

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING

PRINCIPAL TURNOVER



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Principals are vital for ensuring student success. Their actions help maintain a positive school climate, motivate school staff, and enhance teachers' practice. Therefore, they play a major role in retaining effective teachers and ensuring their success in the classroom. Ultimately, principal leadership has significant implications for students' experiences and accomplishments.

Research notes that principal turnover can be disruptive to school progress, often resulting in higher teacher turnover and, ultimately, lower gains in student achievement. Further, the relationship between principal turnover and declines in student outcomes is stronger in high-poverty, low-achieving schools—the schools in which students most rely on education for their future success.

In addition to the costs to students and teachers if good principals leave, schools and districts must devote time and resources to replace the outgoing principals. The financial implications are significant and, often, covered by redirecting funds that had been slated for the classroom.

Turnover is a serious issue across the country. The national average tenure of principals in their schools was four years as of 2016–17. This number masks considerable variation, with 35 percent of principals being at their school for less than two years, and only 11 percent of principals being at their school for 10 years or more. The most recent national study of public school principals found that, overall, approximately 18 percent of principals were no longer in the same position one year later. In high-poverty schools, the turnover rate was 21 percent. Principal turnover also varies by state.

UNDERSTANDING PRINCIPAL TURNOVER

To understand why excessive turnover exists, researchers have investigated the relationship between principal turnover and various features of the principalship; which principals are most likely to leave; and which schools are more vulnerable to principal turnover.

WHY DO PRINCIPALS LEAVE THEIR JOBS?

The research points to five reasons that principals leave their jobs, aside from retirement or dismissal.

1. **Inadequate preparation and professional development.** Several elements of professional learning opportunities are associated with principal retention: high-quality preparation programs that carefully select and deeply prepare principals for challenging schools; access to in-service training, mentoring, and coaching that continue to support and develop principals; and collaborations between professional learning programs and school districts.
2. **Poor working conditions.** A number of conditions can influence principals' decisions about employment, including access to support; the complexity of the job and amount of time needed to complete all necessary activities; relationships with colleagues, parents, and students; and disciplinary climate.
3. **Insufficient salaries.** Salaries matter to principals in choosing new positions and in deciding whether to stay. Low salaries that do not adequately compensate principals and are not competitive with other jobs lead to higher rates of principal departure.
4. **Lack of decision-making authority.** Principals are less likely to leave their positions when they believe they have greater control of their work environment and the ability to make decisions across a range of issues such as spending, teacher hiring and evaluation, and student discipline.
5. **High-stakes accountability policies.** Counter-productive accountability policies can create disincentives for principals to remain in low-performing schools and can influence principals' mobility decisions.



WHICH PRINCIPALS ARE LESS LIKELY TO LEAVE?

Among the principal characteristics most strongly associated with job stability is educational experience, including preparedness for the position as a result of preparation and/or in-service programs and having an advanced degree. Better-prepared principals, including those who have had internships and/or mentors, are less stressed and stay longer, even if they are in high-need schools. Relatedly, some evidence suggests that principals who are viewed as more effective by teachers and supervisors are less likely to leave, unless they are promoted. Researchers suggest that perhaps because these principals feel more efficacious, they feel better about their work and are more likely to stay. Both findings suggest the importance of supporting principals in building their capacity to do the complex work required in their schools.



WHICH SCHOOLS ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO PRINCIPAL TURNOVER?

Overall, the relationships between school and student characteristics and a principal's likelihood of leaving are much stronger than relationships between principals' personal characteristics and principal turnover. The most robust evidence from the studies reviewed indicate that schools with higher percentages of students from low-income families, students of color, and low-performing students are more likely to experience principal turnover. The root of the problem, however, may be the school characteristics—such as low levels of resources, less competitive salaries, and problematic working conditions—that are often concurrent with student disadvantage. These schools are also more likely to be subject to accountability pressures, which are associated with higher turnover. Compounding this problem is the fact that these schools often struggle with student mobility and with attracting highly qualified teachers. Indeed, some research suggests that when teaching and learning conditions are more favorable, both teachers and principals are more likely to stay, regardless of the nature of the student population.





STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING PRINCIPAL TURNOVER

Given the costs of turnover, in terms of finances as well as school outcomes, efforts to retain principals are important. Policymakers and practitioners have multiple opportunities to address the root causes of principal turnover by investing in evidence-based practices to reduce principal attrition.

Based on our review of the research evidence, we have identified five strategies that schools, districts, and states can implement to reduce unnecessary principal turnover. They include:

1. **Providing high-quality professional learning opportunities**, both initial preparation and in-service, to give principals the necessary skills and competencies for school leadership
2. **Improving working conditions** to foster principals' satisfaction with their role
3. **Ensuring adequate and stable compensation** for principals, commensurate with the responsibilities of the position, to value principals' contributions and to attract and retain effective leaders
4. **Supporting decision-making authority in school leadership** to allow principals to shape decisions and solutions to address the specific needs of their staff and students
5. **Reforming accountability systems** to ensure that incentives encourage effective principals to stay in challenging schools to support teachers and improve student learning

While the existing research provides a basis for understanding the mechanisms of principal turnover, there is much more to learn. A better understanding of the implications, the influential factors, and the strategies that best address it would fill gaps in the literature and shed light on promising practices to reduce principal turnover.

UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING PRINCIPAL TURNOVER: A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH


INTRODUCTION

The typical school principal's day might begin with a before-school staff meeting at 7:00 or 8:00 a.m. and end later that evening after engaging students, parents, and community in an extracurricular or outreach event. In between, the rewards are many—watching students learning, coaching teachers as they grow professionally, and connecting the school to the community. The demands and challenges can also be great—and principal turnover is a major concern. What do we know about principal turnover, and what should we do about it?

School principals are essential for providing strong educational opportunities and improved outcomes for students. Thus, the mobility and turnover of principals can be very disruptive to students' education and overall school improvement efforts and, as research shows, damaging to teacher retention and student achievement. Policymakers, district administrators, and all school stakeholders are interested in improving the stability of school leadership.

