

# Turnover Impacts Teaching

Inequity undermines principal longevity, affecting student achievement

By Latoya N. Dixon

**M**ost research on principal turnover indicates two key consequences, according to a 2018 policy brief from the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), and both tend to follow a principal's departure: declines in student achievement and teacher retention.

About 20 percent of principals leave their jobs annually in the U.S., according to 2012 statistics. But this figure is even higher in schools with high concentrations of poverty and a socioeconomically isolated body of students from low-income families. According to UCEA, 30 percent of principals in high-poverty schools leave every year.

We need to determine why those principals are leaving, and the investigation must focus on the reasons why principals in high-poverty schools leave more frequently.

## Why Principals Quit

A 2014 report from the School Leaders Network, "Churn: The High Cost of Principal Turnover," identified a number of reasons why principals leave. Some decide to leave due to the long hours the job requires; others feel restricted by local, state, and national policies. Increasingly challenging responsibilities can have an impact on physical and mental health, leading principals to resign, be dismissed, or change careers. Strenuous conditions are compounded in high-poverty schools.

Acquiring and retaining principals is critical to school improvement, student achievement, and teacher retention. When principals leave or substantially shorten their tenures, these elements suffer—particularly student achievement. Turnover can account for 24 percent of the

variation in academic outcomes for students, says a 2010 report from The Wallace Foundation.

At the heart of the principal turnover challenge are persistent and pervasive issues of inequity in the U.S. A stubborn resistance to making an effort to reduce racial and socioeconomic isolation is likely to continue to play a part in how long principals in high-poverty/low-income schools are willing to stay in their positions.

Who can blame them? Perhaps the tendency to leave more quickly and frequently is simply a reflection of the American public's decision to address the problem of inequity in public schools with a resurgence of segregation via neighborhood schools, gentrification, and weak choice programs. And not only is it difficult to recruit the best and brightest leaders to such challenging school settings, but retaining them also can be equally difficult.

"Twenty-five thousand (one-quarter of the country's principals) leave their schools each year, leaving millions of children's lives adversely affected," says "Churn." "Fifty percent of new principals quit during their third year in the role. Those [who] remain frequently do not stay at high-poverty schools, trading difficult-to-lead schools for less demanding leadership roles that serve more affluent populations."

## A Widespread Problem

Turnover in the principalship has no geographic preference. Among 23 districts analyzed in the District of Columbia for a 2017 article in *The Washington Post*, 21 percent of principals were new to their buildings



in 2017, and more than a quarter of public schools had had at least three principals since 2012.

In Oklahoma, data shows an average tenure of less than four years among principals who serve in low-income and high-minority schools. Similar findings exist in Poughkeepsie, New York, where 20 percent of students were greeted by a different principal when school started this year.

Entering a school that has had numerous leaders in a short period of time creates a set of challenges beyond the typical issues a new leader faces. Ongoing turnover in the District of Columbia's public schools is thought to have caused anxiety, instability, and lack of trust among students, parents, and staff.

#### Consequences Include Costs

The consequences of principal turnover are great, but they are exacerbated in high-poverty schools. Over time, the impact on student achievement, teacher retention, and organizational morale multiplies, creating a pattern that perpetuates the problems we seek to solve by attracting effective leaders. Additionally, turnover has fiscal implications.

A failure to address the root issue of inequity is as fiscally irresponsible as it is ineffective—constant change in who has the keys to the principal's office *costs money*. "Given the average yearly principal churn of 22 percent nationally, this means high-poverty districts spend \$36 million on just hiring costs—not onboarding, and not training," "Churn" says.

Just how much could the nation save if we were to significantly decrease principal turnover in low-income schools? According to the School Leaders Network, investing in efforts to retain principals at the same rate as that of affluent schools could save U.S. school districts \$163 million annually. If tackling racial segregation and socioeconomic isolation doesn't appeal to policy-makers, perhaps its potential impact

on pocketbooks might provide the encouragement they need.

Strategies to address principal turnover include investing in principal preparation and pipeline programs, creating strong peer networks, providing coaching, and revising the structure and purpose of principal supervisor roles. Unfortunately, these solutions do little to address the impact of principal turnover on low-income students.

Until the issue of concentrated racial and socioeconomic isolation is addressed, churn among principals in the schools that need the most help will continue—and so will its effects on student achievement, teacher retention, and morale. **P**

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