



LEARNING TO LEAD

An Analysis of the Administrator Pipeline in Christian Schools



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Administrators are tasked with complex responsibilities that include overseeing personnel decisions, navigating policy, and building school culture. Outside of teachers, administrators may be the most important school input related to student outcomes. While some research has examined the composition, preparation, and prior experiences of public school administrators, very little has been done to consider administrators in private schools, particularly private Christian schools. Since administrators oversee so much in the life of the school, identifying and equipping effective school leaders should be a priority for research.

In the fall of 2021, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) piloted a survey on spiritual formation in Christian schools. While the primary purpose of the study was to develop a validated instrument for understanding spiritual formation and biblical worldview development, the survey also featured questions about administrators' professional experience, demographic characteristics, and educational background. These questions provide rich, descriptive evidence of administrators in private Christian schools.

This report summarizes our first set of findings with respect to the administrator pipeline. Altogether, we collected data on 170 administrators in schools broadly representative of ACSI membership and considered their demographic characteristics, prior experience and certification, educational attainment and spiritual formation, and current work as an administrator. Some of our main findings include:

- We find several differences by sex, with respect to administrative position held, prior experience, and educational attainment.
- For administrators with a graduate degree, about three-fifths of administrators studied at a Christian higher education institution at some point in their education careers. Roughly half studied at a faith-based college or university as undergraduate students and roughly half studied at a faith-based college or university as graduate students.
- Administrators who ever attended a Christian higher education institution at some point in their career were more likely to report that personal study or campus ministries played the most significant part in their spiritual formation when compared to those who never attended a Christian program. Both “ever attended” and “never attended” administrators were more likely to say that church played the most significant role in graduate school than as undergraduate students.
- Administrators report having the most influence over spiritual leadership, teacher evaluation, and personnel decisions, and report having the least influence over academic standards and curriculum—two areas in which teachers report significant influence.
- Administrators overwhelmingly reported that spiritual formation was the top reason a parent would choose their school.
- Similar to teachers, administrators reported that faith had a major influence on their school's mission statement or statement of faith and the least influence on their philosophy of diversity and dress code.
- Finally, three-fifths of administrators reported that a partnership with parents was the underlying biblical philosophy of Christian education.

These data provide important insights into the incredible work being done by Christian school administrators. We hope this report will prove helpful for school leaders everywhere as they carry out their missions to prepare students academically and inspire them to become devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2021, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) piloted a survey on spiritual formation in Christian schools. While the primary purpose of the study was to develop a validated instrument for understanding spiritual formation and biblical worldview development, the survey also featured questions about leaders' professional experience, demographic characteristics, and educational background.

Altogether, 170 administrators representing 33 ACSI member schools in the United States and abroad completed the survey. The schools that participated in the pilot study are broadly representative of ACSI membership. Twenty-nine are based in the United States, with the remaining four outside of the US. Twenty-nine are accredited by ACSI, while four are unaccredited members or accredited by another organization. The vast majority are PK/K-12 schools, with one PK-8 school. Two-thirds (22 schools) are covenantal (that is, requiring one or both parents to acknowledge or agree with a school's statement of faith for student admission) while 11 schools are missional (no admissions standard with respect to school statement of

faith). Roughly two-thirds (23 schools) are governed by an independent board and the other ten schools are affiliated with a church.

The schools are also broadly representative of membership by enrollment, tuition, and division. Six schools (18 percent) are in the smallest enrollment bracket, enrolling between one and 200 students; eight schools (24 percent) enroll between 201 and 400 students; eleven schools (33 percent) enroll between 401 and 700 students; and eight schools (24 percent) enroll over 700 students. The average tuition for these schools was \$10,174, with a median of \$10,000 and a range of \$6,200 to \$16,410. The Eastern US Division had the greatest representation, with 14 schools, followed by Central (11 schools) and Western (four schools).

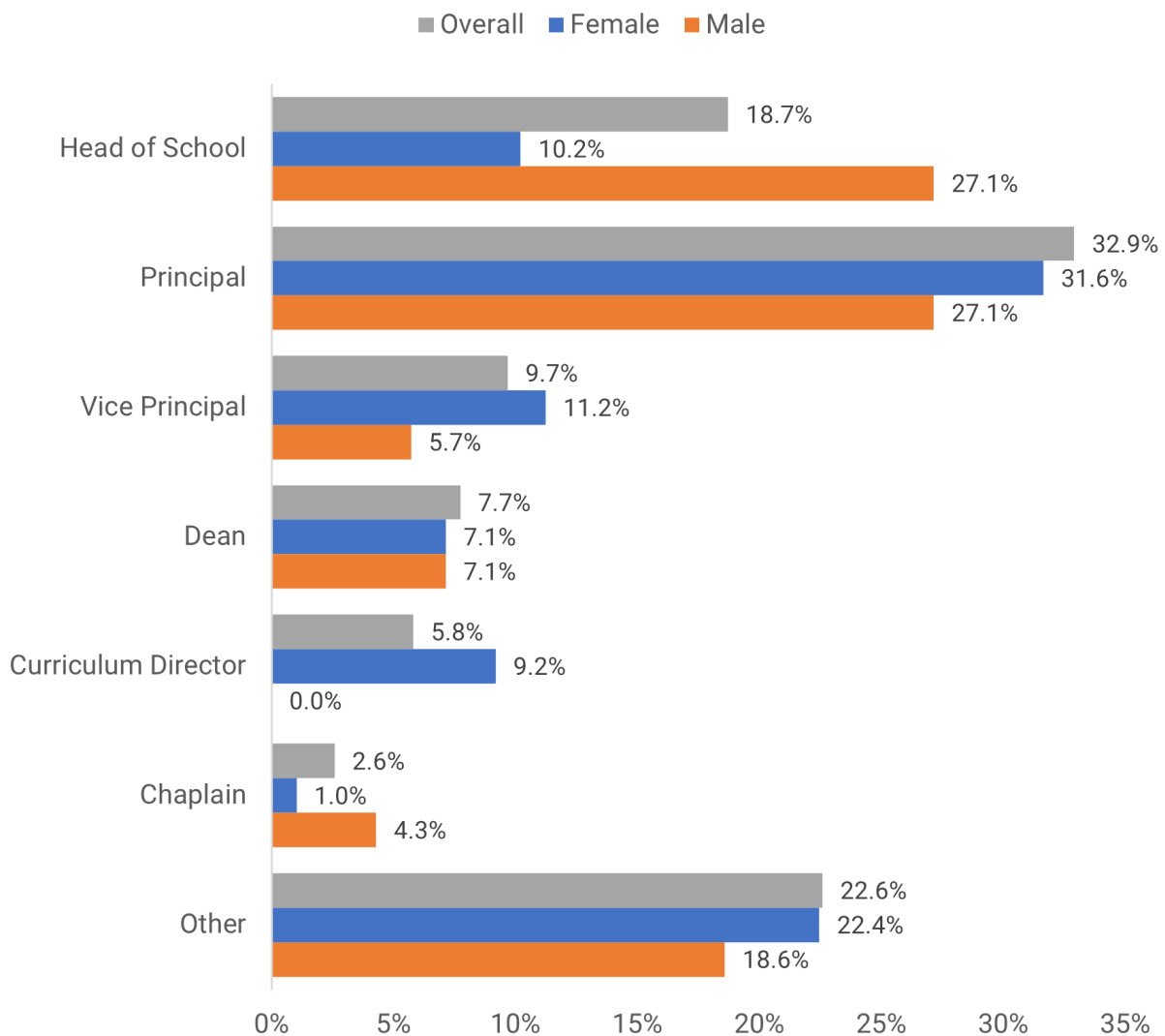
With respect to administrators, we analyzed a rich set of respondent characteristics, including information on demographics, prior teaching and leadership experience, educational attainment, and current work as a school leader. We share our findings in this report.

