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Finding Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from School Principals (Part 4/Volume 4)

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked various, unprecedented challenges to public education, including transitions among remote, hybrid, and in-person learning as well as increased attention to the emotional and physical well-being of teachers, students, families, and communities. School principals were tasked with responding to these new realities as they practiced crisis leadership (Grissom & Condon, 2021), but also aimed to lead for equity, excellence, and accountability. Unsurprisingly, these new demands and additional duties exacerbated already heightened levels of job-related stress for principals. Principal turnover in U.S. schools is at a crisis point: a 2021 survey from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP; 2021) revealed that 40% of principals expect to leave the profession within three years, thereby threatening school improvement and stability. Given that it typically takes five to seven years for school leadership to effect meaningful change (Fullan, 2002), high turnover disrupts progress, hampers policy implementation, and leads to costly hiring and onboarding processes. Therefore, it is critical to understand factors impacting principal turnover and retention in order to minimize the challenges and obstacles school principals face in their profession.

To address this practice and research need, the 21CSLA research team launched a fourth wave of the Principal Resilience Study, a longitudinal survey study designed to identify significant school-related stressors and psychological factors that protect school principals from burnout, specifically in the COVID-19 pandemic context. The survey was open to all active K–12 school principals in California during the 2023–2024 school year. This wave included a new measure on turnover and retention; in this brief, we focus our findings on data analyzed from the new turnover/retention measure.

The results of the survey revealed several important trends regarding principal turnover and retention in California. One significant finding was the disparity between male and female principals in their intentions to remain in the profession. Male principals were more likely to express a desire to stay in their roles long-term, while female principals were more likely to express a desire to leave the profession. This pattern mirrors findings from other states, suggesting a systemic issue related to gender and the role of school principals. Another key finding concerned the influence of school location on principals' decisions to stay. Rural principals were more likely to report that they intended to remain in their positions due to the retirement benefits associated with their roles. In contrast, suburban and urban principals placed less emphasis on retirement benefits, highlighting a potential area for differentiated retention strategies based on geographic context.

Experience also played a crucial role in principals' decisions to stay or leave the profession. The survey

indicated that early-career principals (1–2 years) and late-career principals (11–15 years) were more likely to plan to stay in their positions, while mid-career principals (6–10 years) were the most likely to consider leaving. This finding highlights the unique challenges faced by principals in the middle of their careers, who may feel burned out or be searching for new opportunities. Finally, school demographics appeared to influence principal turnover, particularly in schools with high levels of poverty. Principals leading schools with the highest percentage of free or reduced-price lunch¹ (F/RP) expressed the most uncertainty about staying in their roles. These principals were more likely to report feeling undecided about their future in the profession, suggesting that additional support may be needed to retain leaders in high-need schools.

¹ Free and reduced-price lunch data is often used as a proxy for student socioeconomic status data, though some research critiques using it as the sole proxy for this measure and suggests alternative approaches such as “direct certification.” For more information, see [Measuring Student Socioeconomic Status: Toward a Comprehensive Approach](#).

Background and Context

School principal turnover has become a crisis in U.S. schools. Recent research from NASSP (2021) reported that pandemic conditions have contributed to alarming rates of principals expecting to leave the profession. Specifically, NASSP found that four out of ten surveyed principals plan to leave the profession in the next three years. Principal turnover is concerning due to the pivotal role principals play in leading school improvement and the substantial time it takes to see meaningful changes—approximately five to seven years (Fullan, 2002). Frequent changes in school leadership can disrupt the implementation of new policies and

programs, making sustained improvement difficult (Holme & Rangel, 2012; Miller, 2013). Moreover, principals significantly influence student learning indirectly, including by hiring effective teachers, setting the vision and expectations of the school, creating a positive organizational culture, supporting teachers' professional learning, and providing strong instructional and managerial leadership (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Additionally, principal turnover is costly for districts, with a 2014 report estimating that it costs at least \$75,000 to develop, hire, and onboard a single principal (School Leaders Network, 2014).

