

Principal Retention and Attrition Trends in South Africa: Insights from the PERSAL data

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INTRODUCTION

Principal leadership is one of the most important inputs in formal learning outcomes, accounting for up to one-quarter of school-level effects on student performance¹. Their influence on student performance comes largely through instructional leadership and school managerial leadership^{2,3}. Principals also play an important role in the formation or shaping of their schools' overall vision and culture, while also supporting teacher development⁴.

Principal retention or leadership stability can lead to higher levels of teacher satisfaction⁵ and retention⁶, as well as higher student performance⁷. Principal retention could also facilitate the deepening of relationships with the community, which could contribute to better alignment of values between school and community, higher levels of parent and learner trust, and collaboration with community stakeholders. This is particularly important in communities that are underserved in terms of access to education and education inputs, where successful community engagement over time could contribute meaningfully to resource acquisition and mobilisation, as well as coordination of efforts.

On the other hand, schools with high principal turnover rates can disrupt several processes and outcomes that depend on stability, such as school culture, vision, teacher development and morale, and student achievement. Principal turnover can also lead to subsequent increases in teacher turnover rates and lower student achievement scores, particularly in schools of lower socio-economic standing⁸. Grissom and Bartanen (2018)⁹, for example, find that principal turnover is highest in low-income schools and surprisingly, in middle-class American schools. In their study they find retirement-related turnover, and a link between principal performance (using three measures) and non-retirement-related turnover. Principals at the lower end of the performance spectrum have higher probabilities of being demoted within the school system, while high performers exit to office-level positions.

The role of principals in South Africa is beset by several challenges that constrain their abilities to lead effectively. Resource deficits in underprivileged schools such as a lack of basic infrastructure, learning and teaching materials, as well as poor or no access to technological resources^{10,11}, can also impede the ability of principals to lead effectively in such schools. The impact of these deficits is felt most acutely in rural and township schools, where principals have to navigate their way through bureaucratic inefficiencies due to centralisation of decision-making power¹², as well as deal with learner and parent-level issues^{13,14}. In disadvantaged communities, these issues include food insecurity, high levels of poverty, absence and dropouts, and low levels of parent involvement and student well-being. Strong union affiliations within schools can also negatively impact the effectiveness of school management and leadership, as well as student performance¹⁵. Besides the impacts on resource availability and allocation, some of these limitations impose additional administrative burdens on principals, further compromising their ability to lead effectively.

Among the most pressing challenges in South Africa's low-resource environments is the lack of adequate training and ongoing professional development for school principals. Principals are often promoted into their positions based on a successful record of teaching, with the implicit assumption that their success as teachers and leading at lower levels (such as being a head of department) prepares them for management^{16,17}. Therefore, principals are often appointed with no formal preparation or training for their leadership and management roles. Despite a "growing realisation that school leadership is a specialist occupation that requires specific preparation"¹⁸, there are still very few in-service opportunities for training. In 2007 the Department of Basic Education implemented the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) program for school leadership, but its reach and impact remain rather limited¹⁹. Being ill-equipped to deal with instructional leadership, curriculum management, and staff motivation issues can be particularly devastating in schools with resource limitations.

Principal attrition is often highest in low-resource environments²⁰, precisely where strong leadership and long-term principal retention are most critical. This research note therefore aims to identify whether the South African education system is characterised by high principal attrition rates in poorer schools, and to identify which factors influence principal retention using a combination of relatively recent administration data sets from the Department of Basic Education. An important caveat to keep in mind throughout this research note is that principal absence or attrition **does not mean that principal duties are not being carried out, nor that there is no *de facto* principal**. Principal absence is simply defined as the absence of an individual who does not have the title of principal within a school.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The primary data used to investigate the factors affecting principal retention and turnover are the merged anonymised PERSAL employment, components and expenditure data covering the period 2012 to 2021. These data sets were obtained from the Department of Basic Education and provide information on (amongst others) the rank, job title, age, race, province and gender of Department of Basic Education staff members. The *myjobtitle* variable allows for the identification of school-level staff who have the job titles of teacher, head of department, deputy principals and principals. The school quintile is also provided, which allows for comparison of attrition and retention rates between non-fee paying and fee-paying schools.

The anonymised PERSAL data is combined with the geographical coordinates of schools (also provided by the Department of Basic Education) to produce area-level descriptive analysis of where principal attrition is most common and persistent in South Africa. School locations are linked to provinces using Statistics South Africa (2013) shapefiles. For some schools, exact geographical coordinates for schools were not available. In these cases, the publicly available Masterlist 2021 data (Department of Basic Education, 2023) was consulted to confirm where these schools were located. For example: For the 2021 year, 23 261 schools were identified. Merging the geographical coordinates data and the education districts data, 21 333 school locations in the 75 education districts were positively identified (91.7% match). The maps which follow in this analysis will therefore be at education district level and above.

As the variable of interest is principal attrition or retention, much of the analyses will be done at the school level. As the PERSAL data a school is defined as not having a principal if in the same year at least one staff member's rank title is principal. Similarly, a school is defined as not having a principal in a specific year if in that year there are no staff members with the rank of principal.

There are two important definitional caveats to note: (1) It is possible for schools to have more than one person with the job title of principal; and (2) although some schools may not have any individuals with the job title of principal, **it does not mean that that the principal's duties are not being carried out**. Someone from within the existing ranks of the school, such as the deputy principal, may be the acting principal where there are no ranked principals within the school. This situation may arise when schools lose principals within the same year and are not able to fill the post by November of each year, when schools struggle to attract principals to fill the principal post, when current hiring freezes directly affect the appointment of principals (2015 corruption case), or if past hiring freezes of heads of department or deputy principals (Spaull and Ntaka, 2022) affect the possible progression of teachers into principal positions.

An additional caveat related to the beginning and end dates of the PERSAL data provided (2012 and 2021). Since there is no experience nor years of broken or unbroken service, it is impossible to determine how long it takes individuals to become principals. However, one can use part of the data to determine which previous positions new principals are promoted or appointed from.

PRINCIPAL RETENTION AND ATTRITION IN SOUTH AFRICA: 2012 TO 2021

As Figure 1 shows, schools experienced declining levels of principal retention, as well as increases in both principal losses and absences for at least two consecutive years between 2013²¹ and 2021. 76.1% of schools were able to keep having a principal (not necessarily the same one) since the previous year. By 2021 principal retention had decreased by 10.2 percentage points to 65.9%, while principal losses from the previous year increased from 6.1% to 9.6% over the same period. More worryingly, the percentage of schools that did not have a principal in both the current period and the year before increased from 11.8% in 2012 to 18.5% in 2021. In other words, almost one-fifth of schools in 2021 did not have an educator with the title of principal for at least two years.

