



ACSI Working Paper No. 2024-04

## Which Characteristics Do School Boards Value When Hiring Heads of School? Experimental Evidence from American Christian Schools

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**Purpose:** Though school boards play an important role in governing schools, little empirical research examines board governance particularly with respect to administrator hiring decisions. This study aimed to help close this research gap with a stated preferences experiment, focusing on head of school hiring decisions by private Christian school boards. **Research Methods:** This study uses as experimental identification strategy known as conjoint analysis to examine whether academic achievement, education, and experience impact the likelihood of head of school hire. We use data from the Flourishing Faith Index (FFI), a survey instrument fielded by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), the largest Protestant school organization in the United States and one of the largest school organizations of any kind worldwide. **Findings:** We find evidence that board members place a premium on extensive teaching or leadership experience (37 percentage points), strong academic achievement and qualifications (24 points), and graduation from a postsecondary institution sharing their school's religious tradition (16 points). **Implications:** As school administrators play an important role in leading their schools and school boards exercise oversight in part by hiring school administrators, this study has important implications for board governance, head of school hiring, and private Christian school operations.

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Though school boards play an important role in governing schools, little empirical research examines board governance particularly with respect to administrator hiring decisions. This study aimed to help close this research gap with a stated preferences experiment, focusing on head of school hiring decisions by private Christian school boards. **Research Methods:** This study uses as experimental identification strategy known as conjoint analysis to examine whether academic achievement, education, and experience impact the likelihood of head of school hire. We use data from the Flourishing Faith Index (FFI), a survey instrument fielded by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), the largest Protestant school organization in the United States and one of the largest school organizations of any kind worldwide. **Findings:** We find evidence that board members place a premium on extensive teaching or leadership experience (37 percentage points), strong academic achievement and qualifications (24 points), and graduation from a postsecondary institution sharing their school's religious tradition (16 points). **Implications:** As school administrators play an important role in leading their schools and school boards exercise oversight in part by hiring school administrators, this study has important implications for board governance, head of school hiring, and private Christian school operations.

*Keywords:* school board governance, private school leadership, Christian education, labor economics, randomized controlled trial

## **Which Characteristics Do School Boards Value When Hiring Heads of School?**

### **Experimental Evidence from American Christian Schools**

Researchers and practitioners alike argue that heads of school are the cornerstone of their schools' success. In fact, studies show that school leaders can influence teacher retention and satisfaction (Boyd et al., 2011; Ladd, 2011; Marzano, 2005), professional development (Moore & Kochan, 2013; Swaner, 2016), and student achievement (Branch et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2003). Private school leaders, especially, have the autonomy and freedom to foster the well-being of staff and students (Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017). In one review, private school leaders tend to exert more influence over “performance standards, curriculum, professional development, hiring teachers, discipline policy, and budget decisions” relative to public school principals (Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017, p. 11). Furthermore, Christian school leaders have the added responsibility of infusing their school culture with a biblical worldview and providing spiritual leadership for staff and students (Lee et al., 2021; Sikkink, 2012). Due to these added requirements, head of school hiring practices are likely paramount to the success of private Christian schools, perhaps even more so than in other contexts.

Private schools may be governed by an organization, religious institution, or standalone board of trustees (i.e., governing board). For board-led private schools, governing boards are solely responsible for overseeing head of school selection. By hiring the right leader, governing boards fulfill their duty to safeguard their school's mission. Where heads of school are like ship captains who guide their crew and oversee operations, governing boards provide navigation and direction. To succeed, each party must work in tandem. To that end, governance research suggests that strong, trusting, board-head relationships are a key determinant of thriving private schools (Klutts, 2024; Cook, 2023). Such findings highlight the multidimensional nature of

hiring: Christian school governing boards must hire candidates who accept the mission as their mantle, provide spiritual and academic leadership, and excel at operational management. Thus far, the scientific community that studies this topic has established that school leaders influence student-, teacher-, and school-related outputs (Branch et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2009; Moore & Kochan, 2013; Waters et al., 2005). However, there is a gap in the literature where private Christian school leaders are concerned. Labor market and school leadership research does not examine the qualities that governing boards look for in religious head of school candidates. Some qualitative studies (Swaner et al., 2019) examine the role of school leaders in spiritual formation and other faith-related inputs; however, this research does not translate to the hiring process. Therefore, we shore up this gap by focusing on the hiring preferences of religious governing boards.

In common parlance, the term “principal” most often refers to the leader of a traditional public school; however, the term also refers to charter school leaders and the Director of Academic Affairs in Catholic schools (overseen by a president who serves as the primary school leader; see Dygert, 2013). Moreover, terms like “head of school” and “headmaster” are loosely used to describe private and charter school leaders. For example, classical charter schools tend to call their school leader “head of school,” whereas non-classical charter schools refer to their leader as “principal.” Therefore, for the sake of clarity in this study, traditional public school leaders will be called “principals”; charter and private school leaders will be called “heads of school”; and “school leaders” will encompass those from all sectors.