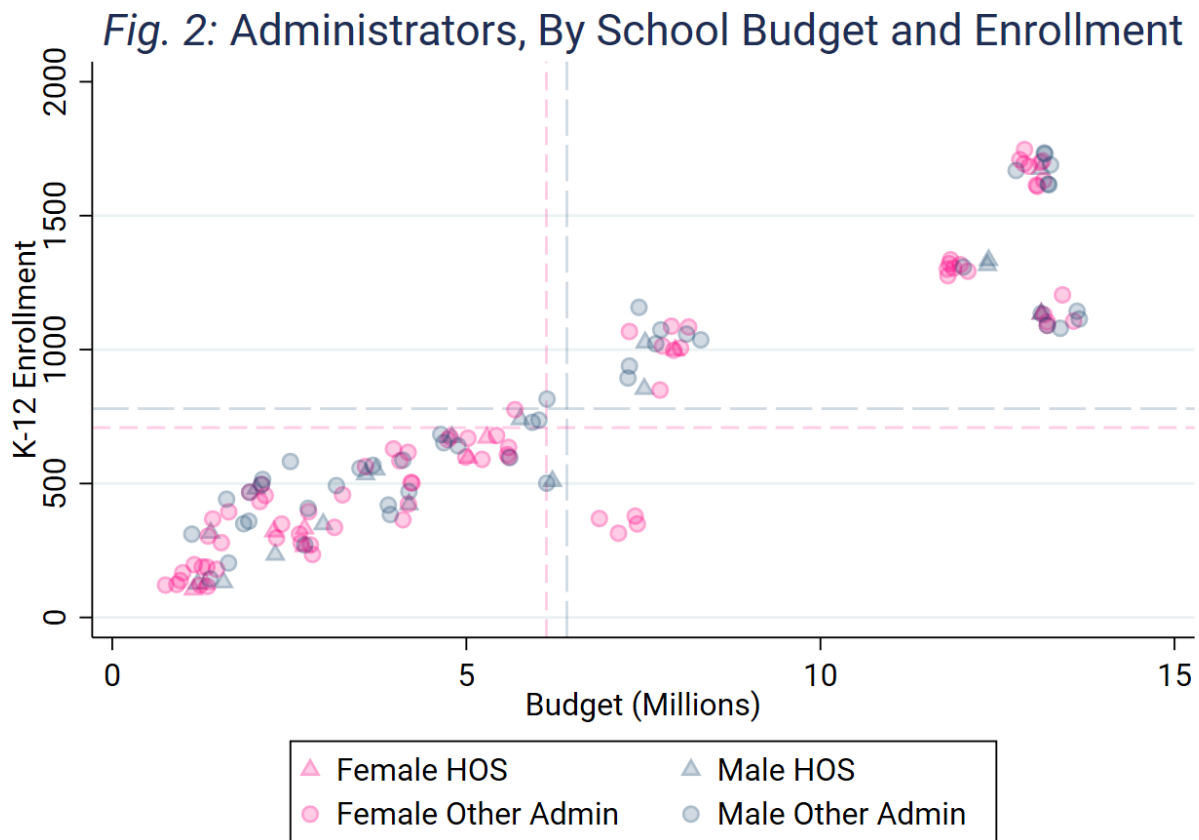
Administrator Demographics

We begin by considering administrator demographic characteristics, when reported. Our sample of school leaders is predominantly White (158 individuals, 93 percent), with 11 school leaders identifying as some nonwhite ethnicity (6 percent). Roughly three-fifths of the sample is female (98 individuals) and two-fifths male (70). However, this overall statistic masks some underlying variation. Heads of school (Superintendents, Presidents, Chief Executive Officers, or similar title) are predominantly male, with roughly one-quarter of the male

sample (19 men) reporting HOS as their administrative role and 10 percent of the female sample (10 women) reporting a similar title. Women are slightly more likely to report serving as a principal (32 versus 27 percent), vice principal (11 versus 6 percent), or curriculum director (9 to 0 percent), while men are more likely to report serving as a chaplain (four to one; see Figure 1 below). Women are also more likely to serve as HOS in schools with smaller budgets or enrollments (see Figure 2 on following page). Among administrators reporting some other leadership role, common roles include those related to athletics, finance, or technology.

Fig. 1: Administrators' Roles





Prior Teaching and Leadership Experience

We also queried respondents about their prior teaching and leadership experience. Roughly half of all respondents reported serving as a classroom teacher prior to serving as an administrator. While male and female administrators have had a similar tenure in their current role (about six

years on average), women have spent more time in the classroom (over 11 years versus nearly eight years) while men have spent more time in other administrative roles (12 years versus eight years; see Figure 3). Prior teaching experience most often came in another Christian school, but teachers in our sample have experience in other private and public settings as well (see Figure 4).

Fig. 3: Administrators' Years of Experience

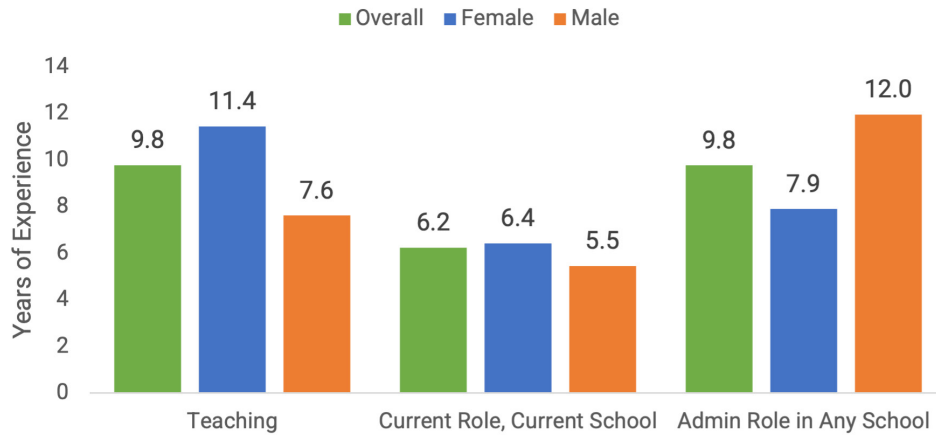
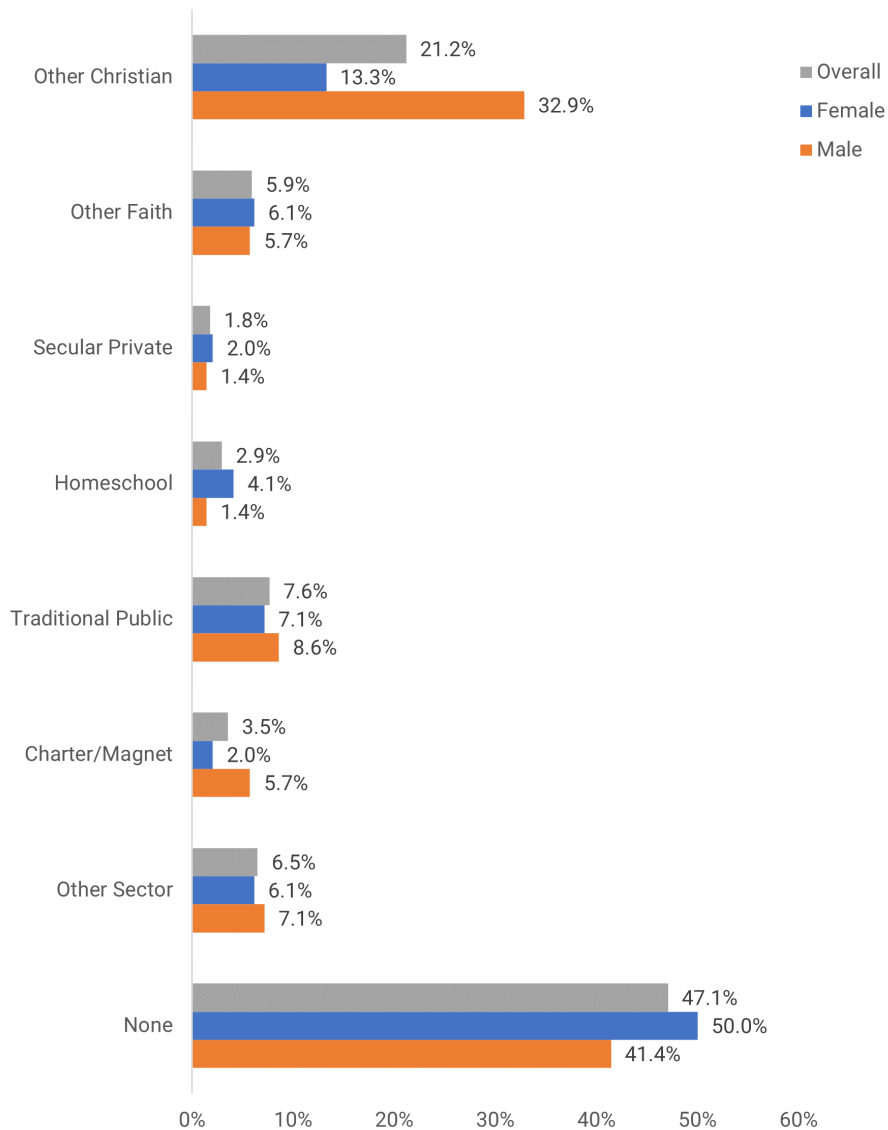


