

Comparing the Working Conditions of Principals and Assistant Principals in South Carolina

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RESEARCH TEAM

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For full analyses and results, read the Technical Appendix at the link above.

+ INTRODUCTION

School administrators' working conditions are closely linked to important professional outcomes, including their well-being, job satisfaction, and future career plans (Collie et al., 2020; Marsh et al., 2023; Mitani, 2018; Starrett et al., 2026; Steiner et al., 2022). Yet research on administrators' working conditions has focused primarily on principals, with comparatively little attention to assistant principals despite their central role in school leadership and daily operations (Barnett et al., 2012; Goldring et al., 2021). As a result, it remains unclear whether the working conditions associated with principals' job satisfaction and intent to remain in their school leadership roles operate similarly for assistant principals. This report investigates that question using data from the 2026 SC Administrator Working Conditions Survey (SCAWCS).

Although principals and assistant principals share responsibility for leading schools, differences in their authority and day-to-day duties may expose them to distinct demands and resources. Principals generally hold final responsibility for school operations, personnel management, accountability, and instructional leadership. Assistant principals, by contrast, often assume more direct responsibility for student discipline, supervision, and the management of daily operations (Goldring et al., 2021; Grissom et al., 2021; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2026). Assistant principals may also have less control over their assignments and fewer opportunities to shape schoolwide priorities, even when they are responsible for addressing time-sensitive or high-conflict situations. These differences may influence how each group experiences workload, autonomy, different avenues of support, and other aspects of their work environment.

Drawing on data from the 2026 SCAWCS, this report extends previous analyses of administrators' working conditions (Starrett et al., 2026) by examining the experiences of principals and assistant principals separately. Specifically, it compares the two groups' working conditions and outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction and intent to remain in school leadership within their current district), and it assesses whether relationships between working conditions and these outcomes vary by role.

Understanding how working conditions relate to outcomes across school leadership positions can inform efforts to improve administrator support and retention. The findings may also have implications for the development of the future principal workforce. This issue is particularly important in South Carolina, where assistant principals make up a large share of new entrants to school administration. Of the 484 administrators who entered the state workforce in 2024–25, approximately 85% entered as assistant principals (Cartiff et al., 2026). Most newly hired administrators also transitioned from positions within their current districts. Working conditions that districts can influence may therefore shape whether assistant principals remain in school leadership. Additionally, they may impact whether those roles advance to principal positions, affecting districts' ability to fill principal vacancies.

DATA

The 2026 pilot administration of the SCAWCS included 1,679 school administrators from 57 participating districts and specialty schools throughout the state. This report focuses on the 1,584 respondents serving as principals or assistant principals: 697 principals from all 57 districts and 887 assistant principals from 51 districts. Participating school administrators in other positions (e.g., career and technical education center directors) were not included in these analyses.

The survey was based on the job demands-resources framework. Job demands are aspects of work that require sustained effort; job resources are aspects of work that help leaders accomplish goals, grow professionally, and manage those demands (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). These analyses focused on the resources, demands, and outcomes in Table 1 (p. 5).

Figure 1. Survey Domains and Constructs

Job Resources	Job Demands	Outcomes
• Autonomy • Community Support • District Shared Governance • District Support • Faculty/Staff Support • Parent/Family Support • Professional Development	• Accountability • Cognitive Demands • Emotional and Relational Demands • Organizational Demands • Student Discipline Management • Workload	• Job Satisfaction • Intent to Remain in School Leadership Within the Current District

Note. Resource, job satisfaction, and intent to remain items used a 0 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*) agreement scale. Demand items used a 0 (*Never*) to 6 (*Every day*) frequency scale.

More details about the survey and its administration can be found in Starrett et al. (2026).

ANALYTICAL METHODS

Before comparing the perceptions and outcomes of principals and assistant principals, analyses tested whether survey items measured working conditions the same way for both groups. Results supported comparability for 97 of 100 items. The three exceptions involved student discipline responsibilities and reflected actual differences in job roles rather than problems within the survey. Comparisons are therefore based on items that functioned the same for both groups. Details of this measurement equivalence testing, also called measurement invariance, appear in the separate Technical Appendix that supplements this report.

