

# **Not So Golden:**

Principals' Views on California  
Teacher Layoff Policies

## **Winter 2016**

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Authors

Mike Stryer

Lauren Stuart

Jennifer Kress

Mark Teoh

## **About the Authors**

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Mike Stryer, Jennifer Kress, and Mark Teoh are Teach Plus staff. Mike Stryer is the Senior Executive Director of Teach Plus California and a former high school social studies teacher. Jennifer Kress is the Research Coordinator at Teach Plus. Mark Teoh is the Director of Knowledge and Research at Teach Plus. Mark is a former high school history teacher and district administrator.

Lauren Stuart is a current 8th grade National Board Certified English teacher and Teach Plus Organizer in Residence (OIR).

## **Acknowledgements**

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The authors wish to thank several Teach Plus staff: Celine Coggins, Alice Johnson Cain, Chris Eide, Anya Grottel-Brown, and Will Wiggins for their key contributions. The authors also would like to thank the following people for reviewing and providing feedback on earlier versions of the survey and report: Katherine Czujko, Sheila Dollaske, Carole Wilson Frye, Dan Goldhaber, Katie Grassa, Michael Herring, Katie Lundgren, Emily Sautter, Brad Strong, and Katharine Strunk.

Finally, we want to thank the more than 500 California principals who helped to provide their perspectives and experiences that were used in this report.

## **About Teach Plus**

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The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success.

## INTRODUCTION

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Over the past decade, budget cuts, judicial rulings, and now a statewide teacher shortage have put the issue of California’s teacher layoff policies in a prominent position in discussions on K-12 public education. Budget cuts and student enrollment declines have forced thousands of teacher layoffs in California – layoffs, with few exceptions, almost exclusively determined by seniority.<sup>1</sup> Research on seniority-based layoffs suggest that this can lead to the dismissal of highly-effective teachers, with adverse effects on teacher quality.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the impact on students and teachers, the issue of seniority-based layoffs has come into even sharper focus with the June 2014 Vergara v. California ruling, which found that the current system for determining teacher layoffs violates the state’s equal protection clause by leaving many of California’s most vulnerable students without access to a quality education.<sup>3</sup> California is one of 11 states to use seniority as a primary factor in layoff decisions.<sup>4</sup>

Amidst the ongoing polarized debate about California’s teacher layoff policies, the views and voices of key stakeholders have often gone missing. Teachers, principals, and the public-at-large are among the constituencies that have been conspicuously absent from the discussion.

Over the past two years, Teach Plus has focused on bringing teachers’ voices and perspectives to this issue through reports, surveys, and policy recommendations. In January 2015, we conducted a survey of a representative sample of 506 traditional public school teachers around California. The survey found that 71 percent of teachers supported the use of teacher performance in the classroom in determining layoffs and that, overall, teachers favored an equal use of performance and seniority in layoff decisions.<sup>5</sup> Other recent surveys that asked about the public’s views on seniority-based layoffs have also illuminated the desire for change: In April, 2014, a University of Southern California/Los Angeles Times survey found that only eight percent of polled California voters felt that layoffs should first target the teacher with the least seniority or classroom experience.<sup>6</sup> In September of 2014, four months after the Vergara ruling, a group of 30 Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows, all of whom teach in diverse public schools across Los Angeles, recommended a new approach to layoff policy that accounted for teacher effectiveness while using seniority as a secondary criterion.<sup>7</sup>

In this report, we seek to deepen the conversation by bringing into focus the views of California’s K-12 public school principals around the issue of teacher layoff policies. Given their responsibility for recruiting, selecting, and retaining quality teachers in their schools, principals are uniquely positioned to offer a school-level perspective on the impact of California’s teacher layoff policies. Specifically, we looked at three key research questions:

1. Are principals satisfied with California’s current layoff policies and do they believe these policies have an effect on teacher quality in terms of teacher recruitment and retention?
2. What do principals see as the appropriate balance between seniority and performance in layoff decisions?
3. Do principals from schools of varying socioeconomic statuses have differing experiences with and views on teacher layoff policies?

