



Getting Down to **FACTS**

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Leadership Stability in California: Capacity, Continuity, and System Coherence

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Introduction

School and district leadership play a central role in how California’s education system functions in practice. Principals shape instructional priorities, teacher development, and school climate, while superintendents and school boards set direction, allocate resources, and translate policy into local action. In a system built on local control, the effectiveness of these leaders is closely tied to the system’s ability to improve student outcomes over time.

At the same time, California’s education system is experiencing sustained leadership instability across multiple levels. These concerns are unfolding within a leadership landscape that is changing in other ways as well, including an increasingly diverse principal workforce and an aging group of school leaders approaching retirement. Between 2012-13 and 2024-25, the share of principals of color increased from 35 percent to 42 percent, and between 2016-17 and 2024-25, the share of female principals increased from 47 percent to 56 percent (Arshan, Darling-Hammond, and Wei). Principal turnover remains high relative to national averages, superintendent tenure is often short, and school boards face increasing demands and pressures. These patterns raise concerns about whether schools and districts have the continuity of leadership needed to sustain improvement, implement policy coherently, and build organizational capacity.

This brief draws on Getting Down to Facts III research to examine trends in school and district leadership in California and their implications for system stability and improvement.

Key Findings

1

Leadership turnover compounds system fragmentation and weakens implementation capacity.

Turnover across principals, superintendents, and school boards reduces continuity across leadership roles and makes implementation harder to sustain. When leadership changes occur across roles at the same time, districts face greater difficulty sustaining reforms, aligning priorities, and maintaining coherent strategies over time.

2

Leadership turnover is widespread across principals, superintendents, and school boards, reducing continuity across the system.

California is experiencing substantial turnover across all three roles. This pattern reduces continuity in the people responsible for setting direction, carrying out priorities, and maintaining relationships over time.

3

Principal turnover remains high and is associated with weaker school conditions and outcomes.

Research consistently links principal turnover to increased teacher turnover and declines in student achievement, underscoring the importance of stable school-level leadership.

4

Superintendent turnover is widespread and limits district continuity.

From 2019-20 to 2025-26, 69 percent of California districts experienced at least one superintendent transition, exceeding the national average. Only 38 percent of superintendents who were new in 2020-21 remained in their roles five years later.

5

School boards are operating under growing strain and variable capacity.

Board members report increasing political, fiscal, and governance challenges, alongside uneven preparation and support for their roles.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

1. Leadership turnover compounds system fragmentation and weakens implementation capacity.

The evidence across these studies suggests that leadership instability may be cumulative. The board report explicitly warns that turnover among board members and superintendents can reduce institutional knowledge and make long-term planning more difficult (Marsh et al.). The principal study shows that turnover at the school level is associated with weaker working conditions and lower stability inside schools, particularly in more challenging environments (Arshan, Darling-Hammond, and Wei).

California's governance structure depends on coordination across boards, superintendents, and principals. Board members establish direction and oversee district leadership. Superintendents translate that direction into district priorities and support structures. Principals shape how those priorities are enacted in schools and classrooms. That means that when schools, districts, and boards all experience turnover at the same time, districts lose continuity in leadership, relationships, and institutional knowledge across multiple levels at once. This makes it harder to maintain shared direction, coordinate work across roles, and follow through on multi-year strategies.

That matters for implementation. Sustained improvement depends on leaders who understand local history, maintain relationships, coordinate across roles, and remain in place long enough to see

