



COUNCIL ON EDUCATIONAL
STANDARDS & ACCOUNTABILITY

PRINCIPALS SURVEY 2025-26

A 5-YEAR UPDATE ON THE CESA SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP



In the winter of 2025-26, the Council on Educational Standards and Accountability (CESA) invited principals across its Member of Council and Candidate schools to complete the CESA Principal Survey, the same instrument, with minor revisions, that CESA administered in the spring of 2020. A total of 137 school leaders responded, more than double the 62 respondents to the 2020 survey. As in 2020, the survey asked leaders about their professional experience, their preparation for the principalship, the demographic characteristics of their schools, and the ways in which Christian faith informs the life of the school.

The purpose of this report is to place the 2025–26 findings alongside the original 2020 results and ask a simple question: how has the CESA school principalship changed over five years, and how has it stayed the same? It is our hope, as it was the hope of the original 2020 brief, that the themes illuminated here raise further opportunities for reflection on this vital role in our schools.

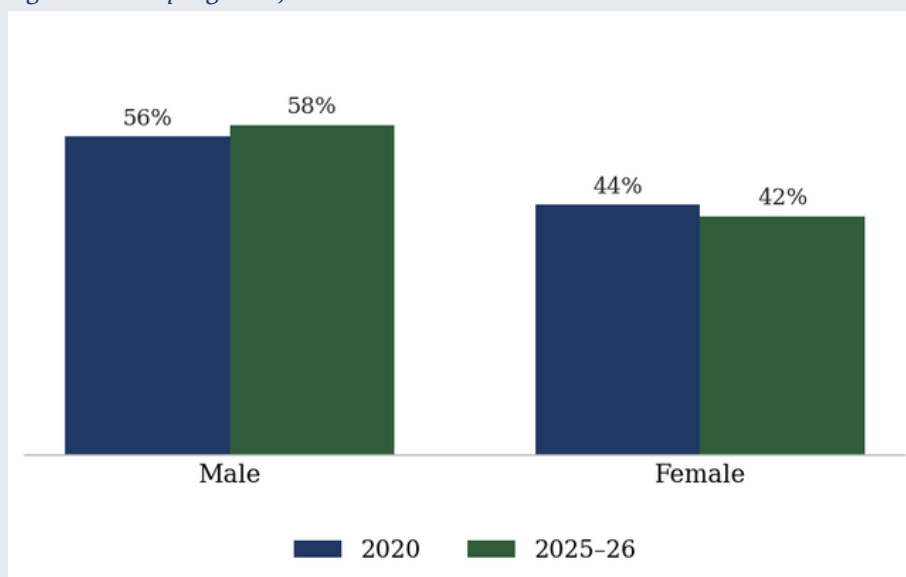
In what follows, we proceed in the same order as the 2020 report. We begin again with the school leaders and schools themselves and, new to this survey, their school size and economic circumstances. We then turn to principal preparation, comparing the training school leaders received before and after taking on the role, and the leadership experience they carried into it. Next, we return to faith in leadership practice, examining CESA schools' educational priorities and the extent to which faith informs the various corners of school life the 2020 survey asked about. We close, as the 2020 report did, by revisiting its three areas for reflection and opportunities for growth.

PRINCIPAL AND SCHOOL PROFILES

SCHOOL LEADERS AND GENDER

As in 2020, CESA schools are led by a fairly even mix of men and women, with men holding a modest overall majority of principal positions. This balance has changed very little in five years: slightly over half of leaders across all schools were male in 2020, and that remains true in 2025–26.

Figure 1. Principal gender, 2020 vs. 2025–26

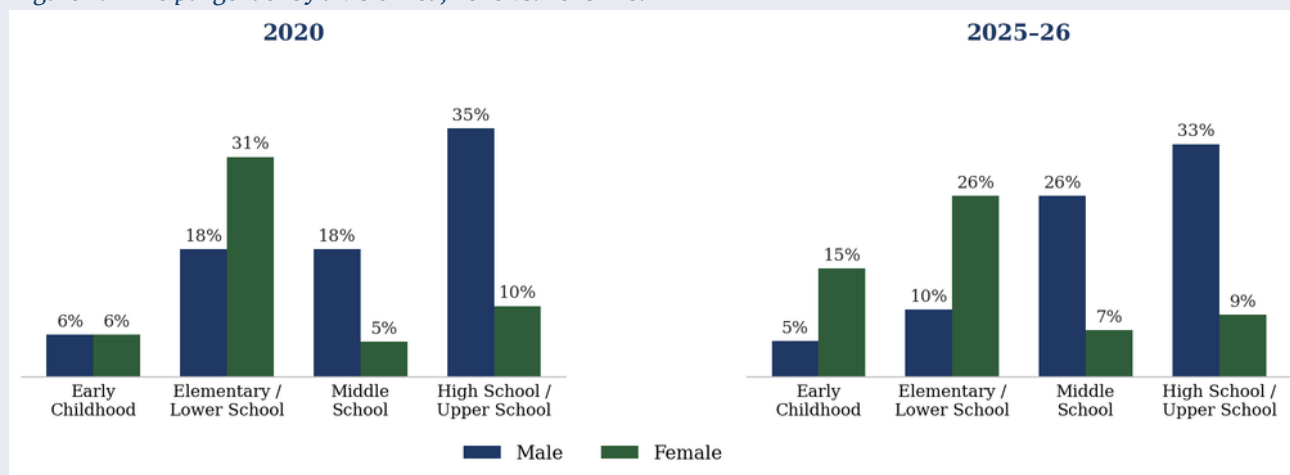


Sources: 2020 Figure 1 (all grade levels); 2025–26 Question 54.

GENDER BY DIVISION LED

As in the 2020 report, we can observe each principal's gender alongside the division or divisions he or she leads — the same comparison can be made here, and it suggests the 2020 pattern of unbalanced gender representation by division has not merely persisted but sharpened.

Figure 2. Principal gender by division led, 2020 vs. 2025–26.