The views of these principals, which show convergence with those of classroom teachers and the voting public-at-large, support the imperative to develop modified layoff policies that better address the needs of students, teachers, principals, and school sites.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Between December 9, 2015 and January 13, 2016, Teach Plus administered an online survey to current principals in California, including 8,511 principals in traditional public schools in California that serve students from kindergarten to grade 12. The list of principal emails was obtained from the publicly available database of school records from the California Department of Education.<sup>8</sup> During the five-week period in which the survey was open, 510 principals from traditional public schools responded, resulting in a response rate of six percent. Of the 510 responding principals, 27 percent work at schools where 39 percent or fewer of the students qualify for free or reduced meals (referred to as low-FRL in this report); 50 percent work at schools where between 39 and 86 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced meals (mid-FRL in this report); 18 percent work at schools where more than 86 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced meals (high-FRL in this report); and five percent work at schools where we did not have access to the FRL data.<sup>9</sup> While this survey was sent to all public school principals in California, we did not include charter school principals in our sample due to differences in layoff policies.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. California K-12 public school principals are dissatisfied with the state’s current system for determining teacher layoffs.
2. Principals believe that California’s seniority-based teacher layoff system can negatively impact teacher quality, possibly by creating a quality-blind system of layoffs or serving as a deterrent to those considering joining the teaching profession.
3. Principals support a system where teacher layoff decisions are heavily determined by performance, while still taking seniority into account.
4. Principals share similar perspectives on teacher layoff policies across schools with varying student socioeconomic levels.

## FINDINGS

**Finding 1.** California K-12 public school principals are dissatisfied with the state’s current system for determining teacher layoffs.

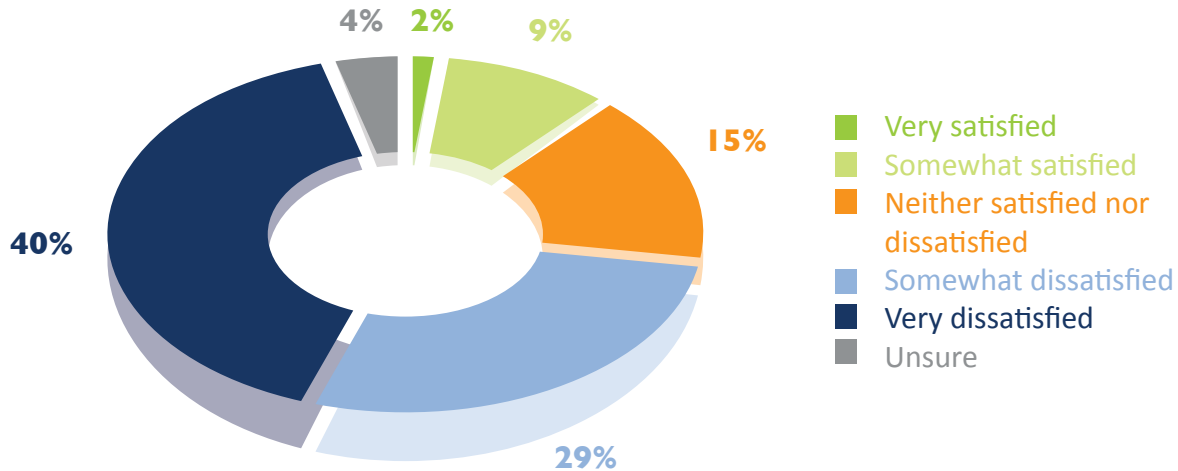
The majority of responding principals are dissatisfied with California’s current policies governing how teacher layoffs are determined in times of budget cuts. Sixty-nine percent of respondents indicated that they are dissatisfied with current teacher layoff policies, while only 11 percent of respondents reported being satisfied (see Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> In their comments, one principal wrote, “Seniority-based layoffs make it extremely difficult for a principal, as a leader/manager, to put together the most effective teaching staff that he/she can. I feel it is one of the major roadblocks that I have faced in providing our students with the best instructional program possible.”<sup>11</sup>

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Another principal added, “Seniority-based layoffs are what holds our profession back from respect and progress. We are doing a great disservice to our students and communities when we honor tenure and seniority above doing right by our kids.”