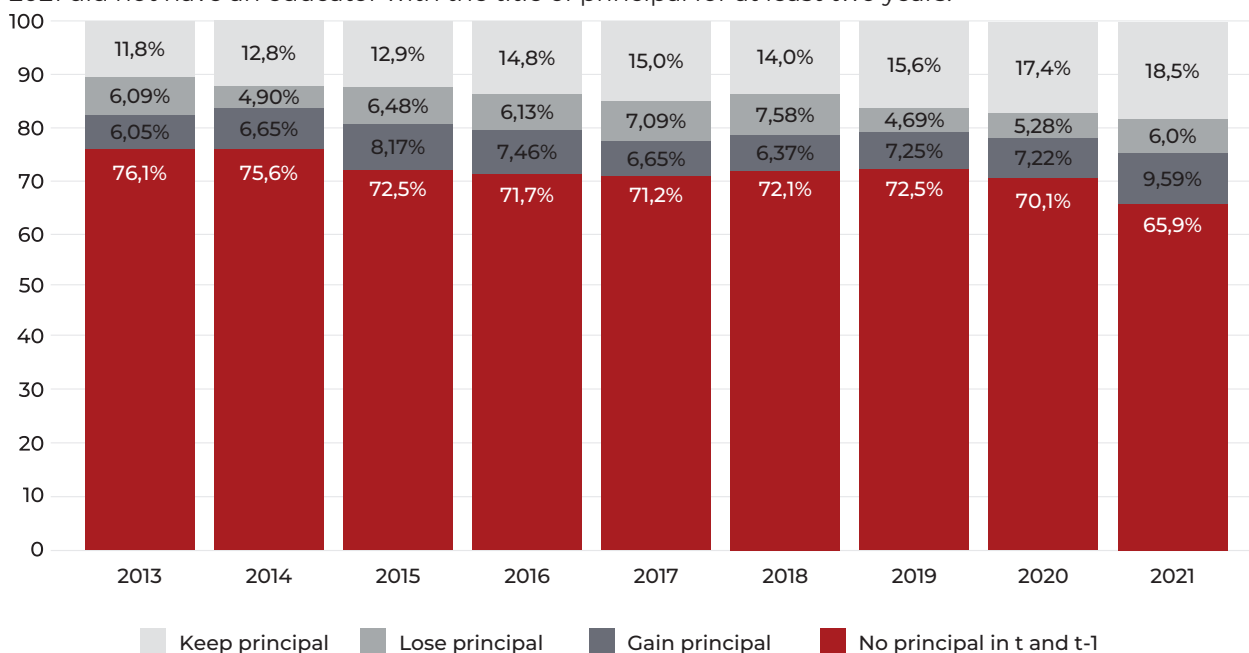


Figure 1 Principal retention and attrition, by year (2012 to 2021)

The decline in principal retention over time is geographically uneven. Figure 2 shows the percentage of schools in each province that recorded having at least one principal employed. All provinces generally experienced downward trajectories in retention from 2012, with pronounced declines from 2018 onwards. In particular, the Free State has struggled to retain and attract new principals, with only 71.75% of schools in the province having a principal in 2012 and only 63% by 2021.

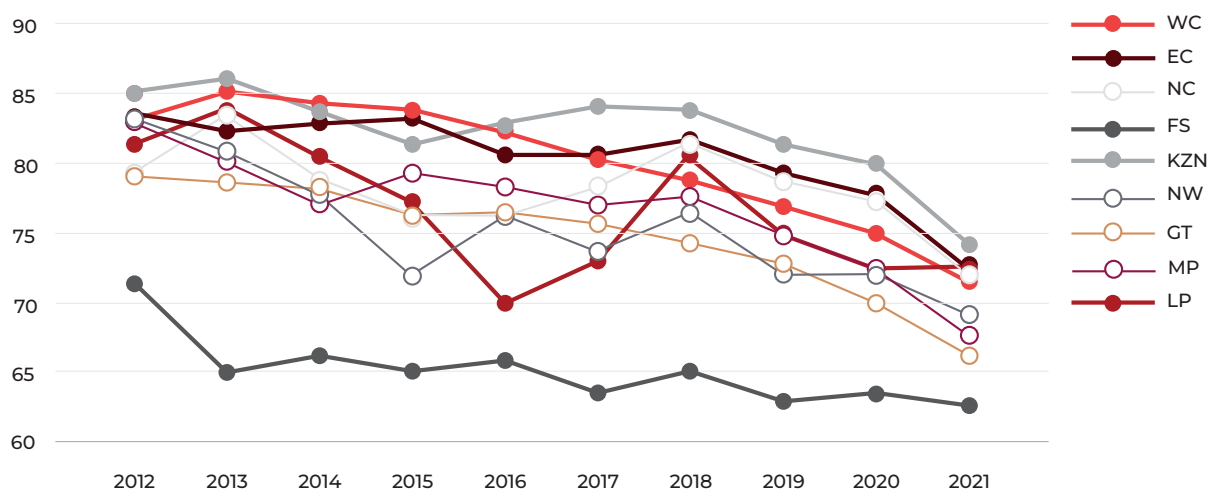


Figure 2 Percentage of schools with at least one principal, by year and province (2012 to 2021)

An alternative representation of principal retention by province is shown below in Figure 3, which shows the average number of years, by province, between 2012 and 2021 that schools were able to keep a principal. Schools in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Kwazulu-Natal had principals for more than 8 out of 10 years on average (with relatively small confidence intervals), while schools in every other province were able to have a principal employed for less than 8 years on average. A notable outlier is the Free State province, where on average a principal was employed at schools for 7 out of the 10 years under consideration.

