

Principals' Assessment of Public Education: 2nd Annual Report

by Annie Galvin Teich



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Introduction

While there are effective and engaging teachers in every K-12 building in the country, the national view is that we are not generating as many positive educational outcomes as should be expected from a country with such abundant resources. Our educational output is not in sync with our economic need. At least 3 million jobs remain open in a sluggish economy because there are not enough technical experts to fill them.

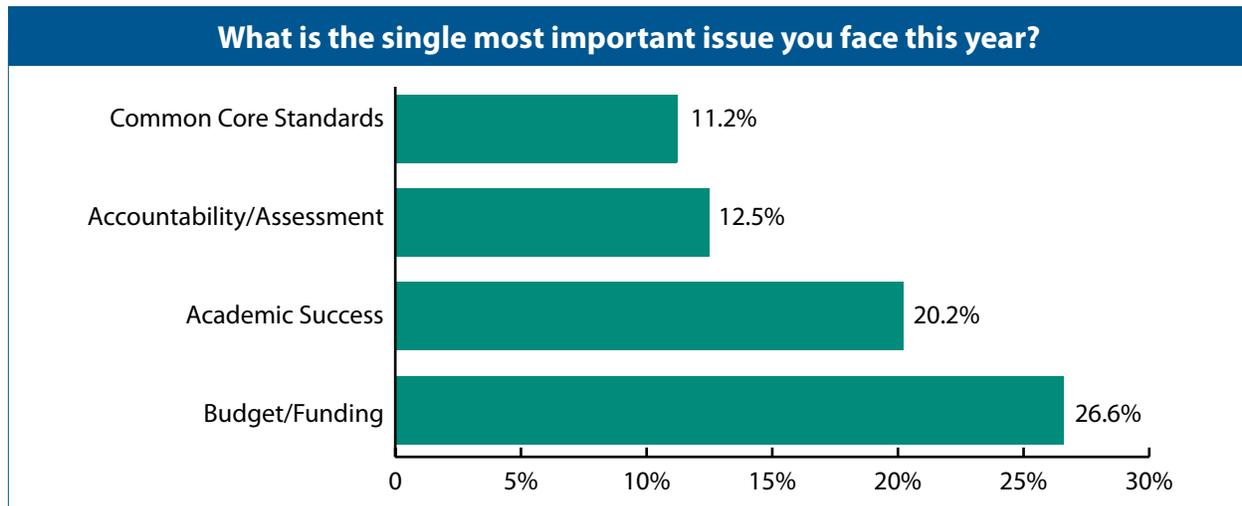
School principals and teachers work on the front lines of this national dilemma. Faced with changing demographics and evolving expectations for student skill sets, principals understand that maintaining the status quo is unacceptable.

This report details the experience of 486 K-12 principals who participated in our second annual assessment of public education in October. Much like the principals who responded in 2011, the 2012 principals are experienced administrators with almost half of them (48.2%) with ten plus years of experience. There is enormous disruption in the status quo this year with the transition to Common Core standards, new technology opportunities, and redefinition of what constitutes 21st century learning.

The principals represent "feet on the ground" reporting for educational marketers. Comparisons to last year's survey reveal that the ground is shifting but most issues remain. This paper reinforces the most significant challenges of today's K-12 principals but also highlights their successes.

Critical Challenges

Although there are some differences year over year in some of the minor topics, the most pressing issues for principals are exactly the same in 2012 as they were in 2011: budgets, academic success, and accountability. Adequate funding remains the number one concern of K-12 principals. The number of principals reporting budgets as their primary concern is down year over year from 33.6% of the survey group in 2011 to 26.6% in 2012; but education funding remains the top concern in 2012 and is a reoccurring theme throughout the survey results.



The second most important issue faced by principals is again academic success or student achievement. There is a slight increase year over year in the number of principals who cited this issue as their number two challenge, but the rankings are consistent in terms of priority. As academic success is the primary goal of education, this result is not unexpected. In addition to parental expectations, there is more public attention on academic issues such as math and science proficiency as well as graduation rates that keep student achievement in the headlines. Increasingly, greater math and science proficiency are featured in the national news as basic requirements for economic growth and scientific innovation.

The next two findings are quite possibly linked. Increases in both accountability/assessment and Common Core standards reflect the pressure on schools to perform. Playing out against the drumbeat of accountability is the transition to the new Common Core standards. The clock is ticking as the Common Core assessments are scheduled for implementation during the 2014-2015 school year. Some districts have preparations well in hand and others do not. But for all schools in the 45 states that have approved the shift to Common Core, the preparations and transition have begun but successful outcomes are uncertain.

Concerns about mandates increased in importance in 2012. When answering the question, principals sometimes responded with “unfunded mandates” and sometimes “mandates” only. With the general decrease in funding at local, state and federal levels, it seems reasonable to assume that when speaking of mandates, the principals are concerned about unfunded mandates. These vary from state to state and are an issue in some districts and not in others.