### Figure 1

Question: “How satisfied are you with California’s current policy governing how teacher layoffs are determined during times of budget cuts?” (n=504)



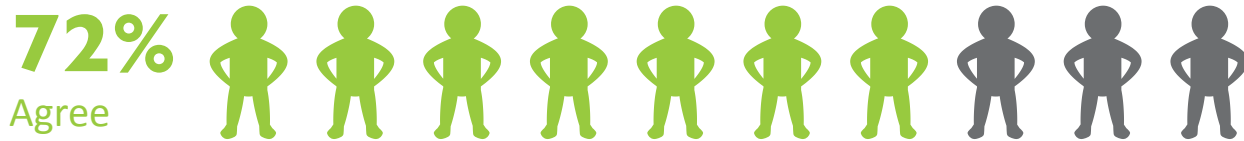
**Finding 2.** Principals believe that California’s seniority-based teacher layoff system can negatively impact teacher quality, possibly by creating a quality-blind system of layoffs or serving as a deterrent to those considering joining the teaching profession.

When asked about their personal experiences during layoffs, principals reported that they lost high-quality educators due to a system that does not consider performance. Reductions in Force (RIF) have occurred at a majority of surveyed principals’ schools. Of principals who had been at their schools for five or more years, 71 percent reported losing

teachers due to a RIF.<sup>12</sup> We asked principals whether they lost a teacher within the last five years even though they were a better teacher in a comparable area than a teacher with more seniority. Seventy-two percent of respondents agreed that this had occurred in their schools and only 14 percent disagreed (see Figure 2).<sup>13</sup>

## Figure 2

Question: “Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statement: Within the last five school years, a teacher in my school has experienced a seniority-based layoff even though I believe that he/she was a better teacher in a comparable area or grade level than one who had more seniority and was retained.” (n=501)



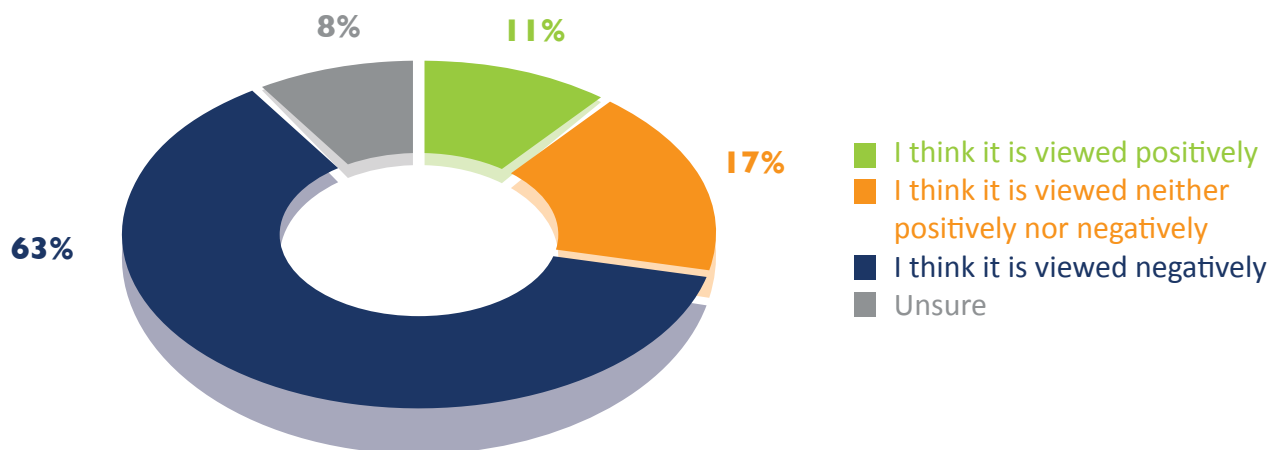
In their comments, several principals discussed their experiences losing high-quality educators to RIFs. One principal wrote, “My school lost 66% of its less senior teachers one year and the effect was horrific. The more experienced teachers that were brought in to replace the laid off teachers were not a good fit for the school.” Other respondents wrote about how discouraging layoffs can be and how they can cause talented teachers to leave the profession all together. “We have lost a lot of amazing teachers over the years who actually gave up the profession when they were laid off. I know of one who is a lawyer, others in business, but none in education.” Principals also commented on how California’s layoff system can negatively impact the quality of instruction by tenured and veteran teachers. One respondent wrote, “The complacency fostered by a seniority-based system robs kids of the motivated teachers they deserve.” These comments speak to the far-reaching effects RIFs have on both the quality of instruction at school sites and the profession at large.