This report reviews findings from 35 major studies that speak to the question of principal turnover.¹ Within these studies, researchers have examined principal turnover nationally and within states and districts, primarily investigating the relationships between principal turnover and various characteristics of principals, schools, students, and policies. While there is some consistency across studies, there is a good deal of variation in research questions, methods, and measurement of turnover. This variation is due in large part to the different contexts in which the studies took place—in terms of labor markets, policy environments, and school contexts which affect recruitment and





retention—as well as different aims of the researchers. Further, there are limits to the principal turnover research. Few studies consider all the possible pathways out of the principalship (which can be voluntary or involuntary and can range from leaving the profession to being promoted to other positions within education),² and few isolate the ways in which specific conditions or features of the principalship impact principals' decisions to leave or districts' decisions to retain principals. Despite these limitations we found that, when examined together, these studies provided important information to help policymakers, education leaders, and other stakeholders understand and address principal turnover.

The report begins with an explanation of why principal leadership matters and the consequences of principal mobility for student outcomes, the school culture and climate, teacher retention, and school districts' budgets. Next, we investigate the magnitude of principal mobility and the job-related factors that influence principals' decisions to leave their jobs, including inadequate preparation through in-service and pre-service professional learning, poor working conditions, insufficient compensation, lack of decision-making authority, and counterproductive accountability policies. Then, we examine which characteristics of principals and schools might suggest a need for more support in order to avoid unwanted principal turnover. Then, we consider such contributing factors as principal educational experiences, school characteristics, and student demographics.

Finally, we share what the research evidence offers to guide policymakers and practitioners, focusing on strategies schools, districts, and states can implement to stem principal turnover. We highlight five solutions put forth by researchers to address the particular contexts within which principals must navigate. They include:

1. **Providing high-quality professional learning opportunities**, both preparation and in-service, to give principals the necessary skills and competencies for school leadership
2. **Improving working conditions** to foster principals' satisfaction with their role

3. **Ensuring adequate and stable compensation** for principals, commensurate with the responsibilities of the position, to value principals' contributions and to attract and retain effective leaders
4. **Allowing decision-making authority** in school leadership to allow principals to shape decisions and solutions to address the specific needs of their staff and students
5. **Reforming accountability systems** to encourage strong principals to stay in challenging schools to support teachers and improve student learning

We conclude with a brief summary and highlight specific areas that require additional study.

WHY STABLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP MATTERS

Principals are the second most important school-level factor associated with student achievement—right after teachers.³ As one study notes, “There are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader.”⁴ This conclusion has been bolstered in recent years by numerous studies that associate increased principal quality with gains in high school graduation rates⁵ and student achievement.⁶

Further, turnover in school leadership can result in a decrease in student achievement. Studies in Texas,⁷ North Carolina,⁸ and multiple urban districts⁹ have found a clear relationship between principal turnover and lower gains in student test scores across grade levels and subjects.¹⁰ This relationship is stronger in high-poverty, low-achieving schools—the schools in which students most rely on education for their future success¹¹ and, unfortunately, the schools in which there is often the highest turnover.¹²

Principals affect student learning through their influence over schools, support of staff, and work to maintain a positive culture and climate.¹³ When principals leave, teachers' views about their school and classroom conditions, as well as their curriculum and instruction, are less favorable.¹⁴ This instability can result in a loss of shared purpose and trust.¹⁵ And when principal turnover

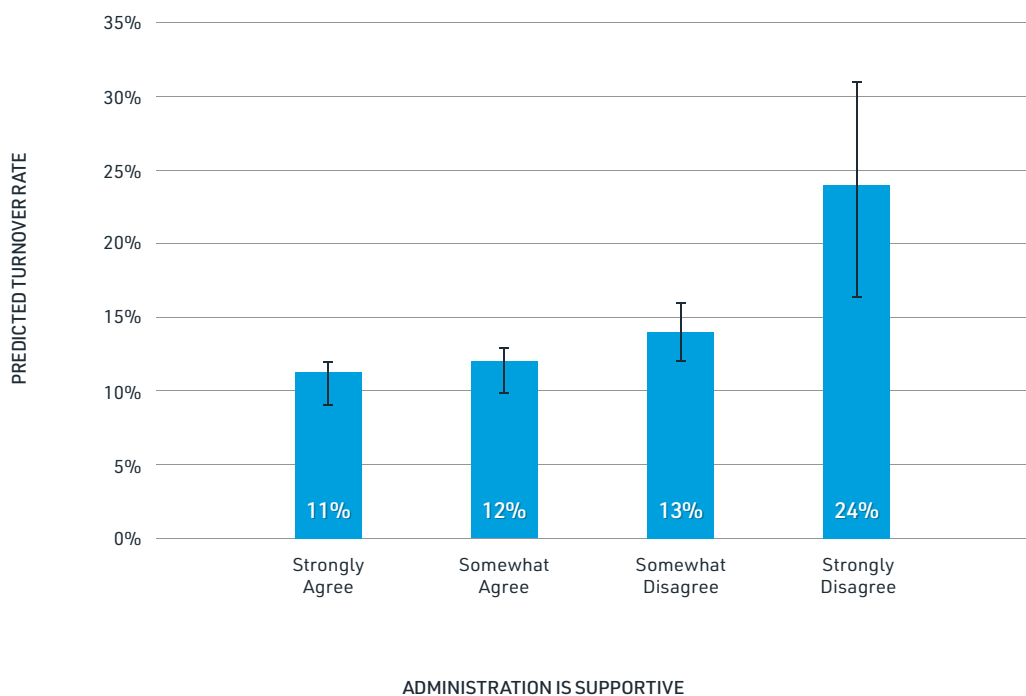
is frequent in a school, teachers and the community are less likely to support a new leader.¹⁶ Thus, a change in leadership can derail school improvement initiatives, making it difficult to build a school's capacity.¹⁷

Research demonstrates that a principal's ability to create positive working conditions and collaborative, supportive learning environments plays a critical role in attracting and retaining qualified teachers.¹⁸ Teachers cite principal support as one of the most important factors in their decisions to stay in a school or in the profession.¹⁹ A national study that examined conditions that predict teacher turnover provides evidence. When teachers strongly disagree that their administration is supportive, they are more than twice as likely to move schools or leave teaching than when they strongly agree that their administration is supportive.²⁰ (See Figure 1.)