In this study, we use conjoint analysis to examine whether academic achievement, education, and experience impact the likelihood of head of school hire by 141 Christian school board members in the United States. Conjoint analysis allows researchers to identify the degree

to which a series of characteristics factor into multidimensional decisions. Using survey data from the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), we extend a research series that analyzes labor market pipelines in evangelical, Protestant Christian schools (Johnson & Lee, 2023a, 2023b; Johnson et al., 2024). First, we describe the body of literature examining principal effects and effectiveness, as well as conjoint experiments in education. Then, we present our study methodology, including administrative data, sample demographics, and experiment design. Finally, we describe our analytic strategy, explicate the results, analyze our findings, and draw conclusions.

### **Literature Review**

It is widely believed and scientifically supported that school leaders have great capacity to impact their school, staff, and students (Branch et al., 2013; Coelli & Green, 2012; Horng et al., 2010; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Lee & Swaner, 2024). One review of principal value-added research concluded that replacing a lower quality principal with a higher quality principal could yield an additional 2.7 to 2.9 months of learning in reading and math respectively (Grissom et al., 2021). Leaders in private Christian schools have further responsibilities in role modeling faith for their students and ensuring alignment between faith and the school's pedagogical goals (Lee & Cheng, 2021; Sikkink, 2012). What researchers still need to explore is how school leaders achieve such an impact and by what mechanisms they do so. How a governing board hiring committee answers these questions, whether it be conscious or unconscious, will likely influence their perceptions of quality and preferences when considering head of school candidates. And, as our study examines board member perceptions of quality leadership, we begin by summarizing the canon of research covering the myriad ways that heads of school can make an impact and how they likely do so.

In the same way that teacher quality is highly associated with experience (Boyd et al., 2006; Staiger & Rockoff, 2010; Rivkin et al., 2005), researchers have shown that heads of school benefit from tenure and prior experience. Coelli and Green (2012) estimated the effect of principals on grade 12 student outcomes as a function of years spent in their role. They found that new principals exert one-fourth of their total possible impact on English test scores during their first year. As principals were given time to “leave their mark,” principal effects for English achievement and, to a smaller degree, graduation rates increased exponentially. Likewise, researchers have found positive tenure effects for school average achievement (Branch et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2009) and that principals with at least six years of experience tend to lead high performing schools (Branch et al., 2013). Only new principals who served as assistant principal beforehand overcame the negative effects (Clark et al., 2009). In all, we see that principal turnover is detrimental to school performance (Beteille et al., 2012; Dhuey & Smith, 2014) and that “leadership changes can be mitigated when vacancies are filled by individuals with prior experience” (Beteille et al., 2012).

Additionally, experienced heads of school manage teacher turnover to benefit the school workforce. Although research on this topic is nuanced, showing that teacher turnover can be harmful or helpful, one factor that can make all the difference is principal experience. For example, Clark et al. (2009) found that principals with at least five years of experience had lower turnover rates; Branch et al. (2013) found that effective principals increased turnover in low-performing grades; and Dhuey and Smith (2014) found that hiring more effective principals decreased the count of National Board Certified teachers and increased the number of new teachers. So, is principal-driven teacher turnover itself helpful or harmful? Branch et al. (2013) provide an answer:

By not rehiring less effective teachers or encouraging them to leave, a successful principal can raise the effectiveness of the teaching force if the replacements outperform the departing teachers. In contrast, a principal that alienates the more effective teachers or hires poorly may lower the quality of instruction. Because high teacher turnover is associated with both improvement and decline in the quality of instruction, the level of turnover provides little information on the wisdom of principal personnel decisions. (p. 4)

Thus, harmful effects notwithstanding, quality principals manage the inflow and outflow of teachers and ensure that the best possible instructors remain, thereby elevating the quality of the workforce.

Organizational management skills such as maintaining campus facilities, managing budgets, and developing a safe school environment are also components of principal success (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Indeed, principals who balance day-to-day instructional leadership with their operational duties seem to produce school improvement. Horng et al. (2010) found non-experimental evidence that proficient organization management skills yield positive school-level effects in student test scores, teacher perceptions of school climate, and parent perceptions of safety. These results showcase additional elements of schooling and education that school leaders influence.

Finally, in discussing the tenets of effective school leadership, it is also important to discuss the qualities of *Christian* heads of school. They are responsible for overseeing both academic growth and spiritual flourishing, which adds yet another facet to an already complex role. This dual mission in Christian education is evidenced in one school's mission statement: our school "exists to cultivate Christ-centered leaders who know truth, practice goodness, and recognize beauty. We will pursue excellence in character, scholarship, and service out of



reverence for God and His glory.”<sup>1</sup> Here, it is clear that academic excellence is paramount; however, it is presented as one of several priorities in addition to faith, character, servant heartedness, and an appreciation for goodness and truth (Swaner et al., 2019). So, what qualities enable heads of school to accomplish these things in addition to leadership experience, workforce quality improvement, and operational management skills? Quantitative research suggests that school leaders in these contexts can exercise leadership by role modeling their faith (Sikkink, 2012) and promoting teacher well-being through spiritual disciplines such as Sabbath-keeping (Lee & Djita, 2024; Lee & Swaner, 2023). Qualitative surveys suggest that such exemplary school leaders are men and women of faith who display Christlike behavior, inspire their staff and students, care deeply about the well-being and spiritual development of their teachers, and lead through service (Banke et al., 2011; Zaharris et al., 2017; Richardson & Hindman, 2023). In other words, “spiritually [healthy] leaders are exemplary and exemplary leaders are spiritually healthy” (Zaharris et al., 2017).