From there, analyses compared principals and assistant principals across 13 working conditions, as well as job satisfaction and intent to remain in school leadership within the current district. An additional analysis tested whether the relationships between working conditions and these outcomes differed by role while accounting for all working conditions simultaneously.

Model details and full results appear in the Technical Appendix, which can be accessed at: <https://www.sc-teacher.org/ewc-principal-ap-comparison-oct2026>.

+ HOW PRINCIPALS AND ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS COMPARED

Similar Job Demands

Principals and assistant principals reported similar levels of cognitive demands, emotional and relational demands, organizational demands, and workload. The differences that did emerge among their perceptions of job demands reflected responsibilities commonly assigned to each role. Assistant principals reported noticeably more frequent student discipline work, including responding to student misbehavior and investigating behavioral incidents. Principals reported slightly higher accountability demands. These differences align with the typical division of responsibilities within schools, where assistant principals often manage individual student issues and principals hold more responsibility for schoolwide performance.

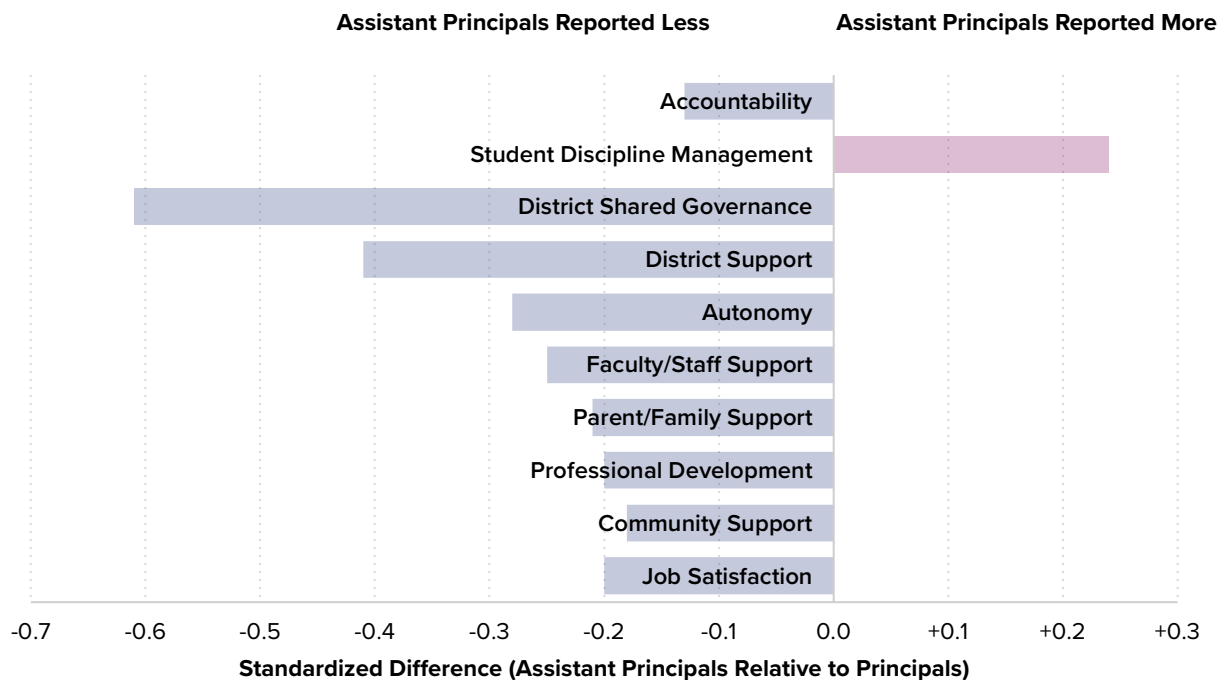
Fewer Resources for Assistant Principals

Although the two roles reported similar job demands, clear differences emerged in their perceptions of available resources. Assistant principals reported lower levels of autonomy and less support from districts, faculty and staff, families, and local community. They also reported less support for professional development.

The largest differences were in perceptions of district-related resources among assistant principals. Compared with principals, assistant principals reported substantially less involvement in district decisions (i.e., shared governance) and less support from district personnel. The gap in shared governance was the largest difference identified in this analysis and represented a large effect by the standards of education research.

Overall, the findings suggest that assistant principals experience having less influence and organizational support across multiple aspects of their work rather than in any single area. Full comparisons appear in the Technical Appendix.