A few researchers have identified factors that either increase or decrease the likelihood of principal turnover, including gender, race, level of experience, and school demographics. We have highlighted some of the research findings below:

FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE LIKELIHOOD OF PRINCIPAL TURNOVER	
Gender	Fuller et al. (2007) found that among the cohort of principals in Texas who started in the year 1996, female principals were 50% less likely than male principals to still be principals after five years, 60% more likely to have left public education altogether after five years, and 78% more likely than their male counterparts to have left education after ten years. However, Fuller et al. also found that female principals were 34% more likely than male principals to still be principals after ten years. Additionally, Gates and colleagues (2006) found that in Illinois, women are more likely to leave the system and change positions than men are. However, while this effect is statistically significant, it is rather small. On average, the probability that a female principal leaves the system in a given year is 2.9%, compared with 2.1% for males.
School Demographics	In the same study, Gates and colleagues (2006) found that in North Carolina and Illinois, principals in schools with a larger proportion of minority students are more likely to change schools and to change positions within the system. Overall, schools serving higher proportions of minority students have higher turnover, suggesting that these schools may have a harder time retaining principals.
Principal Experience	In the same study, the authors found that principal experience is also related to turnover, though the nature of the relationship is inconsistent across studies, contexts, and turnover measures. In North Carolina, Gates and colleagues (2006) found that principals with more experience were 29% less likely to leave the system altogether, but were 14% more likely to change schools.
Race	Prior studies have also indicated racial differences in turnover and retention rates among principals. Nationally, minority principals are 21% more likely to intend to leave the principalship altogether compared to their white counterparts (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). In Illinois, Gates et al. (2006) found that Latino principals were 29% more likely to change schools and more than twice as likely to leave their positions compared to white principals. They also found that African American principals in urban districts in North Carolina were less likely than their white counterparts to transition to non-principalship positions.
Education Level	Gates and colleagues (2006) found no effect of education on the probability of leaving the system or changing schools. However, they did find that individuals in Illinois with a master's degree were less likely than principals without an advanced degree to change positions within the state system.

Gaining a California Perspective

Although there is increased research attention on understanding principal turnover and retention at the national level, there is limited research on the specific experiences of California principals. Given California’s diverse school demographics, varying state legislation, and unique local challenges, understanding the specific experiences and determinants of principal turnover in the state is crucial. By focusing on California-specific data, we can develop more effective strategies to retain principals and ensure stability and success in our schools. To address this research gap, in the fall of 2023, our research team collected a fourth wave of the Principal Resilience Study which was open to all active K–12 school principals in California during the 2023–2024 school year. In this wave of the survey, we included a new measure on

turnover and retention, using an eight-question measure developed by Taie and Lewis (2023) at the Institute of Education Sciences (see below for measure). The current brief focuses on the data analyzed from the turnover/retention measure.

Previous iterations of the Principal Resilience Study assessed major stressors and protective psychological factors related to burnout during the pandemic, such as self-efficacy, district efficacy, connectedness, professional support, core values, and sources of support. Distributed by 21CSLA, UC Berkeley Leadership Programs, and UCLA Center X, the survey included Likert-scale and open-response questions and collected anonymous demographic and work environment data to explore how resilience was distributed across personal and environmental factors.

TURNOVER/RETENTION QUESTIONNAIRE (TAIE & LEWIS, 2023)

Please read each question and indicate your response using the scale provided for each question with regard to your plan to remain a principal.

Scale: 1–5 (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

I plan to remain a principal...

As long as I am able

Until I am eligible for retirement benefits from this job

Until I am eligible for retirement benefits from a previous job

Until I am eligible for Social Security benefits

Until a specific life event occurs

Until a more desirable job opportunity comes along

Definitely plan to leave as soon as I can

Undecided at this time

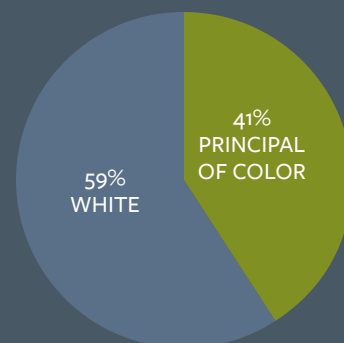
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Demographic Information of Survey Participants