Research also indicates that improvements in school leadership—characterized by communicating a clear vision, managing effectively, supporting teachers, providing teachers time for collaboration, and providing feedback on teachers' instruction—are strongly related to reductions in teacher turnover.²¹ And, conversely, principal turnover results in higher teacher turnover²² which, in turn, is related to lower student achievement.²³ For example, in a study of principal turnover in Miami, researchers found a strong influence of principal turnover on teacher turnover across multiple years of employment data, with the odds of teachers leaving about 17 percent higher when they have a new principal.²⁴

At a time when many schools throughout the nation are struggling to find and keep teachers, the leadership of a strong principal takes on added importance for student

Figure 1: Predicted Teacher Turnover Rate by Administrative Support



Source: Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it (brief)*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

success. This is particularly true for those serving high numbers of students from low-income families and students of color. Importantly, high-need schools benefit most from effective principals who can find and keep talented teachers.²⁵ Multiple studies of teacher attrition in high-poverty schools have found that teachers' perceptions of their schools' leaders is a dominant factor in their decisions to remain at the school.²⁶

In addition to the costs to students and teachers of principal turnover, the financial implications are significant. Schools and districts must devote time and resources to replace outgoing principals. These resources include recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and providing professional development. The expense is substantial and, often, covered by redirecting funds that had been slated for the classroom. A 2014 report released by the School Leaders Network (SLN), a nonprofit developed to build the capacity of principals in large, high-need, urban schools, conservatively estimated the typical cost of replacing a principal to be about \$75,000, but suggested that costs could be considerably higher, especially for under-resourced districts experiencing high levels of turnover. The estimates took into account the costs of principal preparation programs, hiring, signing, internship, mentoring, and continuing education.²⁷

Considering a narrower set of costs, another study of six school districts in South Carolina identified the average cost of principal replacement as approximately \$24,000, with a range of about \$10,000 to \$51,000. Costs considered included personnel resources, physical supplies (business cards, etc.), technological resources (replacing laptops, cell phones), professional network fees, conferences, and stipends for mentorship programs.²⁸ The South Carolina study did not include principal preparation programs, internship, and professional development costs as the School Leaders Network study did. The lower cost of living in South Carolina as compared to the larger urban districts considered in the School Leaders Network report may also help explain the difference in cost estimates. More research is needed to provide better information about the financial implications of principal turnover. The data available suggest it is significant.

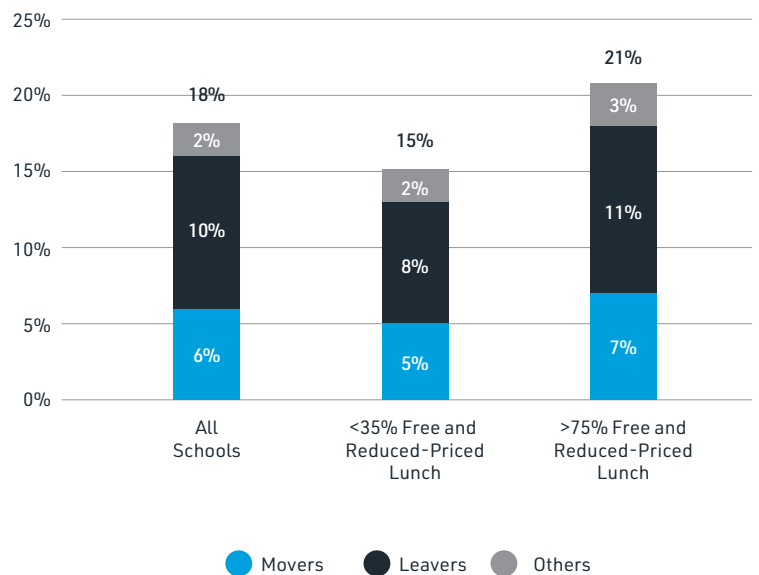




PERSISTENT PROBLEM OF PRINCIPAL TURNOVER, MOST CHALLENGING IN HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

The national average tenure of principals in a given school was four years as of 2016–17.²⁹ This number masks considerable variation, with 35 percent of principals being at their school for less than two years and only 11 percent of principals being at their school for 10 years or more.³⁰ The most recent national study of public school principals found that between the 2015–16 and 2016–17 school years, approximately 82 percent of principals remained at the same school, 6 percent moved to a different school (“movers”), 10 percent left the principalship (“leavers”), and 2 percent were no longer at the school, but there is no report of their occupational status (“others”).³¹ (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2: *Principal Turnover in 2016–17, All Schools, Low-Poverty, and High-Poverty Schools*



NOTE: “Stayers” are principals who were principals in the same school in the current school year as in the base year. “Movers” are principals who were still principals in the current school year but had moved to a different school after the base year. “Leavers” are principals who were no longer principals after the base year. “Other” includes principals who had left their base-year school, but for whom it was not possible to determine a mover or leaver status in the current school year. The base year for 2016–17 was 2015–16.³²

Source: Goldring, R., & Taie, S. (2018). *Principal attrition and mobility: results from the 2016–17 principal follow-up survey first look (NCES 2018-066)*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics.

While the national average rate of principal turnover is approximately 18 percent, there is a considerable discrepancy between the rate of turnover in high- and low-poverty schools. Notably, turnover is 6 percentage points higher in schools with high concentrations of students in poverty than in schools with few students in poverty. The mix of movers and leavers is similar.³³ (See Figure 2.) Similar discrepancies are seen at the local level. In Miami-Dade County Public Schools, for example, 28 percent of principals in the highest-poverty schools leave each year compared to 18 percent of principals in lowest-poverty schools,³⁴ and in Philadelphia, 33 percent of principals in the highest-poverty schools leave each year compared to 24 percent of principals in the lowest-poverty schools.³⁵

Principal turnover also varies by state, as shown in the following examples. A recent study conducted by the Learning Policy Institute found that, from the 2015–16 school year to the 2016–17 school year, 22 percent of California principals left their position, 7 percent moved to a different school, and 15 percent left the profession or state.³⁶ During the same time period, principal turnover was slightly higher in North Carolina. Approximately 23 percent of principals left their positions, 8 percent moved to another school in North Carolina, and 15 percent were no longer working as a principal in the state.³⁷ In contrast, from 2014–15 to 2015–16, turnover

rates were slightly lower in Washington state where only 20 percent of principals left their positions, 8 percent moved to another school in the same district, 6 percent moved to a school in a different district, and 6 percent left the state workforce.³⁸

WHY DO PRINCIPALS LEAVE THEIR JOBS?