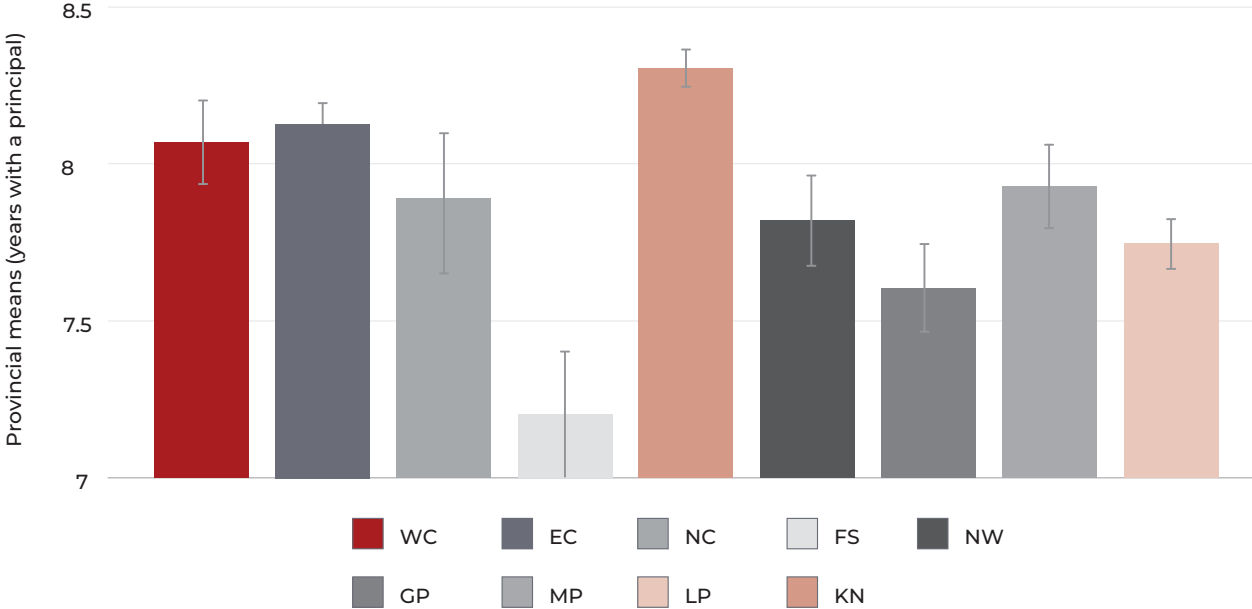


Figure 3 Provincial-level mean: Years with a principal out of 10 years

Part of the principal retention and attrition problem is structural in nature. South Africa’s principal population is relatively old. Figure 4 shows the age distributions of principals by year in violin plots. The circles in the centres of each plot show the median age of principals within a particular year, while the shaded parts around each circle show the kernel densities of each year’s age distribution. As Figure 4 shows, the age distribution of principals has shifted rightwards somewhat in the ten years between 2012 and 2021. In 2012 the median age of principals was 52 years. By 2021 the median age of principals had increased to 54 years. In addition, the standard deviation increased from 6.16 years to 5.25 years, indicating a contraction of the age distribution.

The median age of deputy principals has also increased from 49 to 52 years between 2012 and 2021 (shown in Figure 5). There has also been some contraction of the age distribution around the median. This contrasts with the teacher age distribution in Figure 6, where although the average age has increased marginally between 2012 and 2021, the standard deviation has increased from 8.31 to 11.1 years. This is because of increasing proportions of younger individuals within the teacher ranks.

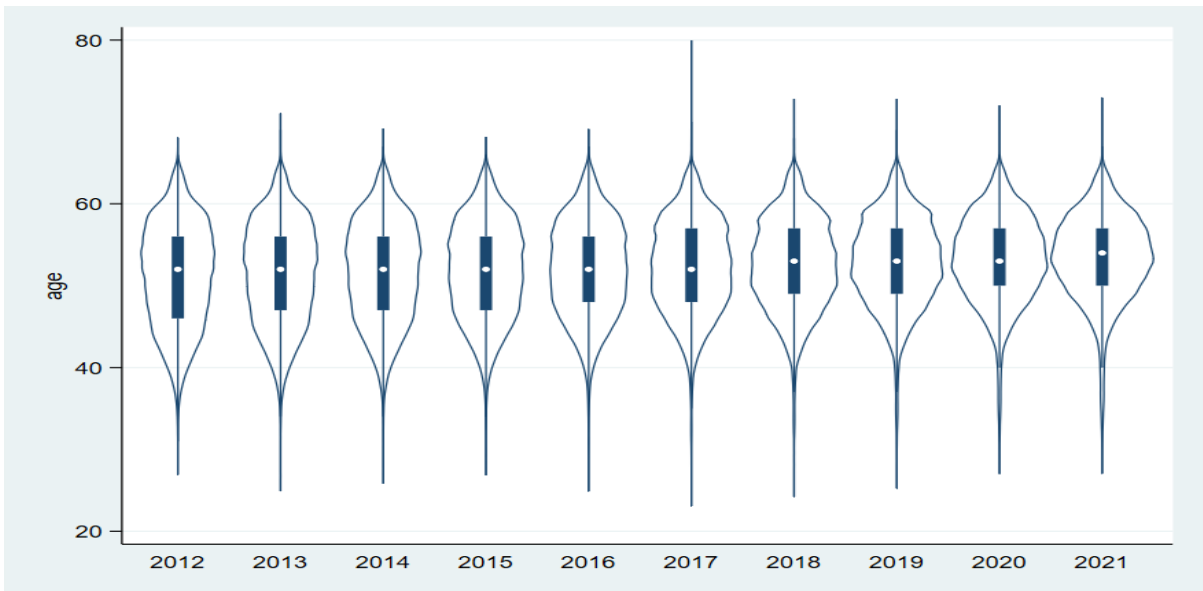


Figure 4 Violin plot of principal age distributions 2012 to 2021 (selected years)

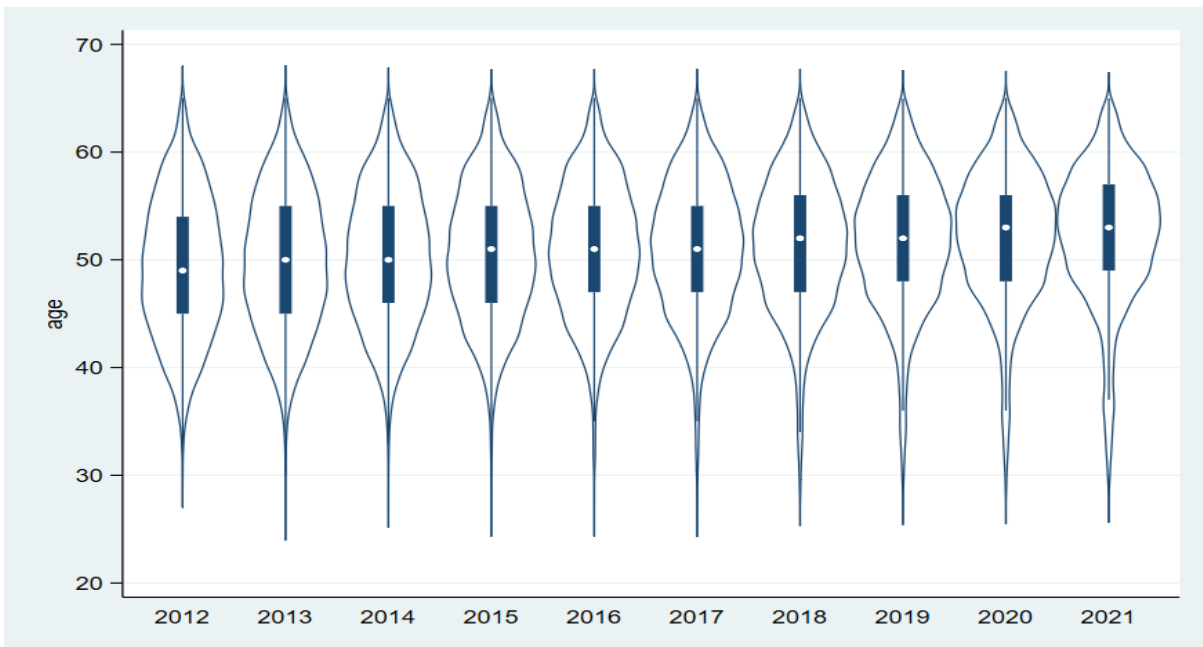


Figure 5 Violin plot of deputy principal age distributions (2012 to 2021)