In this survey, we asked principals whether they see the current layoff system in California as having a detrimental impact on people entering the profession. Sixty-three percent of respondents said that they think a layoff system based on a teacher’s seniority is viewed negatively by people considering joining the profession, while only 11 percent of respondents think that it is viewed positively (see Figure 3).<sup>14</sup> One principal said they believe, “The seniority system makes education look unprofessional when compared to other professions.” Further research would shed light on the issue of how layoff policies affect public opinion of the teaching profession, especially of those considering becoming teachers.

*We have lost a lot of amazing teachers over the years who actually gave up the profession when they were laid off. I know of one who is a lawyer, others in business, but none in education.*

**Figure 3**

Question: “Do you think a layoff system that is based on a teacher’s seniority is viewed positively, negatively, or neither by people considering joining the teaching profession?” (n=506)



**Finding 3.** Principals support a system where teacher layoff decisions are heavily determined by performance, while still taking seniority into account.

*Performance should be a critical factor in keeping and maintaining highly qualified staff no matter what the conditions. Our kids deserve the best possible teachers we can provide.*

In the January 2015 Teach Plus report, “Raising the Bar: The Views of California Teachers on Tenure, Layoffs and Dismissal,” we asked a representative sample of 506 California teachers what they thought the right balance between seniority and performance should be when determining teacher layoffs. These teachers were in favor of a system that weighed performance and seniority equally (50 percent seniority, 50 percent performance).<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, when we asked principals in California the same question, they indicated

that even more consideration should be given to teacher performance. When asked about the balance between a teacher’s seniority and their performance, principals, on average, said that layoffs should be determined 31 percent by seniority and 69 percent by performance (see Figure 4).<sup>16</sup> As one principal wrote, “Performance should be a critical factor in keeping and maintaining highly qualified staff no matter what the conditions. Our kids deserve the best possible teachers we can provide.”

**Figure 4**

Question: “What do you think is the right balance between a teacher’s seniority and their performance to determine teacher layoffs?” (n=501)



However, while principals see performance as critical, it is clear that principals do not support a system based solely on performance. One principal explained, “Our teachers deserve to be honored for their years of commitment, dedication, and cumulative expertise, and our students deserve the highest quality teachers available.”

Another concern that several principals raised about a system that does not take seniority into account was that there could be monetary incentive to lay off more veteran teachers given their higher salaries. “We must ensure there is a mechanism in place that will protect teachers with seniority from being laid off for reasons other than job performance. I have known superintendents who would abuse this new criteria to remove teachers for budgetary reasons,” one principal wrote. Ensuring that high-performing senior teachers are protected from layoffs was a common theme in respondents’ comments.

Lastly, while principals largely support a system that values performance, the respondents highlighted the importance of schools being able to accurately determine a teacher’s performance. One respondent suggested that, “adequate and objective measures of performance are extremely important when deciding if and how they play a role in layoff procedures.” Several respondents indicated that in an ideal world they would put more weight on teacher performance during layoffs, but current evaluation systems need to be strengthened first. One principal wrote, “There needs to be a common performance tool created that can truly measure a teacher’s performance over a period of years. Then, and only then, can we successfully weigh a teacher’s performance and decrease the need to RIF by seniority.”

**Finding 4.** Principals share similar perspectives on teacher layoff policies across schools with varying student socioeconomic levels.

We were interested in determining whether principals’ perspectives and experiences differed based on the percent of children at their schools who receive free or reduced-price lunch (FRL).

This is critical in assessing the degree to which current layoff policies (and their impact on teacher quality) cut across schools with profoundly different socioeconomic profiles. Based on our sample, it appears that principals share similar experiences and beliefs regardless of the socioeconomic status of their students, as measured by the percent of students eligible for free or reduced meals.

