

The Impact of Principal Attrition and Replacement on Indicators of School Quality

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POLICY ISSUE

Transitions to a new principal are common, especially within urban public schools, and potentially highly disruptive to a school’s culture and operations. The full range of the effect of principal transitions remains an understudied component of school leadership policy. This study explores whether principal transitions are inherently disruptive or if the impact of changing principals depends on the context surrounding the outgoing or incoming principal—namely, whether the new principal was hired externally or promoted from within a school. We find that transitions to both internal and external hires negatively impact student performance. Externally hired principals also lead to an increase in teacher turnover and a decline in perceptions of the school’s learning environment, whereas transitions to an internally promoted principal have no such effects. Our findings suggest that reducing principal mobility in general is a valuable policy goal. Additionally, the pattern of our results suggests a need for further research to more completely understand the nature of principal impacts on school quality and student outcomes.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

We identify principal transitions using longitudinal administrative data supplied by the New York City Department of Education for all principals from 2006-2007 through 2017-2018. We separate data for principals who were hired externally (those who never worked within the school) and those who were promoted from within the school (generally a teacher or an assistant principal).

We use data from three sources to measure school outcomes of interest. Report cards distributed by the New York State Education Department contain teacher turnover rates within each school by year. We use school-level composite index scores assessing school environment, student performance, and student progress from the city’s School Progress Reports from 2009 through 2014. Finally, we

KEY FINDINGS

How Principal Turnover Impacts Students, Teachers, and the School Environment

	Any Transition	Internal Promotion	External Hire
Student Progress	▼	▼	▼
Student Performance	▼	▼	▼
Teacher Turnover	▲	—	▲
School Environment:			
Overall Index	▼	—	▼
Trust	▼	▲	▼
Order & Discipline	▼	▲	▼
Vision	▼	▲	▼

Note. Student progress is a measure of year-to-year gains made by students on standardized math and reading tests. Student performance is a measure of the percentage of students scoring above certain achievement thresholds in a given year on standardized math and reading tests.

— means no change

combine data on teacher responses to consistently administered questions on the city's annual surveys of a school's learning environment, with a focus on themes of order and discipline, instructional leadership and vision, and relationships and trust. We then compare changes in a respective outcome within a school during years leading up to and following a principal transition.

We find that principal transitions lead to an immediate and substantial decline in student test scores that is sustained for several years. Similar negative effects were observed whether the principal was externally hired or internally promoted. We also find that schools which transition to an externally hired principal experience an immediate and substantial increase in teacher turnover as well as a decline in teacher perceptions of the school's overall learning environment. There is no significant relationship between transitioning to an internally hired principal and teacher turnover or measures of school environment.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

First, our results demonstrate that principal transitions are disruptive to student learning generally. Though leadership transitions cannot be entirely avoided, limiting principal mobility is a valuable policy goal.

Second, the findings that that principal transitions lead to lower student performance regardless of whether the new principal is internally promoted or hired externally, but only externally hired principals lead to a reported decline in working conditions for teachers and an increase in teacher turnover, are seemingly inconsistent with the common perception that principals primarily impact school quality by influencing the learning environment. Taken at face value, these findings suggest that a principal's impact on student learning could be distinct from their effects on working conditions for teachers within the school. Thus, we argue that there is need for additional research to more completely understand the nature of leadership effects on student learning, and also to further examine the link between

teachers' working conditions and school quality.

Finally, we caution that our results do not necessarily imply that a school that hired an external principal candidate would have experienced a different outcome had they instead promoted someone internally. While comparisons of schools that hired internal or external principals hold relative to schools that did not make a transition, comparisons of the principals themselves might not hold because a school's choice may reflect differences in the pool of available candidates. For example, schools in our analysis that hired an external candidate may have done so at least in part because they did not have a strong internal candidate for the position. Thus, while our results speak to the predicted effect of transitions to one or another type of new principal under current circumstances, decisions about whether to hire an internal or external candidate must take into account the school's specific context.

For the complete working paper, visit wheelockpolicycenter.org.

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