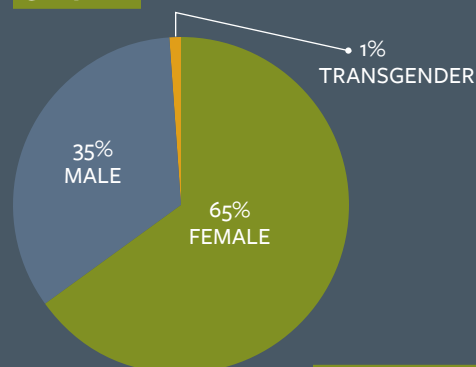
For this wave of the study, we received 115 responses from California principals serving K–12 schools, representing 32 counties (see below for represented counties). Our sample included 75 female and 39 male principals. One principal identified as transgender and did not specify male or female. Additionally, 48 out of 115 (41%) of our participants identified as a principal of color. In terms of school location, 32% of respondents were employed in urban schools, 43% in suburban schools, and 24% in rural schools. Regarding school levels, 35% of our respondents were employed in elementary schools, 12% in middle schools, 12% in K–8 schools, and 19% in high schools. Other school levels include a range of school settings such as preschools, alternative programs, continuation schools, adult education, and special education programs as reported by respondents through open-ended survey items. These categories were not large enough to run statistical analyses. A little over half (52%) of our respondents were early-career principals (5 years or less). Concerning turnover, 15% reported that they had changed schools or roles since the previous academic year.

WAVE 4 PARTICIPANTS:

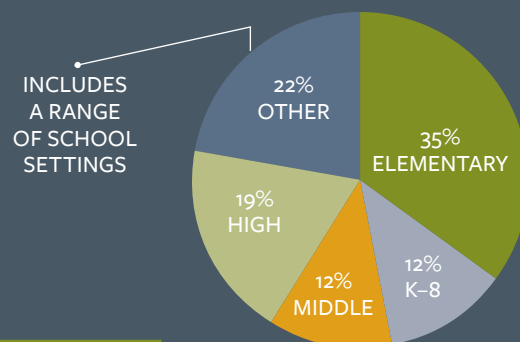
RACE



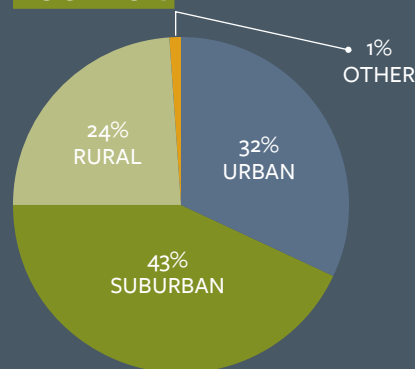
GENDER



SCHOOL LEVEL



LOCATION



Counties represented by respondents:



Overview: The majority of principals want to stay in their roles, but almost half are interested in exploring more attractive opportunities.

When respondents were asked, “I plan to remain a principal ... *as long as I am able to*,” 56% of participants agreed or strongly agreed, indicating that a majority of California principals are committed to staying in the profession. However, when responding to the item, “I plan to remain a principal ... *until a more desirable job opportunity comes along*,” 45% of participants agreed or strongly agreed. This suggests that while the majority of principals want to stay in their roles, almost half of principals are also open to exploring more attractive opportunities. Further investigation is needed to understand what principals consider “more desirable job opportunities” and whether these opportunities lie within the current system or beyond it.

Key Findings

To gain a better understanding of the factors contributing to principal turnover in California, we conducted an exploratory analysis of the data with a focus on how various individual and school demographic factors, including gender, race, school demographics (students with F/RP and school enrollment size), principal experience, and school location, impacted the responses to turnover and retention questions. The following section highlights only the significant results from our findings.

Gender. Female principals in California are more likely to leave the profession compared to their male counterparts.

There were significant gender differences in response to one turnover item. In response to, “I plan to remain a principal ... *as long as I am able to*,” there was a significant difference ($p < .05$) between male and female principals. Specifically, male principals, on average, agreed that they were planning to remain in the principal role as long as they could ($M = 3.79$) more than female principals ($M = 3.36$). This significant difference remained while controlling for other individual and school demographic variables (race, years

employed, school location, students with F/RP, languages spoken, degree earned, and school enrollment size). The significant response is consistent with prior findings in other states (Gates et al., 2006), indicating that female principals in California are also more likely to leave the profession compared to their male counterparts.

