

# IMPLICATIONS FROM UCEA

## THE REVOLVING DOOR OF THE PRINCIPALSHIP



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Selecting and retaining quality principals is critical to improving and sustaining school success. With better understanding of the prevalence and consequences of principal turnover rates and disparities across contexts, districts and states can implement policies and programs that will increase principal retention and success. Data drawn from Texas educational employment files provides a basis for inquiry into this problem.

### **Why does Turnover matter?**

First, emerging research suggests that teacher turnover increases with principal turnover (Fuller, Baker, Young, 2007). Related research shows that teacher turnover has an independent and negative on student achievement (Baker, Young, Fuller, 2007a,b; Levy, Fields, & Jablonski, 2007). Second, current school reform strategies are highly dependent upon fostering small learning communities that increase the level of personalization in a school for both adults and children. It takes time, however, for principals to develop strong personal relationships and support these communities in their formation. Principal turnover impedes this community building. Third, school improvement simply takes time. Research on organizational change suggests that leaders need at least five years for successful implementation of large scale change. Therefore, keeping principal turnover low and retaining principals for at least five years is critical to quality school improvement (Fullan, 1991; McAdams, 1997).

### **What is the prevalence of Principal Turnover?**

A minimum expectation for principal retention is at least three years. In 2007, 52 percent of the principals had left within that three year period. A comparison to

three other 3-year spans (1995-2004) shows that the turnover rate increased gradually from 1995-98.

Principal turnover is highest at the high school level, with 61% leaving within the three year period 2004-2007. Although the turnover rate is the lowest at the elementary level, turnover has increased the most at this level.

Table 1: Principal Three-Year Turnover Rates

School Level	Time Spans			
	1995-1998	1998-2001	2001-2004	2004-2007
Elementary	42.3%	45.9%	51.2%	47.8%
Middle School	51.1%	54.1%	56.2%	55.7%
High School	58.6%	54.5%	59.7%	60.7%
All Schools	47.3%	50.4%	54.3%	52.2%

Over five years, the principal turnover rate jumps to 71%, again highest at the high school level and has increased over the last 10 years.

Table 2: Principal Five-Year Turnover Rates

School Level	Time Spans		
	1995-2000	1998-2003	2001-2006
Elementary	60.9%	66.8%	68.0%
Middle School	68.6%	73.9%	74.9%
High School	73.7%	75.3%	76.4%
Total	65.1%	70.1%	71.3%

The turnover rates are somewhat higher in schools in which more than 50% of the students are economically disadvantaged (73% five year turnover

rate overall, including 79% and 81% of middle school and high school principals).

Table 3: Principal Five-Year Turnover Rates in Schools with More than 50% Economically Disadvantaged Students

School Level	Time Spans		
	1995-2000	1998-2003	2001-2006
Elementary	65.3%	70.1%	70.3%
Middle School	76.8%	77.9%	79.0%
High School	81.3%	79.4%	81.4%
Total	68.6%	72.6%	73.4%

The consequences of leadership instability in such schools are most severe, where sustained support for school improvement is critical to improve student achievement.

### Implications

These rates seem rather exceptional; yet, preliminary research by our colleague Bruce Baker suggests the rates in other states are similar to those in Texas (Baker, 2007). We strongly believe that schools and school reform efforts simply cannot be successful unless high-quality principals remain at the same school for extended periods of time.

The results suggest that new and early career principals need support and development in order to remain over time. Principals of schools with predominantly low-income students may need extra district support and compensation to maintain school site tenure that is so critical for school reform.

States and districts need to measure principal turnover rates and understand the reasons for the turnover as part of their own assessments of quality conditions for school improvement. In addition, principal development and support—that improve principal success and retention—should become integral parts of state and district educational reform strategies.

### References

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