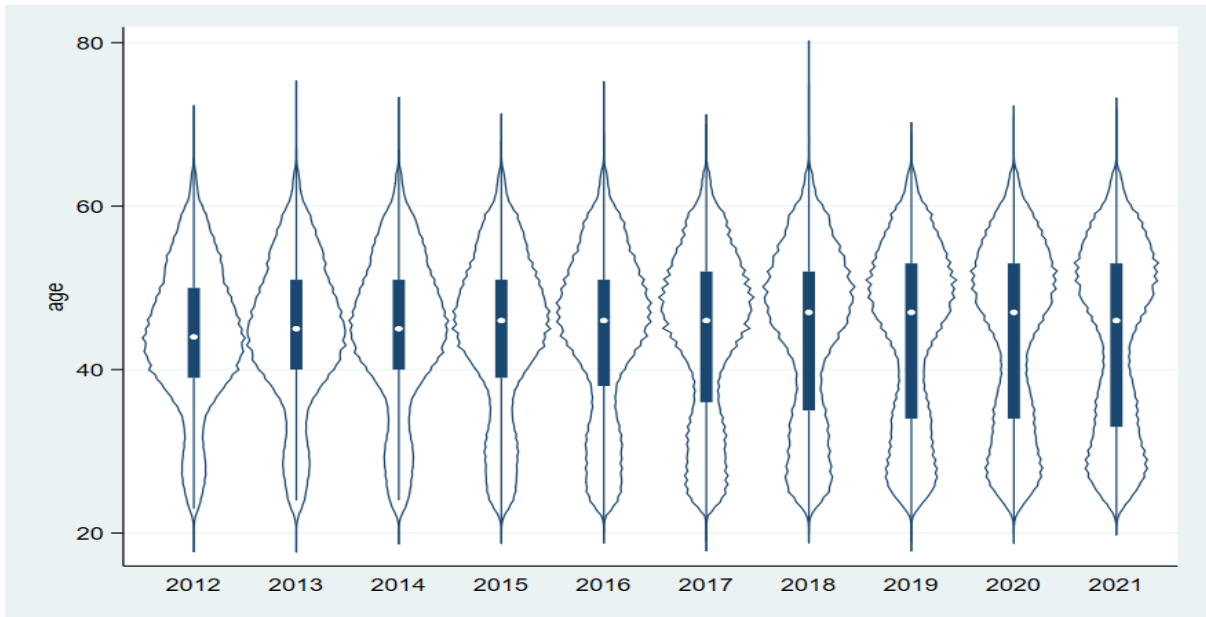


Figure 6 Violin plot of teacher age distributions (2012 to 2021)

Figure 7 shows by school quintile whether a school kept, lost or gained a principal between years, or whether the school had no principal for at least two years. The sample is pooled over the entire period, so it is an average of this retention indicator over the years 2013 and 2021. The differences between quintile 1 and quintile 5 schools are large on average. 77.7% of quintile 5 schools kept principals between consecutive years, while only 72.1% of quintile 1 schools were able to keep a principal. While the gains and losses of principals are similar across quintiles, it is in the absence of principals for at least two years that differences between affluent and less affluent schools are glaring. On average between 2013 and 2021, 14.8% of quintile 1 schools had no principal for at least 2 years, while the same was true for only 9.55% of quintile 5 schools.

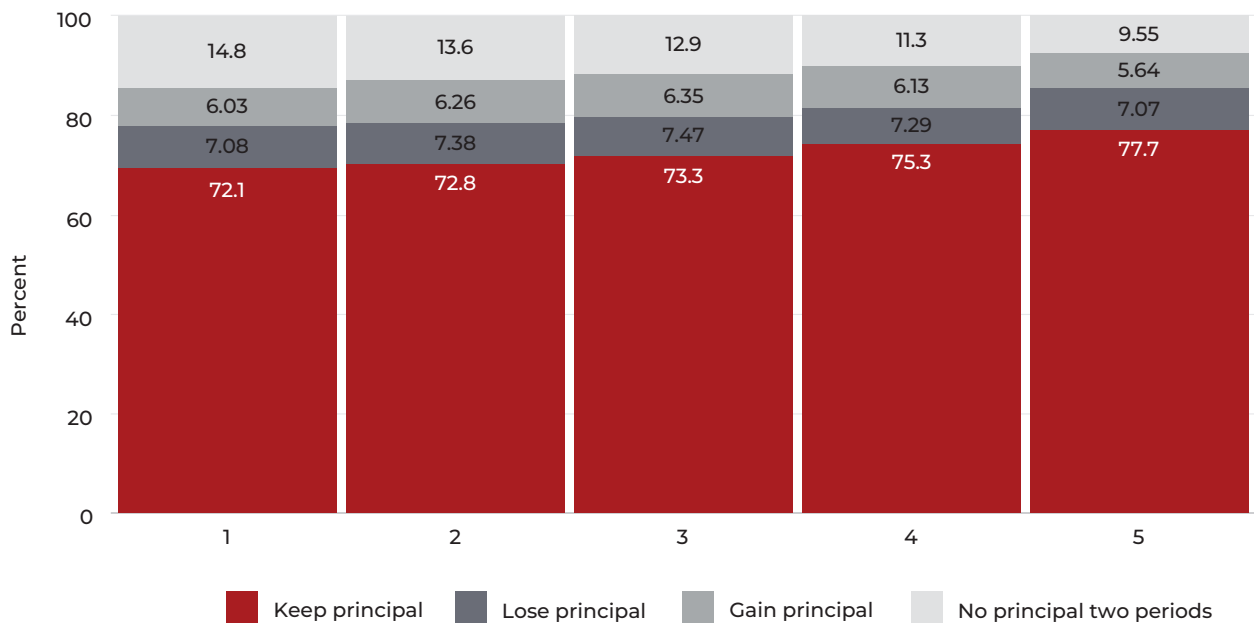


Figure 7 School-level principal retention 2012 to 2021, by quintile

The disaggregation of principal retention and attrition by select year in Figure 8 shows an interesting time trend. All schools, regardless of quintile, experienced increasing levels of attrition over time. For example, in 2013 only 3.86% of quintile 5 schools lost a principal. By 2019 that percentage had increased to 7.61%, and just two years later in 2021 to 11.2% for the same group of schools. Principal retention in all schools also declined almost uniformly for all schools, with the largest declines being

experienced amongst quintile 1 schools. The percentage of schools without principals for at least two years also increased spectacularly over the period, almost doubling for both quintile 1 and 5 schools, and increasing almost as much for the middle 3 quintiles.