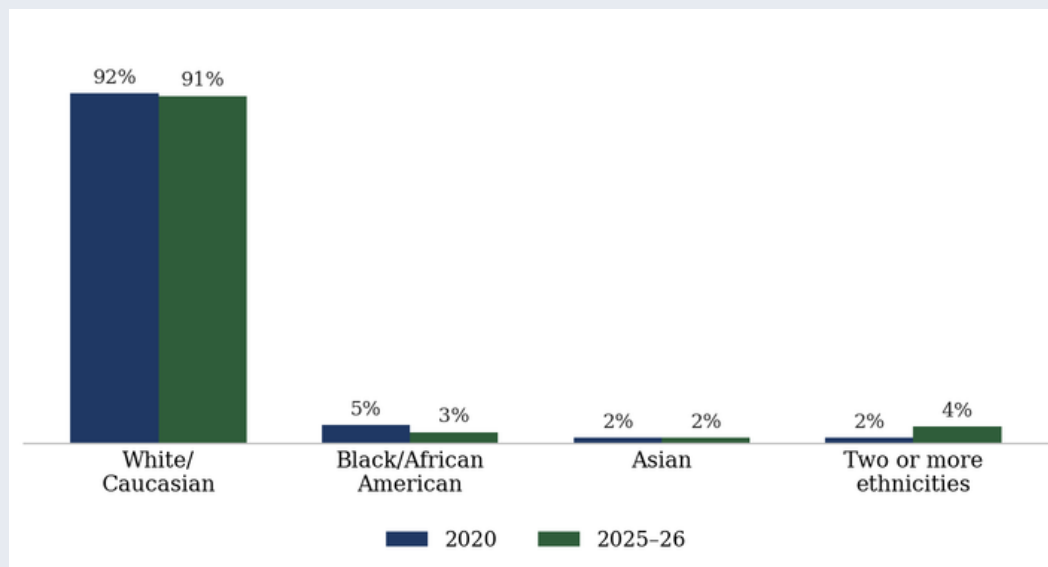
Sources: 2020 Figure 1; 2025–26 Questions 54 and 60 (respondent-level cross-tabulation). Figures are the share of all respondents ($n=137$ in 2025–26) who are male or female and lead each division; because principals may lead more than one division, and because not every respondent answered both questions, bars for a given year do not sum to 100%. “Lower School” and “Upper School” in the 2025–26 survey are treated here as equivalent to “Elementary” and “High School” in the 2020 survey.

The clearest case is the middle grades. In 2020, male middle-school leaders already outnumbered female middle-school leaders by a 13-point margin (18 percent to 5 percent); by 2025–26 that gap had widened to nearly 19 points (25.5 percent to 6.6 percent), driven primarily by growth in the share of male middle-school leaders rather than any decline among women. At the elementary or lower-school level, women continue to lead more often than men, though both shares are somewhat lower than in 2020, which may simply reflect that more 2025–26 respondents identified with a single division rather than describing themselves as overseeing several grade bands at once, as the survey question allowed. Early childhood is worth noting separately: it was the one division with an even 6/6 split in 2020, and it is now the division most clearly led by women, at a 5/15 split in favor of female leaders. Taken together, these patterns suggest that whatever dynamics produced the 2020 gender pattern by grade level, perhaps hiring norms, career pipelines, or something else entirely, have if anything become more entrenched rather than less over the past five years.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

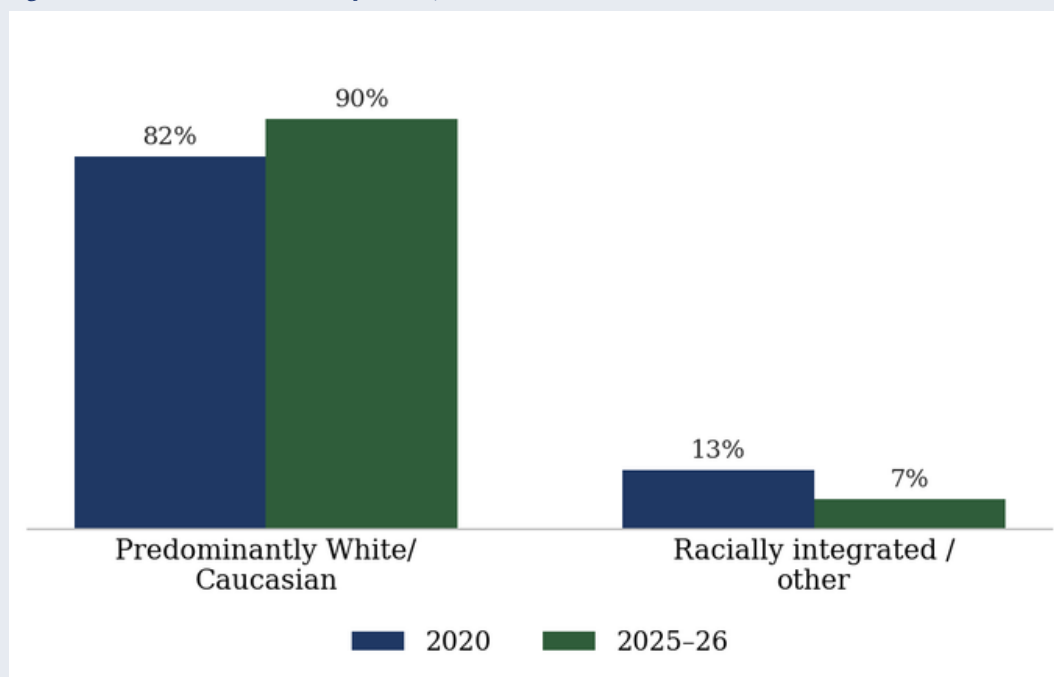
The 2020 report gave considerable attention to the ethnic diversity of CESA schools, noting that over four out of every five administrators worked in a school with a predominantly White student body, and that over 90 percent of CESA principals themselves identified as White. Five years later, both figures look much the same, and by the measure of student body composition, slightly less diverse than they did in 2020.

Figure 3. Principal race/ethnicity, 2020 vs. 2025–26.



Sources: 2020 Figure 2; 2025–26 Question 52.

Figure 4. School racial/ethnic composition, 2020 vs. 2025–26.