Thus far, we have elucidated the many ways a school leader candidate might be considered effective and, therefore, worth hiring. We also established the possible benefits and pitfalls that come with hiring new heads of school. What remains to be seen and what we hope to uncover in this study is what qualities are valued the most by Christian school boards and how much these qualities might influence the likelihood of hire for head of school candidates. Next, we discuss the history of conjoint analysis and its application to education science and its particular usefulness for approaching the problem we’ve outlined.

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<sup>1</sup> Mission statement from the private school, Anthem Classical Academy:  
<https://www.anthemclassical.org/about-us>

### *Conjoint Experiments and Education Research*

Conjoint experiments are a common survey-based approach that emerged in mathematical psychology in the 1960's (Luce & Tukey, 1964). In the following decade, marketing research scientists (Green & Rao, 1971; Green & Srinivasan, 1978; Johnson, 1974) established the foundations of conjoint measurement, which proliferated across the theoretical and applied sciences. For example, this research method is used in political science (Abramson et al., 2022; Hainmueller et al., 2014; Horiuchi et al., 2020; Leeper et al., 2020), agricultural economics and food research (Asioli et al., 2016; Onozaka & McFadden, 2011), health and medicine (Vick and Scott, 1998; Vigneau et al., 2019), as well as labor market and hiring research (Biesma et al., 2007; Eriksson et al., 2016; Humburg & Velden, 2015). This approach can be used to identify respondents' "preferences for characteristics without stating them, ranking them, or even necessarily being aware of them." Thus, researchers can "not only identify the preferred value of each attribute, but also rank the attributes in order of importance" (Giersch & Dong, 2018, p. 434).

Giersch and Dong (2018) used conjoint methods to study K-12 principal hiring preferences, thereby expanding labor market and education administration research. Respondents were presented with fictitious candidates whose characteristics were randomly assigned (e.g., level of education, years of experience, etc.) and asked to "hire" one from each pair. Indeed, the selection process can be compared to an ophthalmologist identifying the ideal level of correction for a near- or far-sighted patient. Patients are presented with a set of visual pairings and asked, "Which one is sharper, A or B?" Giersch and Dong found that principals prefer candidates with a bachelor's degree from a prestigious institution or an advanced degree; however, they more heavily weighted experience over educational attainment. Since then, ACSI has initiated a

research series using conjoint analysis to examine stakeholder preferences in the private Christian school sector (Johnson et al., 2024). Most recently, they studied administrators' favorability toward teacher candidate characteristics such as academic qualifications, experience, and graduation from a Christian college or university. They also investigated which school-level qualities influenced parent enrollment decisions in the private Christian school sector (Lee et al., 2024). In this study, we extend this series of studies by analyzing what attributes board members value when hiring head of school candidates and how much each attribute may impact the likelihood of being hired.

## **Methodology**

### *Data*

In the fall of 2022, ACSI produced a research tool called the Flourishing Faith Index (FFI). This survey instrument exists “to provide powerful insights for Christian schools as they seek to carry out their missions and support the work of families and churches” (Lee et al., 2023). In total, the survey was completed by 10,000 individuals from 29 American and four international Christian schools. Respondents belonged to seven constituencies: students, parents, alumni, teachers, school leaders, support staff, and board members. According to ACSI, the schools in our sample are broadly representative of ACSI membership based on enrollment, tuition cost, and geographic location (for those operating in the United States).

### *Sample*

To be considered a participating school, at least 60% of board member recipients were required to respond. In total, 151 board members completed the pilot survey and the enclosed conjoint experiment. After removing respondents located outside the United States, as well as those who did not provide individual- or school-level demographic information, our final sample

consisted of 141 board members. On average, respondents were married (94%) men (67%) who identified as White (97%) and reported having a child (79%) or grandchild (11%) enrolled in their school at some point in time. The average reported age was 53 years old, with a median of 51.5 years and range of 23 to 81. Next, 45% of board members reported that their highest degree was a bachelor's, 26% a master's, and 14% a doctoral or specialist degree. Respondents reported serving a mean of 13 years on any school board, with a median of eight years and range of two to 35. At the time of the survey, three quarters of respondents reported serving six years or less on their current school board. Specifically, they served an average of five years, with a median of four years and a maximum of 26 years.

With respect to board members' school characteristics, we found that the average student enrollment count was 505 students, with a median of 370 students and a range of 117 to 1,671 students. According to NCES' Private School Universe Survey (Broughman et al., 2021), the average enrollment count of ACSI member schools in 2019-20 was 207 students. Therefore, our sample is skewed towards larger schools and, as a result, larger annual budgets. Board members in our sample reported an average school budget of \$4.28 million USD, with a median of \$3 million and a range of \$1.04 to \$13.44 million per annum. Consequently, we recommend caution when interpreting results since our findings apply to larger-than-average schools with commensurate budgets.

