

Welcome to  
“The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and  
Insights for Advancing School Leadership”

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# The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership

April 13, 2021

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# Today's speakers



**Ellen Goldring**  
Patricia and Rodes Hart Professor  
Vanderbilt University



**Mollie Rubin**  
Research Assistant Professor  
Vanderbilt University



**Mariesa Herrmann**  
Senior Researcher  
Mathematica



Advancing  
Equity



Bolstering the  
Pathway to the  
Principalship



Improving School  
Outcomes



## The Role of Assistant Principals:

### Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership

Ellen Goldring and Mollie Rubin, Vanderbilt University  
Mariesa Herrmann, Mathematica

April 2021

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# Why study the AP role?

- **Reach greater clarity about:**
  - What the AP role should entail
  - How to best prepare and support APs
  - How to effectively prepare APs for success as principals
- **Consider how the AP role can:**
  - Promote equity and diversity in the pathway to the principalship
  - Contribute to equitable experiences and outcomes for students, teachers, and staff

# Purpose

- **Shine a spotlight on an increasingly prevalent and often overlooked role**
- **Synthesize research evidence about APs over the last 20 years**

# Key findings

- **APs have become more prevalent over the past 25 years**
- **Educators of color and women face barriers to advancement on the leadership pathway**
- **APs could promote improved school climate and student outcomes**
- **The relationship between AP experience and future principal performance is mixed**

# Research questions

1. How common is experience as an AP?
2. How does access to leadership pathways differ by educators' race and gender?
3. What are APs' roles, and how do they relate to school outcomes?
4. How does experience as an AP relate to future principal performance?

Background

Diversity in  
pathway

School outcomes

Principal  
performance



# Answering these questions: Systematic synthesis of literature



- **Databases, gray literature, and additional citations → 1,611 studies**
  - Time frame
  - Setting
  - Population

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- **Databases, gray literature, and additional citations → 1,611 studies**
  - Time frame
  - Setting
  - Population
- **Screened studies for inclusion → 79 studies**
  - Wide variation in methodology and topics
  - Mostly urban districts and across all school levels
  - Many gaps and limitations