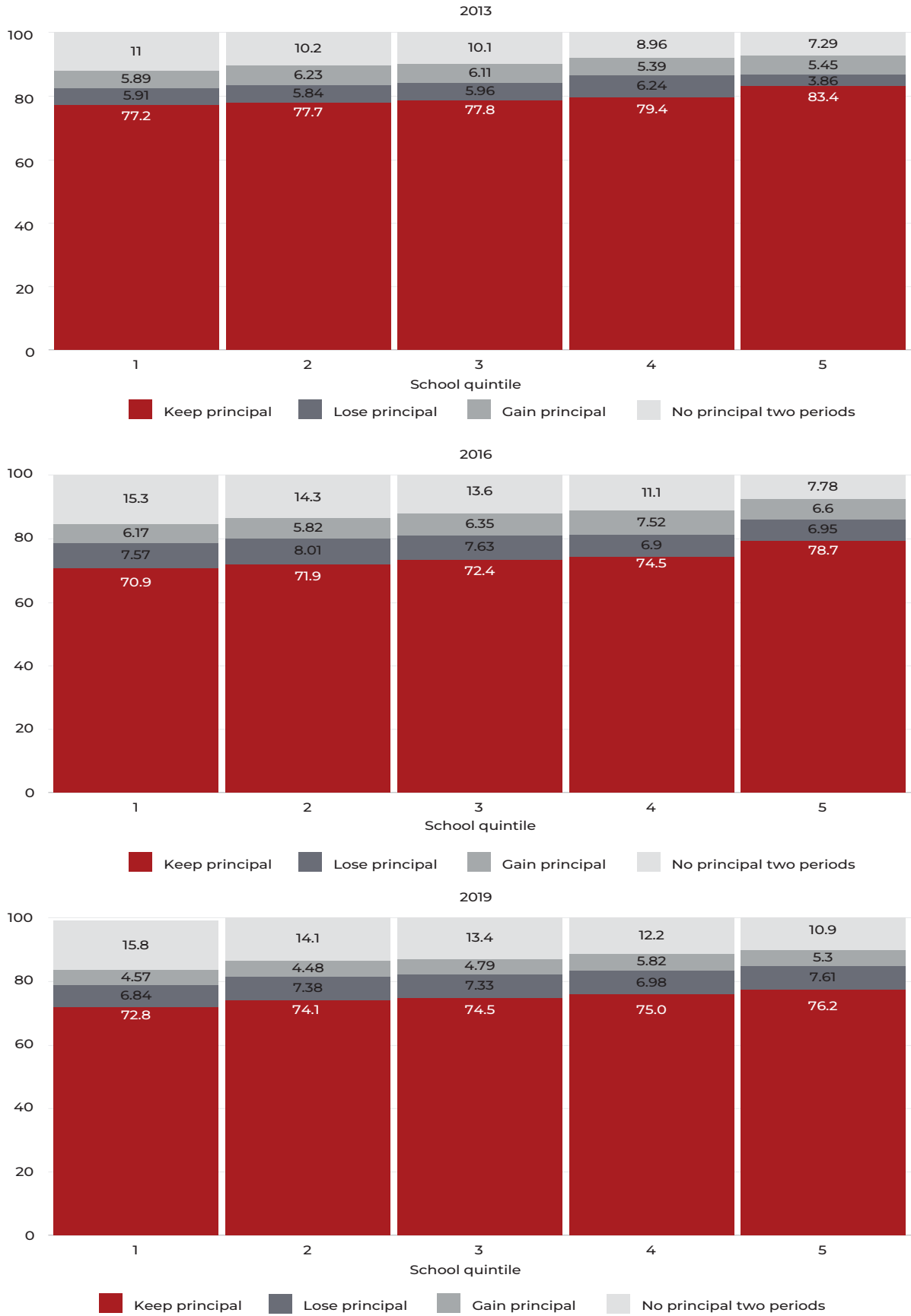


Figure 8 continues on following page

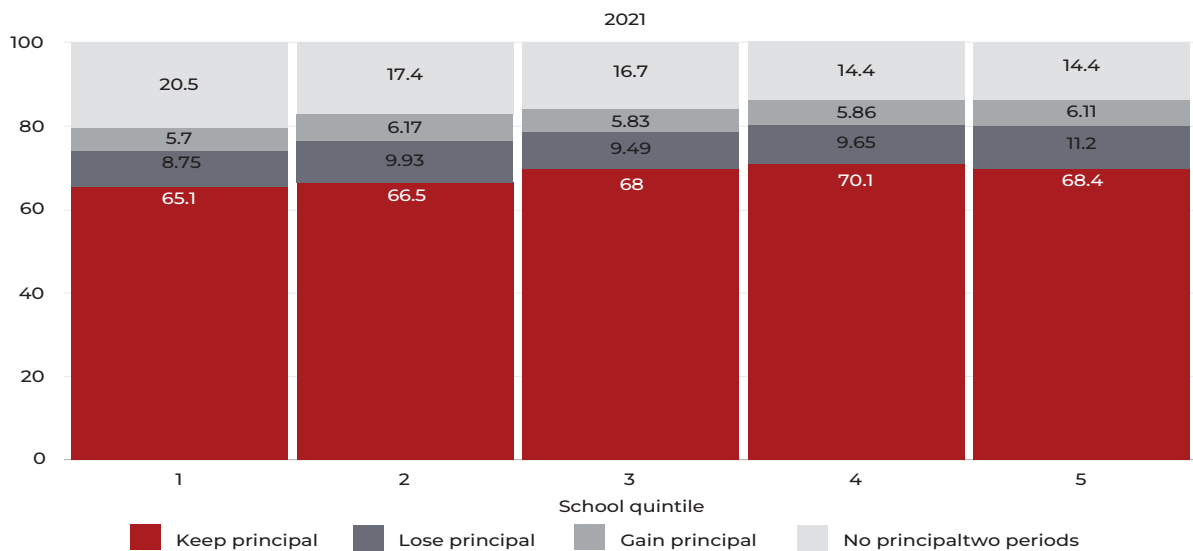


Figure 8 School-level retention, loss and gains of principals, by quintile for select years

As alluded to earlier, part of the increasing principal retention problem stems from an ageing principal and senior staff workforce that is unevenly distributed by geography. As Figure 9 shows, the district-level average ages of principals are between 50.6 and 55.5 years, with the highest average ages concentrated in the Chris Hani and Sarah Baartman districts in the Eastern Cape, Vhembe West and East in Limpopo and parts of Gauteng on the border of the Limpopo Province.