[Table 1 about here]

### ***Experiment Design***

For the conjoint experiment, survey respondents were asked a series of questions to gauge what characteristics they valued when considering head of school candidates for hire. For each question, the board members were asked, "Consider the three applicants below. Which candidate would you prefer to hire for your school as Head of School?" Each board member was

then presented with four sets of three mock candidates and asked to hypothetically hire one candidate in each set. The candidates were randomly assigned a different combination of the following attributes: academic achievement and qualifications, level of teaching and leadership experience, as well as whether the candidate attended a Christian postsecondary institution and graduated from the board member's K-12 school (see Table 2). In total, twelve head of school candidates were presented to the respondent for selection and twelve were "hired."

[Table 2 about here]

As an extension of Johnson et al.'s (2024) study of hiring preferences in Christian schools, we used the characteristics they analyzed in their conjoint study. The attributes listed in Table 2 might reasonably be found on a resume or gleaned by hiring personnel during an interview. Furthermore, they attest to the applicant's ability to provide academic and spiritual leadership within the classroom or an entire school. In fact, teacher labor market research in general overwhelmingly suggests that academic achievement (for example, Goldhaber, 2019) and teaching experience (Boyd et al., 2007) are related to teacher quality. Similarly, principal labor market research firmly establishes that public school principals have a significant effect on school quality (as measured by academic performance and a host of other outcomes like satisfaction, teacher quality, and retention, etc.; Branch et al., 2013; Chiang, et al., 2012; Clark, 2009; Coelli & Green, 2012; Dean, 2014; Waters et al., 2003). Other studies explore what qualities determine principal effectiveness, such as prior leadership experience (e.g., serving as an assistant principal prior to being hired as principal; Clark et al., 2009; Coelli & Green, 2012), tenure (Branch et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2009), management skills (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Horng et al., 2010), and education (Dhuey & Smith, 2014). Therefore, our first hypothesis is that board members would more strongly prefer hiring school leaders with strong academic

achievements and qualifications, as well as extensive teaching or leadership experience (vis-a-vis modest achievement and limited experience, respectively).

Next, we emphasize the role of faith and familiarity in hiring preferences at religious schools. Christian schools ordinarily hire staff and faculty who are also Christian (Egalite et al., 2014) and, in so doing, expect them to spiritually shepherd those under their purview. For that reason, hiring personnel are responsible for gleaning the nature of prospective candidates' faith and their ability to provide spiritual leadership. In our analysis, we treat graduation from a Christian postsecondary institution as a proxy for school leaders' basic (but not necessarily guaranteed) capability to provide spiritual oversight and guidance to their staff and students. The underlying assumption we make here is that time spent at a Christian college or university provides one with opportunities to observe and practice spiritual leadership in real world settings (Johnson et al., 2023a; Lee et al., in press). Given that school leader job applicants can garner spiritual leadership experience outside of academia (Banke et al., 2011), this characteristic is recognized as a noisy proxy for Christian spiritual leadership (Johnson et al., 2024). Finally, we include information about whether candidates attended the board member's school because of familiarity with the school and, potentially, if the board member has a demonstrable impact on the likelihood of being hired. In other words, we assume that candidates with personal knowledge of a school's culture, mission, history, and leadership can strengthen their application and their chances of being hired. Thus, we hypothesize that graduating from a Christian postsecondary institution and graduating from the board member's school will increase the likelihood of hire.

### *Analytic Strategy*

Because head of school candidates were assigned hypothetical characteristics at random, this experiment allows us to determine the causal impact of each characteristic on the likelihood that board members will hypothetically hire a given candidate (Hainmueller et al., 2014). We assume board member  $m$  will hire head of school candidate  $h$  from among  $h = 1, \dots, H$  options based on an unobserved utility model, which is a function of head of school candidate  $h$ 's academic achievement and qualifications ( $A_h$ ), teaching and leadership experience ( $E_h$ ), as well as whether the candidate attended a Christian postsecondary institution ( $C_h$ ) and if they attended the board member's K-12 school specifically ( $S_h$ ). We assume that the selection of a candidate within each set will be that which achieves the highest total utility. Thus, we use average marginal component effects (AMCE) to estimate the causal impact of each characteristic on the likelihood of being hired by board members in our sample. Using the *conjoint* package in Stata, we calculate the following:

$$hire_{msh} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 A_{msh} + \beta_2 S_{msh} + \beta_3 C_{msh} + \beta_4 E_{msh} + \epsilon_{ms} \quad (1)$$

Accordingly,  $hire_{msh}$  is a binary variable where 1 indicates if board member  $m$  decides to employ head of school candidate  $h$  in set  $s$ . This outcome variable is defined as a function of the distribution of the treatment components, namely, head of school characteristics.  $A_{msh}$  is a binary variable indicating whether head of school candidate  $h$  possesses strong academic qualifications and achievements. In this case, modest academic qualifications and achievements serve as the omitted category. Next,  $S_{msh}$  takes a value of 1 if head of school candidate  $h$  graduated from the board member's school and 0 if they do not. Likewise,  $C_{msh}$  takes a value of 1 if head of school candidate  $h$  graduated from a Christian postsecondary institution and 0 if they graduated from a non-Christian institution.  $E_{msh}$  indicates whether candidate  $h$ 's experience is extensive or limited,

and  $\varepsilon_{ms}$  represents the conventional error term. Finally, we clustered the standard errors at the respondent level due to the non-independence of selections made by each respondent.