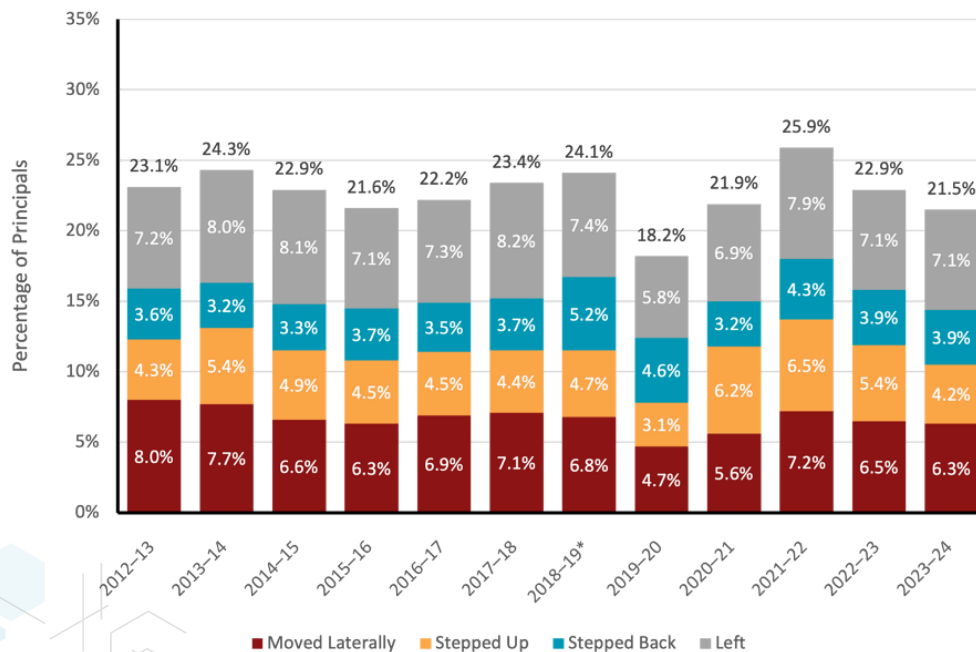
strategies through. Frequent turnover makes those conditions harder to establish. It can also increase the amount of time districts spend onboarding new leaders, rebuilding trust, and revisiting decisions that might otherwise have remained stable. In this sense, leadership turnover is both a staffing issue and a question of system capacity.

These patterns suggest that California’s leadership challenges are broader than principal supply, superintendent tenure, or board support considered one at a time. The larger concern is whether the state’s schools and districts have enough continuity in leadership to sustain improvement, implement policy consistently, and build organizational capacity over time.

2. Leadership turnover is widespread across principals, superintendents, and school boards, reducing continuity across the system

California’s education system is showing signs of leadership instability across schools, districts, and boards. At the school level, principal retention in the same school was 78.4 percent in 2024–25, and California principals were slightly less likely than principals nationally to remain in place, with about 78 percent staying in 2020-21 compared with 80 percent nationally (Arshan, Darling-Hammond, and Wei). **Figure 1** shows that over 20 percent of principals leave their position each year, approximately seven percent of which move to other principal positions and approximately eight percent move into other school system positions.

Figure 1: Principal Turnover by Type of Turnover, 2012-13 through 2023-24



Note: Data from 2012-13 to 2018-19 are not directly comparable to data from 2019-20 to 2023-24 due to changes in data

collection systems between the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years. Turnover outcomes for principals in the 2018-19 school followed into the 2019-20 school should be interpreted with caution. N = 117,681

At the district level, superintendent turnover has also been widespread. From 2019-20 to 2025-26, 69 percent of California districts experienced at least one superintendent transition, compared with 62 percent nationally, and only 38 percent of superintendents who were new in 2020-21 were still in their roles in 2025-26. At the governance level, the school board study found that only about half of board members said they were probably or definitely planning to run again, while many others remained unsure, reflecting the growing demands and strains of board service (Marsh et al.).

These patterns show that turnover is occurring across the leadership structure rather than within a single role. This matters because improvement in a local control system depends on continuity among the people responsible for setting direction, carrying out priorities, and maintaining relationships over time. When turnover is widespread, that continuity becomes harder to sustain across the system.

3. Principal turnover remains high and is associated with weaker school conditions and outcomes

The principal trends study underscores the importance of stable school leadership to school functioning. The paper begins from a broad research base showing that principals influence student test scores, graduation, attendance, teacher retention, and parent satisfaction, and that principal turnover is generally associated with teacher turnover and declines in student achievement (Arshan, Darling-Hammond, and Wei). Within California, principal turnover is associated with compensation, preparation, and working conditions. Principals are more likely to turn over when they earn lower salaries, enter through the test-only route, or work in schools with higher teacher turnover, higher suspension rates, and higher student-teacher ratios. These patterns suggest that leadership stability is connected to broader school conditions rather than isolated from them. Schools facing staffing strain, school climate challenges, and heavier organizational demands may also be the places where stable leadership is hardest to sustain (Arshan, Darling-Hammond, and Wei). Leadership conditions are also unevenly distributed across the system. Rural schools, charter schools, alternative schools of choice, special education schools, and virtual schools are less likely to have experienced and prepared principals than mainstream and non-rural schools (Arshan, Darling-Hammond, and Wei).

The paper also suggests that current conditions may make stability harder to sustain in the coming years. California's principal workforce is aging, with 28 percent of principals age 55 or older, the highest share in the past 13 years, which raises the prospect of additional retirements and further churn ahead (Arshan, Darling-Hammond, and Wei). Principal wages have also been largely stagnant in real terms. Salaries have risen in the past three years, but they remain below their 2020-21 level in real dollars (Arshan, Darling-Hammond, and Wei). These conditions raise questions about how well the state is

positioned to retain experienced leaders, especially in schools where the work is already most difficult.