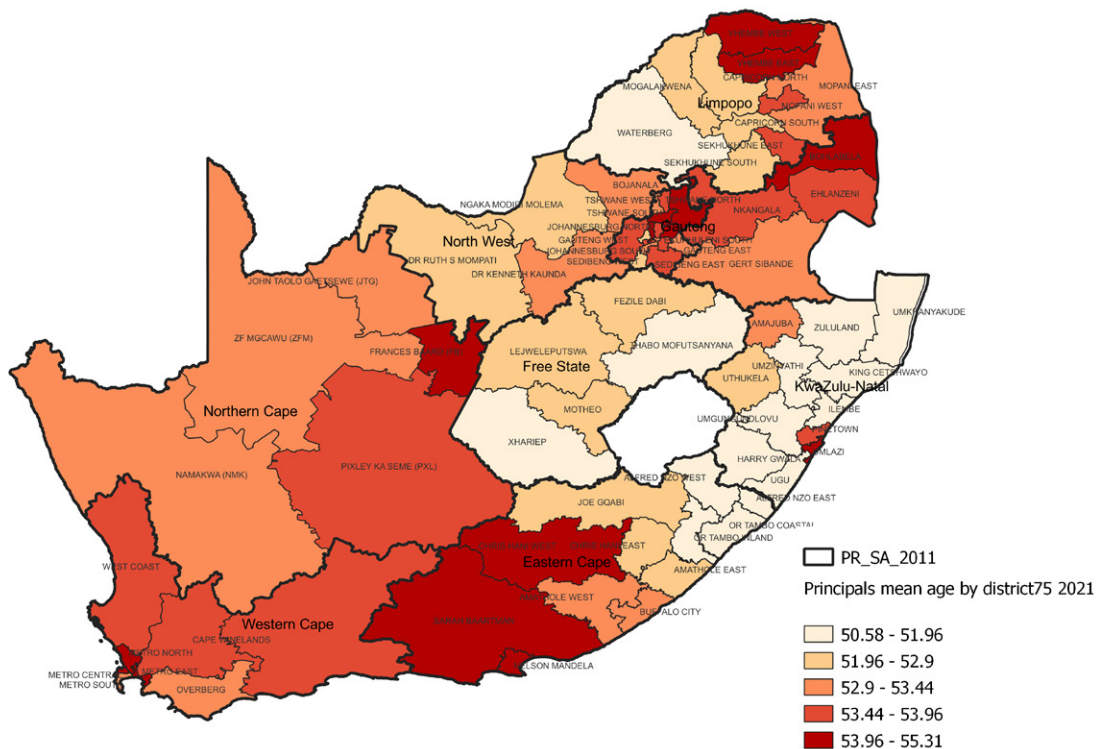


Figure 9 Mean ages of principals by district 2021

Since most new principals tend to come from the ranks of deputy principals and department heads, Figure 10 considers the average ages of senior staff below principal level (department head and deputy principals) by education district in South Africa. The average ages of senior staff are highest in the Limpopo province, where the average ages of senior staff are 52 years and older for most education districts within this province. Age-related principal attrition will likely result in dire consequences for learner outcomes in the Limpopo and parts of the Eastern Cape, where there are also particularly high learner-educator ratios (shown in Figure 11).

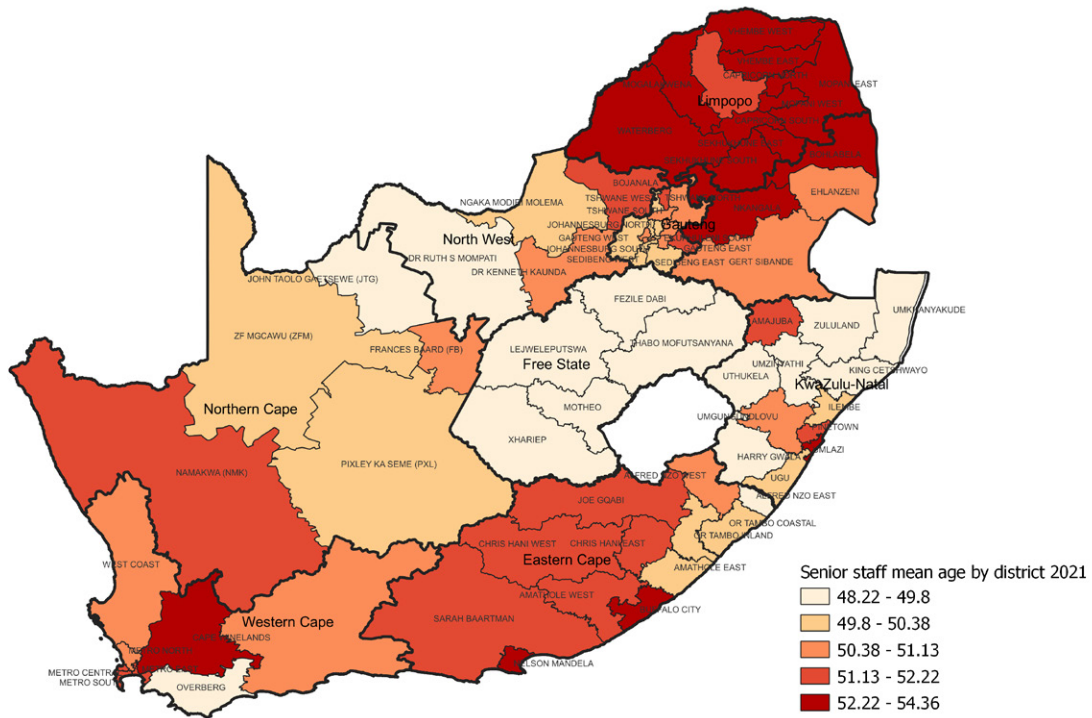


Figure 10 Average ages of senior staff (department head and higher) in 2021

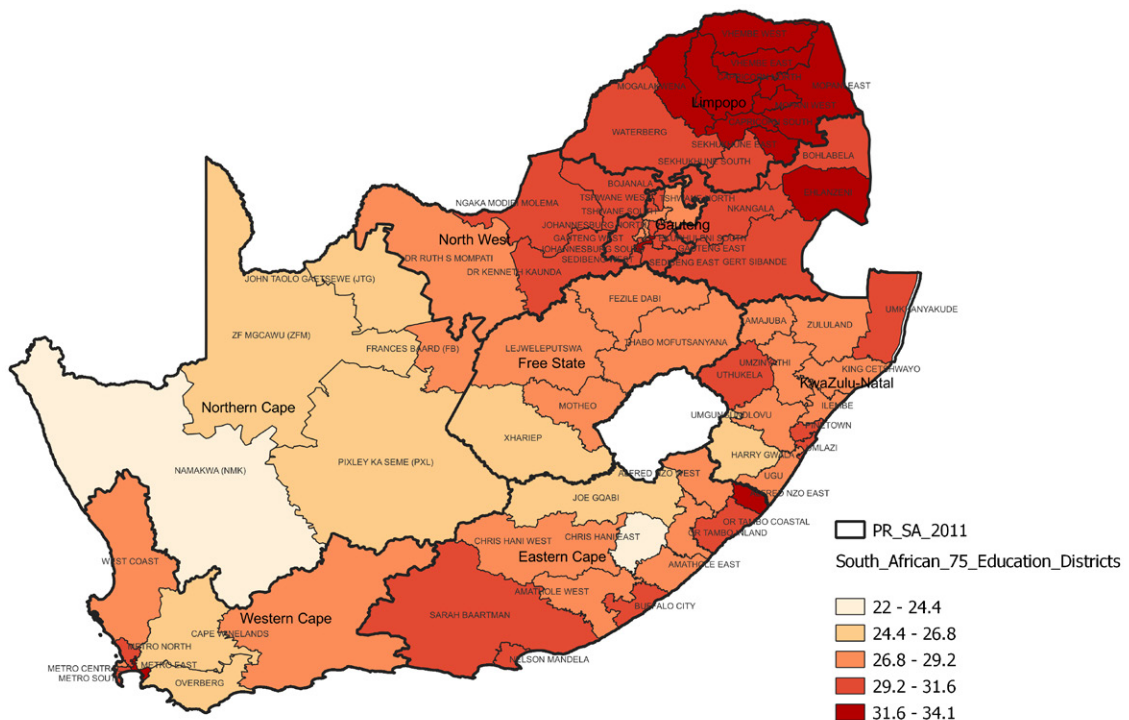


Figure 11 School district averages of learner-educator ratios

Part of the principal attrition problem also seems to be attributable to a juniorisation of the teacher workforce, possibly because of strategic freezes in recruitment (Spaull and Ntaka, 2022). Between 2012 and 2021 the percentage of the school workforce identified as senior or master teacher declined by about two-thirds from 10.2 to 3.2% of the total school workforce (shown in Table 1). While combined teacher, senior teacher and dept head positions increased by 3.4% in absolute terms between 2012 and 2021, principal positions declined by 12.5% in absolute terms. The decline in the number of principals and senior staff shown in Table 1, coupled with increases in learner numbers over the same period from approximately 12.4 million to 13.4 million, is concerning and could very likely compromise learning outcomes in future.

