

Policy Brief 2018 – 4: Impact of Principal Turnover

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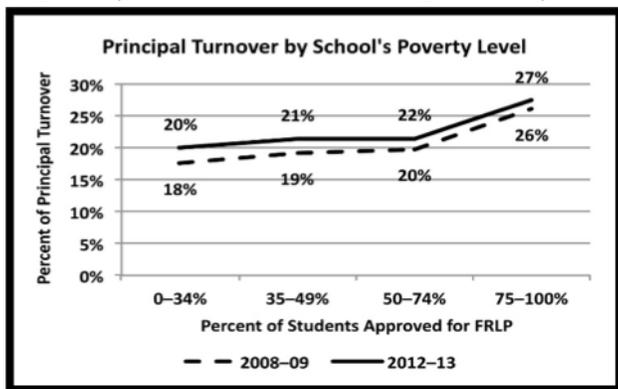
Principals play an important role in determining school effectiveness, developing organizational capacity, and improving student learning. A [principal's impact on student learning](#) is second only to that of a classroom teacher. However, an estimated [22 percent](#) of principals leave their jobs each year.

Principal turnover occurs for both voluntary and involuntary reasons, however [relatively few principals](#) are dismissed for performance each year. Some turnover is due to principals transferring schools, as principals move to more affluent, [better achieving school districts with higher pay](#).

In terms of equity, principal turnover **disproportionately affects low-income students of color** (cf. [Gates et al., 2006](#); [Rangel, 2018](#)). Disparities in turnover have also been found in [charter schools](#) as compared to traditional public schools with charters experiencing greater rates of turnover.

Principals also leave schools facing state and federal accountability sanctions due to low performance, and these schools are also [more likely to serve low-income students of color](#).

Nationally, nearly 30 percent of principals in high-poverty schools leave their campus each year.



Source: Goldring, R., & Taie, S. (2014). Principal attrition and mobility: Results from the 2012-13 Principal Follow-Up Survey. National Center for Education Statistics. Graphic credit: The Wing Institute. (2014). [Does principal turnover correlate with a school's socio-economic status?](#)

This matters because principals have been shown to affect two important drivers of school quality: **(1) student achievement; and (2) teacher retention** (cf. [here](#) and [here](#)).

This is especially important in high-poverty schools, which tend to have higher rates of teacher and principal turnover.

Higher rates of teacher turnover and decreased student achievement have been found in the [years following a principal's departure](#). Correspondingly, schools with higher achievement are less [likely to have new principals and more likely to have consistent school leadership](#).

A previous [policy brief from UCEA](#) explored the role that principals play in potentially reducing teacher turnover and the shortage of teachers.

This brief explores why principal turnover matters and how the effects of this issue are borne out in schools. Specific policy recommendations based on research and aimed at reducing principal turnover are provided.

The High Cost of Principal Turnover

- The cost of developing, hiring, and onboarding a principal has been estimated conservatively at \$75,000, which places financial stress on districts with higher rates of turnover (often the least resourced);
- Excessive principal turnover has been shown to have a negative influence student academic performance, graduation rates, and teacher retention;
- Making changes and building positive momentum through trusting relationships takes time; and
- Leading change effort in a school requires stability and a multi-year (as many as five years) investment ([School Leaders Network, 2014](#)).

The Impact of Principal Turnover

The evidence is clear that frequent turnover of school leadership results in lower teacher retention and can negatively impact student achievement gains.

Student Outcomes. Principal turnover negatively impacts student achievement and graduation rates.

Research suggests student achievement decreases [following a principal's departure](#) and the drop may persist for as many as five years. When students in a high school experience [two consecutive principal changes](#), graduation rates have been shown to decline.

Principals who remain in their positions tend have the opposite effect on student achievement. In one study, researchers found the [longer a principal stays in their position](#), the greater the levels of achievement on that campus.

Teacher Turnover. When principals leave, teachers follow. This simultaneous effect of departing school leadership and teaching staff erodes school climate and culture.

"No one knows who I am," exclaimed a senior in a high-poverty, predominantly minority and low performing high school in the Austin area. She explained, "I have been at this school four years and had four principals and six algebra I teachers,"
(Excerpt from Fuller, 2012).

One study found that the odds of teacher departure were 17 percent greater the year after a principal departed.

Further, leadership changes are particularly harmful in high-poverty and lower achieving schools with the most inexperienced teachers. Part of the principal → teacher turnover effect is attributed to a decline in campus culture once a school leader departs.

Schools that suffer from a revolving door of school leadership experience a lack of

trust, collegiality, and buy-in amongst the teaching staff and students.

Decreased Capacity Building. Principals who are new to a campus have less time to enact capacity building efforts that directly target teacher improvement. Research suggests that principals must be **in place at least five years to successfully implement organizational change** such as recruitment, retention, and staff capacity building.

Conclusions

Principals drive school climate, influence teachers working conditions, and affect student learning in numerous ways. Reducing the churn of principals is a policy action that can play a role in improving school performance. State and local policy modifications can be taken to improve principal preparation, development, and retention.

Recommendations

1. **Preparation:** In terms of leadership preparation and development research recommends: (1) developing more selective, probing processes for use by school districts in choosing candidates; (2) expanding pre-service training to better prepare aspiring principals to become instructional leaders; (3) facilitating partnerships between school districts and preparation programs; (4) exercising state policymaker influence in states to improve the quality of leadership training; and (5) providing access to effective mentoring and professional development for principals tailored to individual and district needs (Mitgang, 2012).
2. **Development:** States and districts should: (1) invest in ongoing professional development for principals; (2) provide opportunities for principals to engage in meaningful networking opportunities with peers; (3)

expand one-on-one mentoring and coaching; and (4) re-envision the role of a principal through Central Office restructuring (School Leaders Network, 2014). Further, development and support should be targeted to early career principals and there should be emphasis on organizational learning and effective use of student- and school-level data.

3. **Support:** The quality of principal support is often the top factor that teachers cite for their decision to leave or stay in the profession, yet research indicates that **principals need support as well**. Recommendations include: (1) extra support and differentiated compensation principals in schools with low-income students; and (2) state and district systems to track and assess principal turnover rates and facilitate targeted intervention.

How to Develop Principals

Sutcher, Podolsky, & Espinoza (2017) identified four areas associated with successful principal development. They suggested that: (1) school districts partner with preparation programs for better coordination of recruitment, curriculum, and field experiences; (2) real-world learning opportunities where participants learn from problem-based learning; (3) access to a cohort with collaborative learning opportunities; and (4) focusing on developing an instructional vision based on data.

What exactly does quality support look like? A district in Georgia created a support program for new principals that pairs retired principals with novice principals for a minimum of four hours a month. The mentors were matched based on similarities between the demographics of the mentor's and the novice's school (see here and here). Novice principals in the program stated that the mentors were helping them to better understand their job responsibilities, reflect, and ask important questions about their leadership roles.

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