In the next section, we present AMCE for the main result and marginal means (MM) for the subgroup analysis of board member characteristics. AMCE represents the average, causal effect of a characteristic on the probability that a hypothetical candidate will be hired. It is beneficial in this context because the AMCE captures both the direction and intensity of board member preferences (Bansak et al., 2021; Ganter, 2020). Thus, from this analysis we can glean whether each attribute influences the selection process, if the influence positive or negative, and how much influence each attribute exerts on the outcome.

## **Results**

### ***Overall Results***

As shown in Table 3, we find that three of the four characteristics in our model have a statistically significant, causal effect on the likelihood of a hypothetical candidate being hired by a board member. Overall, board members prefer head of school candidates who graduated from a Christian postsecondary institution and have strong academic qualifications and extensive experience. Board members are 16 percentage points more likely to hire a head of school candidate with strong academic achievement and qualifications relative to a head of school with modest achievement. Next, we find that graduating from a Christian postsecondary institution increases the likelihood of being hired by 24 percentage points, relative to a non-Christian institution. We also find that, relative to limited experience, board members are 37 percentage points more likely to select a head of school candidate who has extensive teaching and leadership experience. These findings are statistically significant at the 0.001 level. Finally, we find that



graduating from the board member's school marginally increases one's likelihood of being hired (3.7 percentage points); however, this finding is not statistically significant at the 0.1 level.

[Table 3 about here]

[Figure 1 about here]

### ***Results by Board Member Characteristics***

Next, we use marginal means to test subgroup preferences among board members (Figures 2, 3 and 4). In other words, we identify whether board member characteristics (e.g., gender, highest degree, and experience serving on a board) moderate hiring decisions. Altogether, respondent preferences do not differ according to gender and educational attainment. However, there is variation by years of board experience. In Figure 4, we find that board members with 10 to 20 years of board experience are 55 percentage points more likely to prefer non-alumni candidates over those who graduated from their school. In comparison, board members with less than 10 and more than 20 years of experience do not show a strong preference for one or the other (six and nine percentage points, respectively). Next, more experienced board members have a stronger preference for graduates of Christian colleges and universities (47 percentage points) than mid-level and less experienced board members (16 and 12 percentage points, respectively). In other words, veteran board members value a reliable pipeline of school leaders from Christian universities to their Christian school. Finally, we find that board members view head of school candidate experience differently depending on their own tenure. While mid-level members have no preference, more and less tenured members prefer candidates with extensive experience (33 and 47 percentage points, respectively).

[Figures 2-4 about here]

## Discussion

It is challenging to conduct “useful empirical research on principal effectiveness [because] the complex nature of principal work makes categorization of behaviors difficult” (Brewer, 1993). This is especially true for Christian heads of school because faith is difficult to measure or quantify. However, the advancement of scientific research methods and creativity of those who have gone before us provide a way to peer behind the veil. Conjoint analysis applied to education research bypasses the issues of self-reporting and allows us to examine the strength and direction of governing board hiring preferences in Christian schools. We hypothesized that school boards would be more likely to hire heads of school with strong academic achievement and extensive experience, as well as those who graduated from their school and a Christian postsecondary institution. Overall, we find evidence that board members value three of the four characteristics: academic achievement, experience, and college type. Board members are more likely to hire head of school candidates who attended a Christian college or university and demonstrate a history of leadership and strong academic qualifications. Specifically, board members place the highest premium on teaching and leadership experience. Having extensive experience increases the likelihood of hire by 37 percentage points, relative to limited experience. Next, having strong academic achievement and qualifications increases the likelihood of hire by 24 percentage points (compared to moderate achievement). We also find that graduating from a Christian postsecondary institution increases the likelihood of hire by 16 percentage points relative to a secular institution. Regarding the impact of attending a board member’s school, we find small, nonsignificant hiring effects (3.7 percentage points). Board members do not appear to prefer alumni and the familiarity signaled by having attended the

school. Altogether, school board members in our sample seem to value the same qualities that are heralded in public school leadership praxis and Christian school research.

There are some notable differences between the findings of this study of head of school hiring decisions and Johnson et al.'s (2024) study of teacher hiring decisions. Both studies were conducted as part of ACSI's FFI pilot study, involved the same 33 schools (Lee et al., 2024), and implemented a similar experimental strategy. However, this present study surveyed board members for head of school hiring preferences while Johnson et al.'s (2024) study queried school administrators for teacher hiring preferences. Both studies found that respondents favored candidates with strong academic qualifications and extensive experience who graduated from a Christian college or university. However, board members did not prefer graduates of the school they represented ( $0.04, p > 0.1$ ) while administrators preferred homegrown candidates ( $0.13, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, board members placed a greater premium on experience for heads of school ( $0.37, p < 0.001$ ) than administrators did for teachers ( $0.26, p < 0.001$ ).