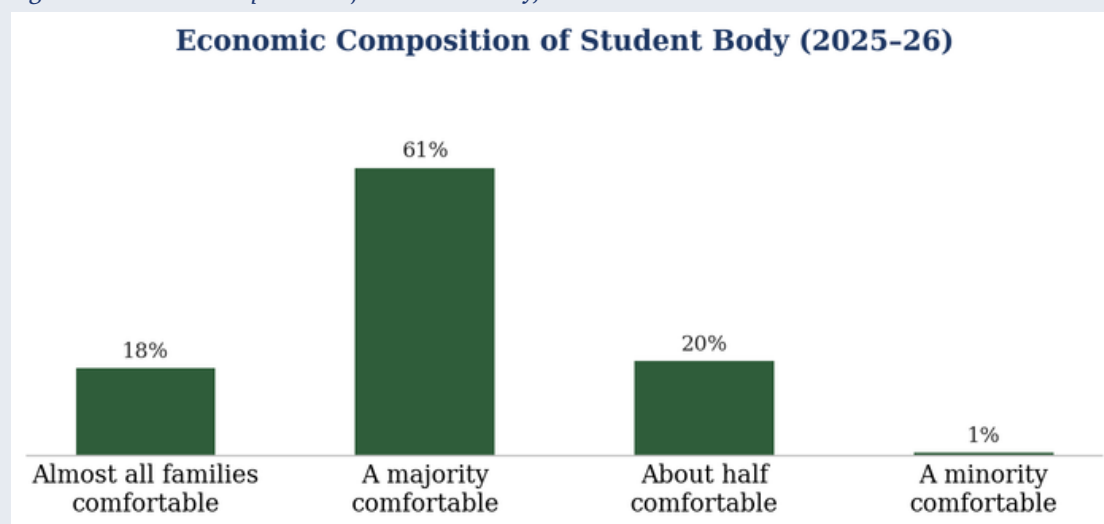
Sources: 2020 Figure 2 and accompanying text; 2025–26 Question 58. “School described as predominantly White” in 2020 was reported as “over four out of every five” (~82%) respondents; the 2025–26 figure (90.3%) is directly comparable. “Racially integrated / other” combines 2020’s racially-integrated category with 2025–26’s “other” category.

Nine in ten CESA principals still identify as White, and nine in ten CESA schools still describe their student body as predominantly White. As the 2020 report was careful to point out, these self-reports may understate the underlying diversity of CESA schools: a principal overseeing a school with a considerable minority population might still, reasonably, describe that school as “predominantly White” if White students remain the largest single group. That caveat held in 2020 and presumably still holds today. What the 2025–26 data cannot show is any movement from 2020. If anything, the share of schools describing themselves as predominantly White has grown somewhat, from roughly 82 percent to just over 90 percent, while the share describing themselves as racially integrated has fallen. We return to this finding, and to the questions the 2020 report raised about it, in the concluding section.

SCHOOL SIZE AND ECONOMIC COMPOSITION

The 2025–26 survey added several questions about school enrollment, principal age, and the economic circumstances of the families a school serves the 2020 instrument did not ask. These do not have a 2020 counterpart to compare against, but we include them here as a baseline that may prove useful the next time this survey is administered.

Figure 5. Economic composition of the student body, 2025–26.



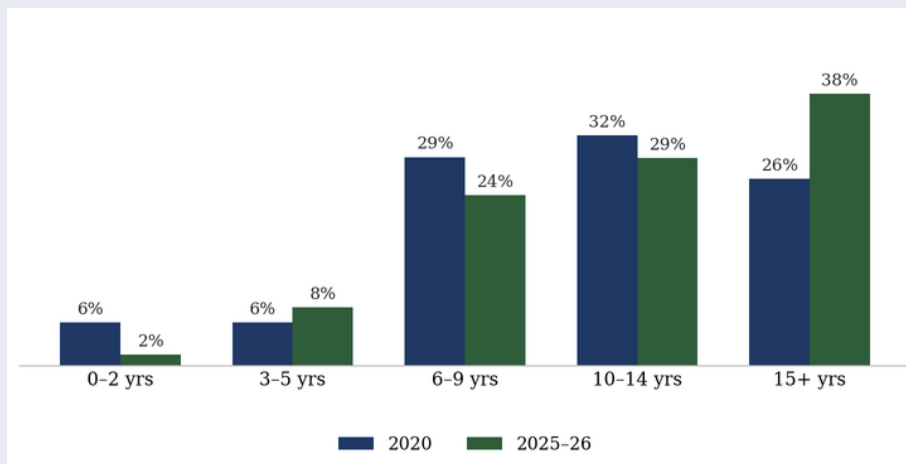
Source: 2025–26 Question 59. Average total enrollment across responding schools is 968 students (median 956; range 132–2,200). Average principal age is 48.5 years (range 33–70).

Nearly four in five CESA schools reported that almost all or a majority of their families can pay their bills with money left over, suggesting a network that serves, on the whole, a financially comfortable population — though, as with racial composition, a school-level average may obscure considerable variation beneath it.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE BEFORE BECOMING PRINCIPAL

As in 2020, CESA principals arrived at the role with substantial time in the classroom behind them, and it appears that experience runs deeper now than it did five years ago. In 2020, almost 60 percent of respondents had at least 10 years of teaching experience; in 2025–26, that figure has climbed further still, with well over 60 percent reporting 10 or more years and a growing share reporting 15 or more.

Figure 6. Years of teaching experience prior to becoming principal, 2020 vs. 2025–26.



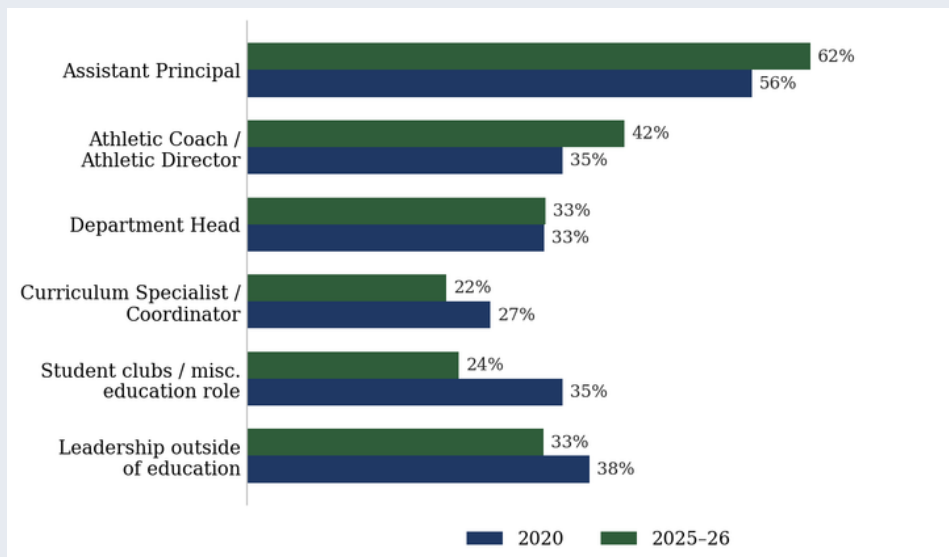
Sources: 2020 Figure 4; 2025–26 Question 3.