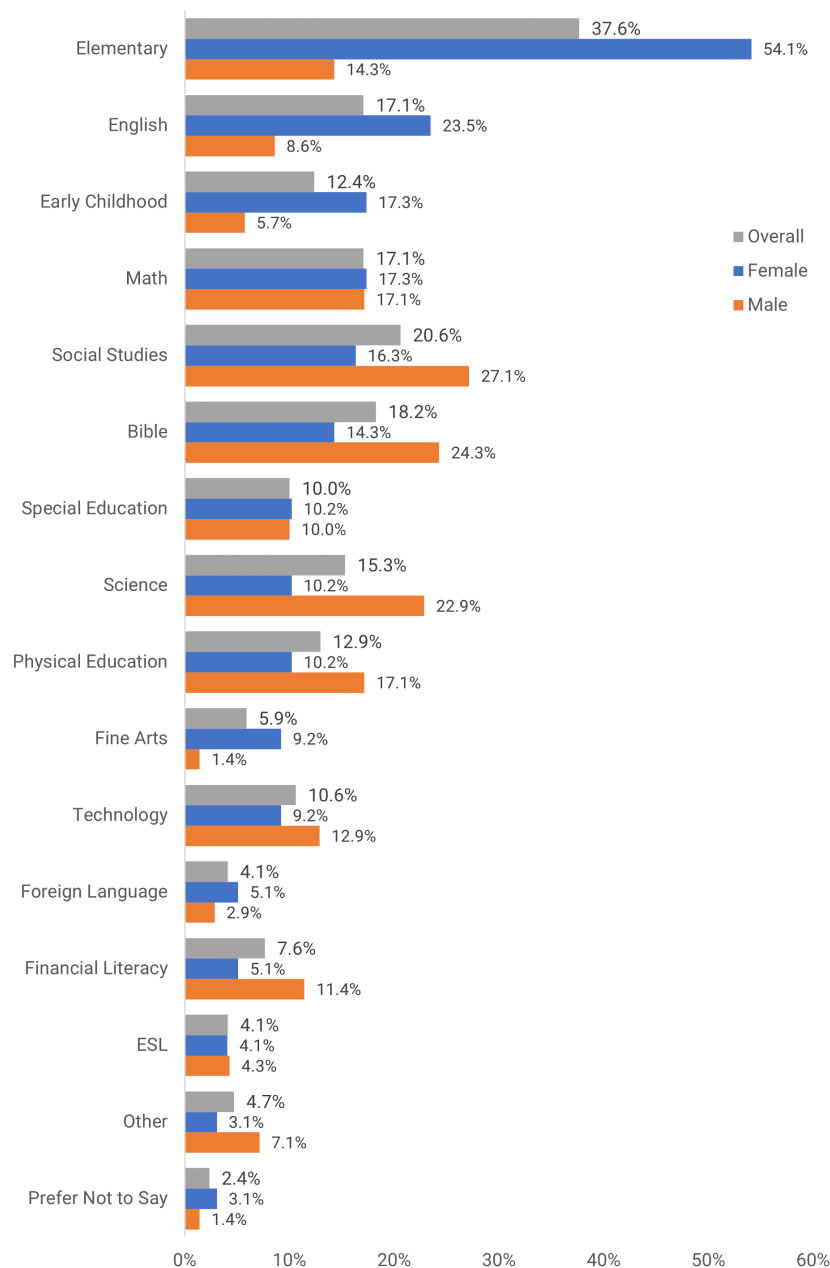
Fig. 4: Administrators' Prior Teaching Experience by Sector



With respect to teaching experience, we observe some other patterns by sex as well. Women were more likely than men to have experience as early childhood (17 percent of women versus six percent of men), elementary (54 versus 14 percent), English (24 versus nine percent), or fine arts teachers (nine versus one percent). Men, on the other hand, are more likely to have experience as social studies

(27 percent of women versus 16 percent of men), Bible (24 versus 14 percent), science (23 versus 10 percent), physical education (17 versus 10 percent), technology (13 versus nine percent), and financial literacy teachers (11 versus five percent). A similar proportion of men and women have experience as math, special education, technology, or English as a Second Language teachers (see Figure 5).

Fig. 5: Content Areas Ever Taught by Teachers



With respect to prior leadership experience, respondents reported their prior experience both in education (Figure 6) and outside education (Figure 7). Here, we note some further key differences by sex. Roughly a third of our leadership sample reports having no prior leadership experience in education. Similar proportions of men and women have prior experience as a department head, chaplain or director of spiritual life, curriculum director, counselor, or other leadership role. Men are more likely than women to have prior leadership experience in athletics (40 versus 17 percent) or as a vice principal (33

versus 15 percent). This finding is consistent with what prior research has documented about leadership in public schools (Maranto et al., 2018).

Outside of education, we observe some further differences by sex with respect to prior leadership. Men are more likely to report having prior leadership experience outside of education (87 versus 62 percent). The most common experiences for men include leadership in church (59 versus 45 percent) or parachurch ministry (13 versus six percent), business (21 versus 12 percent), or in the military or law enforcement (11 percent of males versus no women).

Fig. 6: Administrators' Prior Leadership Experiences in Education

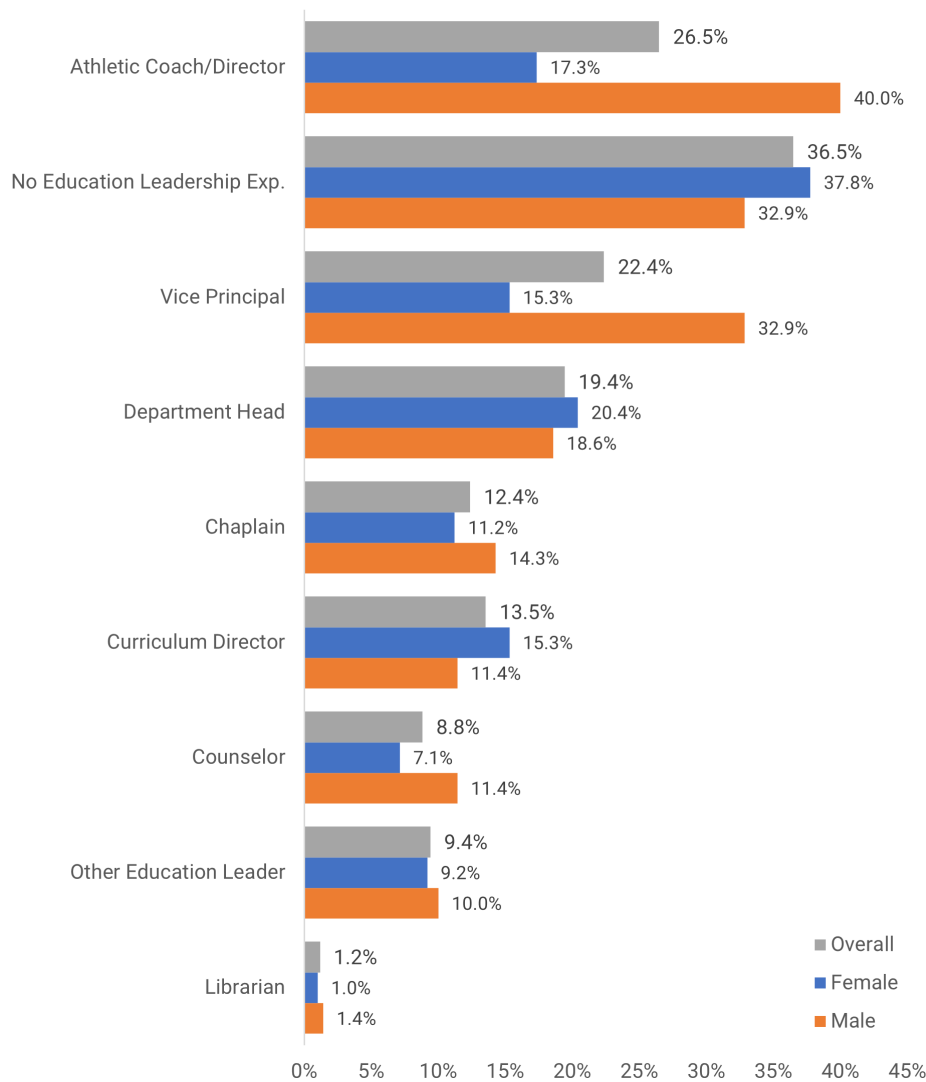
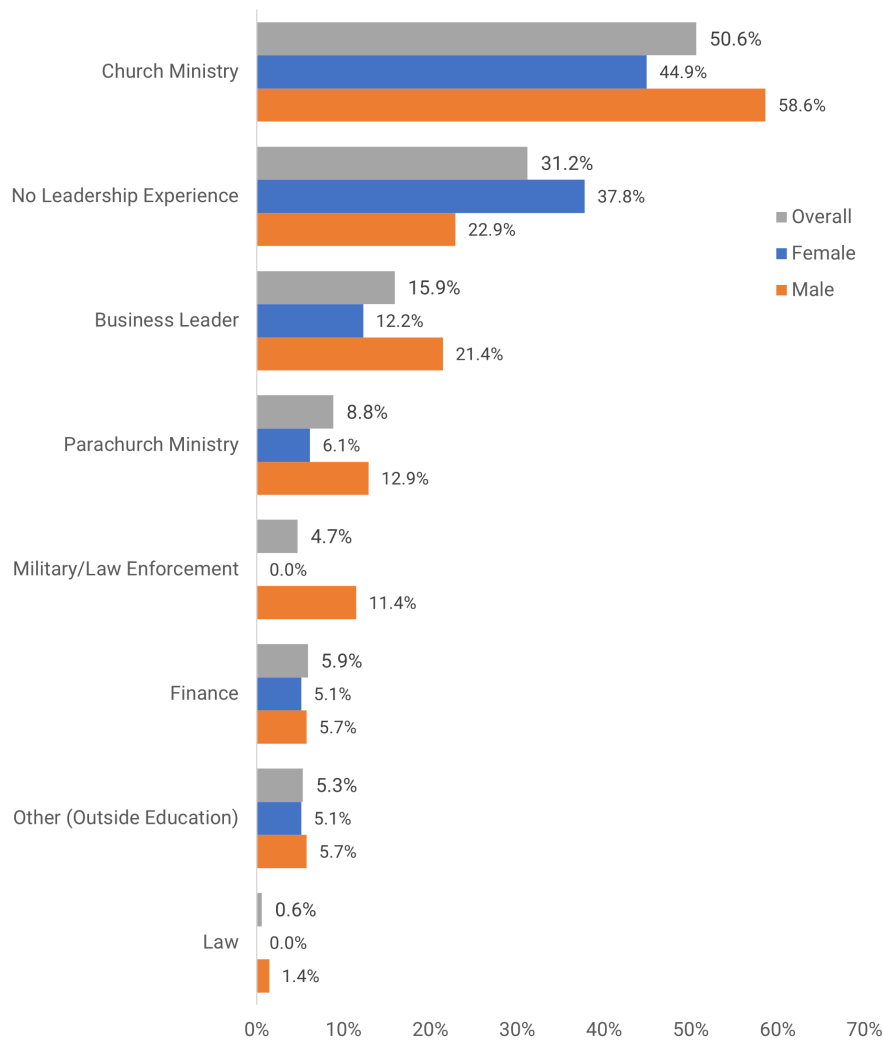