*Our teachers deserve to be honored for their years of commitment, dedication, and cumulative expertise, and our students deserve the highest quality teachers available.*

With regards to the number of teacher layoffs due to RIFs, we found that principals across all three school FRL categories reported similar numbers of layoffs, though principals from low-FRL schools reported experiencing slightly fewer layoffs over time. Seventy-one percent of principals who have been at their current school for at least five years indicated they lost at least one teacher to a RIF and 18 percent lost more than five teachers.<sup>17</sup> We broke down the 71 percent of principals who lost at least one teacher by FRL and saw similar results across income levels. Of respondents who have worked in low-FRL schools for five or more years, 62 percent lost at least one teacher to a RIF, while 74 percent of principals who work in mid-FRL schools and 74 percent at high-FRL schools lost at least one teacher to a RIF.<sup>18</sup> This data suggests that RIFs may be more prevalent in mid-FRL and high-FRL schools. More research on the occurrence of teacher layoffs at schools from different socioeconomic contexts would shed light on this issue. It is important to note that responses to this survey question are not indicators of the number of RIFs that occurred in schools, rather, these responses suggest how similar the experiences were for principals across their schools’ socioeconomic statuses.

We also looked at whether principals’ beliefs differed



across this socioeconomic measure. Principals from low, middle, and high-FRL schools were also aligned on the issue of whether or not they are satisfied with the current system for determining teacher layoffs. Overall, 69 percent of principals reported being dissatisfied with the current layoff system.<sup>19</sup> Sixty-six percent of principals at low-FRL schools said they were dissatisfied with the system, as well as 69 percent of principals at mid-FRL schools, and 73 percent at high-FRL schools.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the majority of principals (72 percent) agreed that over the past five school years, a teacher in their school had experienced a seniority-based layoff even though they believe that he/she was a better teacher in a comparable area or grade level than the one who had more seniority and was retained.<sup>21</sup> When we disaggregate this by FRL, we again find consistent results: 72 percent of principals from low-

FRL schools agreed, 70 percent of principals from mid-FRL schools agreed, and 78 percent of principals from high-FRL schools agreed that they had lost high-quality teachers to seniority-based layoffs.<sup>22</sup>

Lastly, when asked what the split should be between performance and seniority in teacher layoff decisions, principals from low-, mid-, and high-FRL schools were fairly consistent in their opinions. Overall, principals thought that teacher layoffs should be based 69 percent on performance and 31 percent on seniority.<sup>23</sup> On average, principals from low-FRL schools thought layoff decisions should be based 70 percent on performance and 30 percent on seniority, mid-FRL principals said 68 percent performance and 32 percent seniority, and high-FRL principals said 65 percent performance and 35 percent seniority.<sup>24</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

While the surveyed principals come from different school environments, they share a strong desire for change in California's teacher layoff policies. Concerned with layoff policies' impact on teacher quality and the ability to recruit new teachers into the profession, the vast majority of principals support a system that values teacher performance in layoff decisions. At the same time, principals, like previously surveyed teachers, are clear in their caution that any change in this direction must be done fairly and thoughtfully. There is strong support for ensuring that higher-paid, senior teachers are not targeted for cost reasons and for developing a rigorous evaluation system that allows for fair assessment of performance.

The views of principals, teachers, and California voters on layoff policies should provide a clear pathway for policymakers to find a middle ground — a ground that values performance in staffing decisions, honors teaching experience, and ensures fair treatment of all teachers. Recognizing that this research is based on a sample of California principals, we encourage further research to be conducted to more fully grasp the perspectives of school and district administrators. We nevertheless feel that our study does suggest directions for future work and present early evidence concerning principals' stances on this important issue.