Research about principal job satisfaction points to principals' reasons for staying or leaving. In an analysis of national survey data, researchers identified satisfied principals as reporting that they: 1) experience more positive working conditions; 2) have greater influence or decision-making authority; and 3) are content with their salaries. Dissatisfied principals reported a fourth condition: not having access to professional development.³⁹ In addition to these conditions, researchers have found that principals' mobility decisions can be influenced by accountability policies that issue sanctions associated with student outcomes, especially when unaccompanied by school supports. Job complexity can also be associated with turnover when principals must take on multiple roles and endure excessive work responsibilities.⁴⁰

These conditions, for example, were reported by principals in Chicago Public Schools. In a 2008 survey, principals reported challenging working conditions



(lack of time to evaluate teachers, difficult school climate), high-stakes accountability (pressure to get test scores up quickly), and lack of decision-making authority (difficulty removing ineffective teachers) as major impediments.⁴¹ Notably, principals in low-performing schools reported their top roadblocks to be related to working conditions, likely due to the needs of their students and the under-resourcing of their schools.⁴² In a 2018 survey, Chicago principals were asked which areas, if improved, would make them stay in their roles longer. Principals identified features of working conditions, including school funding (45 percent) and compliance requirements (45 percent), access to professional learning (38 percent), and better compensation (38 percent). (See Figure 3.)

Based on our synthesis of the research, we found that the reasons principals leave their jobs fall into five broad categories.

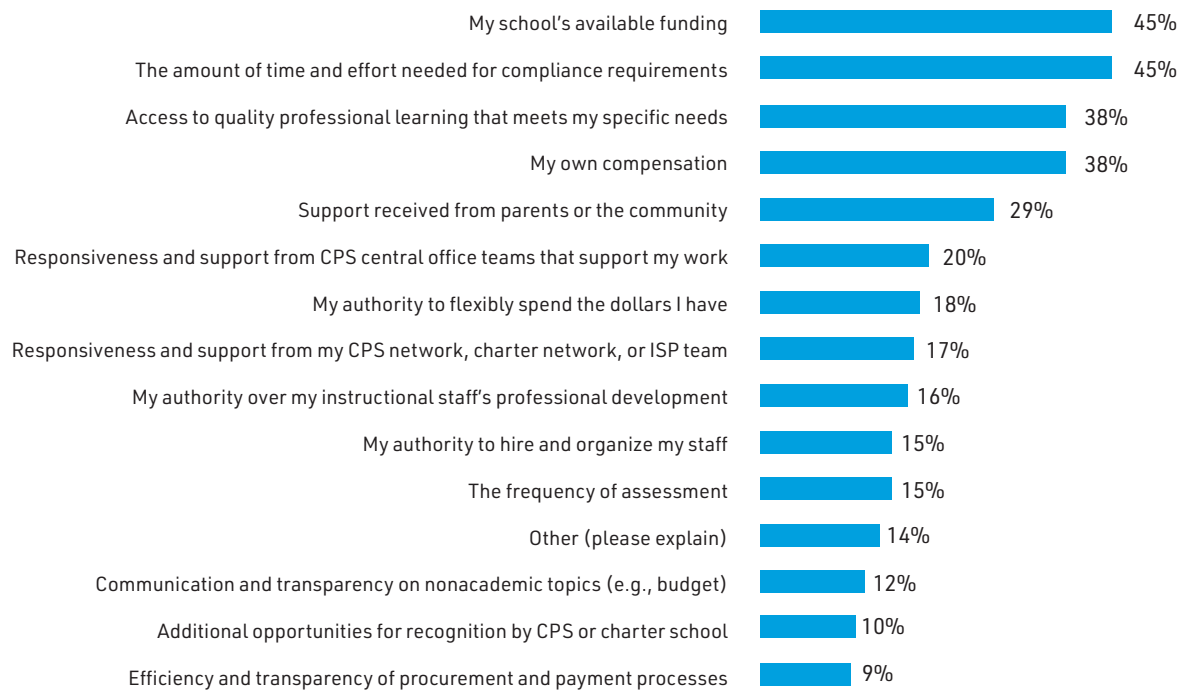
1. **Professional development**, including preparation programs and in-service supports such as mentoring and coaching, can improve principals'

sense of efficacy and satisfaction and, in turn, improve retention.⁴³ As noted above, studies have found that access to high-quality preparation programs and principal internships and mentoring significantly reduces the likelihood that principals will leave their schools.⁴⁴ Programs that carefully select and prepare principals for challenging schools, and that work with school districts to support and develop principals in those schools, are likely to produce principals who stay.⁴⁵

2. **Working conditions** experienced by principals in their schools and districts influence their mobility decisions.⁴⁶ Researchers have defined working conditions in a variety of ways. Some have focused on workload (the number of school-related work hours inside and outside of the school),⁴⁷ job complexity (having multiple roles and responsibilities),⁴⁸ and disciplinary environment (student behavior, and student and teacher absenteeism).⁴⁹ For example, studies of principal mobility in Tennessee, Miami, and Delaware found a significant relationship between

Figure 3: 2018 Principal Engagement Survey, Chicago Public Schools

Chicago principals' reports of conditions that, if improved, would make them stay in their roles longer.