This study has three main limitations: sample size, limited generalizability, and construct clarity. First, the sample size is small and, consequently, lacks variation. Second, our sample features Christian school leaders from ACSI member schools, many of which have larger student bodies and annual budgets than the average. Furthermore, the board members in our sample are predominately white. As a result, our findings may not generalize to larger, more diverse schools or those outside of Christian education. In addition, this research may not generalize to principal literature, broadly, but it can inform hiring practices in Christian schools. Third, as a stated preferences experiment, our constructs are subject to interpretation by survey respondents (e.g., achievement and qualifications, as well as teaching or leadership).

As an extension of this line of inquiry, we recommend that researchers evaluate the impact of experience type on head of school effectiveness. Although researchers have highlighted the benefits of serving as an assistant principal beforehand (Clark et al., 2009), the wider body of literature focuses exclusively on experience in the principalship. While this type of experience is likely beneficial—probably the most beneficial—we don't know if experience in corporate leadership, for example, or other professional areas translates to head of school effectiveness. If different types of leadership experience do translate to principal effectiveness, however, hiring personnel in private Christian schools could look to other industries for additional qualified candidates.

Finally, shifting our focus to board recruitment, researchers should consider what qualities private Christian school board members value when recruiting and selecting new members. This would be especially beneficial as philosophies of governance and industry best-practice differ regarding what qualities should be prioritized (e.g., prior board experience; faith; education-related work; personal network; and other specialized skills such as fundraising, accounting, architecture, or legal analysis, etc.). Experimental evidence of what qualities are valued, aside from what is recommended, would shed light on the recruitment and onboarding process for governing boards in Christian schools.

In summary, this research suggests that prior teaching and leadership experience, a degree from a college or university that shares the school's faith tradition, and strong academic qualifications are the qualities most likely to get a Christian school leader candidate hired. That is to say, they seem to believe that these qualities most closely correlate with strong leadership. Such findings beg the question: do these qualities actually translate to successful leadership?

Further research ought to explore if experience, education, and Christian postsecondary education are in fact predictors of success in religious schools.

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## Tables

**Table 1**  
*Sample Demographic Characteristics*

Characteristics	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	N
<b>Board Member</b>						
Male	0.67		0.47	0	1	138
Nonwhite	0.03		0.18	0	1	138
White	0.97		0.16	0	1	138
Age	53.29	51.50	11.79	23	81	140
Married	0.94		0.24	0	1	139
Has had a Child Enrolled	0.79		0.41	0	1	141
Has had a Grandchild Enrolled	0.11		0.32	0	1	141
Bachelor's Highest Degree	0.45		0.50	0	1	141
Master's Highest Degree	0.26		0.44	0	1	141
Doc./Specialist Highest Degree	0.14		0.35	0	1	141
Years Served on Current Board	5.38	4.00	4.84	1	26	141
Years Served on Any Board	13.15	8.00	10.86	2	35	13
<b>Board Member's School</b>						
School Size (Enrollment)	504.96	370	369.42	117	1671	129
School Budget (Millions, USD)	\$4.28	\$3.00	\$3.49	\$1.04	\$13.44	129

*Note.* Out of the 151 board members who completed the conjoint experiment portion of the survey, only 141 respondents were based in the United States and provided the necessary individual and school-level demographic information.

**Table 2***Possible Head of School Characteristics in the Conjoint Experiment*

Variable	Characteristics
Academic Achievement / Qualifications	Strong academic achievements / qualifications  Modest academic achievements / qualifications (omitted)
Graduate of Board Member's School	Graduate of the board member's K-12 school Not a graduate of the board member's K-12 school (omitted)
Type of College	Graduated from a Christian postsecondary institution Graduated from a secular postgraduate institution (omitted)
Experience	Extensive teaching / leadership experience Limited teaching / leadership experience (omitted)

**Table 3**  
Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE)

Variable / Levels	$\beta$	SE	P>t
Strong Academic Achievement and Qualifications	0.160***	0.022	0.000
Graduate From Member's School	0.037	0.025	0.131
Graduate of a Christian Postsecondary Institution	0.244***	0.023	0.000
Extensive Teaching and Leadership Experience	0.374***	0.021	0.000

\*\*\*p<.001. Number of observations: 1,692, Number of respondents: 141, H0 = 0.5. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. For academic achievement and qualifications, the omitted category is "modest." For teaching and leadership experience, the omitted category is "limited."