## ENDNOTES

1. See California Education Code § 44955 and Adams, J. M. (2013, May 19). Teacher layoffs lowest since economic downturn, CTA reports. Retrieved February 19, 2016, from <http://edsources.org/2013/teacher-layoffs-lowest-since-economic-downturn-cta-reports/32287>.
2. See Goldhaber, D. and Theobald, R. (2013). "Managing the Teacher Workforce in Austere Times: The Determinants and Implications of Teacher Layoffs." *Education Finance and Policy* 8:4 and Taylor, M. (2012). *A Review of the Teacher Layoff Process in California* (Rep.). Sacramento, California: Legislative Analyst's Office.
3. See *Vergara v. California*, Superior Court of the State of California. (2014). Retrieved from <http://laschoolreport.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Judgement-Vergara-Judge-affirms-ruling.pdf>.
4. See Education Commission of the States (2014). "A closer look: Teacher evaluations and reduction-in-force policies." Retrieved from <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/12/43/11243.pdf>.
5. See Teach Plus. (2015) *Raising the Bar: The Views of California Teachers on Tenure, Layoffs, and Dismissal*. Los Angeles, California.
6. See USC Dornslife/Los Angeles Times Poll. (2015) Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-pol-teachers-poll-20150411-story.html>.
7. See Teach Plus. (2014) *Valuing Performance and Honoring Experience: Teacher Solutions for a Post-Vergara Profession*. Los Angeles, California.
8. See Public Schools Database. (n.d.). Retrieved December 9, 2015, from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp>. Principals were invited via email to take the survey and restrictions were put in place to ensure each respondent took the survey no more than one time.
9. See Student Poverty FRPM Data. (n.d.). Retrieved January 14, 2016, from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filespp.asp>. In our analyses, the low-FRL category consists of schools in the lower quartile of all traditional public schools in California based on the percent of students who are eligible for free or reduced price meals. These schools have 39 percent or fewer students who qualify for free or reduced meals. The mid-FRL category consists of schools from the 25th to the 75th percentiles of schools, which are 39 and 86 percent, respectively, of students who qualify for free or reduced meals. The high-FRL category consists of the upper quartile of schools where more than 86 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced meals. Twenty-three schools (4.5 percent) did not have FRL information. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in California in the 2011-2012 school year, which is the most recent data available, the average number of years of experience that principals had as a principal in their current school was 3.1 years. There were 40.6 percent who had less than 2 years of experience as a principal at their current school, 25.4 percent who had 2 to 3 years, 28.3 percent who had 4 to 9 years, and 5.7 percent with 10 or more years. In the sample of 510 principals who responded to our survey, the average number of reported years of experience was 4.7 years at their current school. There were 20.8 percent who had less than 2 years of experience as a principal at their current school, 30.8 percent who had 2 to 3 years, 34.7 percent who had 4 to 9 years, and 13.7 percent with 10 or more years. See National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) - Data Tables*. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables\\_list.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables_list.asp). Results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.
10. Question: "How satisfied are you with California's current policy governing how teacher layoffs are determined during times of budget cuts?" (n=504) Responses: "Very satisfied" (2.2 percent), "Somewhat satisfied" (9.1 percent), "Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" (15.5 percent), "Somewhat dissatisfied" (29.0 percent), "Very dissatisfied" (40.1 percent), "Unsure" (4.2 percent).

11. Question: “Do you have any additional comments, suggestions, or ideas you would like to share on the issue of teacher layoffs and/or the process by which teachers are laid off?” Quotes referenced in this report are in response to this question.

12. Question: “If you have been the principal at your current school for five or more years (going back to the 2010-2011 school year), how many teachers would you estimate have left your school due to a reduction in force (RIF)?” (n=490) Responses: “None” (14.1 percent), “1 to 5 teachers” (25.3 percent), “6 to 10 teachers” (5.5 percent), “11 to 15 teachers” (1.6 percent), “15 or more teachers” (1.4 percent), “Not applicable – I have not been the principal in my current school for the past five school years” (52.0 percent). Principals who have been at their school for five or more years (going back to the 2010-2011 school year) (n=235) Responses: “None” (29.4 percent), “1 to 5 teachers” (52.8 percent), “6 to 10 teachers” (11.5 percent), “11 to 15 teachers” (3.4 percent), “15 or more teachers” (3.0 percent).

13. Question: “Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statement: Within the last five school years, a teacher in my school has experienced a seniority-based layoff even though I believe that he/she was a better teacher in a comparable area or grade level than one who had more seniority and was retained?” (n=501) Responses: “Strongly agree” (57.1 percent), “Somewhat agree” (14.8 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (9.8 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (1.8 percent), “Strongly disagree” (12.0 percent), “Unsure” (4.6 percent).

14. Question: “Do you think a layoff system that is based on a teacher’s seniority is viewed positively, negatively, or neither by people considering joining the teaching profession?” (n=506) Responses: “I think it is viewed positively” (11.3 percent), “I think it is viewed negatively” (63.0 percent), “I think it is viewed neither positively nor negatively” (17.4 percent), “Unsure” (8.3 percent).