Family poverty popped up as a concern this year. In this year’s survey two separate issues emerged around families. The first was the degree of parental involvement and the other was family poverty. In this year’s results and moving forward, we will be documenting these two different aspects of student

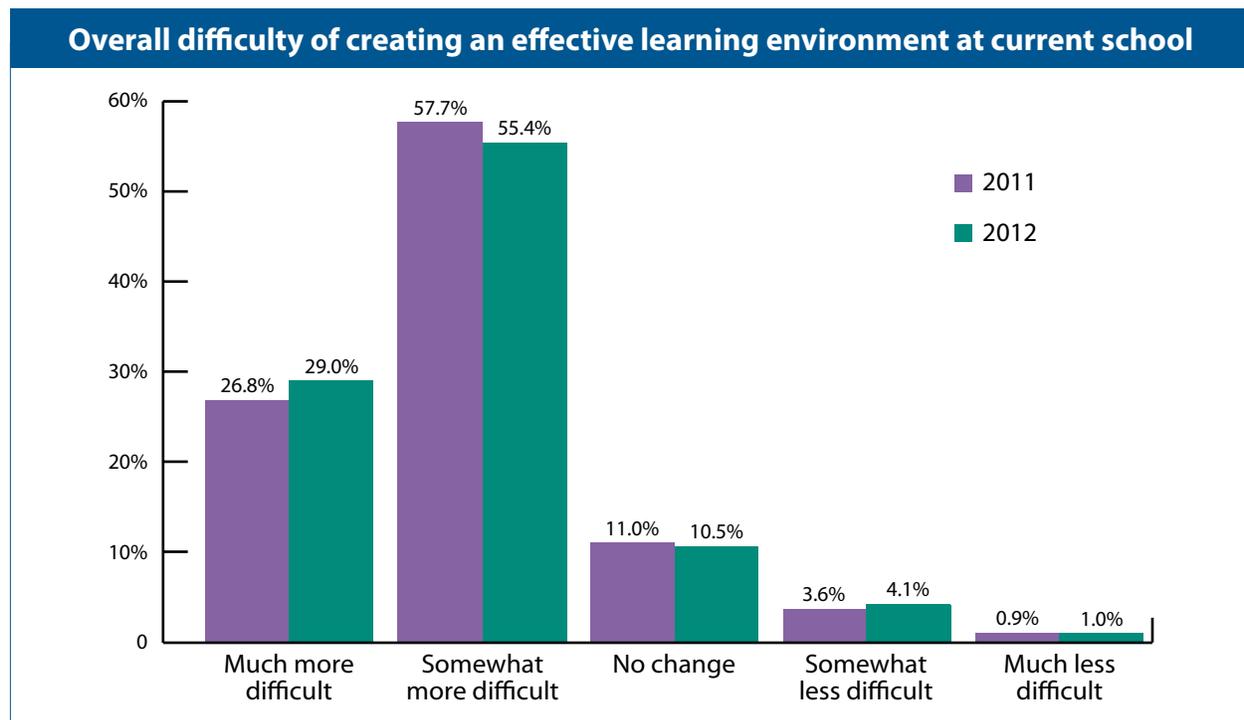
families. Principals complained that parents are less involved than in 2011 and there are more families dealing with the effects of a stalled economy and living in poverty. A number of principals mentioned the increase in students receiving free and reduced breakfast and lunch at school.

When asked to identify the number of students in their schools coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the movement from 2011 to 2012 was in those schools with smaller populations of disadvantaged students. So schools with less than 25% of their student population in this category saw some increases, but schools with higher percentages of lower socioeconomic students were stable year over year. Even with the slight shifts in degree, the takeaway here is that student poverty remains a concern for many principals. A number of principals also noted that violent behavior was present in their students' families – for both adults and students. Determining whether there is a link between poverty and violence is beyond the scope of this study, but it is a topic deserving exploration. There is no doubt that poverty and violence affect a student's health and ability to learn.

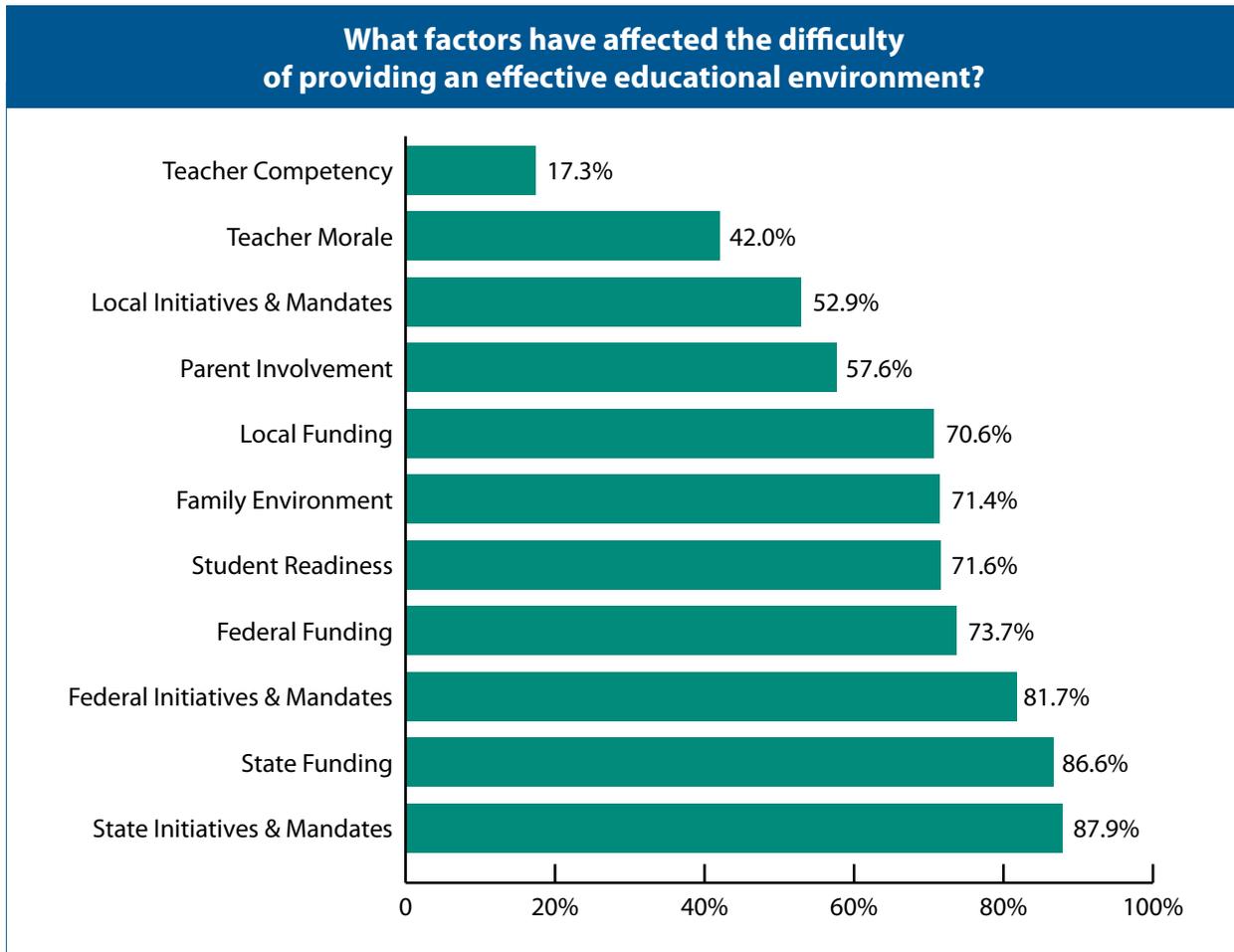
There was also an increase in the number of students who do not speak English as their first language. The only decrease noted in this category was in those schools where non-English speakers were 26% to 50% of the population. In schools where English language learners were less than 26% of the students population or greater than 50%, there are increases year over year in the number of students whose native language is not English.