Figure 2. *Differences in Principal and Assistant Principal Experiences*



Note. Negative values mean assistant principals reported lower levels of a working condition or outcome than principals did. Positive values mean they reported higher levels. Only statistically significant role differences are shown. Principals serve as the reference group at 0.0.

Lower Job Satisfaction, Equal Commitment to Stay

Assistant principals reported modestly lower job satisfaction than principals, but the two groups expressed similar intent to remain in school leadership within their current districts. Lower satisfaction alongside equal intent to remain means assistant principals remain committed despite less favorable conditions. Whether that pattern would hold if conditions remain unchanged cannot be determined from a single survey. The finding does suggest that districts have a window to strengthen the conditions associated with assistant principals' job satisfaction while commitment remains high.

Connections Between Working Conditions and Outcomes

Working conditions were associated with job satisfaction and intention to remain in school leadership for both principals and assistant principals. Statistical tests showed no differences in these relationships for each role type. The results for both groups are therefore reported together. Additional details appear in the Technical Appendix.

Of all the working conditions, district support had the strongest correlation with both job satisfaction and intent to remain in school leadership within the current district. This means administrators who reported greater district support also reported greater job satisfaction and stronger intentions to stay.

Other working conditions also showed meaningful associations with the outcomes. Faculty/staff support was moderately associated with higher job satisfaction, while heavier workloads were moderately associated with lower job satisfaction and had a small negative association with intent to remain.

Of the job demands, accountability showed a more complicated pattern. On its own, accountability behaved like other demands, with more frequent accountability demands corresponding with slightly lower job satisfaction and intent to remain (Starrett et al., 2026). However, among administrators with otherwise similar working conditions, those reporting more accountability demands tended to report somewhat higher satisfaction and intent to remain. This pattern may reflect the responsibility that comes with leadership, which can be motivating when other demands are manageable. It does not suggest that increasing accountability pressure would improve satisfaction or retention.

Table 1. Associations Between Working Conditions and Outcomes

Construct	Association with job satisfaction	Association with intent to remain in school leadership in current district
JOB RESOURCES		
District support	Positive, large	Positive, large
Faculty/staff support	Positive, moderate	Not significant
Professional development	Positive, small	Positive, small
JOB DEMANDS		
Accountability	Positive, moderate	Positive, small
Workload	Negative, moderate–large	Negative, small

Note. Each association reflects a condition's unique relationship with the outcome when all 13 working conditions are considered together (see Technical Appendix, Table A3). All associations shown are statistically significant ($p < .05$) except where marked not significant. Size labels are based on standardized values.

The associations with district support are particularly notable considering the differences between the two groups. Assistant principals reported lower levels of district support and job satisfaction than principals, while both role types reported similar intent to remain. Given the strong relationship between district support and job satisfaction, the lower district support reported by assistant principals may help explain their lower job satisfaction. At the same time, the similar levels of intent to remain between the two groups show that these differences have not been accompanied by assistant principals showing a weaker commitment to their role in the district.

These findings do not establish cause and effect. They do, however, suggest an important opportunity for districts to improve job satisfaction and intent to remain, as district support was the working condition most strongly associated with both outcomes and one that district leaders can directly influence.

+ IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

These state-level findings suggest that principals and assistant principals face many of the same workplace demands but without equal access to workplace resources. The clearest differences involved district support, participation in district-level decision-making, and student discipline responsibilities.

Because working conditions were similarly associated with job satisfaction and intent to remain in school leadership in the district for principals and assistant principals, the same broad priorities can guide efforts to support both roles. At the same time, the lower levels of resources reported by assistant principals suggest that they may benefit most from targeted attention to these priorities.

Districts may consider responding in several ways:

1. Include assistant principals more deliberately in district planning, policy discussions, and cross-school decision-making.
2. Review how discipline responsibilities are distributed so that assistant principals have sufficient time for instructional leadership, professional learning, and leadership development.
3. Address workload across both roles, as heavier workloads were associated with lower job satisfaction and weaker intention to remain in school leadership.

Taken together, these findings caution against treating the two positions as interchangeable. Principals and assistant principals have distinct responsibilities, and assistant principals may need more targeted attention as districts seek to strengthen the working conditions of school administrators.

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