School Location. Retirement benefits may be a more significant factor for retention in rural areas when compared with suburban and urban areas.

There were very few significant differences in responses by school location. However, one item, “I plan to remain a principal ... *until I am eligible for retirement benefits from this job*,” had a small but significant difference ($p < .05$) between rural principals and suburban and urban principals. On average, rural principals ($M = 3.89$) were more likely to report remaining in the profession for retirement benefits compared to suburban principals ($M = 3.16$) and urban principals ($M = 3.06$). This significant difference remained even while controlling for other individual and school demographic variables (gender, race, years employed, F/RP, languages spoken, degree earned, and school enrollment size).

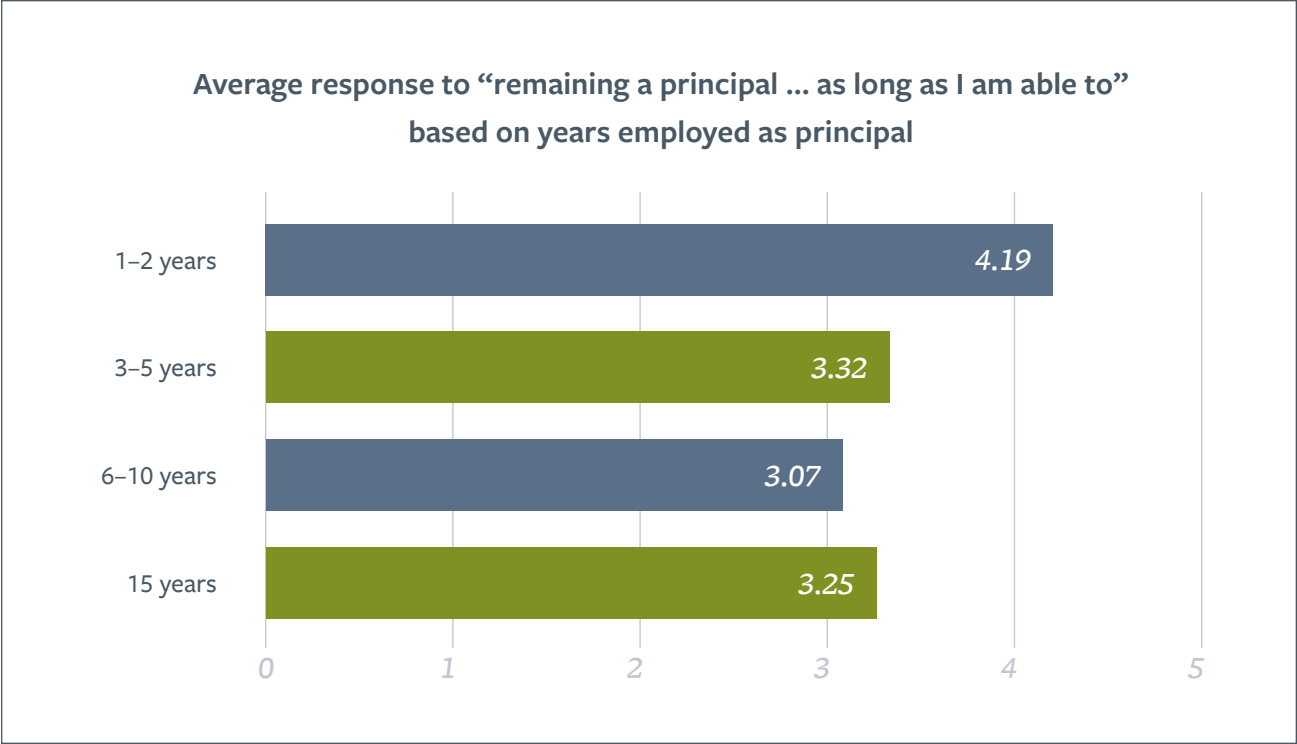
This finding suggests that retirement benefits may be a more significant factor for rural principals to remain in the profession than for their suburban and urban counterparts. It is important to further examine the factors driving this difference and to leverage retirement benefits for retention purposes, particularly targeting suburban and urban principals.