One finding that has not moved at all: the share of principals who continue to carry a teaching load alongside their administrative duties. In 2020 the report described this as “only one in 10 respondents”; in 2025–26 it is 9.6 percent, which is, for practical purposes, the same figure. Whatever else has changed about the principalship at CESA schools, the expectation that most principals set aside classroom teaching once they take on the role has not.

PRIOR LEADERSHIP ROLES

The 2020 report found that CESA school leaders arrived at the principalship by way of a predictable set of prior roles — most commonly as an assistant principal, and often as an athletic coach, athletic director, or department head as well. That pattern holds in 2025–26, and the assistant-principal pathway appears to have become somewhat more common still.

Figure 7. Positions held before becoming principal, 2020 vs. 2025–26.



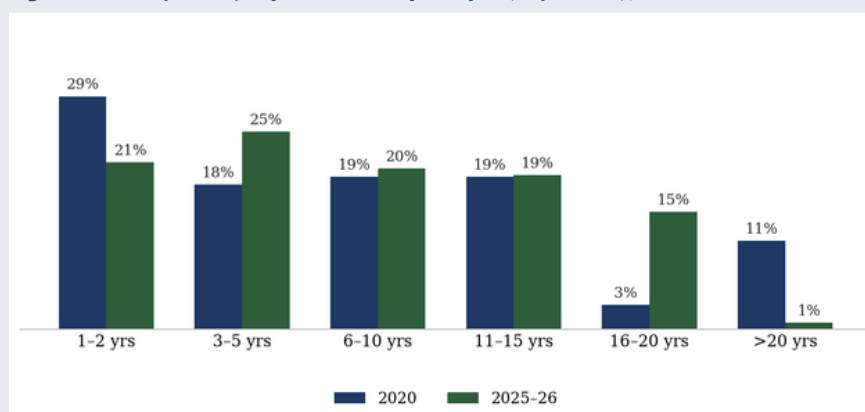
Sources: 2020 Figure 6 and accompanying text; 2025–26 Questions 7 and 22. “Student clubs / misc. education role” and “Leadership outside of education” are not perfectly equivalent across survey versions and should be read as directional only.

The one category that has moved in the other direction is leadership experience gained outside the field of education — in church ministry, business, or the military — which the 2020 report found among almost 40 percent of respondents and which the 2025–26 data puts closer to a third. This is a modest decline, but it may be worth watching: the 2020 report suggested that outside leadership experience was one route by which principals arrived with skills, particularly in finance and management, that their formal educational training had not supplied.

PRINCIPAL TENURE AND THE PRINCIPAL PIPELINE

Perhaps the central concern of the 2020 report was the instability of the principal pipeline. Nearly half of all respondents at that time had fewer than five years of experience as a principal at any school, and over half had fewer than four years of experience at their current school, a pattern the 2020 authors linked to a wave of recent retirements, possibly accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, and were concerned might undermine school leaders' capacity to build a longer-term vision for their schools. Five years on, this appears to be one of the areas where the picture has improved.

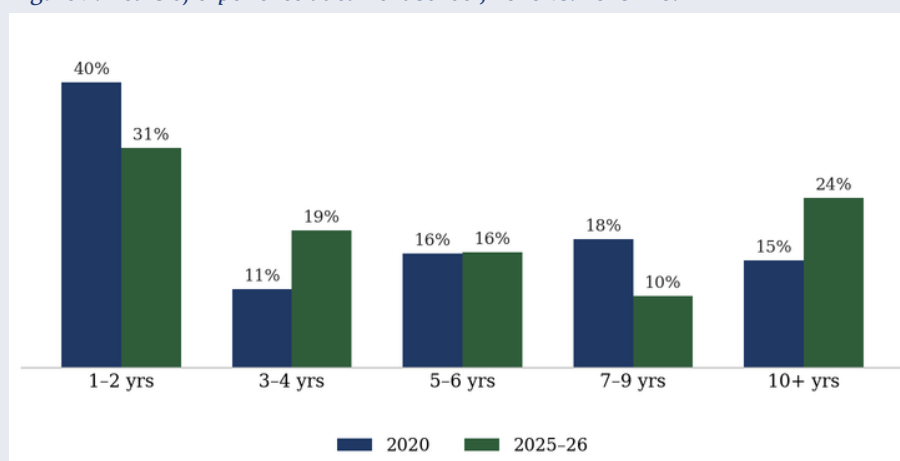
Figure 8. Total years of experience as a principal (any school), 2020 vs. 2025–26.



Sources: 2020 Figure 7; 2025–26 Question 1. 2025–26 “1–2 years” bucket includes first-year principals reporting 0 years of prior experience.

Considering experience as a principal at any school, tenure has lengthened across most of the range: fewer principals are now in their first two years on the job (down from 29 percent to about 21 percent), and the 16-to-20-year cohort has grown considerably, from 3 percent to nearly 15 percent. The one exception is at the very top of the scale, where the 2020 survey did ask about and report a 20+ year category: that most veteran cohort has all but disappeared, from 11 percent of respondents in 2020 to under 1 percent in 2025–26. Read together with the growth of the 16-to-20-year cohort just below it, this looks consistent with the retirement wave the 2020 report was already anticipating having largely worked its way through the network in the years since.

Figure 9. Years of experience at current school, 2020 vs. 2025–26.