Creating an Effective Environment for Learning

Principals' evaluations of the overall difficulty of creating an effective learning environment at their schools are relatively stable year over year with a slight increase in "much more difficult" and a slight decrease in the "somewhat more difficult" category. This category is also the one that drew the greatest number of responses in both years. More than half of the principals feel that creating an effective learning environment for their students is somewhat more difficult than in previous years.



Next we will examine specific areas that contribute to this overall sense of difficulty. With one exception, the majority of the principals rated each of the topic areas as making it “more difficult” to create an effective learning environment. In terms of the overall effect on schools this year, the responses ranked in exactly the same order as 2011 results. The one exception was in rating teacher competency. In keeping with the 2011 survey results, the majority of principals in 2012 ranked teacher competency as being less of an issue for them. In fact there was a slight increase in the number of principals who appreciated the competency of their teaching staff.



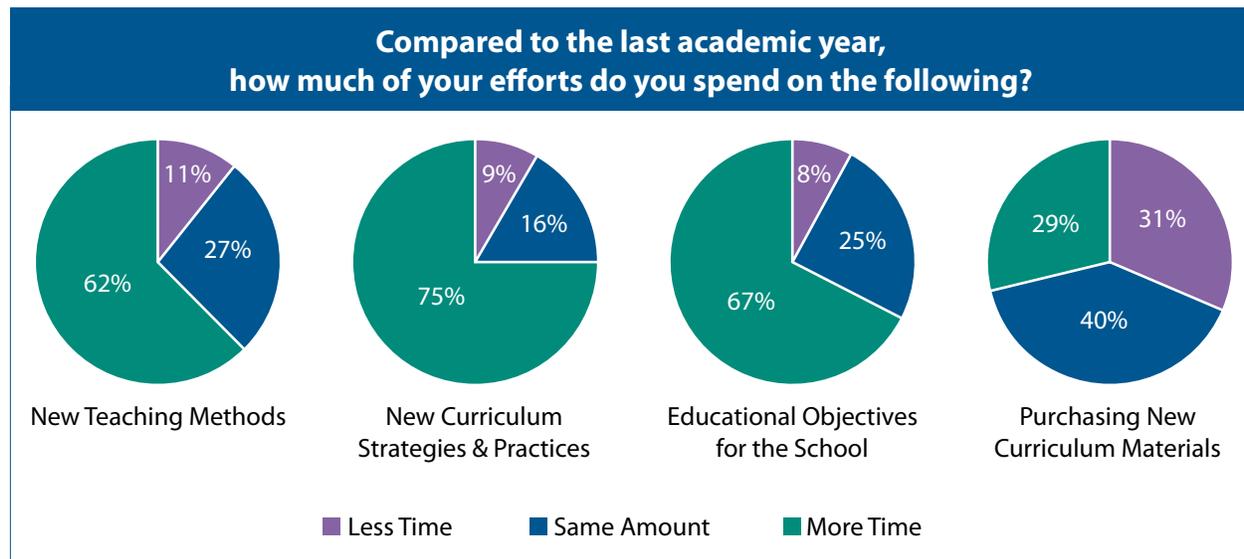
The top academic concern for principals this year is student readiness. Increasing national attention on high school graduation rates and readiness for college are part of the national conversation around the question, “are public schools adequately preparing students for college and career?” Although national attention is focused on graduation rates, student readiness is an issue for every grade as learning builds on prior knowledge and experience. Almost 72% of the principals noted that lack of student readiness affected the quality of the learning environment in their schools.

A student’s readiness to learn and academic success are dependent on a wide variety of factors including their home situation and native language. Ensuring that students are making adequate progress is the primary focus of assessment and accountability. Also, the lack of student readiness as measured by high stakes testing is one of the primary drivers of the Common Core standards.

In an attempt to better understand the effect of a student's family on his/her learning experience, "family environment" was added as a topic this year to distinguish from parental involvement. More than 70% of principals said that family environments have made it more difficult to create an effective learning environment at school. There is also an increase, (from 52.2% in 2011 to 57.6% in 2012) in the number of principals who believe that parent involvement is making it more difficult this year to create effective learning conditions.