# Answering these questions: Secondary analyses of national and state data



- **Schools and Staffing Survey / National Teacher and Principal Survey data**



- **Tennessee statewide data and educator survey data**

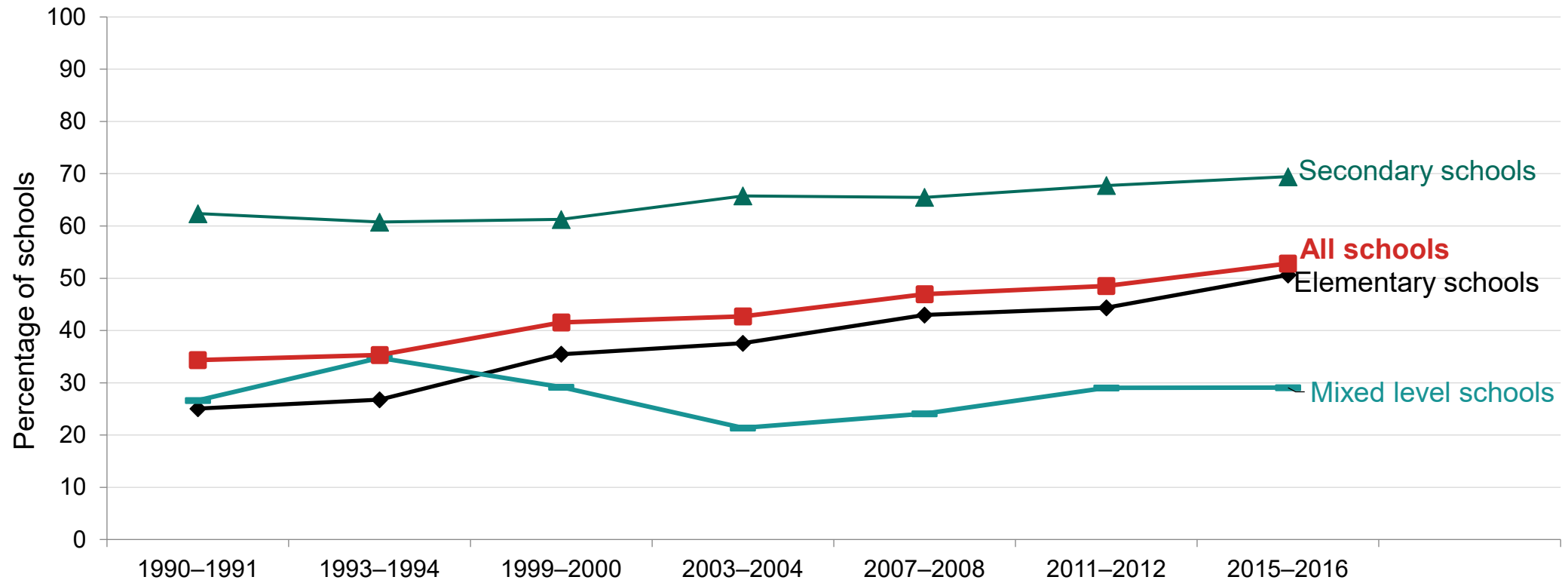


- **Pennsylvania statewide data**

## Key Finding 1:

**Assistant principals have become more prevalent over the past 25 years**

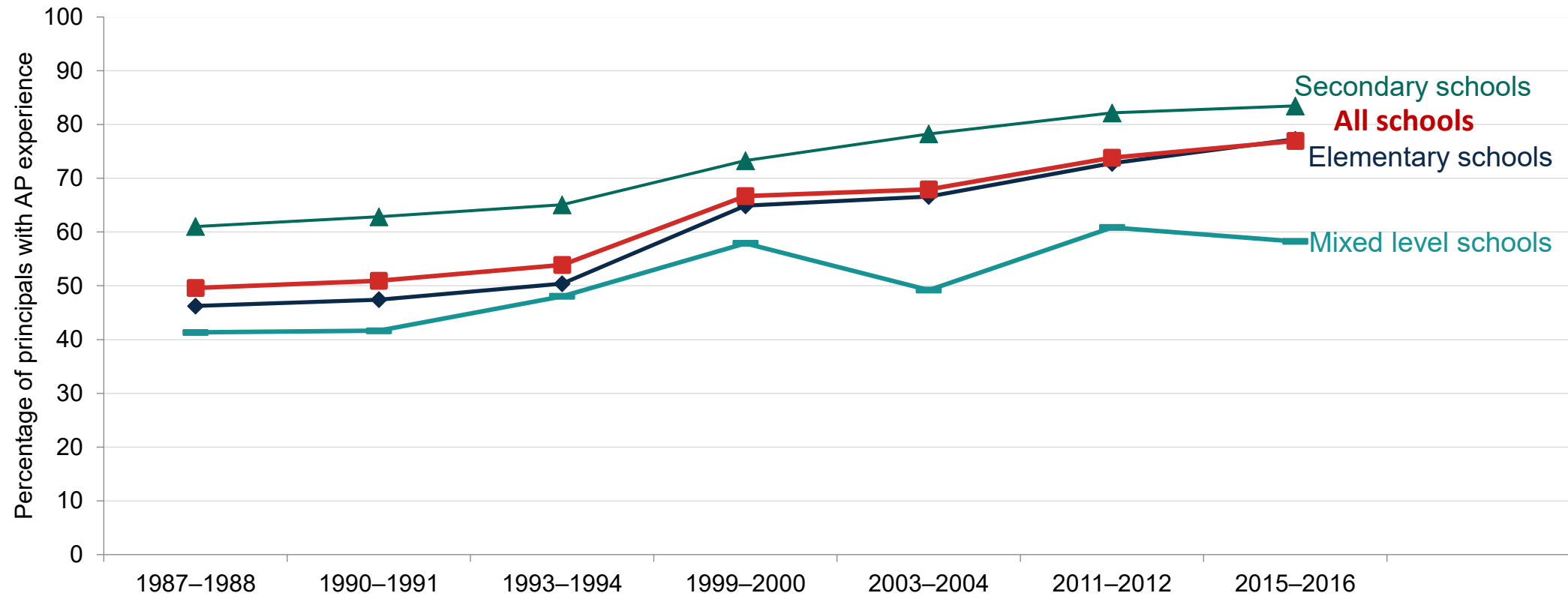
# Percentage of schools with APs has increased