Fig. 7: Administrators' Prior Leadership Experiences Outside Education



Educational Attainment

Next, we turn to administrators' educational attainment. Generally speaking, male administrators in our sample reported a higher level of educational attainment than their female counterparts (see Figure 8). Women were more likely than men to report as their highest level of education a high school diploma or an associate's degree (eight percent of women versus four percent of men) or a bachelor's degree (38 versus 11 percent). Men were more likely to report a master's degree (66 percent of men versus 45 percent of women) or an advanced graduate degree (19 versus nine percent; includes specialist and doctoral degrees).

We observed some patterns with respect to field of study as well. With respect to their bachelor's degree, women were more likely than men to have studied education (48 percent of women versus 32 percent of men) or English (seven versus two percent) as undergraduates. On the other hand, men were more likely to have studied some social science (23 versus seven percent), finance (15 versus 10 percent), science (seven versus four percent), math (six versus three percent), or a foreign language (three versus one percent). A similar proportion of men and women studied religion as undergraduate students (see Figure 9). For both men and women, the most common master's degree field was

Fig. 8: Administrators' Highest Level of Education

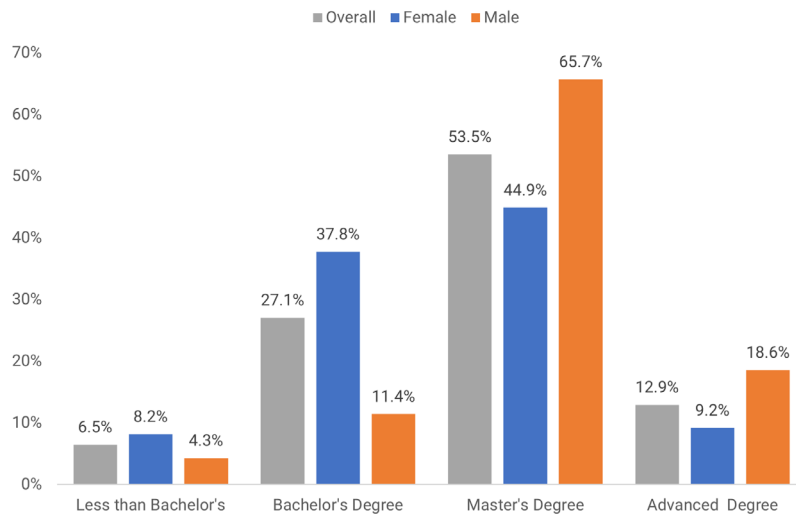
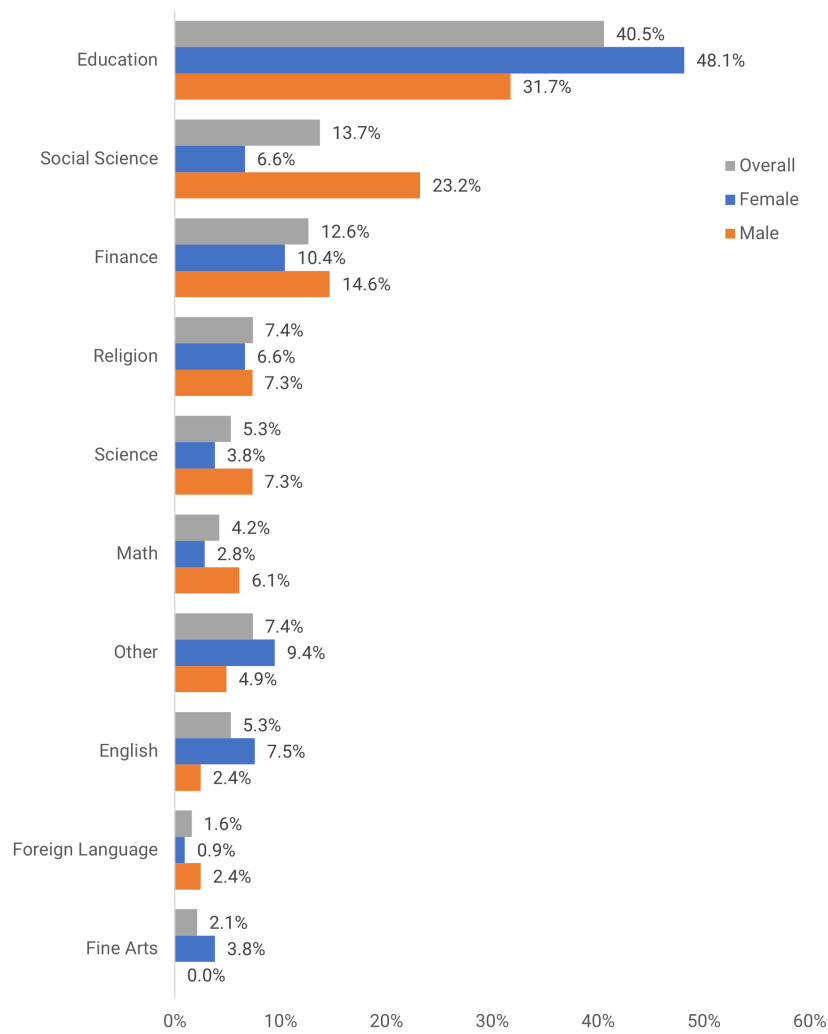


Fig. 9: Administrators' Bachelor's Degree Fields

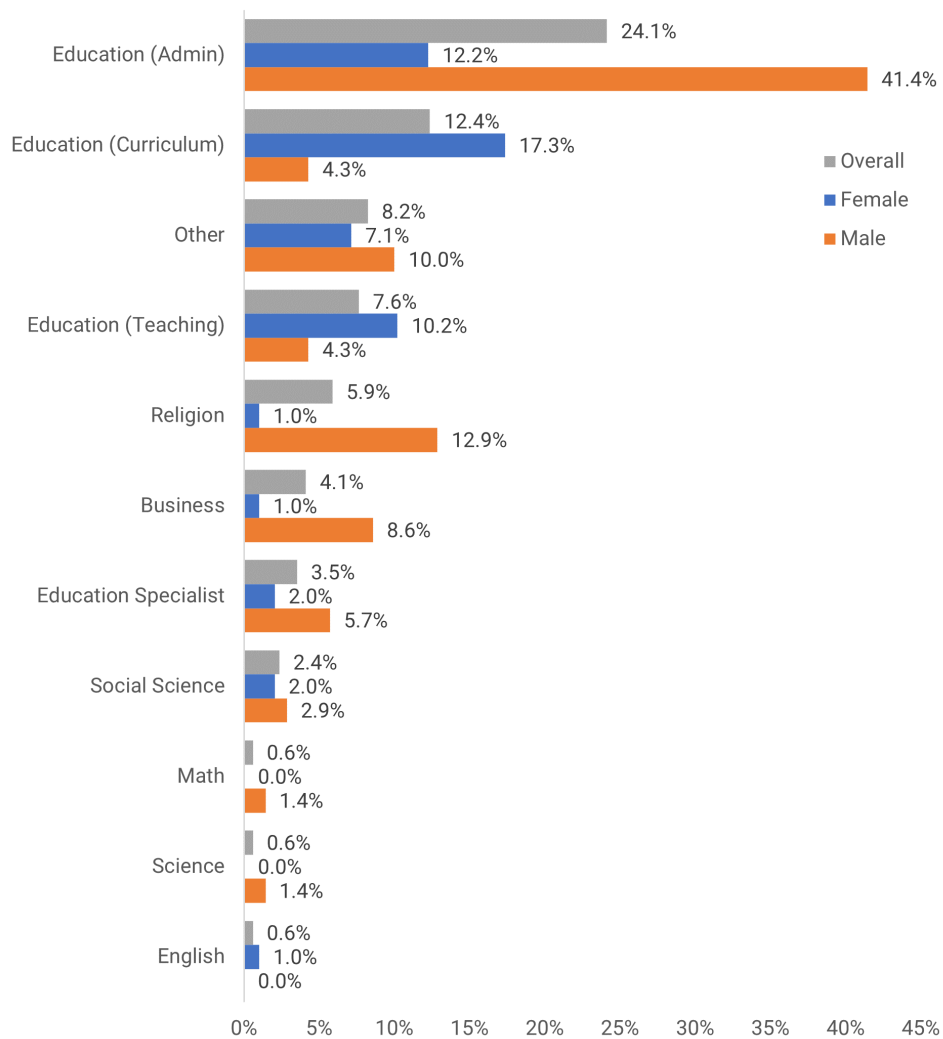


education. However, within education, men were more likely to pursue a degree in administration (41 versus 12 percent) and women were more likely to pursue a degree in curriculum (17 versus four percent; see Figure 10). Finally, for those obtaining a doctorate, education leadership was the most common field for both men (six out of nine) and women (13 out of 17). Five other respondents indicated earning a doctorate in religion or education law.