As mentioned above, one of the bright spots in this year's data centers on the issue of teacher competency. Principals' confidence in their teachers' abilities increased across the board compared to last year. Principals said that teachers' competency either had no effect on the difficulty of providing effective learning environments or made it less difficult. This is a significant improvement in the principals' evaluation of their teaching staffs.

Perhaps it is a side effect of the transition to the Common Core standards and the push for greater accountability, but principals are spending more time this year on new teaching methods, new curriculum strategies, and educational objectives. However the majority of principals are spending the same or less time on purchasing new curriculum materials compared to last year.



Funding Challenges and Mandated Initiatives

As mentioned above in **Critical Challenges**, the majority of principals report decreased funding as the biggest challenge to creating an effective learning environment:

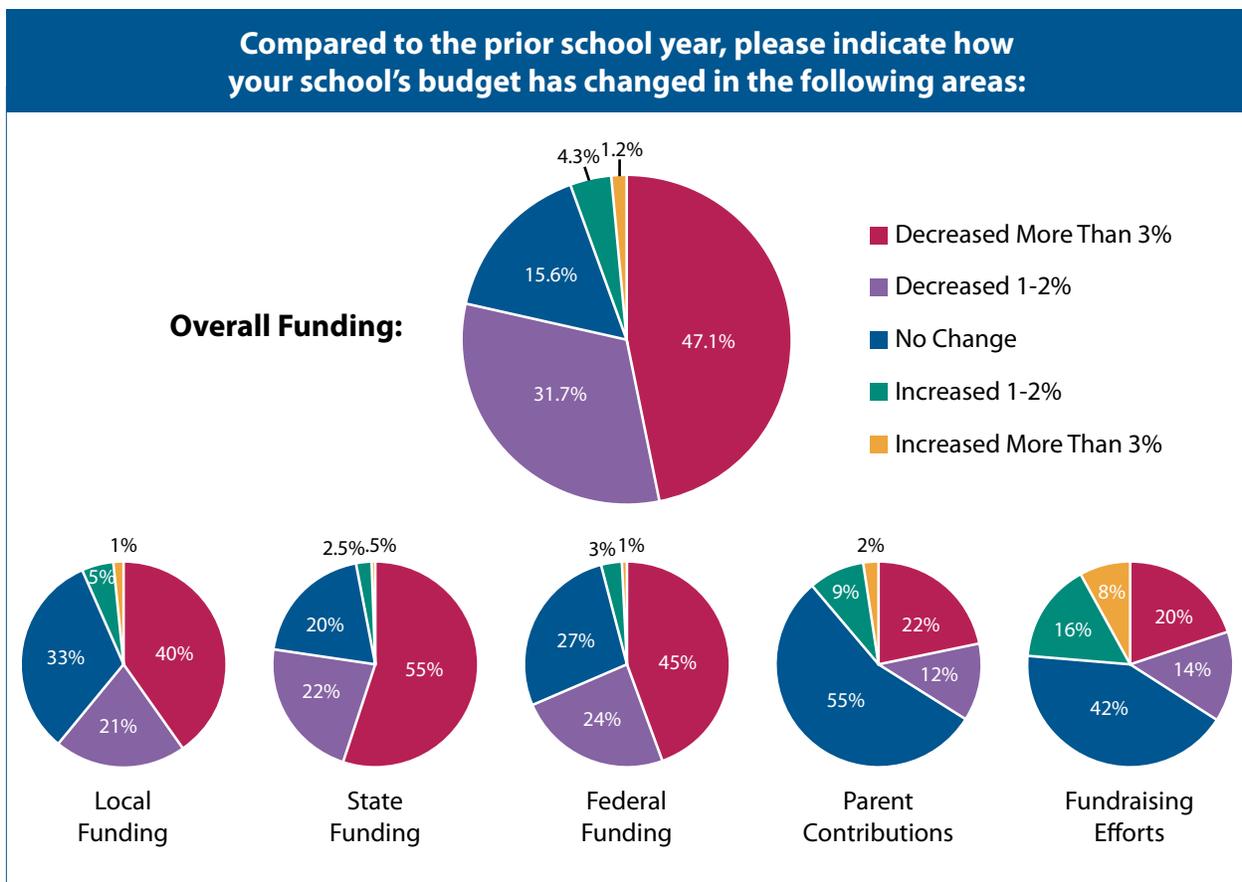
- 70.6% cite decreased local funding
- 86.6% cite decreased state funding
- 73.7% cite decreased federal funding.

The majority of the principals also cite mandated initiatives as an issue in creating an effective learning environment:

- 52.9% cite local mandates
- 87.9% cite state mandates
- 81.7% cite federal mandates.

While 34.6% of principals feel that there is no effect from local mandates and initiatives, this is not the case with state and federal issues where there appears to be an increase in difficulty in dealing with state and federal mandates. Clearly, principals are concerned with increased directives that do not have funding attached.

The issue of funding is so critical that it is useful to look at it more closely:



Compared to the 2011 results, a greater number of principals saw a 1-2% decrease in local funding in 2012 but fewer experienced a decrease of 3% or more. There was also a small increase in those principals noting “no change” year over year, with a net effect of fewer decreases in local funding. This pattern remains consistent with state funding with fewer principals seeing a decline year over year. In fact, there is even a small increase in principals seeing a 1-2% increase in funding. Although there is some movement between categories for federal funding, there is a significant decrease in the number of schools experiencing 3% or more decrease in funding from 72.4% in 2011 to 44.7% in 2012.