Source: The Chicago Public Education Fund, 2018. Principal Engagement Survey.



a school's disciplinary climate and principals' intentions to leave.⁵⁰ In a similar study designed to determine the factors that influence principal turnover in a large urban district, researchers found that including school climate measures in their analysis eliminated the significant relationships between student demographics and principal turnover, indicating that efforts to improve working conditions can be a constructive approach to reducing principal turnover in schools with high-need students.⁵¹ Other researchers have focused on availability of school resources, including money and staff,⁵² and relationships with students, families, teachers, and district administrators.⁵³ Lastly, researchers have considered the amount of support provided by the central office.⁵⁴ Across all these varying studies, working conditions have been associated with principal turnover.

3. **Salaries** matter to principals in choosing new positions and in deciding whether to stay.⁵⁵ In a national study of public-school principals, 76 percent agreed with the statement, "If I could get a higher paying job, I'd leave this job as soon as possible."⁵⁶ Studies examining the relationship between principal turnover and compensation have observed principals moving to positions with higher salaries.⁵⁷ For example, after controlling for other factors influencing turnover, the New York schools within the lowest tier of salaries were nearly 10 times more likely to lose their principal than those within the highest tier of salaries.⁵⁸ Dissatisfaction with salary is further exacerbated by

the fact that, in some contexts, principals' salaries can be lower than salaries of experienced teachers, despite principals' additional responsibilities and time commitment.⁵⁹ This serves as a disincentive for qualified educators from moving to a leadership position.⁶⁰ While low compensation is a factor in principal turnover, higher salaries can sometimes offset the effect of poor working conditions⁶¹ or poor school outcomes.⁶² In fact, a recent study conducted in Tennessee found that once principal salary and other school conditions are accounted for, student demographics are no longer a significant predictor of principal turnover.⁶³

4. **Decision-making authority** makes a difference in principal retention. Principals who believe they have greater control of their work environment and the ability to make decisions across a range of issues such as spending, teacher hiring and evaluation, and discipline are less likely to leave their positions.⁶⁴ Nationally, principals who perceived they had more autonomy over personnel decisions and disciplinary policies were less likely to intend to leave the principalship or their schools.⁶⁵ In a study in Delaware, principals interviewed about their career paths reported that having autonomy to make decisions and "drive the vision, culture, or mission of the school" was a reason for remaining in their positions.⁶⁶ And in another study, 45 percent of Virginia principals responding to a survey addressing the reasons for the principal shortage pointed to lack of decision-making authority and 63 percent pointed to limited influence over district policies.⁶⁷

5. **High-stakes accountability policies** that create disincentives for principals to remain in low-performing schools can influence principals' mobility decisions. Several researchers have directly addressed the relationship between principal turnover and accountability policies.⁶⁸ For example, teachers enrolled in 11 Master of School Administration programs in North Carolina in 2006 identified "increased risk," including pressure from test scores, as something that would inhibit them from becoming administrators.⁶⁹ Research on the impact of federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has found that NCLB sanctions were associated with a higher level of principals' job stress and a higher turnover rate. These findings appear to be consistent across principal, school, or student characteristics.⁷⁰ Another NCLB study found that principals moved to schools less likely to incur NCLB sanctions and were replaced with less-effective principals, resulting in an overall decrease in principal quality.⁷¹

WHICH PRINCIPALS ARE LESS LIKELY TO LEAVE?

To better understand the dynamics of principal turnover, researchers have examined how principals with certain attributes and qualities may be more or less likely to move from their school or leave the profession. While some studies have found significant relationships between principal turnover and principal characteristics such as years of experience in the principalship⁷² and racial/ethnic background,⁷³ the findings are mixed, likely because they depend on the time frames and policy contexts in which each study took place. Researchers also considered associations between principal turnover and principals' age and gender.⁷⁴ Again, the findings are mixed, likely related to local contexts and policies.

Researchers have also studied the influence of principal effectiveness on turnover. While one study, relying on schools' relative improvement in test scores in Miami-Dade Public Schools, found no relationship between principal effectiveness and turnover,⁷⁵ two other studies did. The first, a study examining first-year principals in six large urban districts, found that new principals were more likely to leave when test scores declined in their first year.⁷⁶ The second study in Tennessee used



multiple measures of principal effectiveness including student achievement data, principal supervisor reports, and teacher surveys. Among those leaving the principalship, the study found low performers to be more likely to exit the education system altogether or move to another position; meanwhile, high performers were more likely to leave due to a promotion or move to a more desirable school.⁷⁷

Interestingly, one feature of principals associated with principal turnover is educational experience, including preparedness for the position as a result of preparation or in-service programs and particular degrees. There is evidence that better-prepared principals, including those who have had internships and/or mentors, are less stressed and stay longer, even if they are in high-need schools.⁷⁸ One study that considered principal leadership programs in Connecticut, New York, Kentucky, California, and Mississippi found that principals who participate in, and graduate from, high-quality pre- and in-service programs feel better prepared and are more likely to plan to stay in their principalship, even when working in schools with high concentrations of students of color and those living in poverty.⁷⁹



In addition to preparation and in-service programs, researchers examined how degree attainment is related to principal turnover. Nationally, principals with a master's degree or educational specialist degree/professional diploma (at least one year beyond a master's degree) are most likely to stay in their school, followed by principals with a doctorate or professional degree. Principals with a bachelor's degree or less are least likely to remain in their positions.⁸⁰ This is consistent with studies conducted in Utah and Illinois.⁸¹ However, findings on the relationship between having a doctoral degree and principal turnover were mixed. Some researchers found greater mobility among principals with doctoral degrees,⁸² possibly due in part to principals' moves to central office or other jobs in education consistent with their training.⁸³

WHICH SCHOOLS ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO PRINCIPAL TURNOVER?

Overall, the relationships between school and student characteristics and a principal's likelihood of moving to another position or leaving the profession are stronger than relationships between principal characteristics and principal turnover. The strongest evidence from the studies reviewed indicates that schools with higher

percentages of students from low-income families, students of color, and low-performing students tend to experience higher principal turnover.⁸⁴ Although these findings are consistent across studies, they may misrepresent the root of the problem, because these student characteristics are often concurrent with schools that are under-resourced, with less competitive salaries and less favorable working conditions.⁸⁵ They are also more likely to be subject to accountability pressures, which are associated with higher turnover.