A similar proportion of administrators, male or female, chose public, private nonsectarian, or private religious higher education institutions as we reported with teachers [citation]. Figure 11 [next page] is a Sankey plot, a combination of stacked columns with flows that indicate changes in the population in two points in time.

In the first column, we administrators' undergraduate institutional sector, whether private religious (dark blue), private nonsectarian (orange), or public (light blue). Roughly half of the sample attended a faith-based university and half attended a nonsectarian university, either private nonsectarian or public. In the second column, we plot administrators' graduate institutional sector, adding seminary (green) to private religious (dark blue), private nonsectarian (orange), or public (light blue). Again, roughly half of the sample attended a faith-based graduate school (either seminary or private religious) and half attended a secular institution (either private nonsectarian or public). It is also noteworthy that a substantial proportion of the sample switched sector from

Fig. 10: Administrators' Master's Degree Fields



undergraduate to graduate school (as indicated by the thick flows). Two-thirds of our sample attended a religious higher education institution at some point during their postsecondary studies.

Next, we asked administrators to identify their top reason for choosing a postsecondary school among seven options (or to provide another reason): (1) desired program or faculty, (2) faith-based program, (3) proximity to family, (4) affordability, (5) career advancement, (6) flexibility, or (7) reputation or ranking. As with teachers, flexibility and career advancement were much more prominent. However, while for teachers, choosing a graduate school for desired program or faculty was the predominant reason, no clear pattern emerges for administrators. A considerable proportion of administrators cited desired program or

faculty (25 percent), affordability (20 percent), flexibility (16 percent), faith-based (14 percent), career advancement (12 percent), or proximity to family (nine percent) as the top reason for choosing a school.

Finally, we asked administrators to identify the greatest influence on their spiritual growth in both undergraduate and graduate school. Our findings here largely mirror those we found when we asked teachers the same question [citation]. A few similarities between these teachers emerge. A larger proportion of both those who ever and those who never attended a faith-based institution report that church and personal study played a much greater role in their spiritual formation as graduate students than as undergraduate students. Among “evers,” the proportion reporting that church played the greatest role in their