While there is some positive movement among degrees in the chart above, it is important to note that the rank order of funding shortages remains the same year over year with **the vast majority of principals noting a decrease in funding for their schools**. This means that adequate funding remains the primary issue for principals. Parent contributions and general fund raising efforts are flat year over year. Although there are fewer principals citing 3% or greater decreases in overall funding this year, 57.7% to 47.1% respectively, it is important to note that 78.8% of principals are dealing with overall funding decreases.

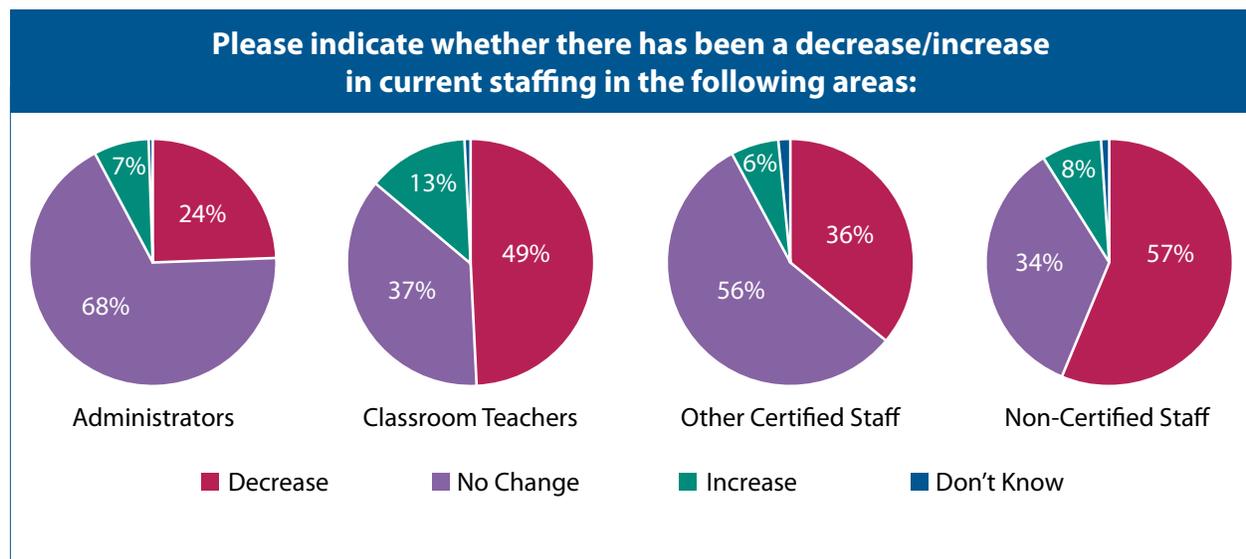
In a final question about funding, principals were asked, if and when there are excess funds left in the budget at the end of the school year, who the decision maker would be and how the funds would be spent. Just over half of the principals responded that a district administrator would make that decision. The other decision maker is the principal. The top two categories of materials purchased from excess funds are classroom materials and professional development materials. It is reassuring to know that surplus budget dollars go directly to teaching and learning.

Impact on School Staffing

While there is a slight decrease in principals reporting a decline in staffing, the schools are still in reduction mode. One-third of principals are dealing with a hiring freeze. More than 50% have had to reduce both certified and non-certified staff. In a time of increased expectations, principals are finding it difficult to maintain both adequate funding and staff.

Other outcomes from decreased funding include an increase in cancelled field trips year over year. Also one-third of principals report they have decreased extracurricular activities and 63.6% report decreased curriculum spending. These findings are consistent with last year.

Principals were then asked about specific staffing categories to determine the impact of decreased funding on administrators and teachers as well as certified and non-certified staff. The good news is that there are fewer administrators, teachers and other staffers losing their jobs this year compared to last. The bad news is that schools and districts are still trimming staff to manage their budgets. Salaries and benefits are the largest component of a school budget, so eliminating positions is a sure way to decrease expenses. However, it's often the most visible aspect of decreased funding.



Although down from 31.4% percent last year, 24.5% of principals report fewer administrator positions this year. Similarly, 49.2% report that they have reduced classroom teachers this year. Compared to last year's 60.1%, this is an improvement, still almost half of principals surveyed reported fewer teacher positions. For both certified and noncertified staff positions, the news is similar in that both categories are showing fewer positions lost and greater stability with no changes year over year. However, the reality is discouraging. One quarter of the principals saw a decrease in administrator positions this year; almost half lost classroom teachers; over one third lost certified staff; and more than half let go non-certified staff. While the loss of positions is not as drastic this year compared to last, it is still disappointing.

Teacher Morale

With staff and funding in decline and increased expectations the norm, the impact of these issues on teacher morale becomes an interesting question. While the principals have greater respect for teacher competency this year, they are concerned about teacher morale. Throughout the verbatim comments featured in the Appendix, there is a constant refrain about additional expectations of teachers without additional compensation. Also, the principals' perception of teacher morale as an influence on creating an effective learning environment is a mixed verdict:

- 42.0% reported teacher morale made it more difficult
- 21.8% said there was no effect
- 33.1% said it made it less difficult.

