

## Effect of Principal Longevity and Turnover on Student Achievement

from  
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From *"The relationship between principal longevity and school performance in a large urban school district,"* by Navella Jean Walker, Mercer University, 2009.

"The purpose of the study was to determine if there is a relationship between principal longevity and five measures of school performance: student achievement, initiatives to improve student achievement, customer satisfaction, school management and overall school performance." The study targeted 98 schools and principals in large urban school districts for the 2006-07 school year. "The findings from the study revealed that principal longevity in the current school is not predictive of school performance. However, **principal longevity in the district or in other locations is significantly related to four of five measures of school performance:** student achievement, customer satisfaction, initiatives to improve student achievement, and overall school performance."

From *"Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning,"* by Karen Seashore Louis et al., July 2010.

From the study's introduction, "a different but quite compelling sort of evidence about leadership effects derives from research on leadership succession. Unplanned principal succession, for example, is a common source of adverse effects on school performance, regardless of what teachers might do. Studies by Macmillan (2000) and Fink & Brayman (2006) demonstrate **the devastating effects of rapid principal succession, especially on initiatives intended to increase student learning.** And rapid succession is very common. Clearly, leadership matters."

The study's data is from nine states, 43 school districts, and 180 elementary, middle, and secondary schools over the course of six years.

On principals' sense of efficacy: "stable and consistent leadership, which we included as a feature of district personnel policies, also contributed ... Principals' commitment to directions established by the district, and confidence in being able to pursue them successfully, were significantly eroded by frequent superintendent turnover. Principals' efficacy was especially challenged when principals were appointed to schools that had been experiencing frequent turnover of leaders in recent years."

The study cites six key findings relating to principal succession/turnover:

- On average, schools experience fairly rapid principal turnover: about one new principal every three to four years.
- **Rapid principal turnover has moderately negative effects on school culture.**
- Rapid principal turnover seems not to have much effect on classroom content or instruction.
- **Rapid principal turnover explains a modest but significant amount of variation in student achievement across schools.**
- Coordinated forms of leadership distribution have the potential to mitigate at least some of the negative consequences of rapid principal turnover.

- Principals newly assigned to schools who initially work within the existing culture of their schools, rather than attempting to quickly, substantially change it, are more likely to avoid negative turnover effects.

On the rate of turnover: “Leadership turnover does not have to occur every year or two to be problematic. Even in cases where a principal’s tenure extends over a period of several years, teachers may remain alienated when principal turnover is the result of a district leadership rotation policy.”

The effects: **“principal turnover explain[s] 24% of the variation in student achievement.”** “Results suggest that principal turnover has significant negative effects on student achievement. These effects are mediated more by school-level than classroom-level conditions.”

Case studies on four schools with high rates of principal turnover suggested the following:

- **Leadership distribution has the potential to moderate the negative consequences of rapid principal turnover.**
- Principals have significant leverage in the distribution of leadership across their schools.
- Planfully aligned patterns of distributed leadership seem likely to contribute most to school improvement efforts once they are established.
- The challenge of fostering leadership distribution is greatly influenced by the existing culture of the school; autonomous teacher cultures are strong sources of resistance to leadership distribution efforts.
- While rapid principal turnover has negative effects on student achievement – on average, some individual schools are able to manage rapid turnover in ways that prevent achievement decline. It seems very unlikely, however, that student achievement will improve under most conditions associated with rapid principal turnover.

The study cites three policy and practice implications from their analysis of principal turnover: **“districts should aim to keep most principals in their schools for a minimum of four years, and preferably five to seven years”**; “under conditions of rapid principal turnover, districts need to encourage incoming principals to understand and respect the school-improvement work in which staff members have previously been engaged”; and “Incoming principals should not have the sole responsibility to encourage distributed leadership in schools that have previously experienced rapid principal turnover.”

*From “Investing in Leadership: The District’s Role in Managing Principal Turnover,”* by B. Mascall and K. Leithwood, 2010.

The article does not have open access, but the executive summary states, “The findings from this qualitative and quantitative analysis show that **rapid principal turnover does indeed have a negative effect on a school, primarily affecting the school culture.** Where there is high principal turnover, taking a coordinated approach to leadership distribution appears to mitigate at least some of the negative consequences of leadership turnover.”

*From "Estimating Principal Effectiveness," by G. Branch et al., 2009.*

The study considers principals in Texas. The abstract states, "principals follow patterns quite similar to those of teachers – preferring schools that have less demands as indicated by higher income students, higher achieving students, and fewer minority students. **Looking at the impact of principals on student achievement, the authors find some small but significant effects of the tenure of a principal in a school.** More significant, however, are the estimates of variations in principal effectiveness. The variation in principal effectiveness tends to be largest in high poverty schools, consistent with hypothesis that principal ability is most important in schools serving the most disadvantaged students. Finally, considering principal mobility, the authors find that **principals who stay in a school tend to be more effective than those who move to other schools.**"

*From "Stepping Stones: Principal Career Paths and School Outcomes," by T. Beteille et al., 2011.*

Access to this article is not open, either. The abstract states, "more than one out of every five principals leaves their school each year ... We use longitudinal data from one large urban school district to study the relationship between principal turnover and school outcomes. We find that **principal turnover is, on average, detrimental to school performance.** Frequent turnover of school leadership results in lower teacher retention and lower student achievement gains. **Leadership changes are particularly harmful for high poverty schools,** low-achieving schools, and schools with many inexperienced teachers. These schools not only suffer from high rates of principal turnover but are also unable to attract experienced successors. The negative effect of leadership changes can be mitigated when vacancies are filled by individuals with prior experience leading other schools. However, the majority of new principals in high poverty and low-performing schools lack prior leadership experience and leave when more attractive positions become available in other schools."

*From "Examining Principal Turnover," by Ed Fuller, Jul 16, 2012 (Shanker blog post).*

Ed Fuller, in a lengthy blog post, states, "a number of recent research efforts have found that principal turnover is important for three primary reasons":

- High principal turnover often leads to greater teacher turnover, which can negatively impact student achievement and increase costs.
- Principal turnover has a direct negative effect on student achievement; the strongest impact comes immediately after a change in leadership.
- Research "suggests that regular principal turnover can lead to teachers not investing in any change efforts," instead "waiting principals out." Large-scale changes—for example, in recruitment and retention of staff—need principals to be in place for numerous years for full implementation.