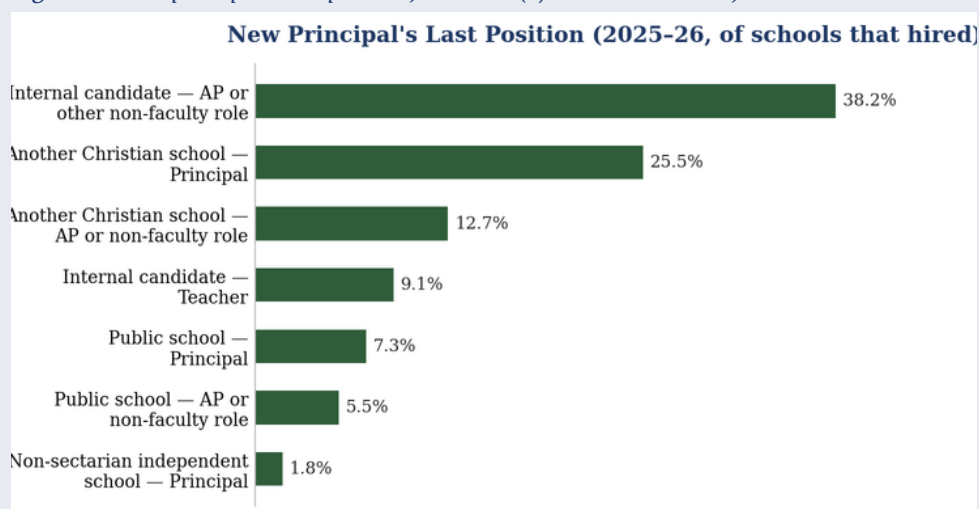


Sources: 2020 Figure 8; 2025–26 Question 2. Includes first-year principals at their current school.

Tenure at the current-school level has lengthened as well, though the 2020 survey did not ask this question with enough precision to compare the top of the range directly. Fewer principals are now brand-new to their current school (down from 40 percent to about 31 percent), and the share with a decade or more of experience there — the 10–14, 15–19, and 20+ bands combined — has grown to nearly 24 percent, up from the 15 percent 2020 reported for its single, undifferentiated “10+ years” category. Within that combined 2025–26 figure, most of the growth sits in the 10–14-year band (18.5 percent of respondents), with far fewer in the 15–19 year band (4.6 percent) and only one respondent, the maximum in this dataset, at 20 years.

The 2025–26 survey also asked a question the 2020 instrument did not: whether a school had hired a principal in the past five years, and if so, where that person came from. Eighty-six percent of schools reported *at least* one such hire. Of those, the most common source was an internal candidate already serving as an assistant principal or in another non-faculty leadership role, followed at some distance by a principal hired away from another Christian school. Relatively few new principals came directly from the public sector or from a non-sectarian independent school.

Figure 10. New principal's last position, 2025–26 (of schools that hired).



Source: 2025–26 Questions 61–62 (new data point; no 2020 equivalent).

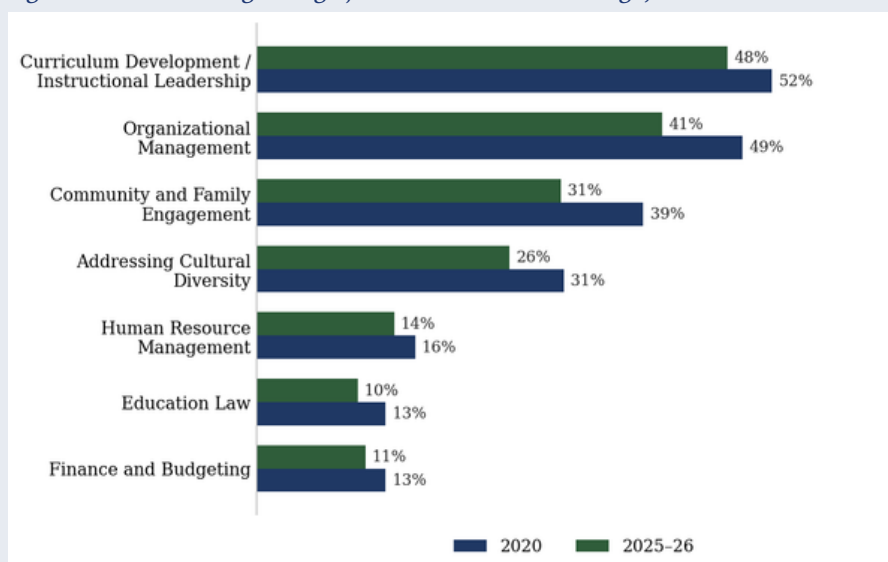
PRIOR AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

As in 2020, most CESA principals pursued their formal education in the field of education itself, and the great majority hold a graduate degree: 96 percent report a post-baccalaureate degree in 2025–26, up from “over 80 percent” in 2020. Here we can compare is how well-prepared principals felt, area by area, before and after stepping into the role.

AMOUNT OF TRAINING RECEIVED PRIOR TO BECOMING PRINCIPAL

The figure below shows the share of respondents in each year reporting “a significant amount” or “more than enough” training, before becoming principal, in seven areas of school leadership practice.

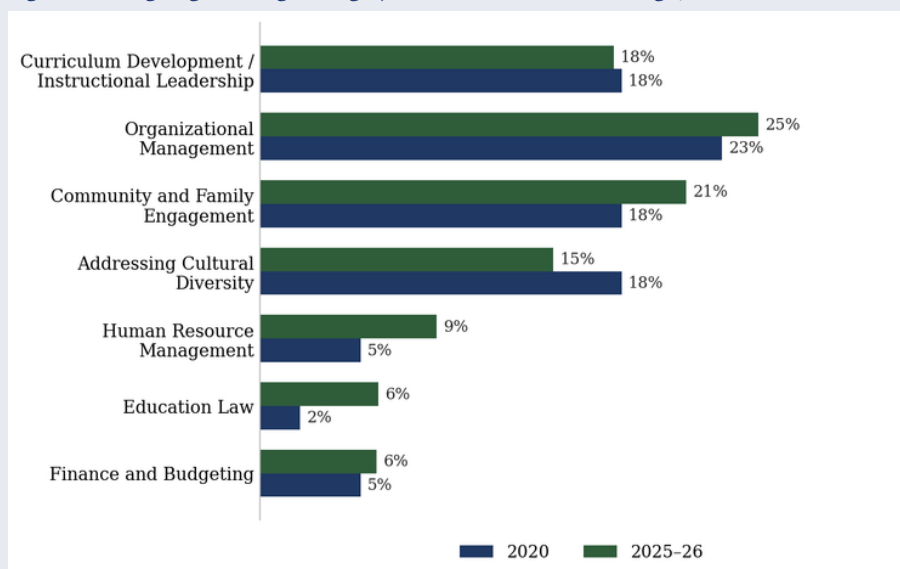
Figure 11. Prior training — “significant” or “more than enough,” 2020 vs. 2025–26



Sources: 2020 Figure 9; 2025–26 Questions 13–19.