Source: Schools and Staffing Survey//National Teacher and Principal Survey



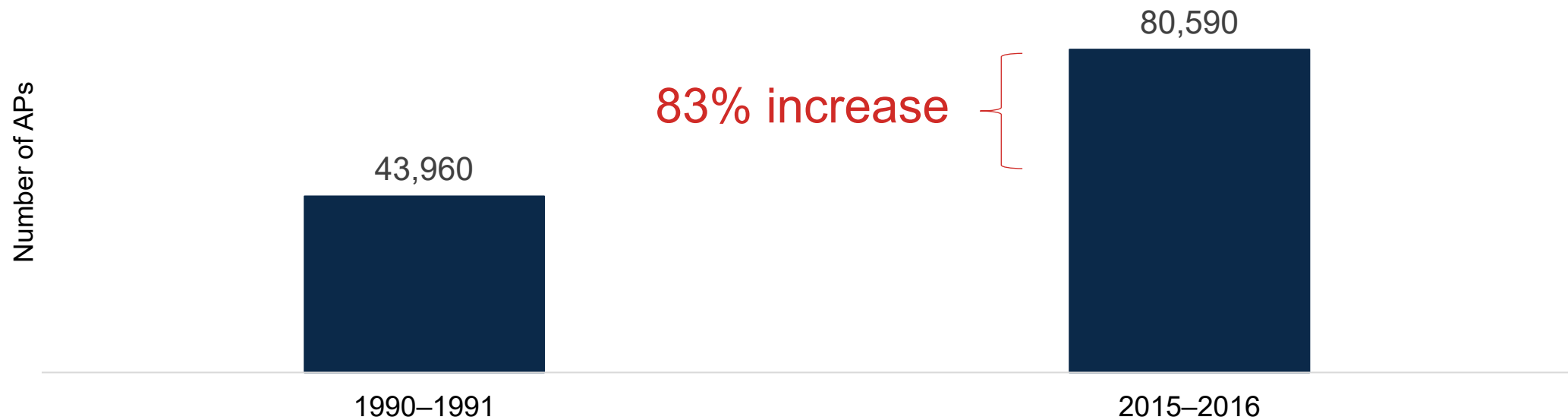
# More principals today have AP experience