Fig. 11: Institutions Where Administrators Earned Degrees

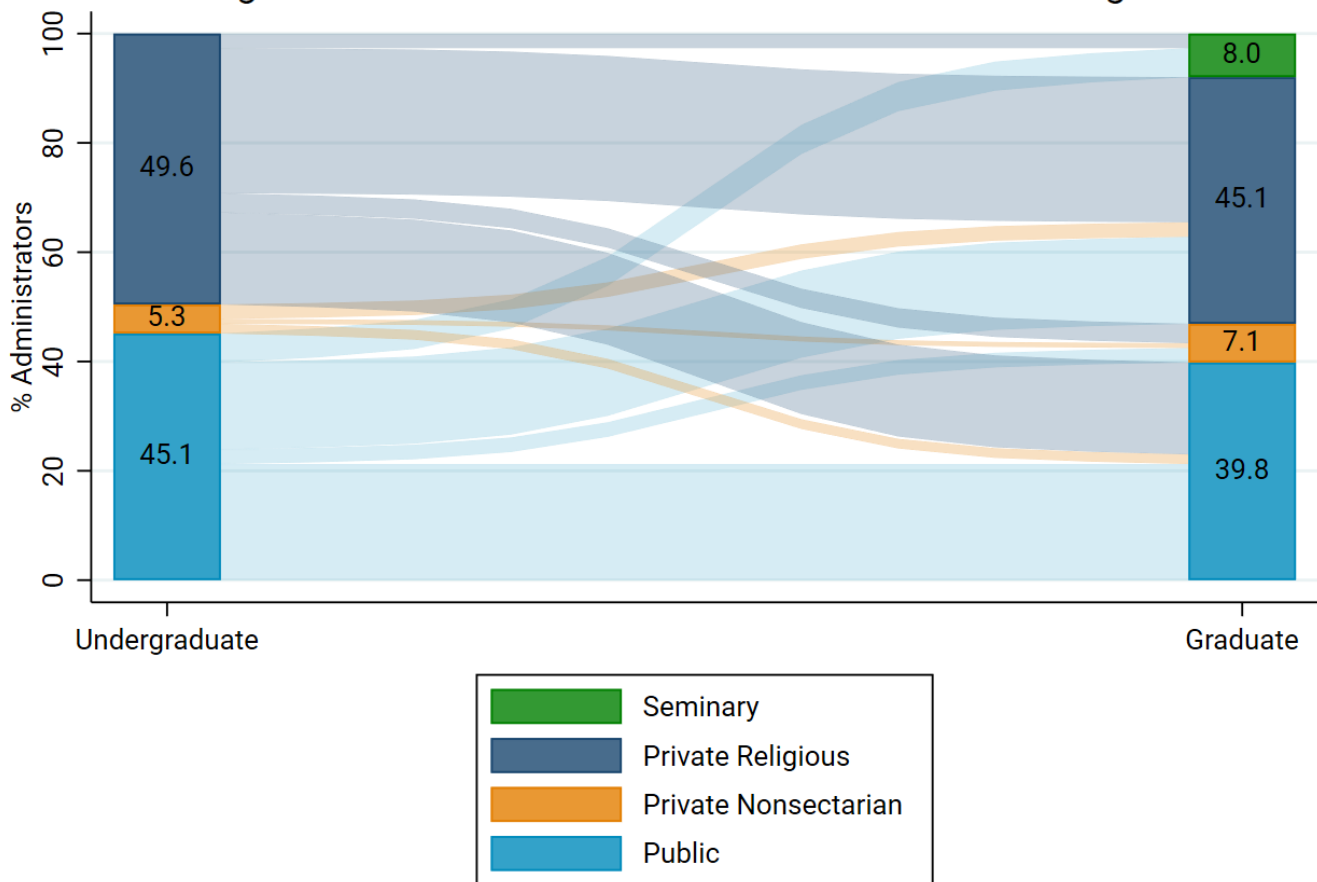


Fig. 12: Administrators' Reasons for Choosing Educational Institutions

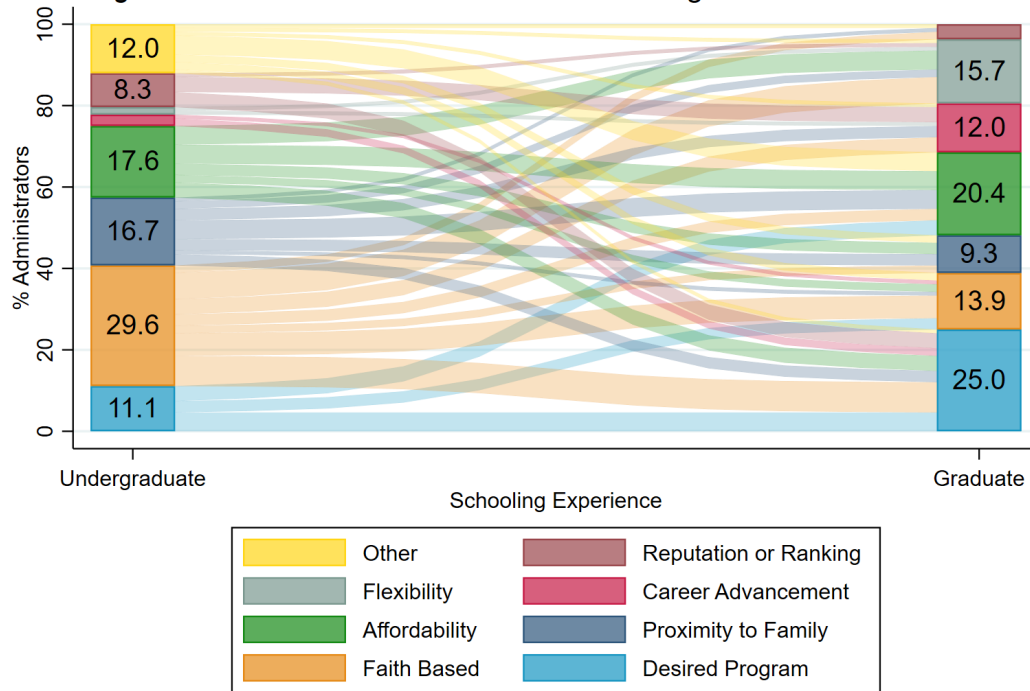
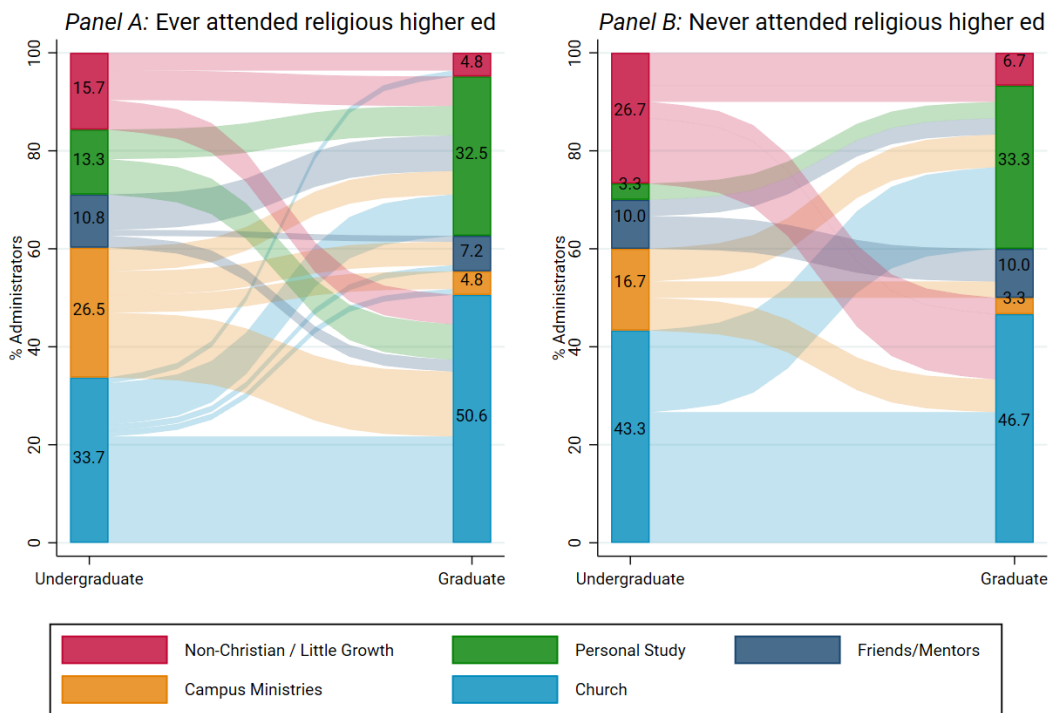


Fig. 13: Administrators' Spiritual Formation During Schooling



spiritual formation rose from 34 percent as undergraduates to 51 percent as graduates, while the proportion for “nevers” rose slightly from 43 to 47 percent. Similarly, the proportion of “evers” reporting that personal study played the greatest role rose from 13 to 33 percent, while the proportion of “nevers” rose grew tenfold from three to 33 percent. A smaller proportion of both “evers” and “nevers” report that campus ministries and chapel played the greatest role as graduate students than as undergraduates. Finally, the proportion of both “evers” and “nevers” reporting they were not a Christian or grew little spiritually declined from college to graduate school, from 16 to five percent for “evers” and from 27 to seven percent for “nevers.”

Some important differences arise as well, providing clues as to how attending a faith-based higher education institution may play a role in administrators’ spiritual formation. “Evers” are much more likely than “nevers” to report that campus ministries played the greatest role in the spiritual formation as undergraduates, but not as graduates. “Nevers” are twice as likely to report they were not a Christian or grew little spiritually as undergraduates. Finally, for both college and graduate school, a greater proportion of “nevers” report church as playing the most important role for their spiritual formation.

Influence in the Life of the School

How much influence do administrators believe they exercise over various aspects of the life of the Christian school? The area in which administrators report exercising the greatest influence is in spiritual leadership (see Figure 14). This finding is consistent with previous research, which documents evidence that school leaders, particularly those in Protestant school settings, emphasize spiritual leadership (Beckman et al., 2012; Sikkink, 2012). Other areas in which school leaders are more likely to report a “moderate” or even a “major” influence include teacher evaluation, personnel decisions, and discipline policies. In contrast, administrators feel they have relatively less influence over academic standards and curriculum, two areas in which teachers reported slightly more influence [citation].

When comparing patterns of administrator and teacher responses to this question, two other important

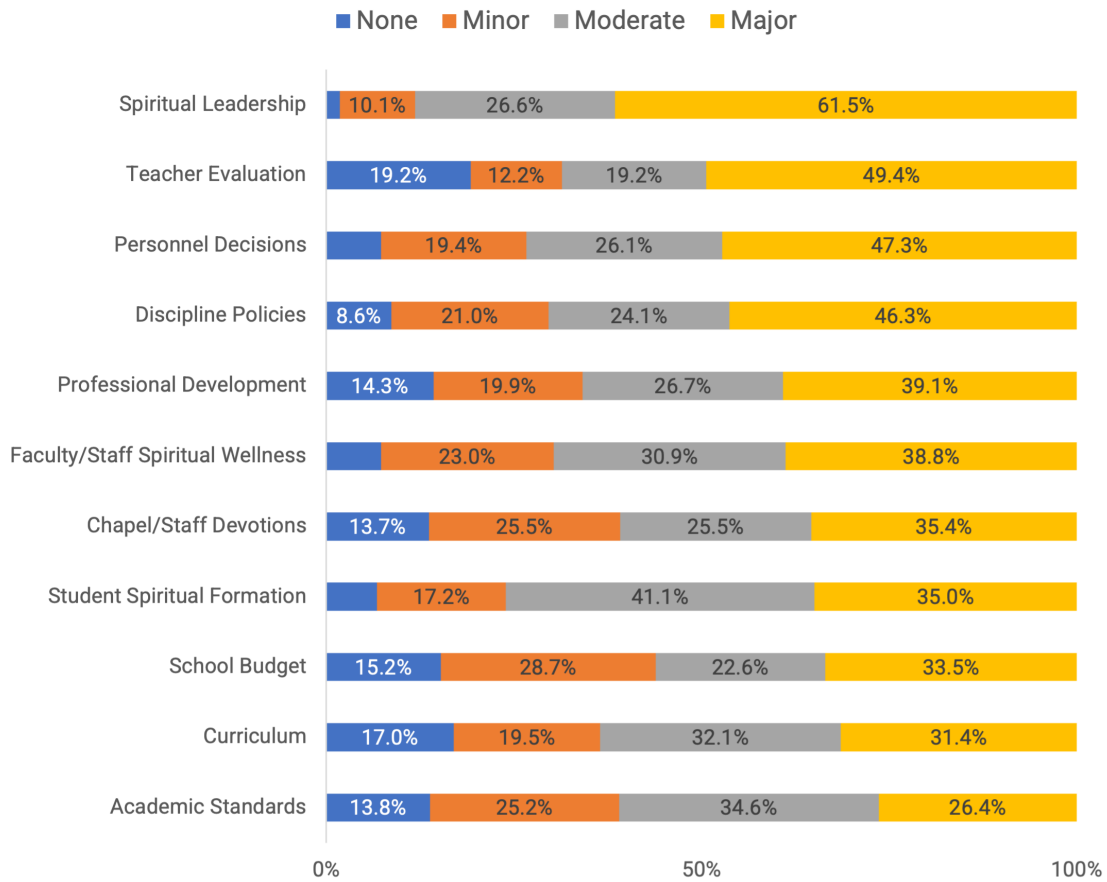
considerations emerge. First, in general, administrators are more likely to report having “major” influence in various aspects of the school. This pattern is unsurprising since, as the highest ranking officers in the school, they do exercise substantial influence in these regards. Second, teachers reported almost no influence over their own spiritual wellness. Over 90 percent of teachers reported “no influence” or only a “minor” influence over their spiritual wellness, with 71 percent reporting no influence whatsoever. However, this was not a particular area in which administrators felt they exercised a great deal of influence, with only 39 percent reporting “major” influence. This raises the question, who is concerned about the spiritual well-being of faculty and staff, especially considering that this was a major concern for Christian schools coming out of COVID-19 (Swaner & Lee, 2020)?

The Purpose of Christian Education

We presented administrators with a list of ten educational goals and asked them to rank them in order of importance (see Table 1). These educational goals are the same as those asked of principals on the National Center for Education Statistics’ National Teacher and Principal Survey (question 2-1).¹ Among the options presented, “fostering religious or spiritual development” was by far the consensus top choice, with over four-fifths of our sample ranking it first. This goal was followed by “promoting specific moral values” (an average rank of 4.1), which was followed closely by “encouraging academic excellence” (4.6) and “promoting good work habits and self-discipline” (4.7). The least important educational goals were “promoting occupational or vocational skills” (8.0) and “promoting multicultural awareness or understanding” (8.1)

1 https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/pdf/2021/Principal_Questionnaire_2020_21.pdf.