The report also suggests that leadership stability is shaped not only by compensation and working conditions, but also by preparation and ongoing support. Recent improvements in preparation, induction, and professional development are viewed positively by California principals, and the paper notes that coaching and professional learning communities through 21CSLA are valued by participants and associated with stronger perceptions of preparedness and effectiveness (Arshan, Darling-Hammond, and Wei).

4. Superintendent turnover is widespread and threatens district continuity

Similar patterns appear at the district level, where superintendent turnover is widespread. The school board report notes that the effects of board turnover may be compounded by simultaneous superintendent turnover. From 2019-20 to 2025-26, more than two-thirds of California districts experienced at least one superintendent transition, and the state trailed the national average in superintendent retention over a five-year span. This degree of churn raises concerns about districts' ability to sustain improvement strategies, maintain coherent implementation, and follow through on policy decisions over time.

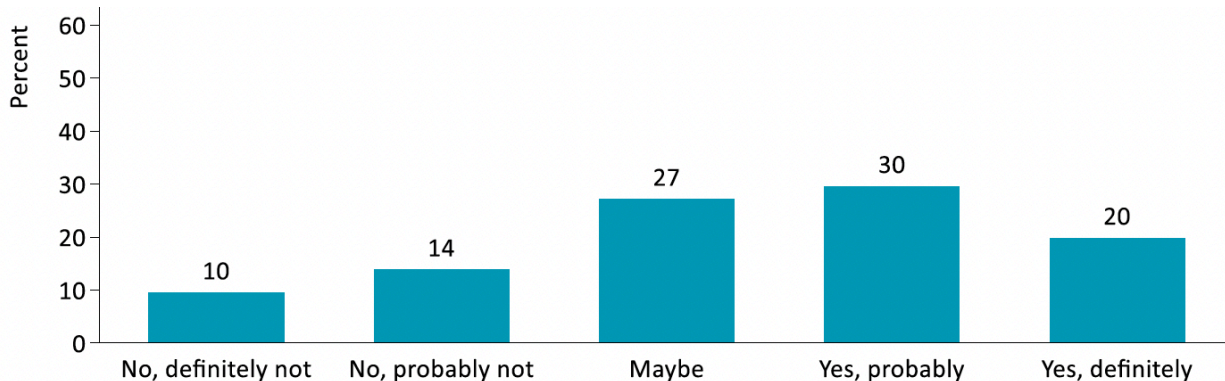
That concern is especially important in California because districts are the key operating units in a local control system. Superintendents help translate policy into practice, coordinate central office work, shape priorities, and maintain alignment across schools. When district leadership changes frequently, initiatives are more likely to be interrupted, reset, or weakened before they have had time to take hold. Repeated transitions can make long-term direction harder to sustain.

5. School boards are operating under greater strain and with uneven support

The board study presents a more mixed picture of local governance than public debate sometimes suggests. Many board members reported confidence in district operations, relationships with leadership, fiscal conditions, student outcomes, and community engagement, as well as their effectiveness as board members (Marsh et al.). At the same time, those positive assessments coexisted with widespread strain. Board members identified fiscal pressure, declining enrollment, labor issues, uncertainty around federal funding, and internal board conflict as important challenges (Marsh et al.). Roughly half said board service had become more politically challenging than they expected, and many reported persistent difficulty securing meaningful and representative community engagement (Marsh et al.). The study also found substantial uncertainty about continuity in board service. As shown in **Figure 2**, only half of respondents said they probably or definitely intended to seek reelection or reappointment, while 27 percent said maybe and 24 percent said they probably or definitely would not

(Marsh et al.).

Figure 2: Intent to Seek Reelection or Reappointment on the School Board (n=527)



The report also suggests that governance capacity is shaped by who serves and how members enter the role. Board members in the sample were more likely to be white and higher income than the broader population, and school board elections in California are often uncontested. The report notes that in members' prior elections, 38 percent ran unopposed and 7 percent were appointed rather than elected, patterns that raise broader questions about the pipeline into board service and the representativeness of local governance (Marsh et al.).

The study also points to important capacity concerns. Board members expressed a clear desire for more support in using data for evaluation and decision making, navigating legal guidance on policy changes, understanding personnel and union contracts, and handling social media dynamics and political conflict (Marsh et al.). More than two-thirds wanted more support around personnel and union contracts. More than half explicitly wanted more training on navigating social media interactions (Marsh et al.). The authors stress that these needs vary by local context and that one-size-fits-all approaches are unlikely to be sufficient (Marsh et al.).