Compounding limitations such as insufficient resources, schools often struggle with student mobility⁸⁶ and with attracting highly qualified teachers.⁸⁷ In studies of teacher turnover, when salaries and working conditions are included in the analyses, turnover is found to be a function of resource conditions rather than characteristics of the students.⁸⁸ Some studies have found this is the case for principal turnover, as well. Unfortunately, many of the studies reviewed do not include these factors in their analyses.⁸⁹

Principals typically leave high-poverty schools at higher rates than low-poverty schools.⁹⁰ This dynamic is seen nationally, as presented in Figure 2 (page 10), as well as at the state and local levels. In Tennessee, for example, researchers found higher turnover among schools with greater numbers of high-poverty students.⁹¹ The same pattern is seen at the local levels, where principal turnover is greater in high-poverty schools than in low-poverty schools; 28 percent versus 18 percent in Miami⁹² and 33 percent versus 24 percent in Philadelphia.⁹³ It is often the case that those principals leaving high-poverty schools are moving to schools with fewer high-poverty students.⁹⁴

As with high-poverty schools, **principals leave schools with greater numbers of students of color at higher rates than schools with fewer students of color.**⁹⁵

This association can be quite significant in studies that rely on administrative data, which do not include other factors such as poor working conditions or low salaries, systemic inequities strongly associated with schools with high proportions of students of color. For example, in a study to identify the variables related to principal turnover from 2010 to 2015 in Colorado urban schools, the percentage of students of color was the only variable predictive of principal turnover.⁹⁶

In another study, researchers examined statewide data in Illinois and found that principals in schools with larger percentages of students of color were more likely to leave. The data also led them to predict very different turnover rates for schools with no students of color and schools with 100 percent students of color: 13 percent versus 16 percent.⁹⁷ The turnover rate was smaller when the race of the principal matched the race of the majority of students in the school; for example, in a school with all students of color and a principal of color, the expected turnover rate was reduced to 15 percent.⁹⁸ In contrast, one study of principals in New York state found principals of schools with large percentages of students of color to be slightly less likely to move.⁹⁹

On average, principals working in academically struggling schools are more likely to move to another school or leave the profession. This is true across a range of measures of academic performance, including test scores and accountability ratings.¹⁰⁰ These findings have held true in studies in large and small districts, and across the country.¹⁰¹ This trend was evident in studies in Ohio, Tennessee, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.¹⁰² For example, in a district-wide study in Philadelphia and a state-wide study in Texas, researchers found principals' tenure to be shortest in low-performing schools and longest in high-performing schools.¹⁰³ Not all studies account for student poverty in their analysis, which is often conflated with performance.¹⁰⁴ Further, none of the studies account for the fact that low-performing schools may also suffer from lack of resources and/or poor working conditions.

While most turnover is voluntary due to retirements or such factors as principals seeking less challenging schools,¹⁰⁵ it is also the case that some mobility is explained by involuntary movement, whereby districts close schools or seek to remove ineffective school leaders. Past national policies have encouraged school closures and removal of principals from persistently low-performing schools.¹⁰⁶ This can result in school improvement in some instances, if districts are able to replace the ineffective principal with a more effective principal. For example, in a study in Washington D.C., researchers found increases in student test scores after the district replaced ineffective principals with more effective principals.¹⁰⁷

Researchers have also considered the relationship between principal turnover and other school-level characteristics such as urbanicity, school size, and school level, factors that may play out differently under distinctive policy conditions.

- **Nationwide, principals leave their schools more frequently when they are located in city and rural areas than when located in suburbs or towns.**¹⁰⁸ National 2016–17 survey results indicate that, since the previous year, nearly 1 in 5 principals in cities and rural areas left their positions, while closer to 1 in 6 principals in suburbs and towns left their positions.¹⁰⁹ Researchers investigating state data found similar results in Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Texas.¹¹⁰ However, the mix of movers and leavers differs by community type. In the 2016–17 school year, principals from rural areas were least likely to move schools, but most likely to leave the profession, while principals from cities moved schools at higher rates than principals from any other community type.¹¹¹ It may be the case that principals are more likely to move from school to school within urban areas because they have more options to move while preserving their seniority and benefits than principals in rural areas.
- **Most studies find that larger schools are associated with higher rates of principal turnover.** The preponderance of studies reviewed find a relationship between larger student populations and higher rates of principal turnover. Researchers have found that as the number of students in a school increases, the likelihood that a principal will leave the school, either to move to another school or to leave the education system, increases. This trend occurs nationally¹¹² and has also been found in studies in Illinois, North Carolina,¹¹³ Missouri,¹¹⁴ New York,¹¹⁵ and Iowa.¹¹⁶
- **The research on school level is mixed and varies by local context.** Recent national data indicate that high school principals are slightly more likely to stay in their schools (84 percent) than middle school principals (82 percent) or elementary schools principals (82 percent).¹¹⁷ The same survey data show that principals' pathways out of the profession vary by school level as well, with high

school principals more likely to leave the education system altogether and elementary and middle level principals more likely to move to other positions in education.¹¹⁸ Researchers who have examined this over the past 15 years have reached different conclusions. Studies in Missouri¹¹⁹ and Tennessee¹²⁰ found middle level principals to be least stable, while studies in Utah,¹²¹ North Carolina, and Illinois¹²² found high school principals to be most

likely to leave their schools. The different findings likely depend on many aspects of the context in which the studies took place (e.g., school size and school conditions).

Greater understanding of how school-level characteristics interact with features of the principalship may inform policy solutions to reduce principal turnover.



STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING PRINCIPAL TURNOVER

Principals' influence is significant, affecting teacher retention, school culture and climate, and, ultimately, student achievement. Given the costs in terms of finances as well as school outcomes, efforts to minimize principal turnover are necessary. There are multiple opportunities to address the root causes of principal turnover and invest in evidence-based practices to reduce principal attrition.