Table 1 School workforce composition changes 2012 to 2021

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
1. PRINCIPAL	23 011	22 603	21 915	21 223	20 826	21 241	21 756	21 241	20 789	20 134
	6.11	6.01	5.88	5.74	5.58	5.63	5.78	5.58	5.41	5.23
2. DEPUTY PRINCIPAL	12 551	12 394	12 213	11 867	11 528	12 142	12 617	12 668	12 182	11 813
	3.33	3.3	3.28	3.21	3.09	3.22	3.35	3.33	3.17	3.07
3. DEPARTMENT HEAD	46 290	45 820	44 648	42 912	42 813	44 080	45 047	45 589	44 512	43 212
	12.28	12.19	11.97	11.61	11.46	11.69	11.98	11.98	11.59	11.23
4. SENIOR/MASTER TEACHER	38 317	35 641	32 703	28 626	25 485	22 523	19 681	17 207	14 898	12 220
	10.17	9.48	8.77	7.74	6.82	5.98	5.23	4.52	3.88	3.18
5. TEACHER	256 685	259 490	261 418	265 010	272 806	276 963	277 036	283 965	291 787	297 434
	68.11	69.02	70.1	71.69	73.05	73.47	73.65	74.6	75.95	77.29
TOTAL	376 854	375 948	372 897	369 638	373 458	376 949	376 137	380 670	384 168	384 813
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

WHERE DO PRINCIPALS COME FROM?

Given that the number of principals is declining in the face of increasing learner populations and declining proportions of senior staff, it may be of some use to consider from which positions principals are recruited from. The Sankey diagram in Figure 12 shows the progression of staff over three-year periods into 2021 principal positions. 39% of principals in 2021 were already principals in 2012. In other words, 39% of the 2021 cohort of principals had at least 9 years of experience being a principal. 56% had at least 6 years of experience and 81% had at least 3 years of experience. In terms of career progression, the largest contributor to the increasing stock of principals were deputy principals and department heads, and to a lesser degree teachers. Very rarely is a new entrant to the school system appointed as a principal. Figure 12 also shows demotion from the title of principal to lower-level school positions, although this is very limited.

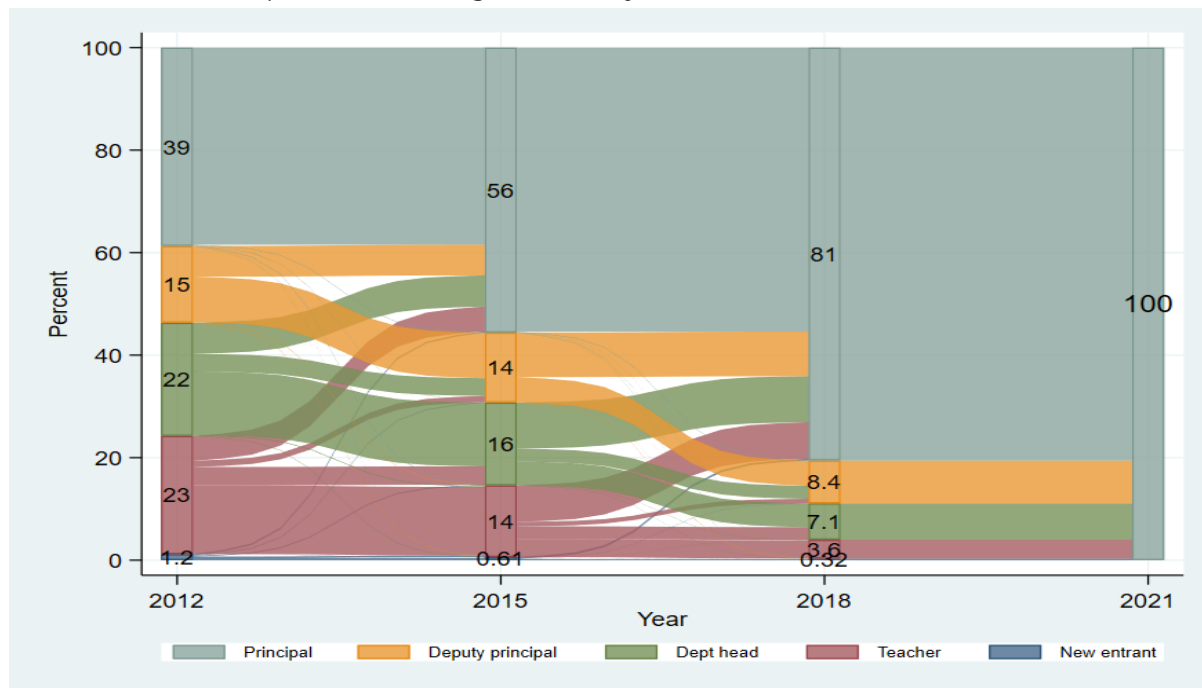


Figure 12 Sankey diagram showing previous positions of educators who are principals in 2021

New principals also tend to have been senior staff at other schools than the one that employed them as principals. 91% of new principals (principals who were not principals in the previous year) appointed between 2013 and 2021 were appointed at a different school than the one they were in the year before. As expected, there is some downward mobility in terms of school quintile amongst new principals. 61% of new principals who were not promoted at the same school moved to a new school that had a lower quintile than they were in the year before when they were not principals, 36% remained in the same quintile, and only 3% were able to move to a higher quintile school. However, new principals, like their lower-level counterparts, display extremely low rates of interprovincial and inter-district mobility. 99.1% of the approximately 15 459²² individuals promoted from within the education system to principalship between 2013 and 2021 remained within the same province. Of the 13 600 who changed schools for the promotion, only 0.06% changed provinces. Only 214 or 1.58% of newly promoted principals changed districts.

The relative immobility of principals between provinces is of some concern for provinces and districts that have historically struggled to attract and retain principals.

REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL-LEVEL PRINCIPAL RETENTION

Table 1 presents a series of logistic regressions using the pooled data between 2012 and 2021 to determine which factors affect retention of principals between two consecutive years ($t-1$ and t). Independent variables between years are lagged by one year. All coefficients are presented as odds ratios. For continuous independent variables, this means that where coefficients are less than 1, a negative relationship between the dependent and independent variables exists, and where the coefficient is more than 1 a positive relationship exists. Where the coefficients are equal to 1 for continuous variables, this implies that there is no impact. For categorical independent variables, coefficients of less than 1 imply that the odds of the outcome occurring are lower than they are for the reference group, and higher when the coefficients are more than 1. Where the coefficient is equal to 1, the odds of the outcome occurring are the same as that of the reference group.

In model 1 the characteristics of the principal are first considered. Unsurprisingly, the age of the principal in the previous year matters a great deal for principal retention. Relative to schools who have principals between the ages of 25 and 34 years (the reference group), schools with principals between the ages of 35 and 54 years are more likely to retain principals. Schools with principals 55 years and older in the previous year are much more likely to lose principals. Principal gender also matters somewhat for retention, with female principals more likely to still be employed as principal in the following year. Principal retention is highest when schools have black principals, and lowest when the principal is white.

