 4.

### Percentage distribution of public school principals who were stayers, movers, and leavers, by percentage of students approved for free or reduced-price lunch: School year 2021–22



<sup>1</sup> Includes those who were on leave (e.g., maternity/paternity, military, disability, or sabbatical).

NOTE: Stayers are principals in 2020–21 who stayed in the same position at the same school in 2021–22, movers are principals in 2020–21 who moved to work as a principal at a different school in 2021–22, and leavers are principals in 2020–21 who were no longer working as a principal in 2021–22. Low-poverty schools are defined as public schools where 25.0 percent or less of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL); mid-low-poverty schools are those where 25.1 to 50.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; mid-high-poverty schools are those where 50.1 to 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; and high-poverty schools are those where more than 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL. Students from households with incomes under 185 percent of the poverty threshold are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). In addition, some groups of children—such as foster children, children participating in the Head Start and Migrant Education programs, and children receiving services under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act—are assumed to be categorically eligible to participate in the NSLP. Students reported as eligible for FRPL also include students whose NSLP eligibility has been determined through direct certification, which is a “process conducted by the states and by local educational agencies (LEAs) to certify eligible children for free meals without the need for household applications” (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/direct-certification-national-school-lunch-program-report-congress-state-implementation-progress-1>). Also, under the Community Eligibility option, some nonpoor children who attend school in a low-income area may participate if the district decides that it would be more efficient to provide free lunch to all children in the school. For more information, see <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp>. Figures are plotted based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals due to rounding or the omission of the “status unknown” category, which includes cases in which the school reported that the principal had left, but it was unable to report on the current occupational status of the principal.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal Data File,” 2020–21; and NTPS Principal Follow-up Survey (PFS), “Public School Principal Status Data File,” 2021–22. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2023*, table 212.20.

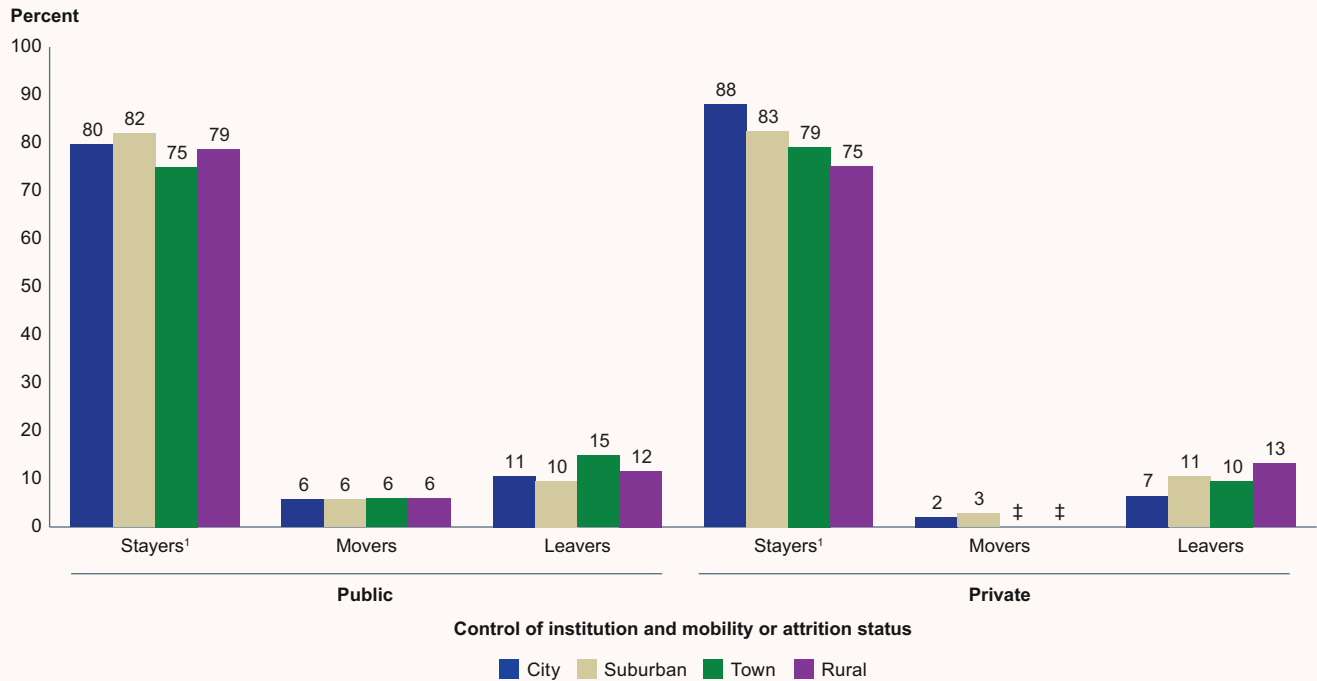
There were also few differences observed in the mobility or attrition status of principals by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) in the school in which they worked in the 2020–21 school year. Eligibility for FRPL under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a common measure of poverty in public schools.<sup>13</sup> This indicator uses quarters of school FRPL eligibility as a proxy for school poverty.<sup>14</sup> Most private schools do not participate in the NSLP,<sup>15</sup> so this section presents data on public school principals only. Although there were few differences, principals who worked in high-poverty schools showed greater mobility than principals from low-poverty schools in 2021–22. Specifically,

- the percentage of stayers was lower for principals from high-poverty public schools (77 percent) than for principals from low- or mid-low-poverty public schools (82 and 81 percent, respectively); and
- the percentage of movers was higher for principals from high-poverty public schools (7 percent) than for principals from low-poverty public schools (4 percent).

The percentages of public school principals who were leavers in 2021–22 did not differ measurably by school poverty.

FIGURE 5.