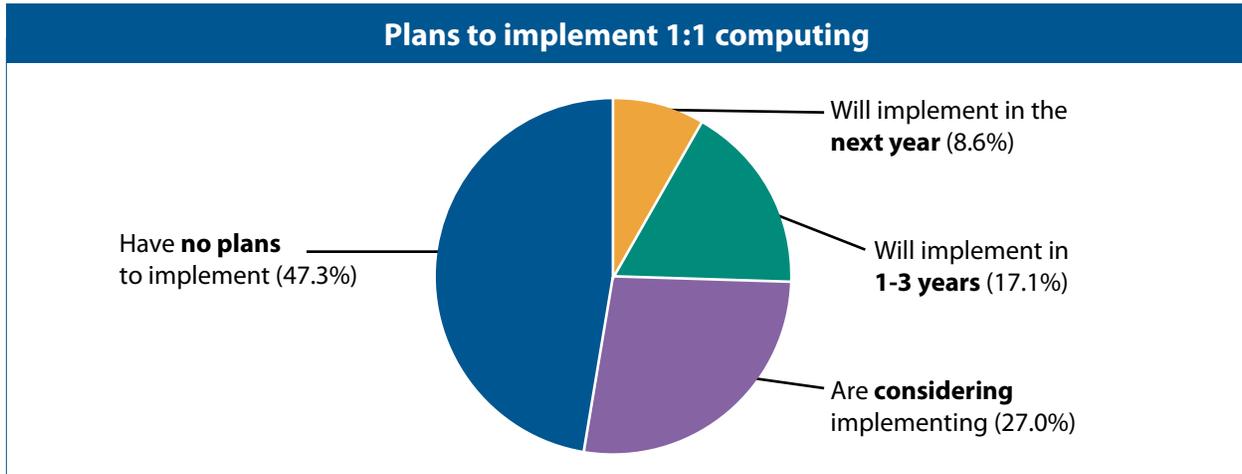
Certainly there are a great many teachers who maintain high teaching standards even in the face of decreased funding and increased expectations. To really understand the impact of teacher morale on learning, we included multiple questions on this topic throughout the survey. For this question principals were specifically asked their opinions on the state of teacher morale. The largest group (33.3%) said that morale was somewhat worse than the previous year. Approximately the same number of principals rated "no change" in teacher morale and "somewhat better" morale compared to the previous year. 10.7% of the principals felt that morale was much worse and 7.2% rated morale as much better than in 2011. The 2012 results mirrored those from 2011; there was little change year over year in how principals viewed teacher morale.

Principals were also asked to rank some professional development issues in terms of their impact on the learning environment. There is an interesting dichotomy in the results for professional collaboration tools, where comments were more negative than last year, but principals have positive feelings about teacher professional development itself. They clearly favor the positive contribution of professional learning communities, personal coaching, and collaboration and its impact on the learning environment. These three topics were added to the survey this year, and will be monitored over time. Principals indicate their positive rankings below. The percentages indicate the number of principals who are either somewhat positive or very positive on these three topics.

- 72.6% - professional learning communities (PLCs)
- 54.7% – professional coaching
- 84.1% - professional collaboration

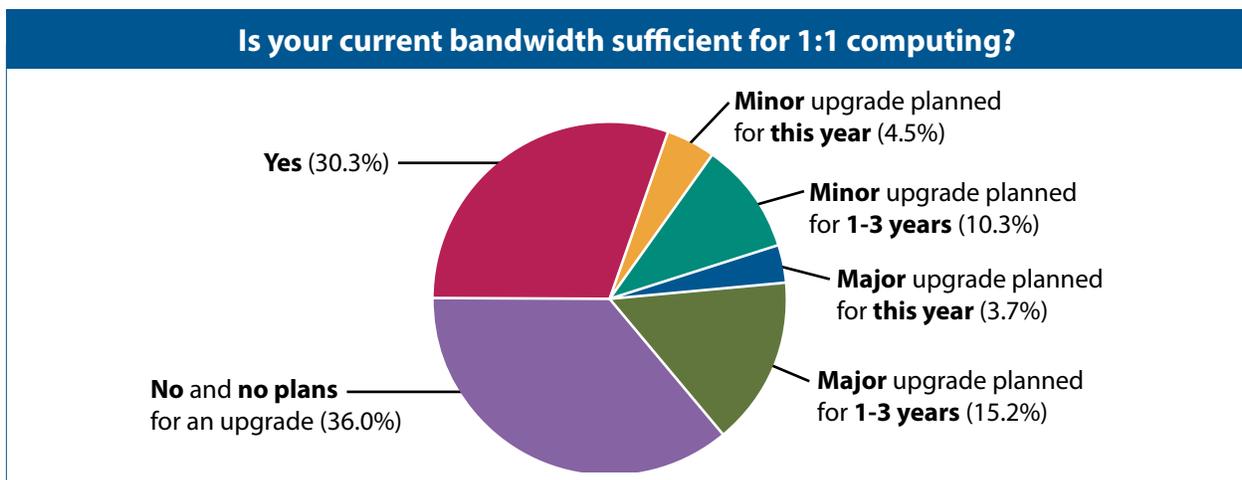
Technology

Because technology is such a large budget item, this year's survey included a set of new technology questions. 1:1 technology with one device per student is one of the most frequently written about technology issues in K-12 education today. 1:1 computing holds the promise of personalized learning for all students. When asked if they plan to implement 1:1 computing in the near future, almost half of the principals said no. This is an interesting finding that seems counter to the general trend in 1:1 curriculum.



27% of principals are considering the 1:1 initiative; 17.1% said they are planning to implement it within the next three years; and 8.6% plan to implement it next year.

In order to increase their use of technology, some schools are investing in their infrastructure and expanding their bandwidth capabilities. Principals were asked if their current bandwidth is sufficient for 1:1 computing, and their answers are below.



Approximately one third responded in the affirmative. Just over a third said no with no plans for an upgrade while the remaining principals' answers were distributed between major and minor upgrades in the near term, this year, and over the next three years.