15. See endnote 5.

16. Question: “What do you think is the right balance between a teacher’s seniority and their performance to determine teacher layoffs? Your answer can be anywhere from (0% seniority and 100% performance) to (100% seniority and 0% performance), or any combination in between. [Percent seniority and percent performance]” (n=501) Open response: Mean % seniority – 31.47 percent, Median % seniority – 30.0 percent, Mean % performance – 68.53 percent, Median % performance – 70.0 percent.

17. See endnote 12.

18. Question: “If you have been the principal at your school for five or more years (going back to the 2010-2011 school year), how many teachers would you estimate have left your school due to a reduction in force (RIF)?” Principals from low-FRL schools who have been at their school for five or more years (going back to the 2010-2011 school year) (n=66) Responses: “None” (37.9 percent), “1 to 5 teachers” (54.6 percent), “6 to 10 teachers” (4.6 percent), “11 to 15 teachers” (1.5 percent), “15 or more teachers” (1.5 percent). Principals from mid-FRL schools who have been at their school for five or more years (going back to 2010-2011) (n=120) Responses: “None” (25.8 percent), “1 to 5 teachers” (54.2 percent), “6 to 10 teachers” (12.5 percent), “11 to 15 teachers” (4.2 percent), “15 or more teachers” (3.3 percent). Principals from high-FRL schools who have been at their school for five or more years (going back to the 2010-2011 school year) (n=42) Responses: “None” (26.2 percent), “1 to 5 teachers” (50.0 percent), “6 to 10 teachers” (14.3 percent), “11 to 15 teachers” (4.8 percent), “15 or more teachers” (4.8 percent).

19. See endnote 10.

20. Question: “How satisfied are you with California’s current policy governing how teacher layoffs are determined during times of budget cuts?” Principals from low-FRL schools (n=139) Responses: “Very satisfied” (0.7 percent), “Somewhat satisfied” (12.2 percent), “Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” (17.3 percent), “Somewhat dissatisfied” (23.7 percent), “Very dissatisfied” (42.4 percent), “Unsure” (3.6 percent). Principals from mid-FRL schools (n=252) Responses: “Very satisfied” (3.2 percent), “Somewhat satisfied” (7.9 percent), “Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” (15.9 percent), “Somewhat

dissatisfied” (28.6 percent), “Very dissatisfied” (40.1 percent), “Unsure” (4.4 percent). Principals from high-FRL schools (n=90) Responses: “Very satisfied” (2.2 percent), “Somewhat satisfied” (7.8 percent), “Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” (13.3 percent), “Somewhat dissatisfied” (38.9 percent), “Very dissatisfied” (34.4 percent), “Unsure” (3.3 percent).

21. See endnote 13.

22. Question: “Please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statement: Within the last five school years, a teacher in my school has experienced a seniority-based layoff even though I believe that he/she was a better teacher in a comparable area or grade level than one who had more seniority and was retained?” Principals from low-FRL schools (n=138) Responses: “Strongly agree” (55.1 percent), “Somewhat agree” (16.7 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (8.0 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (0.7 percent), “Strongly disagree” (15.9 percent), “Unsure” (3.6 percent). Principals from mid-FRL schools (n=250) Responses: “Strongly agree” (55.2 percent), “Somewhat agree” (14.4 percent), “Neither agree nor disagree” (11.2 percent), “Somewhat disagree” (2.4 percent), “Strongly disagree” (12.4 percent), “Unsure” (4.4 percent).

23. See endnote 16.

24. Question: “What do you think is the right balance between a teacher’s seniority and their performance to determine teacher layoffs? Your answer can be anywhere from (0% seniority and 100% performance) to (100% seniority and 0% performance), or any combination in between. [Percent seniority and percent performance]” Principals from low-FRL schools (n=138) Open response: Mean % seniority – 30.4 percent, Median % seniority – 25.0 percent, Mean % performance – 69.6 percent, Median % performance – 75.0 percent. Principals from mid-FRL schools (n=250) Open response: Mean % seniority – 31.8 percent, Median % seniority – 30.0 percent, Mean % performance – 68.2 percent, Median % performance – 70.0 percent. Principals from high-FRL schools (n=90) Open response: Mean % seniority – 35.4 percent, Median % seniority – 30.0 percent, Mean % performance – 64.6 percent, Median % performance – 70.0 percent.