Fig. 14: How Much Influence Administrators Report Having Over Various Facets of School Life



Educational Goals	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Avg. Rank
Spiritual Formation	82.4%	7.6%	1.4
Moral Values	2.4%	35.9%	4.1
Academic Excellence	5.3%	11.2%	4.6
Good Work Habits/Disciplines	2.4%	10.0%	4.7
Basic Literacy Skills	5.3%	13.5%	5.0
Interpersonal Skills	0.0%	5.9%	5.7
Personal Growth	0.0%	10.6%	5.9
College Preparation	1.2%	3.5%	7.4
Vocational Preparation	0.6%	0.6%	8.0
Multicultural Awareness	0.6%	1.2%	8.1

It is important to note that as a government entity, NCES may not consider the full breadth of educational goals that Christian school administrators value. As Lee and Cheng (2021) observed, one limitation of relying on NCES data is that it “did not probe school leaders for what they may consider the ultimate ends of education. A survey of Christian school leaders could consider other priorities” (p. 19). To fill this gap, we asked our sample to rank an additional ten goals that may be distinctly considered by Christian schools (see Table 2).

The consensus pick was that the most important goal of Christian schools is helping students in “developing intimate relationships with Jesus Christ.” This goal was closely followed by “grounding students in the Christian faith” (an average rank of 3.0), “developing cultural discernment and a biblical worldview” (4.6), and

promoting biblical literacy (4.7). The least important goals included “developing knowledge of a specific theological tradition” (9.2), preparing students to be countercultural (7.7), and “training students for a life of ministry and service” (7.6).

The pattern of administrators’ responses to these questions closely mirrors what they perceive to be the most important reasons for which parents would choose their schools (see Table 3). Nearly half of all administrators in our sample stated that spiritual formation would be the top reason, followed by academic quality and school culture (each with an average rank of 3.1). The least important reasons for choosing their schools included professional/vocational opportunities (7.8), disciplinary environment (6.9), and athletics (6.5).

Table 2: Administrators’ Distinctly Christian Goals for Students

Distinctly Christian Goals	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Avg. Rank
Intimate Relationship with Jesus	68.2%	15.9%	1.7
Ground in Christian Faith	15.3%	39.4%	3.0
Biblical Worldview	5.3%	11.2%	4.6
Biblical Literacy	3.5%	13.5%	4.7
Train Ambassadors for Christ	2.4%	8.8%	5.5
Promote Spiritual Disciplines	0.6%	3.5%	5.5
Prepare to Fulfill Great Commission	2.9%	5.9%	5.9
Life of Ministry/Service	1.2%	1.2%	7.2
Countercultural Living	0.6%	0.0%	7.7
Knowledge of Theological Tradition	0.0%	0.6%	9.2

Table 3: How Administrators Ranked the Reasons a Parent Might Choose Their School

Distinctly Christian Goals	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Avg. Rank
Spiritual Formation	49.4%	21.8%	2.3
Academic Quality	11.8%	32.9%	3.1
School Culture	22.9%	21.8%	3.1
Peers and Social Environment	4.1%	6.5%	4.9
School Safety	7.6%	11.2%	4.9
School Programs	2.9%	4.1%	5.5
Athletics	0.6%	1.2%	6.5
Disciplinary Environment	0.0%	0.0%	6.9
Professional/Vocational Opportunities	0.6%	0.6%	7.8

A Christian Philosophy of Education

How much does the Christian faith influence various aspects of the Christian school? With respect to a school’s mission and philosophy (see Figure 15), unsurprisingly, faith has a “major” influence on a school’s statement of faith (91 percent) and mission statement (89 percent). Faith also greatly informs school culture (75 percent), portrait of a graduate (72 percent), parent and family relations (64 percent), engagement with social issues (58 percent) and school discipline (55 percent). It has comparatively less bearing on a schools’ philosophy of diversity (36 percent), special education (44 percent), and dress code (34 percent).

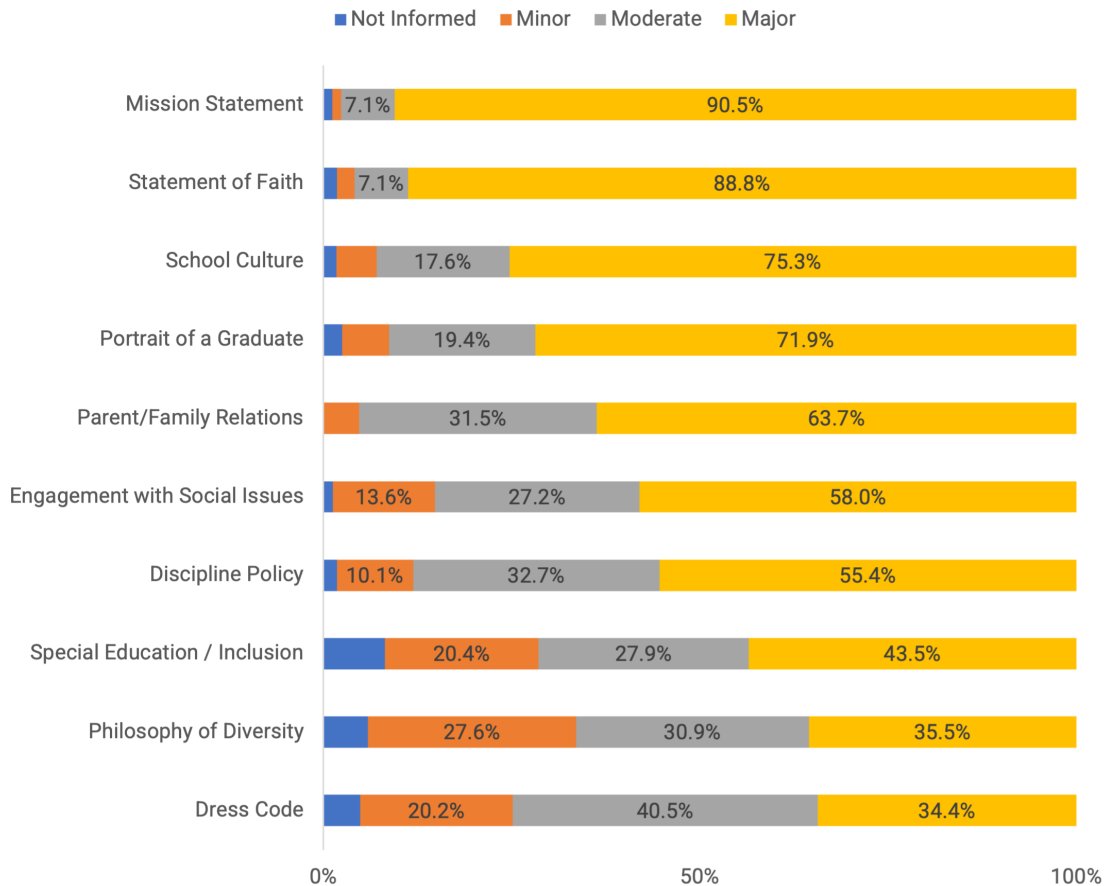
With respect to academics (see Figure 16), we observe some similarities with what teachers reported. Again,

unsurprisingly, faith has a “major” influence on a school’s Bible curriculum (87 percent). It also has considerable influence on other curricula, including science (55 percent), and social studies (49 percent), and English. It has comparatively less bearing on math curriculum (25 percent), extracurriculars (24 percent), and homework policy (18 percent).

Finally, with respect to school operations (see Figure 17), administrators were nearly identical with teachers, reporting “major” influence on personnel decisions (79 percent), but comparatively less on professional development (50 percent), school budget (41 percent), technology (38 percent), and tuition (35 percent).

When asked which of the following statements best describes the respondent’s understanding of a biblical

Fig. 15: How Much Administrators Report Faith Informs Aspects of School's Mission/Philosophy



philosophy of Christian education (see Figure 18), administrators were again nearly identical to the US sample of Christian school teachers. Roughly three-fifths reported that “Christian education takes place in partnership with parents, who are charged with training their children.” One-quarter of administrators that Christian education “takes place in partial fulfillment of the Great Commission to make disciples,” while the remaining administrators identified “obedience to God’s command to love neighbor” or some other reason as the biblical philosophy of Christian education.