Principal Experience. Mid-career principals reported lower rates of retention than both early- and late-career principals.

There was a significant difference ($p < .05$) based on principal experience in response to “I plan to remain a principal ... as long as I am able to.” Specifically, early-career principals (1–2 years), on average, reported a higher intention to remain in the principal role as long as they could ($M = 4.19$) compared to late-career principals (see figure 1 for mean

differences by years of experience). This significant difference remained while controlling for other individual and school demographic variables (race, gender, school location, F/RP, languages spoken, degree earned, and school enrollment size). The significance is more nuanced than prior findings (Gates et al., 2006), indicating that the newest principals are most likely to report remaining in the profession, followed by late-career principals (11–15 years), with mid-career principals (6–10 years) least likely. This highlights the importance of focusing on the retention of mid-career principals in California.

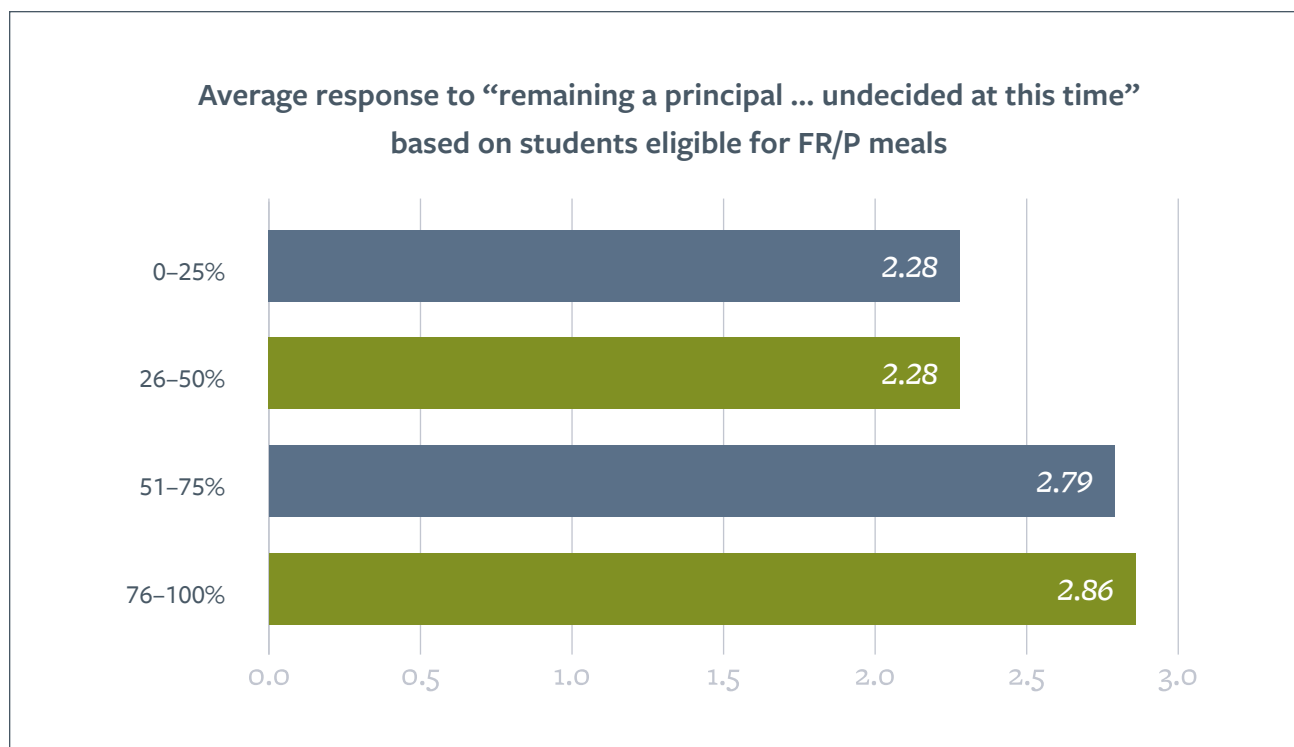
Figure 1



School Demographics. Principals leading schools with the highest rates of poverty are the most undecided about remaining in the profession.