The rank order of these seven areas is essentially unchanged from 2020: curriculum development and organizational management remain the areas principals feel best prepared in, and finance, education law, and human resource management remain the areas they feel least prepared in. What has shifted, modestly, is the overall level: every one of the seven areas shows a small decline in the share of principals reporting substantial prior training, suggesting that incoming principals in 2025–26 feel, on the whole, somewhat less prepared than their 2020 counterparts did — not sharply so, but consistently, across every category.

Figure 12. Ongoing training — “significant” or “more than enough,” 2020 vs. 2025–26.



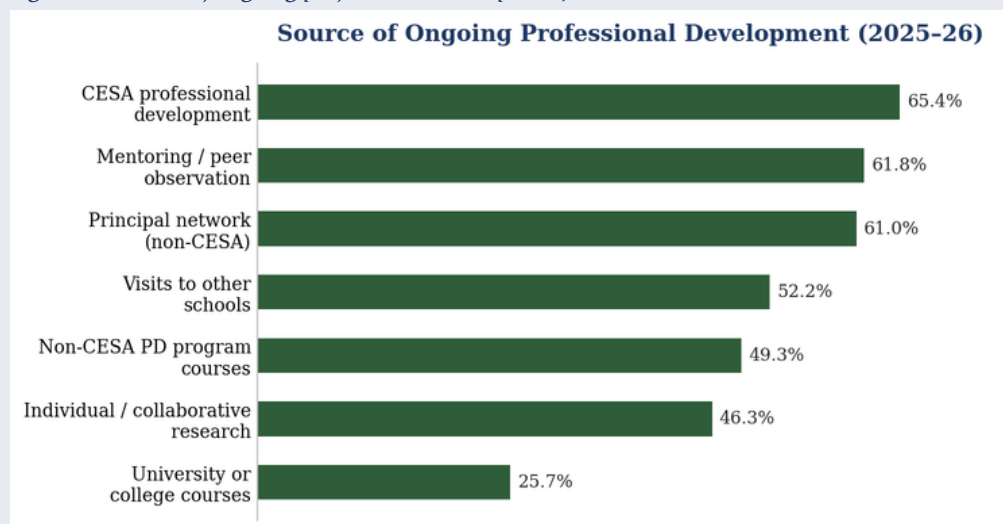
Sources: 2020 Figure 11; 2025–26 Questions 24–30.

The picture for ongoing training, received after taking on the role, is somewhat more encouraging, and runs in the opposite direction from prior training. Human resource management, education law, and community and family engagement all show meaningful gains, nearly doubling their “significant amount” or “more than enough” share even though they remain, as they were in 2020, the areas where principals report the least ongoing support. Finance and budgeting is the one area that has barely moved. On the whole, CESA principals appear to be entering the role somewhat less prepared than five years ago but receiving somewhat better ongoing support once they arrive — though in the very areas where support is improving fastest, it is improving from a low base.

WHERE PRINCIPALS GET THEIR TRAINING

One new finding in this section concerns not how much training principals receive but where it comes from. In 2020, CESA's own professional development offerings were not tracked as a distinct source in the survey, as CESA did not offer any of the current principal-focused resources and events. By 2025–26 these resources have quickly become principals' single most common source of ongoing, post-hire training, ahead of mentoring and principal networks which also overlap with CESA resources, and school visits.

Figure 13. Source of ongoing professional development, 2025–26.



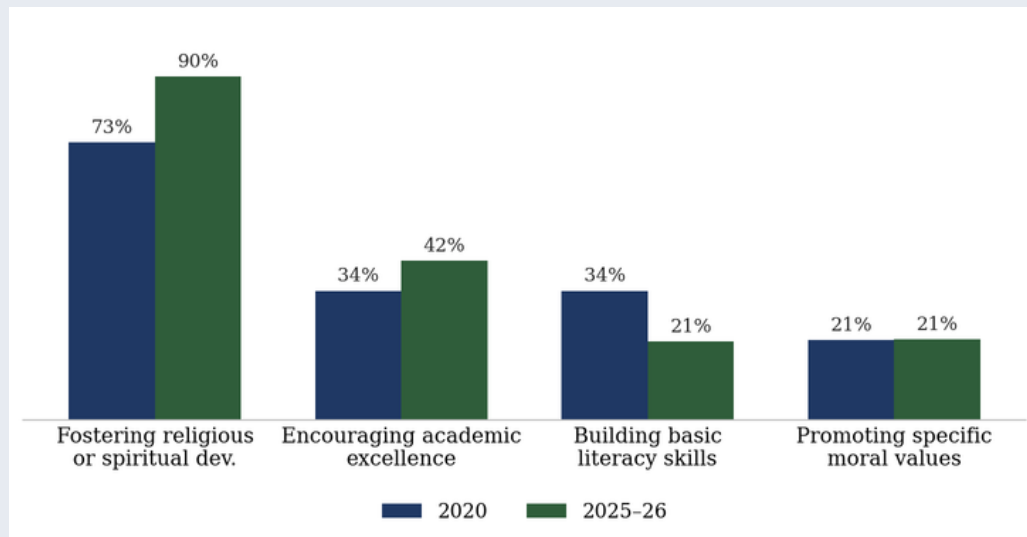
Source: 2025–26 Question 21. University coursework, the dominant source of pre-hire training (84 percent — Question 20), gives way almost entirely to peer- and network-based learning once principals are on the job.

This is broadly consistent with what the 2020 report observed, even without CESA professional development as a separate category: “many respondents to the survey mentioned receiving training through peer mentoring, school visits, and other principal networks,” and the 2020 authors asked how CESA and its member schools might “come together to find ways to address” gaps in formal preparation. Five years later, CESA's own programming appears to have become one part of the answer to that question.

AIMS OF EDUCATION

As in 2020, CESA school leaders were asked to rank ten broad educational goals from most (1) to least (10) important. The 2020 report highlighted the four goals most often ranked first or second, and we use the same four here for comparison.

Figure 14. Ranked 1st or 2nd most important educational goal, 2020 vs. 2025–26 (combined).