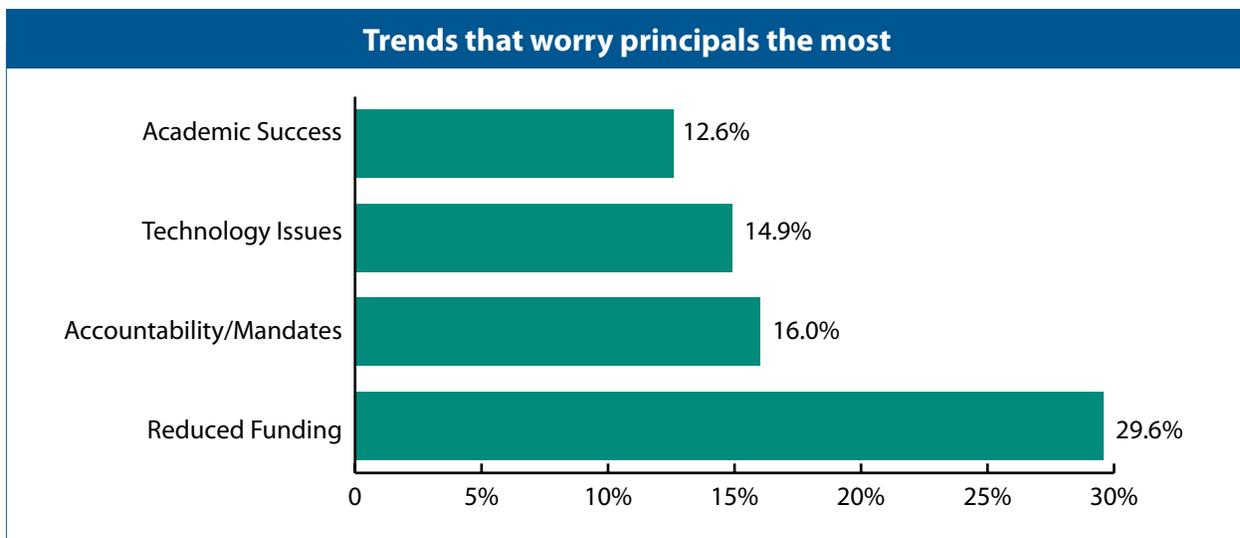
From the results to the next two questions, it appears that this group of principals has already made some investment in their infrastructure as 63% report that their current infrastructure is a combination of wired and wireless with 20.8% reporting totally wireless and only 16.3% reporting a hard wired infrastructure. The vast majority of the principals also responded that any new changes to their infrastructure would be a combination of both wired and wireless (54.9%) or wireless alone (42.0%). Only 3.1% of respondents reported planning hard wired changes only.

One aspect of the 1:1 trend is allowing students to bring their own mobile devices to school. This has required many districts to rethink their Internet access policies. When asked if teachers were using their own personal devices to get around school network restrictions, 39.9% of principals reported "no." However, 29.6% of principals said their teachers are using their own devices to circumvent the network. Almost a third (30.5%) of principals are not aware whether or not this is occurring in their schools.

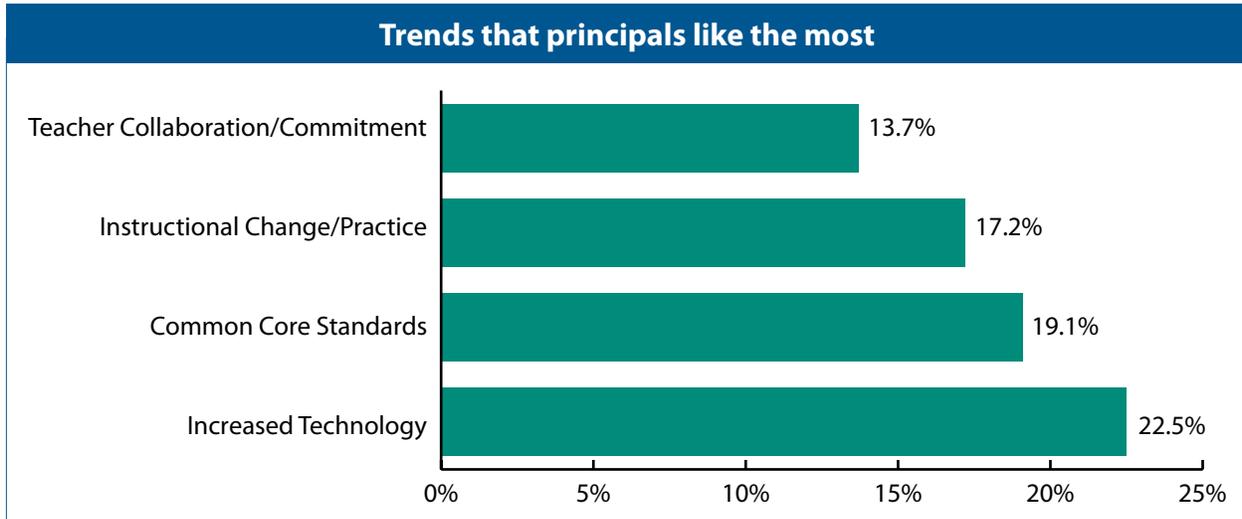
Looking to the Future

In an attempt to put some bookends on the principals' experiences, this year we asked them what trend worries them the most and what trend pleases them the most. The top four answers from these open-ended responses are below.

The trends that worry principals the most:



The trends the principals like the most:



The first table reiterates the concerns expressed in earlier questions on funding. The second table presents the optimistic side of the changes happening in today's schools. Here we see the promise of technology to make learning more engaging and personalized, there is optimism about the Common Core standards and the resulting change in instruction as well as the hope of recouping the benefits of teacher collaboration.