These findings matter because boards are central to district leadership in California. They hire and oversee superintendents, approve budgets and plans, and help establish local direction. When board members face growing strain while also lacking sufficient support for core governance responsibilities, local leadership capacity may weaken.

Implications for California

The evidence suggests that leadership instability affects individual roles as well as the coherence and implementation capacity of California's education system.

Leadership stability as a condition for improvement

Leadership stability is closely connected to California's capacity for sustained improvement. California's system places substantial responsibility on local actors to interpret policy, set direction, and carry out implementation. That work depends on continuity. Leaders need time to understand local contexts, build relationships with staff and communities, and sustain multi-year strategies.

High rates of turnover across principals, superintendents, and boards make that continuity harder to maintain. When leadership changes frequently, districts are more likely to experience shifts in priorities, interruptions in implementation, and loss of momentum. Even where new leaders are effective, transitions take time and can introduce uncertainty into systems that depend on coordination and follow-through.

Preparation and support for leaders

The research also highlights the importance of preparation and ongoing support across leadership roles. In the principal study, preparation means more than administrative credentialing. High-quality principal preparation includes close collaboration with local districts, targeted recruitment of candidates with leadership potential, attention to core skills such as instructional leadership and change management, problem-based learning that connects coursework to practice, and year-long field-based internships with expert principals. The study also points to the value of induction, coaching, professional learning communities, and 21CSLA as supports that help principals continue developing once they are in the role.

These forms of preparation matter because principals are expected to lead learning, not simply manage buildings. They need knowledge of instruction, school climate, educator development, student supports, and organizational design. They also need the ability to understand how teachers are using curriculum and instructional knowledge in classrooms, how students are organized for learning, and how school structures support academic, social, and emotional development. The superintendent and board studies point to parallel demands at the district level. Superintendents are responsible for translating policy into local systems and practice, while board members report wanting more support in areas such as data use, evaluation, legal guidance, personnel and union contracts, and navigating political complexity.

Across these roles, preparation and support appear as conditions for leadership quality and stability. Principals, superintendents, and board members are operating in a system where instructional improvement, community conflict, fiscal pressure, staffing strain, and policy implementation are deeply connected. The evidence suggests that leadership preparation needs to build the knowledge and judgment required to lead across those domains, while ongoing support helps leaders continue learning as conditions change.

Schools facing the most leadership inequity

The principal study demonstrates that rural schools, charter schools, alternative schools of choice, special education schools, and virtual schools face inequity in their leadership. These schools have greater than average rates of principals who: are nearing retirement age, have bypassed traditional preparation programs, have little experience, or have short tenure in the building. These settings often face the most difficult conditions, thinner labor markets, and the greatest risk of leadership turnover.

Working conditions and incentives

The findings also indicate that working conditions and incentives are closely tied to leadership stability. In the principal study, turnover is associated with lower salaries and with school contexts marked by greater staffing and student challenges. These patterns suggest that leadership retention is shaped in part by the conditions under which leaders work, including workload, compensation, staffing support, school climate, and the broader political and organizational environment.

System coherence across leadership levels

California's governance structure depends on coordination across boards, superintendents, and principals. Board members establish direction and oversee district leadership. Superintendents translate that direction into district priorities and support structures. Principals shape how those priorities are enacted in schools and classrooms.

The evidence suggests that leadership stability affects how well these levels connect to one another. When leaders remain in place, they have more opportunity to develop shared understandings, build trust, and coordinate their work over time. When leadership changes frequently, those connections become harder to sustain. The result can be weaker alignment across levels of the system and greater fragmentation in implementation.

The cumulative effect of turnover

Our evidence also suggests that turnover may matter differently when it occurs across several levels of

the system at once. While any turnover creates instability, the broader concern raised by these studies is the possibility of simultaneous instability among principals, superintendents, and board members.

When turnover is occurring across roles, districts may lose institutional knowledge in several places at the same time. Relationships that support continuity may weaken. Long-term strategies may become more difficult to sustain. In this sense, leadership turnover is both a staffing issue and a question of system capacity. The findings suggest that California's ability to maintain coherent direction over time depends in part on whether continuity exists across the leadership structure as a whole.

GDTFIII Technical Reports Referenced

Arshan, N., Darling-Hammond, L., & Wei, W. (2026). *California principal trends in supply, preparation, distribution, retention, and turnover*. *Getting Down to Facts III*, SCALE Initiative, Stanford University.

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