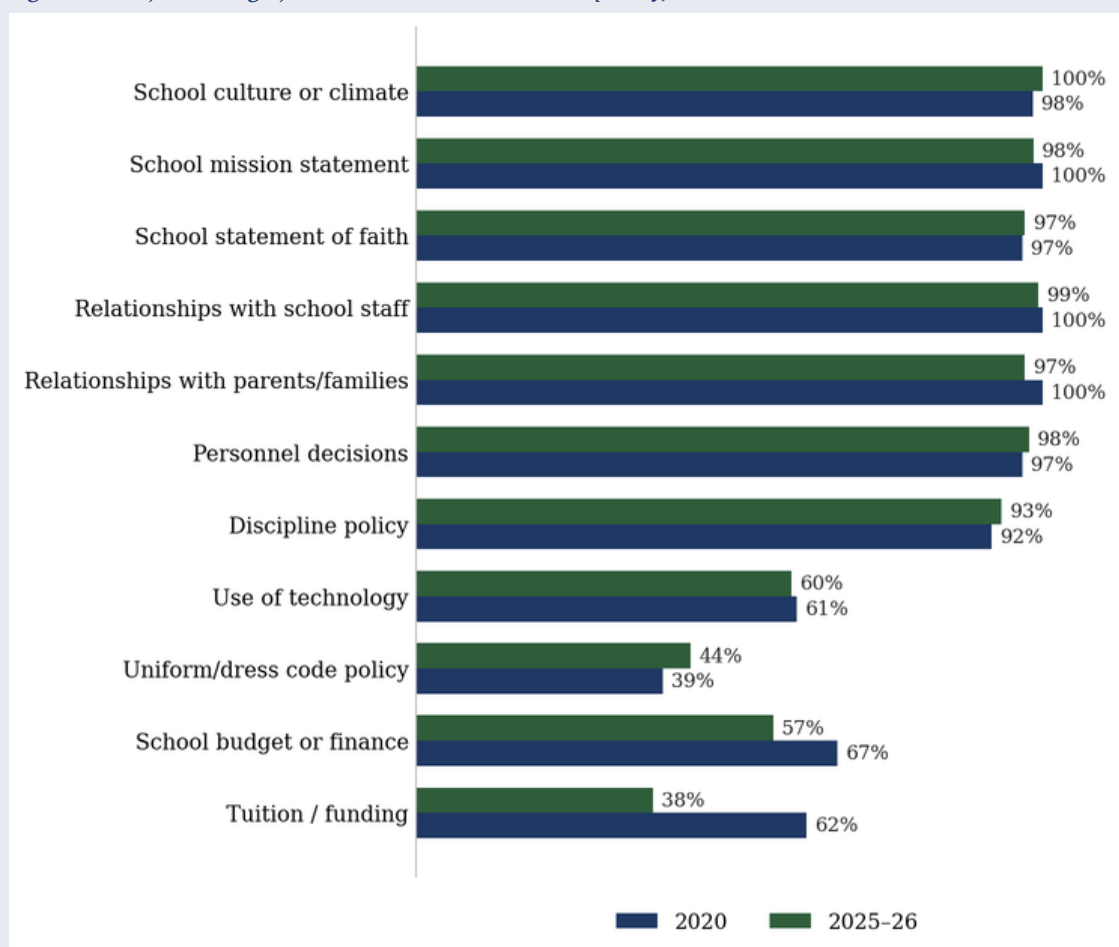
Sources: 2020 Table 2; 2025–26 Question 50 (rank-1 + rank-2 shares). In 2025–26, fostering religious or spiritual development was the #1 goal for 78.7 percent of respondents on its own — up sharply from 48 percent in 2020.

CESA school leaders placed a heavy emphasis on spiritual development as a priority for their schools in 2020, and that emphasis has only grown more pronounced in 2025–26. Encouraging academic excellence has gained ground as well. Building basic literacy skills, by contrast, has fallen well behind the other goals shown here, a decline the 2020 data gave no particular reason to expect. In fact, given the Covid-effect many schools have reported anecdotally, this finding is a bit of a surprise. However, as in 2020, the remaining six goals on the list- promoting occupational or vocational skills, preparing students for post-secondary education, promoting multicultural awareness, personal growth, work habits and self-discipline, and human relations skills- were rarely ranked first or second by more than a small minority of respondents in either year.

THE ROLE OF FAITH IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

The 2020 survey also asked CESA leaders to indicate the extent to which they believed their Christian faith informed various aspects of the life of their school: organizational culture, relationships, financial practices, and curriculum and extracurricular activities. With a few exceptions, 2020 respondents reported that faith informed school culture and relationships “a significant amount” or “completely,” while school leaders were somewhat less likely to report faith playing a major role in financial practices. Five years later, that same basic shape holds — faith’s influence on the core of school identity remains close to universal — but the gap between the “cultural” and “financial” halves of school life has widened.

Figure 15. “Informs a significant amount” or “almost completely,” 2020 vs. 2025–26.



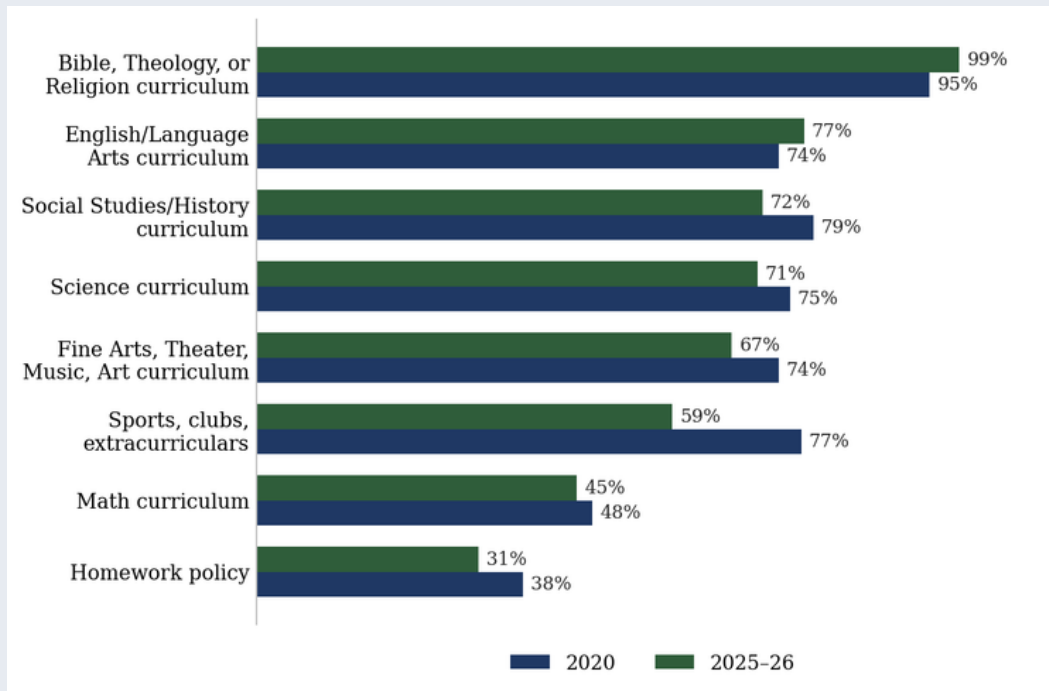
Sources: 2020 Figure 13; 2025–26 Questions 31–39, 48–49.