### Percentage distribution of public and private school principals who were stayers, movers, and leavers, by school locale: School year 2021–22



‡ Reporting standards not met. Either there are too few cases for a reliable estimate or the coefficient of variation (CV) is 50 percent or greater.

<sup>1</sup> Includes those who were on leave (e.g., maternity/paternity, military, disability, or sabbatical).

NOTE: Stayers are principals in 2020–21 who stayed in the same position at the same school in 2021–22, movers are principals in 2020–21 who moved to work as a principal at a different school in 2021–22, and leavers are principals in 2020–21 who were no longer working as a principal in 2021–22. Figures are plotted based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals due to rounding or the omission of the “status unknown” category, which includes cases in which the school reported that the principal had left, but it was unable to report on the current occupational status of the principal.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), “Public School Principal Data File,” 2020–21; and NTPS Principal Follow-up Survey (PFS), “Public School Principal Status Data File” and “Private School Principal Status Data File,” 2021–22. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2023*, table 212.20.

There were some differences in the mobility or attrition status of principals in 2021-22 by the locale (city, suburban, town, rural) of the schools in which they worked in 2020-21. Among public school principals,

- the percentage of stayers was lowest in towns (75 percent vs. 79 percent in rural areas, 80 percent in cities, and 82 percent in suburban areas); and
- the percentage of leavers was highest in towns (15 percent vs. 12 percent in rural areas, 11 percent in cities, and 10 percent in suburban areas).

Among private school principals,

- the percentage of stayers was highest in cities (88 percent vs. 83 percent in suburban areas, 79 percent in towns, and 75 percent in rural areas); and
- the percentage of leavers was lower in cities (7 percent) than in suburban (11 percent) and rural areas (13 percent).

Lastly, there were some differences in the mobility or attrition status of principals in 2021-22 by the level of schools in which they worked (i.e., elementary or secondary) in 2020-21.<sup>16</sup> Among public school principals,

- the percentage of stayers was lower in secondary/high schools (75 percent) than in middle (81 percent) and elementary (82 percent) schools; and
- the percentage of leavers was higher in secondary/high schools (15 percent) than in middle and elementary schools (10 percent each).

Among private school principals, the percentage of leavers was lower in combined/other schools (7 percent) than in elementary and secondary/high schools (11 percent each).

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this indicator, the United States includes the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

<sup>2</sup> For general technical notes related to data analysis, data interpretation, rounding, and other considerations, please refer to the *Reader's Guide*.

<sup>3</sup> Stayers include those who were on leave (e.g., maternity/paternity, military, disability, or sabbatical).

<sup>4</sup> Not discussed as stayers, movers, and leavers are an additional 3 percent of public school principals and 5 percent of private school principals who were no longer at the same school but whose current occupational status was unknown or were reported deceased by their schools.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this indicator, mobility and attrition status for a given school year refers to the status in that year relative to the prior year.

<sup>6</sup> Eighteen percent of public school movers were working as a principal at a public school in an unknown district or at a school with unknown control.

<sup>7</sup> Principal characteristics are based on reports during the 2020-21 school year.

<sup>8</sup> Refers to years of experience as a principal at any school.

<sup>9</sup> Principals were asked whether they were male or female. The questionnaire did not use either the term "gender" or "sex."

<sup>10</sup> Many differences by race/ethnicity, particularly for private school principals, were not testable because reporting standards were not met.

<sup>11</sup> School characteristics are for the schools in which principals taught during the 2020-21 school year.

<sup>12</sup> Many differences for private school movers by student racial/ethnic composition were not testable because reporting standards were not met.

<sup>13</sup> Students from households with incomes under 185 percent of the poverty threshold are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under

the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). In addition, some groups of children—such as foster children, children participating in the Head Start and Migrant Education programs, and children receiving services under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act—are assumed to be categorically eligible to participate in the NSLP. Students reported as eligible for FRPL also include students whose NSLP eligibility has been determined through direct certification, which is a "process conducted by the states and by local educational agencies (LEAs) to certify eligible children for free meals without the need for household applications" (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/direct-certification-national-school-lunch-program-report-congress-state-implementation-progress-1>). Also, under the Community Eligibility option, some nonpoor children who attend school in a low-income area may participate if the district decides that it would be more efficient to provide free lunch to all children in the school. For more information, see <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp>.

<sup>14</sup> In this indicator, low-poverty schools are defined as public schools where 25.0 percent or less of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL); mid-low-poverty schools are defined as those where 25.1 to 50.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; mid-high-poverty schools are defined as those where 50.1 to 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; and high-poverty schools are defined as those where more than 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL under the National School Lunch Program.

<sup>15</sup> About 80 percent of responding private schools were coded as missing or not applicable on the percent of students approved for free or reduced-price lunch variable in 2020-21.

<sup>16</sup> School levels include elementary, middle, secondary/high, and combined/other. All school levels are defined in the glossary.

**Reference tables:** *Digest of Education Statistics 2023*, tables [212.20](#) and [212.30](#); and *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table [212.20](#)

**Related indicators and resources:** [Characteristics of Public and Private School Principals](#); [Characteristics of Public School Teachers](#); [Characteristics of Public School Teachers Who Completed Alternative Route to Certification Programs](#) [*The Condition of Education 2018 Spotlight*]; [Teacher Turnover: Stayers, Movers, and Leavers](#)

**Glossary:** [Bachelor's degree](#); [College](#); [Combined/other school](#); [Doctor's degree](#); [Education specialist/professional diploma](#); [Educational attainment \(Current Population Survey\)](#); [Elementary school](#); [Locale codes](#); [Master's degree](#); [Middle school](#); [Private school](#); [Public school or institution](#); [Racial/ethnic group](#); [Secondary/High school](#)