Principals' concerns for the implementation of the Common Core standards and assessments by the 2014-2015 school year are as follows:

1. Teacher Readiness	26.0%
2. Alignment of Curriculum	14.3%
3. Effective Implementation	14.0%
4. Accountability	13.8%
5. Student Readiness	11.6%
6. Not Concerned	11.6%
7. Resources & Funding	10.7%
8. Unrealistic Expectations	9.3%
9. Staff Morale	6.6%
10. Miscellaneous	6.0%

Conclusion

K-12 schools are clearly in flux. Principals are experiencing competing priorities for their attention and resources: greater expectations of both students and teachers, a shift to the Common Core standards and assessments, new teacher evaluations, staff layoffs, government mandates, greater technology demands, and diminishing budgets. Creating positive student outcomes amid a host of challenges is the daily focus of principals, teachers and schools across the country.

Public education receives more national attention than in years past, in part, because the national need is great to reignite the country's economic engine. Greater focus on math, science and technology is advocated for every school. Education advocates encourage schools and districts to think about our public education model in new ways that will ensure that our students are able to compete globally with their peers from around the world.

Thanks to the 486 principals who shared their perspectives through the survey.

About the Annie Galvin Teich

Ms. Teich is an independent writer, researcher, and education marketing consultant with more than 25 years of K-12 experience. For more information, see www.theteichgroup.net or email ateich@theteichgroup.net.

About the MCH Strategic Data

MCH Strategic Data (www.mchdata.com) is a U.S. based compiler of comprehensive K-12 and early childhood marketing databases. MCH provides email, direct mail, telemarketing, online, social media, and geospatial marketing solutions focused on more than five million K-12 educators. For more information, contact Jackie Finnegan, PR Coordinator, at 800-776-6373 or at jackief@mchdata.com.

Appendix: Participant Sample Comments

What is the single most important issue you face this year?

Academic success expectations and unfunded mandates.

Money which impacts staffing, supplies, everything.

Adequate strategies and resources to assist at-risk students to succeed.

Achieve with poverty students who also have high mobility.

New teacher evaluation system.

Budget challenges (increased class sizes, loss of some paraprofessionals, and furlough days).

Building relationships with parents and the community.

Cell phone abuse, including bullying, harassment.

Change in standards. Common Core assessment. Matching instruction to assessment.

Changing demographics.

Decreasing course failure rate and increasing student test scores.

Increase student success on state graduation tests.

Getting our Hispanic parents involved in their children's education.

Implementation of Common Core standards to the rigor needed for all students.

Improving student achievement in math and reading.

Increase in poverty and literacy concerns.

Ineffective central office leadership and unprofessional teaching staff.

Lack of leadership/competence at the district level.

Low morale.

Maintaining 95% attendance while reducing suspensions.

Meet our students' needs while meeting the many district initiatives expected of staff.

Over-crowded classrooms.

Providing interventions to students not on grade level.

Real poverty and the effects on children.

Shortage of instructional support personnel due to staff reduction to meet budget.

Social norms of low-income population.

State mandates and the continual changing of accountability practices.

Student-learned helplessness; low expectations of selves.

Students that come to school with little parenting – lots of behavioral issues.

Teacher evaluations and student learning objectives.

Technology integration.

Acting out behaviors combined with heavy teacher workload.

Differentiated instruction to meet needs of diverse population.

Keeping up with educational trends while lacking funds for technology and adequate staffing.

Providing an effective, challenging, and engaging education for every student.

Reduced funding with increased mandates.

Struggling, dysfunctional families.

The ability to put technology in the hands of students and teachers to prepare students for what they will see when they enter post-high school programs.

Building a collaborative culture amongst a staff that has a history of working in isolation or small teams that excluded other same grade level colleagues.

Engaging parents in a highly effective manner in order for parents to be in a position to support their children academically.

What is your greatest concern about transitioning to the Common Core State Standards by the 2014-2015 school year?

Aligning the curriculum to satisfy the needs of all our students.

Alignment of the standards and the assessments.

Appropriate professional development.

Getting all the teachers to implement the standards effectively.

Ensuring that teachers are provided those higher learning opportunities.

Getting quick, effective measures of student learning without the 1:1 computing ability.

Getting students prepared to handle the demands of the Smarter Balanced assessments.

Greater emphasis on nonfiction informational reading.

Helping teachers understand how to make appropriate shifts in instruction and expectations.

I think the Common Core will widen the achievement gap. We will see.

Implementation with integrity is worrisome.

Increased rigor for students who already struggle.

Little concern. I like the move to Common Core and my teachers have embraced this move as well.

Math, math, math, math, math.

No help from state or federal government, more unfunded mandates.

Not enough technology.

None! We embrace the change. Love the rigor and look forward to having worldwide standards.

Our teacher's ability to teach literacy across the curriculum.

Professional development and funding.

What trends do you see that please you the most?

A push for PLCs on campuses.

Administrators and teachers working as a "team."

Best practices being used in the classroom/lab...a move toward all education using project-based learning.

Better technology out there to engage teachers, students, and parents.

Changes in teacher evaluations.

Classroom teachers excited and embracing their work with the Common Core Curriculum.

Consistency with our teaching strategies.

Excellent teachers being prepared from our local teaching college.

Focus on research-supported instruction and professional learning communities.

Greater collaboration among teachers.

Holding teachers to a higher standard based on student performance.

Increased emphasis on student application and thinking skills.

Larger focus of teachers making real changes to instructional practices on a daily basis.

Making education more engaging for students and meeting the needs of 21st century learners.

More charter schools being authorized.

More tech savvy among staff.

PLC's – district providing time for effective collaboration.

Positive parent involvement.

Shift in assessment and standards to more performance-based and critical thinking.