School culture, mission, statement of faith, staff relationships, and personnel decisions all remain informed by faith at rates of 93 percent or higher in both years, and in most of these categories the 2025–26 figure is within a point or two of 2020. The more noticeable movement is in the financial categories: in 2020, roughly two-thirds of principals said faith informed the school budget and tuition decisions a significant amount or more, and in 2025–26 that share has fallen, most sharply for tuition, to well under half. We do not have a confident explanation for this decline. It may reflect financial pressures — affordability, enrollment competition, or the rising cost of operating a school — that have pushed budget and tuition decisions toward more conventional financial reasoning in recent years, even as faith's hold on culture, relationships, and personnel decisions remains essentially what it was in 2020. We would encourage CESA leaders to consider for themselves whether this represents a meaningful shift in how financial stewardship is practiced, or simply a more precise accounting of a boundary that was always there.

FAITH IN CURRICULUM AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

The 2020 report found that faith's influence on curriculum varied considerably by subject: nearly universal in Bible, theology, and religion courses, strong in most other academic subjects, and weakest in math curriculum and homework policy. The same general pattern is visible in 2025–26, though several subject areas show a modest softening.

Figure 16. “Informs a significant amount” or “almost completely,” 2020 vs. 2025–26.



Sources: 2020 Figure 14; 2025–26 Questions 40–47.

Bible and theology courses remain, unsurprisingly, the area where faith's influence is most total, and that figure has if anything grown slightly, to 99.3 percent. English and language arts curriculum also shows a small gain. Nearly every other category, however, shows some decline — most notably sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities, down 18 points, and to a lesser extent the humanities and arts. Math curriculum and homework policy remain, as they were in 2020, the two areas principals are least likely to describe as informed by faith. We pose the same question here that the 2020 report posed about these areas: what would it look like for a Christian school's approach to math instruction or homework policy — not merely its Bible curriculum — to be shaped by the school's faith commitments, and is that a gap CESA schools ought to close, or one that reflects an appropriately different kind of subject matter?

The 2020 CESA Principal Survey closed by leaving school leaders with three areas for reflection: pursuing Kingdom diversity, tending the principal pipeline, and training school leaders for spiritual leadership. We take up each of these again here, five years and 137 responses later, and ask what has changed.

TENDING THE PRINCIPAL PIPELINE

This is the theme on which the 2025–26 data are most encouraging. The instability the 2020 report worried about — nearly half of all principals with fewer than five years of experience anywhere, and over half with fewer than four years at their current school — has eased noticeably. Tenure has lengthened at both the career level and the current-school level, and a new data point unavailable to the 2020 authors shows that when CESA schools do hire a new principal, that person most often comes from within the building or from elsewhere in the Christian-school world, rather than from the public sector. The pipeline looks sturdier than it did five years ago. The one note of caution is that the most veteran cohort of principals — those with more than 20 years of experience — has nearly vanished from the 2025–26 sample, which is consistent with, and perhaps confirms, the retirement wave the 2020 report saw beginning to gather.

TRAINING FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

CESA principals continue to name spiritual formation as their schools' top priority, and more decisively than they did in 2020, even though — as in 2020 — relatively few of them bring formal training in Bible, theology, or religion to the role. What has changed since 2020 is less the priority itself than the machinery available to support it: CESA's own professional development, a category too small to register separately in 2020, is now the single most common source of ongoing training reported by principals. This would seem to position CESA well to take up a question the 2020 report left open — how school leaders and their association might come together to close the persistent gaps in finance, law, and human resource preparation — and, on the evidence of this survey, a new gap in how confidently faith is understood to inform financial stewardship in particular.

DIVERSITY

Of the three themes the 2020 report raised, this is the one where the 2025–26 data offer the least substantive change. In 2020, about 82 percent of respondents described their school as serving a predominantly White student body, and over 90 percent of principals identified as White themselves. Five years later, those figures stand at roughly 90 percent and 91 percent, respectively, essentially unchanged on the principal side, and if anything, somewhat higher on the school-composition side. We do not read this as evidence that CESA schools have moved backward on this front so much as evidence that five years have passed without much visible movement in either direction. As the 2020 report cautioned, and as remains true here, self-reported “predominantly White” status may still understate the diversity present within individual schools; that caveat does not, however, amount to progress.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

In the spirit of the 2020 report, we close not with firm conclusions but with questions we hope CESA school leaders will continue to sit with:

- Why has faith's reported influence on tuition, budgeting, and extracurricular life declined more than its influence on any other area of school life — and is that decline a concern, or a sign of a more precisely understood form of stewardship?
- With CESA's own professional development now the leading channel for ongoing training, how might CESA use that position to close the finance, law, and human-resource gaps that both the 2020 and 2025–26 surveys identify?
- With racial composition essentially unchanged, or slightly less diverse by self-report, what concrete steps beyond reflection might move CESA schools toward the Kingdom diversity the 2020 report called for?
- Why has the gender pattern by division widened rather than narrowed over five years, particularly at the middle-school level, and what does that suggest about how CESA schools recruit and advance leaders?
- As principal tenure lengthens, how can CESA help that added stability translate into the kind of long-term vision-building the 2020 report identified as tenure's chief benefit?

The 2025–26 CESA Principal Survey suggests a network of schools that is, in most respects, more experienced, somewhat more stable, and even more emphatically oriented toward spiritual formation than it was five years ago — while facing new financial pressures and having made little visible progress on the questions of racial diversity the 2020 report raised. We hope this comparison, like the original 2020 brief, prompts continued reflection among CESA school leaders on how they can be more faithful in their pursuit of educational excellence and in their respective vocations.

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