We found that principals' responses to "I plan to remain a principal ... *undecided at this time*" were significantly different ($p < .05$) based on school demographics, specifically the percentage of students served who are eligible for F/RP. Principals serving schools with 76–100% of students eligible for F/RP meals were the most likely to be undecided ($M = 2.86$), followed by those in schools with 51–75% eligible students ($M = 2.79$). In contrast, principals at schools with 0–25% and 26–50% of students eligible for F/RP reported a mean of 2.28. This finding highlights the need for further investigation into supporting principals who serve a high percentage of students in poverty and addressing the uncertainties they face.

Figure 2



Conclusion and Implications

The most significant factors related to principal retention in California were gender, school location, principal experience, and school demographics. While previous studies have identified education and race as additional factors, they were not significant in this particular study. Given the high cost and pervasiveness of principal turnover as well as the urgent need for more studies that can confirm and elaborate on this initial work, we have provided an extended section on potential implications for the field.

Given the significant result indicating that female-identifying principals are more likely to leave the profession, it is crucial to delve deeper into their experiences to understand the specific challenges they face. This involves examining factors such as work-life balance, access to professional development, support systems, and potential gender-related obstacles (e.g., family planning, parental leave, etc.). Although our findings were not consistent with prior literature suggesting that principals employed in schools with the highest poverty rates (as measured in this study by the percentage of students eligible for F/RP) are most likely planning to leave the profession, we did find that these principals were significantly more likely to be undecided about remaining in the profession at this time. It is important to understand their experiences contributing to this uncertainty and to increase efforts aimed at retention.

Further investigation is needed with regard to the factors of race and education level. In this study, race was categorized as a binary variable (principals of color vs. white principals) due to the small sample sizes of various demographic groups. With a larger

sample size, further analysis would be conducted to determine if significant differences emerge among different demographic groups. Additional investigation into education level is needed in order to pay particular attention to pathways for licensure, as California allows three distinct approaches.

Our results indicate that mid-career principals may be the most susceptible to planning to leave the profession. This finding highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and experiences faced by mid-career principals. Identifying the specific factors that contribute to their dissatisfaction or desire to leave can help inform targeted retention strategies. Relatedly, it is important to gain a better understanding of the “more desirable opportunities” principals, especially mid-career principals, are seeking and whether these opportunities lie within the education system or outside of it. Policymakers and employers will greatly benefit by understanding the characteristics and elements of the more desirable opportunities, with the potential of using them to reshape the role of the principal.

Given our finding that rural principals place significant value on retirement benefits, compared to their urban and suburban counterparts, more investigation is needed with regard to retention strategies in various contexts. To enhance retention, policymakers should consider leveraging this insight for suburban and urban principals as well. By offering more attractive retirement benefits or tailored retirement incentives in these areas, policymakers can create a stronger incentive for principals to stay longer in their roles. Targeted strategies such as enhanced retirement plans or

retention bonuses could help improve retention rates across different school locations.

While the survey results of this study are limited, they provide a preliminary window into the information needed to stabilize the principal workforce in California. With the identification of more variables and information, resources such as professional learning, employer practices, and policy incentives can be more effectively used to address this critical issue.

Acknowledgments

We thank all of our 115 principal respondents for their time and effort in participating in our study, especially with the little time they have as active principals. This study could not have been completed without their support.

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21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

About 21CSLA

21CSLA (21st Century California School Leadership Academy) is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. A key member of California's Statewide System of Support, 21CSLA is headquartered at UC Berkeley School of Education and works in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, California Subject Matter Project, and seven 21CSLA regional academies throughout the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California. Programs are provided at no cost to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve outcomes for historically marginalized students.

Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education for educational leaders. We coordinate and facilitate Research–Practice Partnerships among California educational leaders and educational researchers by creating connections and providing research support. The research briefs compile and present current research in a concise format, including reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. 21CSLA regularly produces Research–Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. We also curate a variety of resources for educational leaders to learn about current and important topics in education (e.g., webinar video recordings and highlights, research briefs, podcasts). For more information, visit <https://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu/research>

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