Source: Schools and Staffing Survey/National Teacher and Principal Survey



# The number of APs has increased by 83%

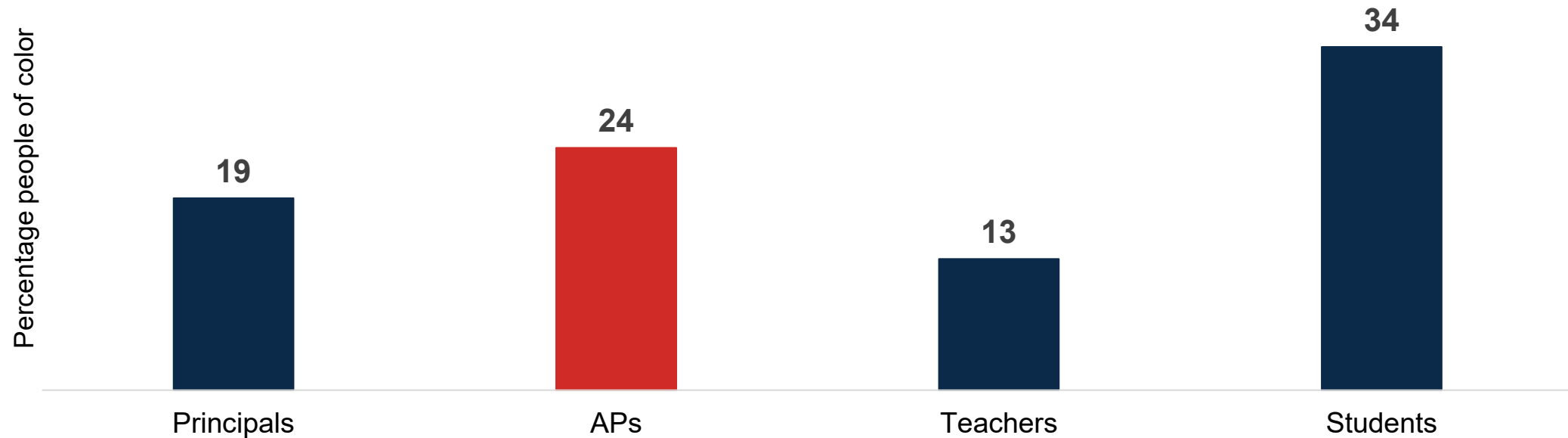


## Key Finding 2:

**Educators of color and women face barriers to advancement  
on the leadership pathway**



# Across six states, APs are more likely to be people of color than principals or teachers



- **In these states, APs of color are also increasing over time**

# Not clear whether educators of color have to take an extra step not required of white educators

- **Nationally, principals of color are more likely to have AP experience than white principals**



# Not clear whether educators of color have to take an extra step not required of white educators

- **Nationally, principals of color are more likely to have AP experience than white principals**
- **State findings are mixed**
  - Studies from Texas find that educators of color are less likely to directly advance to the principalship and more likely to become APs
  - Findings from Illinois, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee are mixed



# Potential barriers to advancement for people of color



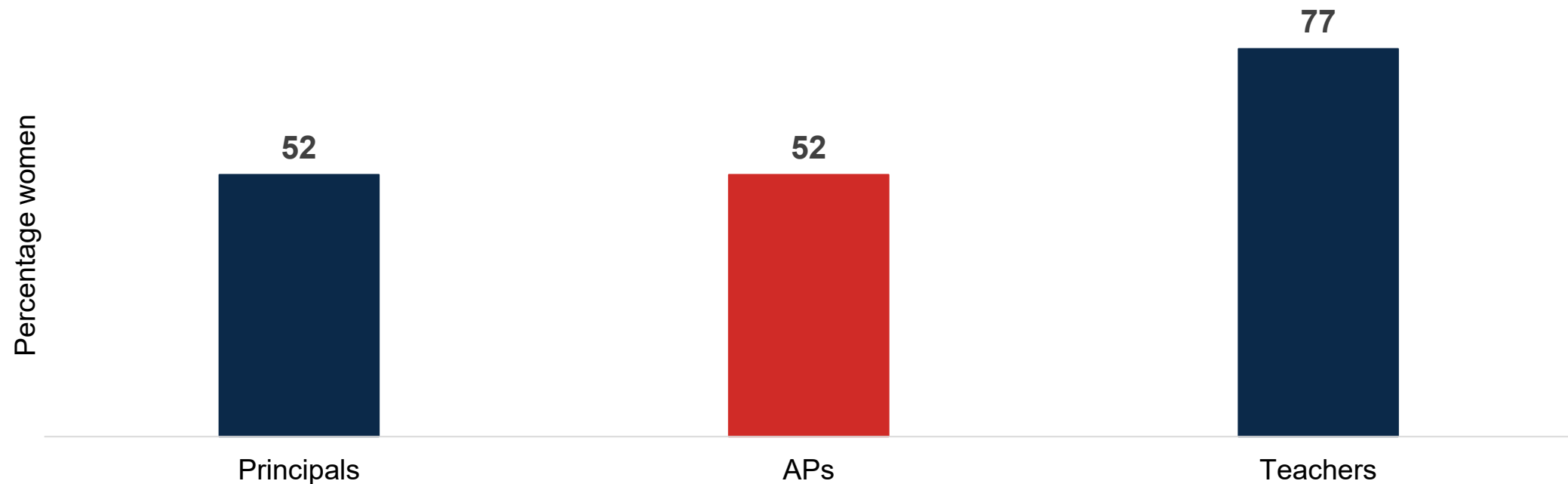
- **Access to mentorship**
- **Discrimination**
- **Assigned leadership tasks**

# Potential barriers to advancement for people of color



**“I was not hired and was informed I was not the right fit... Most of the [African American female administrators in our district] are placed in high-poverty schools. Perhaps this is where we fit?”**

# Women are underrepresented among APs and principals, relative to teachers



# Potential barriers to advancement for women



- **Access to mentorship**
- **Assigned tasks**
- **Family responsibilities**
- **Differences in aspirations or confidence**
- **Discrimination**

# Isolation, meaningless tasks, and lack of mentorship are barriers to advancement for women



“I really think women do not move into administration because they are not mentored or encouraged, and once they get in, they are once again on the outside. ... You are very isolated. You are assigned all the duties that no one else wants.”