## Figures

**Figure 1**

Average Marginal Component Effects for Head of School Characteristics

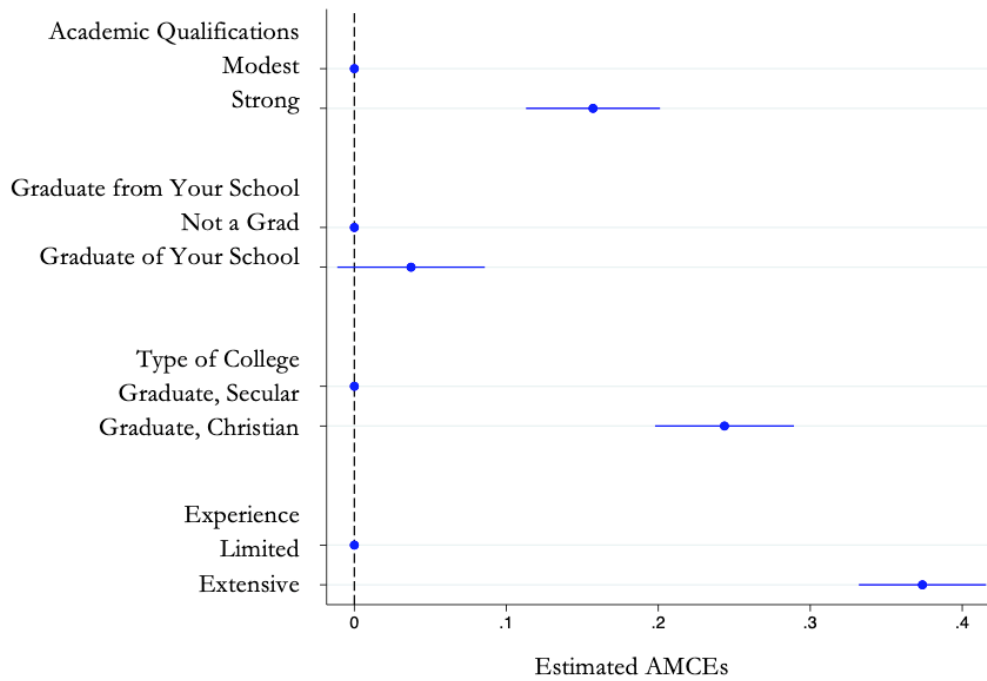
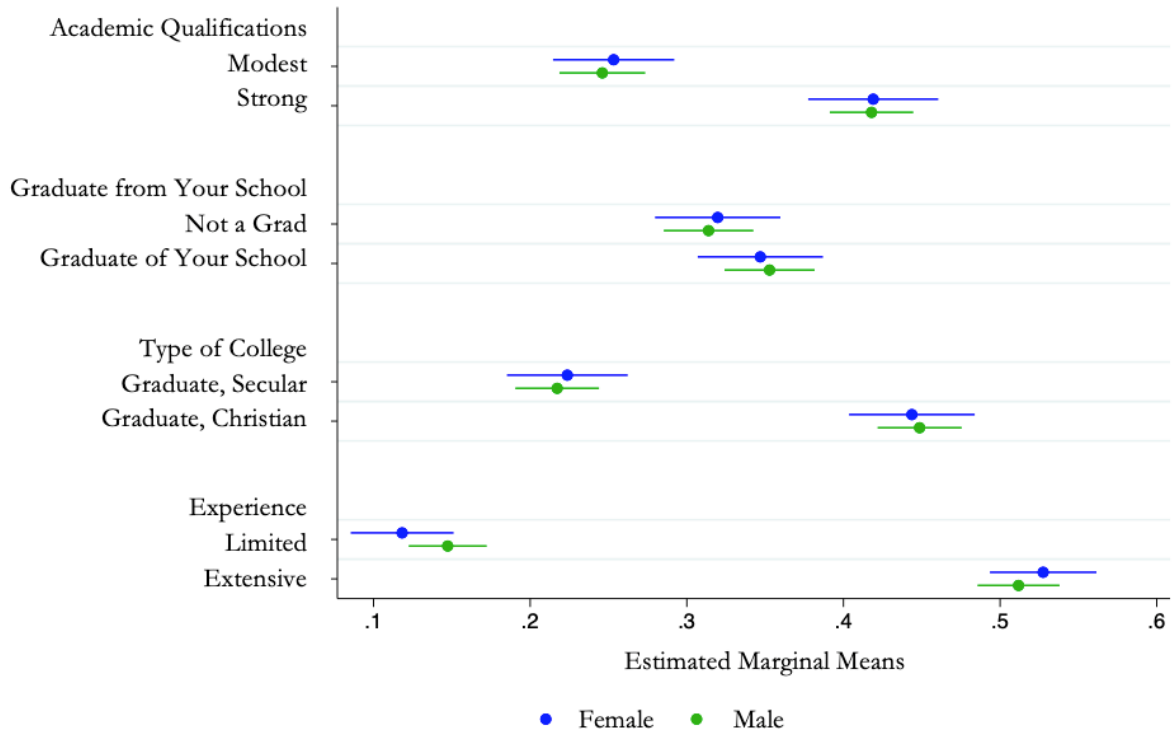


Figure created using “conjoint” package in Stata. Confidence intervals at the 95% level.