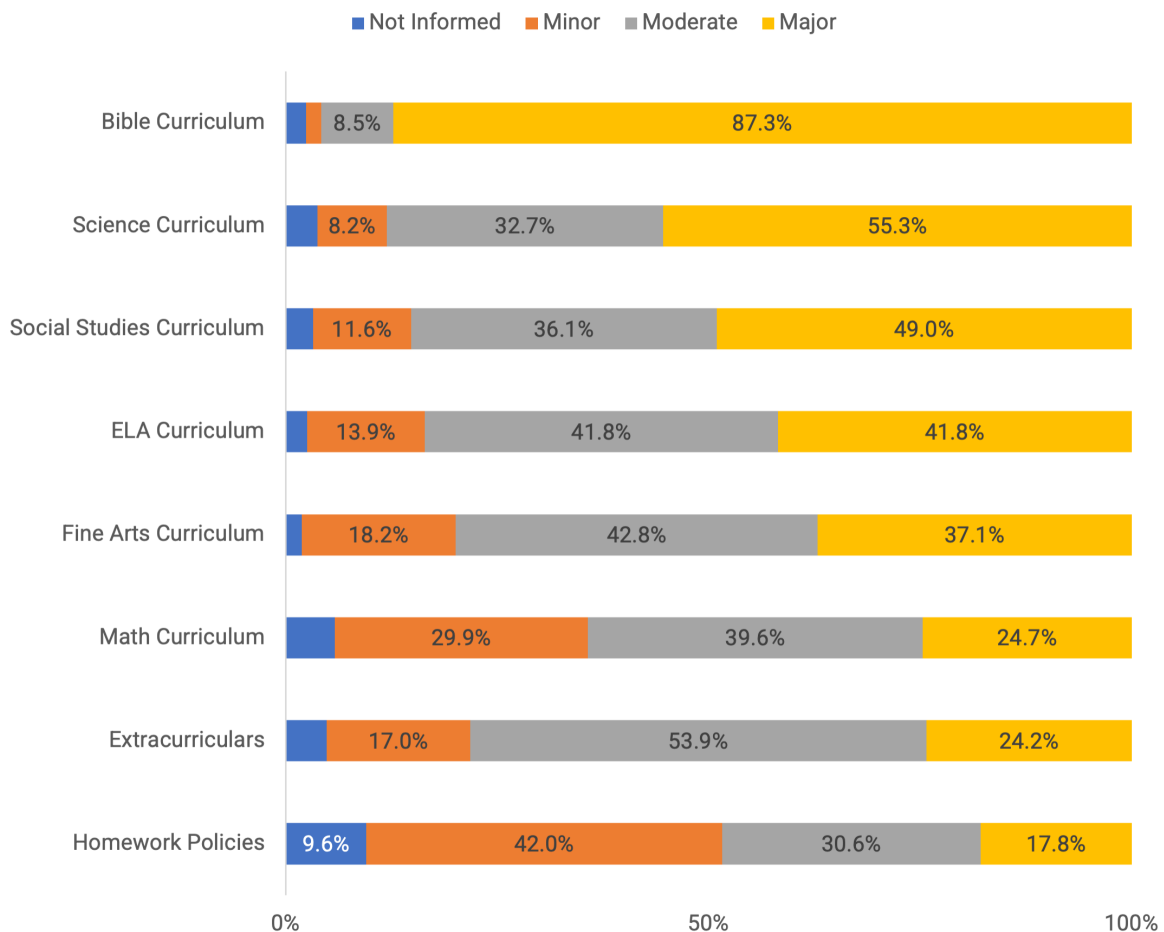
Discussion

In this final section, we highlight a few key findings from our report and draw concluding thoughts from the analysis.

Consistent with the findings of previous research on Christian school leadership, we find that administrators in ACSI member schools place a high priority on spiritual or moral formation and academic excellence, and relatively low emphasis on career readiness (Lee et al., 2021; Lee & Cheng, 2021). We make an important contribution to understanding the purpose of a Christian education by broadening consideration of the goals of Christian education outside of those asked on the NCES National Teacher and Principal Survey.

This report, together with our report on teacher preparation in Christian schools, provides some helpful insights for the ways in which administrators and teachers prepare for their roles and view the interplay of faith and education. First, we observe that leaders and teachers

Fig. 16: How Much Administrators Report Faith Informs Aspects of School's Academics



are largely in agreement about how they perceive faith influences Christian schools, the purpose of Christian education, and the philosophy of Christian education. This sense of missional alignment from leadership to faculty is encouraging to observe in the data.

Second, we find that many leaders, like teachers, attain degrees in the field of education. Schools should consider whether this is a mimetic practice in which Christian schools emulate public schools, many of which require an education degree or certification to teach (Burke, 2016), despite the fact that there is little evidence of a relationship between an education degree and effectiveness as a teacher or school leader (Goldhaber, 2019) the value of formalized preservice teacher education is unclear. In this review of the quantitative evidence about teacher preparation programs, We find that most studies show only minor differences in the value added of teachers who graduate from different programs, and that there are only a few studies that focus on the association between the features of teacher preparation and teacher workforce outcomes. The lack of evidence on the importance of the features of teacher preparation is primarily due to data deficiencies: data often do not permit connections between TPP features and teacher workforce outcomes. As a consequence, feedback loops that could theoretically provide TPPs with actionable information about program design typically do not exist. However, this raises the question as to which characteristics predict educator effectiveness. Research

does not come to any definitive conclusion on this matter, and even if it did, leaders of Christian schools may rightly question whether those findings would generalize to the faith-based sector. It is clear *that* we must attend to the administrator pipeline, yet more research is needed to understand this concern more fully.

Third, by comparing and contrasting the perceived influence of administrators and teachers on the life of the school, school leaders can gain additional insights. Teachers are more likely than administrators to report having a “major” influence on professional development, but administrators believe they are more likely to have a “major” influence on every other aspect of the school. This pattern may simply be a reflection of reality—administrators exert more influence than teachers by virtue of their position—but it may also highlight an opportunity for administrators to exercise more supportive leadership, one of the constructs of the Flourishing School Culture Model (Lee, 2022). It is worth noting that many administrators and teachers feel they have a “major” influence on the spiritual formation of students.

One way in which school leaders may gain these insights into spiritual formation and biblical worldview development at their schools is by administering the Flourishing Faith Index (FFI), which ACSI plans to make available in the 2023-2024 school year. The FFI builds on the work of the Flourishing School Culture Instrument

Fig. 17: How Much Administrators Report Faith Informs Aspects of School's Operations

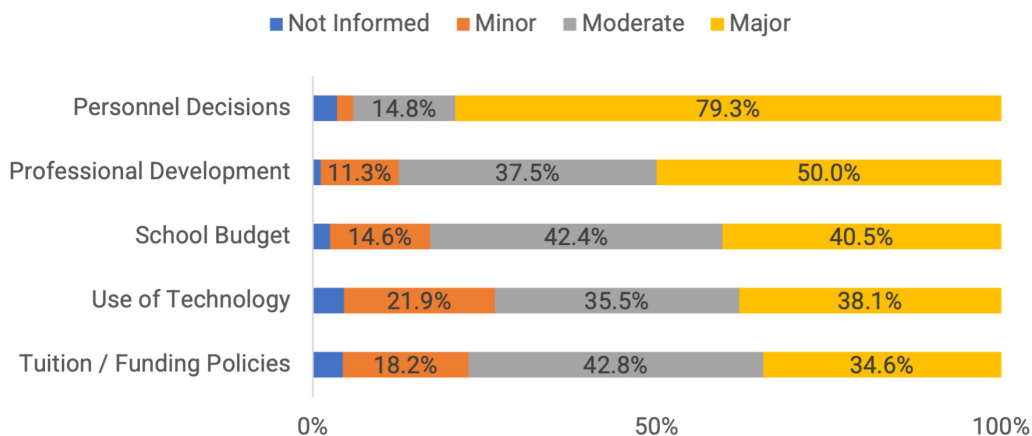
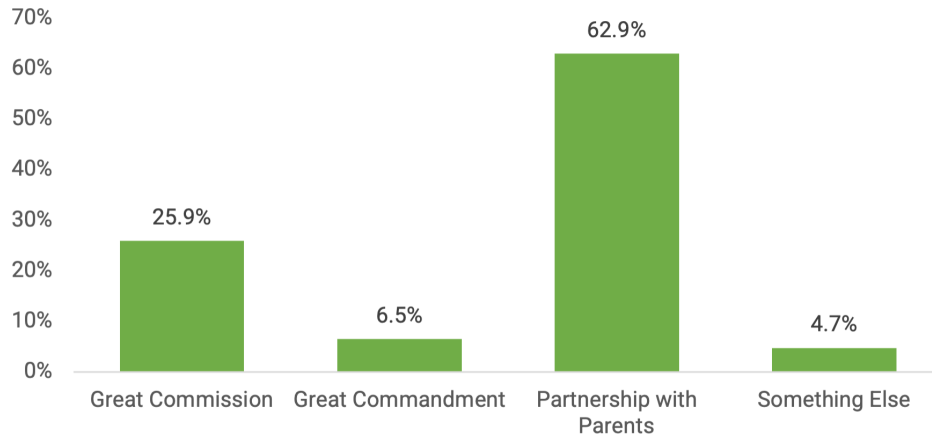


Fig. 18: Administrators' Philosophy of Education



(FSCI) as a validated survey tool for measuring spiritual formation and biblical worldview development in Christian schools. The FFI includes such validated constructs as Spiritual Growth, which measures how supported administrators, teachers, and staff feel in their own spiritual

health and growth, and Sabbath-Keeping, which measures the extent to which school policies help the school community keep the Sabbath.

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