-Study participant response (McGee, 2010, p. 15)



## Key Finding 3:

**APs could promote improved school climate and student outcomes**

# AP roles vary considerably



- **The role is much more complex and nuanced than one framed as either focused on instructional leadership or discipline**
  - Not all APs have leadership roles and responsibilities that might best prepare them for the principalship
  - More recent research suggests APs spend increasingly more time on instructional leadership
  - No research on how principals assign tasks to APs and why role varies
- **No unique professional standards for APs**
  - They are typically evaluated on same rubrics as principals



# Evaluations for APs don't match the role

[It's] confusing both for an AP...[and] for me as a principal. If I'm evaluating my AP and [the standards are] saying she should be doing all the things I'm doing, I don't think that [she should be]. She doesn't get to set a new vision...because I'm running the school, and I have a vision. And as an AP, your job is to get on board with some of those things.

-Study participant (Turnbull et al., 2016, p. 54)

# Specific AP roles can matter for school outcomes

- **Coaching teachers**
- **Being visible in the classroom**
- **Being a highly effective AP**
- **Paying attention to cultural inclusivity**



## Key Finding 4:

**The relationship between AP experience and future principal performance is mixed**

# Little evidence of a relationship between AP experience and school outcomes as a principal



- **Principals highly value their experiences as an AP**
- **Principals with AP experience generally perform similarly to principals without this experience**

“In order to be a principal, you need to go through [the AP] experience, and you need to have a lot of skill sets that APs refine, and it prepares you for the principalship.”

-Study participant response (Parylo et al., 2012)

# Specific AP experiences may help APs when they become principals



- **Suggestive evidence that improved school outcomes as a principal may be related to:**
  - Having served as an AP in the current school
  - Having served as an AP in a more effective school
  - Being effective as an AP

**A caveat:**

**The evidence base is still nascent**





# The evidence is limited in some areas

- **Study topics on assistant principals vary widely**
- **Findings rarely discuss contextual information about study**
- **Quality of studies varies widely**
  - Some use multiple years of data and employ rigorous analytical methods
  - Many are small-scale, individual studies

# There is still a lot we need to know to inform policy and practice

- **Why is the number of APs increasing and how are they assigned to schools?**
- **Why are educators of color more likely than white educators to become APs and less likely to advance directly to the principalship?**
- **How can experiences on the pathway from teacher to principal be more equitable for educators of color and female educators?**
- **What are the most effective approaches to developing APs and assigning tasks and roles to them?**
- **Which AP roles are most related to improved outcomes for students and schools?**

# Setting an agenda to make the most of the increasingly prevalent AP role

# Recap

- **Growth in number of APs**

# Recap

- **Growth in number of APs**
- **Racial and gender differences on pathway to principalship**

# Recap

- **Growth in number of APs**
- **Barriers on pathway to the principalship**
- **APs could promote school climate and other outcomes**

# Recap

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- **AP position is an important precursor to principalship**

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- **Role is undefined**



# Recap

- **Growth in number of APs**
- **Barriers on pathway to the principalship**
- **APs could promote school climate**
- **AP position is an important precursor to principalship**
- **AP role is undefined**
- **It is important in its own right -- and a stepping-stone to principalship**

# Identifying and addressing barriers to AP advancement for educators of color and women

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- **Examine who is receiving mentoring and professional development, and who is being tapped for advancement**
- **Ensure equitable experiences in leadership roles while in the AP position**
- **Collect and analyze data by race or ethnicity and gender in leader tracking systems to see who is advancing**

# Developing APs for the principalship

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- **Create AP evaluations appropriate to the role**
- **Ensure principals have the skills to mentor APs and delegate tasks to develop APs' leadership skills**
- **Develop awareness and practices for principals to advance equity among educators in the pipeline**



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## Panel Discussion

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