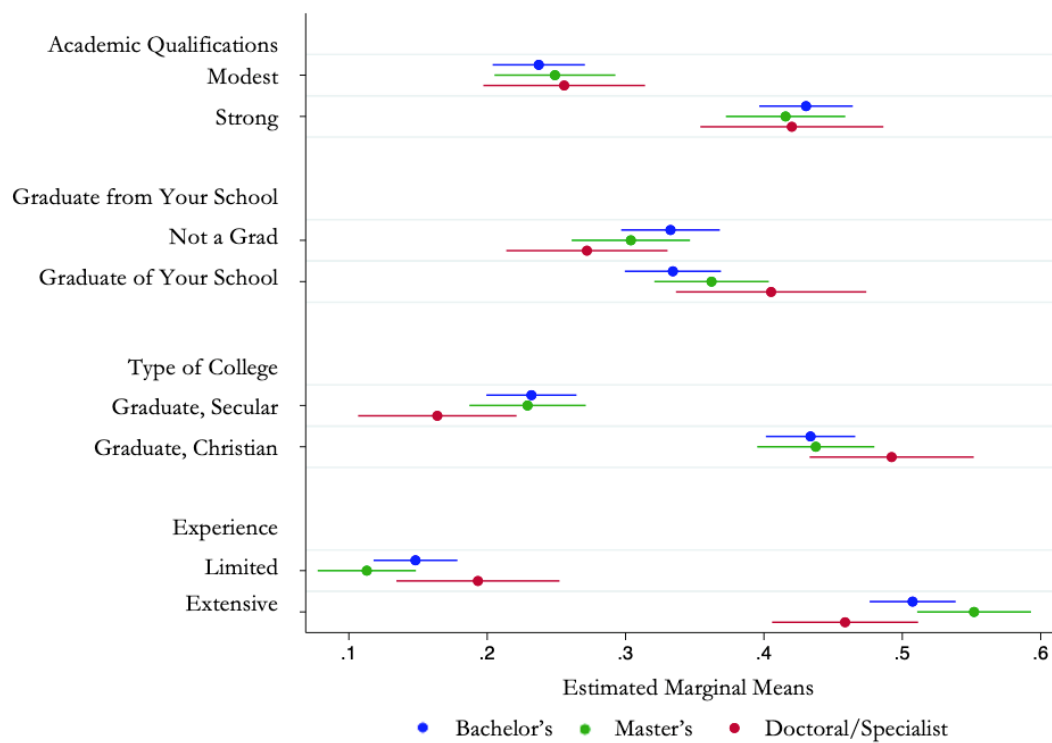
**Figure 2**

## Marginal Means by Board Member Gender



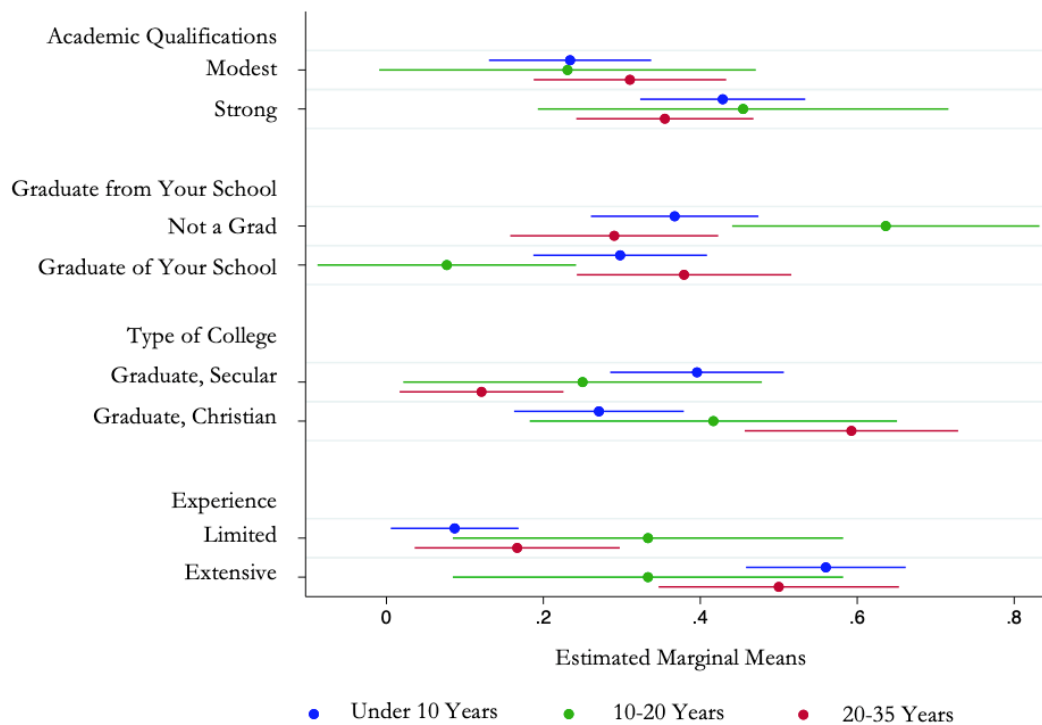
**Figure 3**

Marginal Means by Board Member's Highest Degree



**Figure 4**

Marginal Means by Board Member's Experience on a Board



## Appendix A: Robustness Check

**Table 4**

Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE)

Variable / Levels	$\beta$	SE	P>t
Strong Academic Achievement and Qualifications	0.160***	0.021	0.000
Graduate From Member's School	0.030	0.024	0.209
Graduate of a Christian Postsecondary Institution	0.240***	0.022	0.000
Extensive Teaching and Leadership Experience	0.384***	0.021	0.000

\*\*\*p<.001. Number of observations: 1812, Number of respondents: 151,  $H_0 = 0.5$ . Standard errors are clustered by respondent. For academic achievement and qualifications, the omitted category is "modest." For teaching and leadership experience, the omitted category is "limited."