The research we have reviewed in these areas can inform strategies to reduce principal turnover. These strategies address districts' and schools' need for retaining effective principals and the concerns of school leaders by focusing on: investments in pre-service preparation and in-service support systems; support for improved working conditions; appropriate compensation; efforts to ensure principals have decision-making authority to address their schools' needs; and accountability systems that are fair and encourage principals to work in high-needs schools. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4: Strategies to Sustain Principal Retention



Source: Learning Policy Institute



HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR PRINCIPALS

Some research has found that professional learning opportunities for principals, such as high-quality preparation programs, ongoing training, peer networks, and coaching support, can build leadership capacity and reduce principal turnover.¹²³ Such learning opportunities build the capacity of principals to lead across their full range of responsibilities, fostering school environments where adults and students thrive. Moreover, teachers appear more likely to remain in schools led by principals who participate in these types of professional learning programs. In a rigorous study of McREL's Balanced Leadership Professional Development, for example, researchers found participation in the program had a significant impact on reducing teacher turnover as well as principal turnover. Researchers posited that this could be due to principals' enhanced sense of efficacy.¹²⁴ As principal turnover is highest in the first three years on the job, providing an induction period for early-career principals can be a useful tool in stemming turnover.¹²⁵



IMPROVING WORKING CONDITIONS THAT INFLUENCE PRINCIPALS' SATISFACTION WITH THEIR ROLE

Working conditions can play a role in principals' mobility decisions. Addressing the various conditions that make worklife more stressful and less satisfying can lead to reductions in principal turnover.¹²⁶

Research findings show that principals' views of their working relationships have a strong influence on principal retention and have led researchers to suggest that central offices should play a more deliberate role in supporting principals.¹²⁷ The principal turnover research literature indicates that unwanted principal turnover might be stemmed by directing additional funding to schools to ensure effective and stable school leadership and to address poor conditions due to insufficient resources for instruction,¹²⁸ as well as problems with school climate, especially in low-performing schools.¹²⁹



COMPENSATION FOR PRINCIPALS COMMENSURATE WITH THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE POSITION

Researchers have recommended reviewing and reforming salary structures to reflect the significant responsibilities of principals in ensuring that students are provided with a safe and welcoming learning environment in which they can flourish.¹³⁰ Redesign of compensation should address the problem that principal salaries can be lower than experienced teacher salaries in some localities, serving as a disincentive to moving into school administration. Another disincentive in some jurisdictions has been an effort to replace compensation tied to experience with compensation tied largely to each year’s student outcomes, resulting in unreliable compensation which leaves principals unable to plan for their personal finances, a spur to attrition.¹³¹ Further, given that labor markets can influence principal mobility, researchers have recommended that salaries be competitive with neighboring districts.¹³² This is especially important for schools considered to be more challenging due to their students’ needs.¹³³



REFORMING ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT PRINCIPALS IMPROVES STUDENT LEARNING

Researchers find principal turnover to be more prevalent where high-stakes accountability systems that threaten schools with reconstitution, takeover, or closure are in place.¹³⁸ By making it more difficult to retain principals, especially in schools serving the neediest children, punitive accountability systems can be counter-productive.¹³⁹ While school and principal accountability policies that have aligned curriculum and assessments, provide equitable and adequate resources, and support greater capacity among schools and educators can be valuable in supporting students’ learning,¹⁴⁰ policies that threaten staff with humiliation, loss of jobs, or decreased pay have been found to work against getting and keeping high-quality leaders and staff, especially in challenging contexts.

As we have noted, research indicates that some schools, such as those struggling with poor performance and high rates of poverty, are far more vulnerable than others to principal turnover, and that it is often harder to recruit experienced principals to these roles.¹⁴¹ Given these realities, some researchers have recommended that states and districts develop strategies for training and placing more experienced and better-prepared principals in high-need schools to improve student achievement¹⁴² and stem principal turnover.¹⁴³ This would require developing programs that invest in principals’ learning and create incentives and supports that attract and keep high-performing principals in high-need schools, as a number of states are proposing to do as part of their plans under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).¹⁴⁴



GREATER DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Principals often report feeling constrained by their lack of authority to make on-the-ground decisions affecting personnel, budgets, and working conditions that impact their school.¹³⁴ This is particularly concerning given that a sense of agency is key to job satisfaction and retention across fields.¹³⁵ The research suggests that providing adequate decision-making authority to principals over areas such as spending, staffing, teacher evaluation, and disciplinary policy may change the intentions of principals to leave their school.¹³⁶ After studying the experiences of school leaders in five urban districts, researchers recommended that principals be given the power to lead. They write, “Top-notch leaders want the leeway to run their organizations successfully: selecting a team, setting strategy, and deciding how to use resources to get the job done. Districts could make the principalship more attractive by extending this kind of autonomy.”¹³⁷

CONCLUSION

Principals are vital for ensuring student success. Their actions help maintain a positive school climate, motivate school staff, and enhance teachers’ practice. In doing so, they play a major role in retaining effective teachers and ensuring their success in the classroom. Ultimately, principal leadership has significant implications for students’ experiences

and accomplishments.¹⁴⁵ Consequently, principal turnover is associated with a less-hospitable working environment resulting in higher teacher turnover and, ultimately, lower gains in student achievement.¹⁴⁶

The national principal turnover rate is high, and some regions, states, districts, and schools face excessive churn. Principals are a powerful resource for improving student learning. Still, too many state and local systems are not investing adequately in this resource, especially for communities faced with concentrated levels of student need. Researchers have suggested that district and school leaders, as well as policymakers, implement a number of strategies to increase principal retention: Offer effective and ongoing professional development; improve working conditions; provide fair, sufficient compensation; provide greater decision-making authority; and decrease counter-productive accountability practices. In addition, a number of states

are planning to support deeper training and offer a range of supports to recruit and retain well-prepared principals in high-need schools.

While the existing research provides a basis for understanding the mechanisms of principal turnover, there is much more to learn. A better understanding of the implications, influential factors, and strategies to address it would fill gaps in the literature and shed light on promising practices to reduce principal turnover. Going forward, researchers can address gaps in our understanding by taking into account principals' pathways out of their schools,¹⁴⁷ exploring the role of working conditions and opportunities for professional learning,¹⁴⁸ considering how school context influences principal mobility,¹⁴⁹ examining the role of administrative teams and teacher-leaders, and focusing on the effects of district and school policies on principal turnover.¹⁵⁰



ENDNOTES

¹ We searched journal articles, government documents, and institutional reports using relevant search terms. We then mined reference lists for additional resources. Ultimately, we identified 35 studies conducted in North America within the past 16 years to include in our review.