In model 2, school-level factors are added. The higher the school quintile, the lower the probability of retention. Relative to smaller schools, very large schools are more likely to retain school principals. Learner-educator ratios appear to have no statistically significant impact on principal retention. Staff racial composition matters somewhat for principal retention. Schools with proportionally more white staff are more likely to retain principals, while schools with proportionally more black staff are less likely to retain principals. Adding staff racial composition and school quintiles diminishes the differences between school principal races.

In model 3 the province and year under consideration are added as controls. While the year coefficients are not reported here, principal retention in every year after 2013 is significantly lower than it was in 2013. The provincial coefficients reveal that there is only a significant difference between the Western Cape (the reference group) and the Northern Cape.

In model 4 race is removed entirely as an explanatory factor. While the principal age coefficients remain relatively stable and significant, the school quintile coefficients and province coefficients change appreciably. The change in these coefficients is in all probability related to the strong relationship between school quintile, race and province in South Africa. Quintile 5 schools are now most likely to retain principals. The province coefficients now reveal that while there are no significant differences between the Western Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng, schools in every other province are on average less likely than those in the Western Cape to retain school principals. The Free State, North West, Northern Cape and Limpopo provinces are the most likely to lose principals.

Table 2 Factors associated with principal retention between consecutive years: pooled logistic regression

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
25 TO 34 YEARS OLD PRINCIPAL				
35 TO 44 YEARS	0.445** (0.185)	0.413** (0.185)	0.348* (0.186)	0.315* (0.186)
45 TO 54 YEARS	0.632*** (0.183)	0.591*** (0.183)	0.574*** (0.183)	0.545*** (0.183)
55 TO 64 YEARS	-0.699*** (0.183)	-0.747*** (0.183)	-0.761*** (0.183)	-0.774*** (0.183)
65 TO 70 YEARS	-2.757*** (0.223)	-2.831*** (0.223)	-2.856*** (0.224)	-2.789*** (0.223)
MALE PRINCIPAL				
FEMALE PRINCIPAL	0.0611*** (0.0191)	0.101*** (0.0194)	0.0939*** (0.0195)	0.0850*** (0.0194)
BLACK PRINCIPAL				
COLOURED PRINCIPAL	-0.207*** (0.0647)	0.0798 (0.116)	0.0749 (0.117)	
INDIAN/ASIAN PRINCIPAL	-0.303*** (0.0486)	-0.172* (0.0911)	-0.185** (0.0917)	
WHITE PRINCIPAL	-0.489*** (0.0357)	-0.158** (0.0732)	-0.155** (0.0738)	
QUINTILE 1 SCHOOL				
QUINTILE 2 SCHOOL		-0.0561** (0.0274)	-0.0510* (0.0275)	-0.0504* (0.0275)
QUINTILE 3 SCHOOL		-0.0807*** (0.0268)	-0.0744*** (0.0276)	-0.0718*** (0.0276)
QUINTILE 4 SCHOOL		-0.118*** (0.0375)	-0.141*** (0.0391)	-0.0644* (0.0381)
QUINTILE 5 SCHOOL		-0.126*** (0.0458)	-0.154*** (0.0470)	0.0857** (0.0395)
ULTRA MICRO SCHOOL SIZE				
MICRO		0.0425 (0.107)	0.0435 (0.107)	0.0476 (0.107)
SMALL		-0.0611 (0.0873)	-0.0623 (0.0875)	-0.0560 (0.0873)
MEDIUM		-0.00178 (0.0875)	0.00298 (0.0878)	0.0292 (0.0875)
MEDIUM TO LARGE		0.124 (0.0891)	0.135 (0.0899)	0.182** (0.0893)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
LARGE		0.233**	0.246**	0.302***
		(0.0949)	(0.0960)	(0.0953)
MEGA		0.324***	0.324***	0.361***
		(0.0930)	(0.0945)	(0.0938)
PUPIL:TEACHER RATIO		0.00108	0.00133	-0.00295*
		(0.00157)	(0.00161)	(0.00152)
PROPORTION OF STAFF BLACK				
PROPORTION OF STAFF COLOURED		0.175*	0.243**	
		(0.0987)	(0.121)	
PROPORTION OF STAFF INDIAN/ASIAN		0.00603	-0.0291	
		(0.162)	(0.165)	
PROPORTION OF STAFF WHITE		0.676***	0.692***	
		(0.136)	(0.137)	
WESTERN CAPE				
EASTERN CAPE			0.0223	-0.0938**
			(0.0627)	(0.0452)
NORTHERN CAPE			-0.164**	-0.211***
			(0.0716)	(0.0695)
FREE STATE			-0.0811	-0.187***
			(0.0752)	(0.0596)
KWAZULU-NATAL			0.0538	-0.0976**
			(0.0637)	(0.0429)
NORTH-WEST			-0.0742	-0.184***
			(0.0709)	(0.0539)
GAUTENG			0.0879	-0.0284
			(0.0679)	(0.0492)
MPUMALANGA			0.0287	-0.0825
			(0.0702)	(0.0532)
LIMPOPO			-0.0563	-0.183***
			(0.0655)	(0.0467)
CONSTANT	2.782***	2.388***	2.699***	2.791***
	(0.185)	(0.213)	(0.226)	(0.207)
ADDITIONAL CONTROLS: YEAR	N	N	Y	Y
OBSERVATIONS	158,909	158,909	158,909	158,909

CONCLUSION

This research note examines the factors that influence principal retention and turnover in South African schools between 2012 and 2021, by combining anonymised PERSAL employment data with the publicly available Masterlist data and SNAP geodata. The data sets were all provided directly and indirectly by the Department of Basic Education (2023). The findings point to troubling patterns in principal retention and replacement, with almost one-fifth of schools not having somebody with the job title of principal for at least two consecutive years in 2021. Principal presence and retention are also unequally distributed across provinces, with the Free State province consistently having the lowest percentage of schools with principals between 2012 and 2021.

A key structural constraint affecting principal turnover rates is the ageing principal workforce, as well as an ageing senior staff component. The combination of an ageing workforce, declining rates of replacement of senior staff and growing learner populations are likely to threaten the stability of schools in future in terms of instructional leadership and administrative management. Our final regression model reveals that school-level factors such as school size and school quintile affect principal retention, with quintile 5 schools having the highest probability of retaining principals from year-to-year. Descriptive evidence also suggests that much of the age-related principal attrition is likely to occur in Limpopo and Eastern Cape provinces.

The study points to an urgent need for well-targeted interventions in provinces with high turnover rates. Further research that delves more deeply into the incentives and disincentives associated with entry into the education system, promotion, training and retention is needed. The exploration of the systemic barriers to principal retention, along with addressing the ageing workforce issue through improved recruitment and retention strategies are vital in ensuring that leadership stability, and by extension the quality of South African education, is not compromised in the near future.

ENDNOTES

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- 21 Note that 2012 is the base year and is therefore excluded. The various states of principal retention/attrition in Figure 6 are relative to the previous year.
- 22 A further 403 came from outside of the education system.



Requests for additional information on the Teacher Demographic Dividend project can be directed to info@tdd.sun.ac.za.

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