² In reviewing the research on principal turnover, it is necessary to keep in mind that there are multiple pathways out of the principalship. For instance, there is voluntary movement, where the principal decides to move due to dissatisfaction and/or the existence of more attractive options, or involuntary movement, where the decision is made by the district, possibly as a result of poor performance. Leaving the role could mean retirement, promotion to a central office position, moving to another school, a "demotion," an intentional move back to the classroom, moving to higher education to teach other leaders, or leaving the profession entirely. Competing opportunities, both inside and outside the education field, may draw practicing principals and principal candidates away from the profession. Clearly, some turnover is beneficial for schools and students, and some is not.

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- ⁷² Studies investigating experience as a predictor of turnover typically find a positive relationship, with principals with more years of experience being more likely to remain in their positions, until retirement age, when turnover once again increases. [See Papa, F. (2007). Why do principals change schools? A multivariate analysis of principal retention. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 6(3), 267-290; Baker, B. D., Punswick, E., & Belt, C. (2010). School leadership stability, principal moves, and departures: Evidence from Missouri. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(4), 523-557; DeAngelis, K. J., & White, B. R. (2011). Principal turnover in Illinois public schools, 2001-2008. Illinois Education Research Council, 1-28; Gates, S. M., Ringel, J. S., Santibañez, L., Guarino, C., Ghosh-Dastidar, B., & Brown, A. (2006). Mobility and turnover among school principals. *Economics of Education Review*, 25(3), 289-302. doi: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2005.01.008; Podgursky, M., Ehlert, M., Lindsay, J., & Wan, Y. (2016) An examination of the movement of educators within and across three Midwest Region states. (REL 2017-185), Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest.] These relationships, however, depend on where the study takes place and what measures are used to define turnover as well as years of experience when principals leave their schools. [See Grissom, J. A., & Bartanen, B. (2018). Principal effectiveness and principal turnover. *Education Finance and Policy*, (Just Accepted), 1-63.] For example, while most studies find this relationship, one case study of six large urban districts found no clear relationship between a principal's prior experience and retention. [See Burkhauser, S., Gates, S. M., Hamilton, L. S., & Ikemoto, G. S. (2012). First-year principals in urban school districts: How actions and working conditions relate to outcomes. Technical report. RAND Corporation].
- ⁷³ There are a number of studies suggesting that a principal's racial/ethnic background may be related to turnover, but the findings vary based on geography and the type of move. For example, a number of studies have found greater mobility among African-American and Latino/a principals. [See Baker, B. D., Punswick, E., & Belt, C. (2010). School leadership stability, principal moves, and departures: Evidence from Missouri. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(4), 523-557; Tekleselassie, A. A., & Villarreal, P. (2011). Career mobility and departure intentions among school principals in the United States: Incentives and disincentives. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 10(3), 251-293.] However, others have found African-American principals to be less likely to leave their position. [See Gates, S. M., Ringel, J. S., Santibañez, L., Guarino, C., Ghosh-Dastidar, B., & Brown, A. (2006). Mobility and turnover among school principals. *Economics of Education Review*, 25(3), 289-302. doi: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2005.01.008; Solano, P. L., McDuffie, M. J., & Farley-Ripple, E. N., & Bruton, J. (2010). *Principal retention in the state of Delaware*. Newark, DE: University of Delaware, Center for Community Research and Service]. Researchers also looked at the interaction between a principal's race and the demographic composition of his or her school and found that when there was a match, principals were less likely to leave their school. [See Gates, S. M., Ringel, J. S., Santibañez, L., Guarino, C., Ghosh-Dastidar, B., & Brown, A. (2006). Mobility and turnover among school principals. *Economics of Education Review*, 25(3), 289-302. doi: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2005.01.008].
- ⁷⁴ While the findings are not conclusive, there is some evidence that younger and older principals are more likely to leave their schools, and middle-aged principals more likely to stay. [See Tekleselassie, A. A., & Villarreal, P. (2011). Career mobility and departure intentions among school principals in the United States: Incentives and disincentives. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 10(3), 251-293; DeAngelis, K. J., & White, B. R. (2011). Principal turnover in Illinois public schools, 2001-2008. Illinois Education Research Council, 1-28; and Ni, Y., Sun, M., & Rorrer, A. (2015). Principal turnover: Upheaval and uncertainty in charter schools? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 51(3), 409-437]. This is likely because younger principals, like teachers, have higher turnover rates if the job is challenging for them, and older principals are more likely to retire or be recruited to the central office. Research on the relationship between a principal's gender and the likelihood of turnover are mixed, with some studies finding greater mobility among male principals, [See Gates, S. M., Ringel, J. S., Santibañez, L., Guarino, C., Ghosh-Dastidar, B., & Brown, A. (2006). Mobility and turnover among school principals. *Economics of Education Review*, 25(3), 289-302. doi: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2005.01.008 and Tekleselassie, A. A., & Villarreal, P. (2011). Career mobility and departure intentions among school principals in the United States: Incentives and disincentives. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 10(3), 251-293] and others finding no relationship. [See Ni, Y., Sun, M., & Rorrer, A. (2015). Principal turnover: Upheaval and uncertainty in charter schools? *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 51(3), 409-437].
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ABOUT NASSP

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and voice for principals and other school leaders across the United States. NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student's potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the National Honor Society, National Junior Honor Society, National Elementary Honor Society, and National Student Council.

The NASSP Policy & Advocacy Center is a trusted resource and online hub for legislative news, policy information, data, research, and advocacy tools related to K-12 education and additional school leaders' interests. It elevates the influence of school leaders by providing ways for them to directly communicate with policymakers at all levels of government. It is also a space to learn about important education issues affecting schools, and serves as a portal through which stakeholders and constituents can take action.

ABOUT THE LEARNING POLICY INSTITUTE

The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.



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