

Principal Retention Patterns in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah

The departure of an effective school leader can influence staff turnover and student achievement. Approximately 6–7 percent of U.S. principals change schools every year, while another 9–12 percent depart the principalship entirely. With school systems facing an unprecedented public health crisis due to COVID-19, principal retention is a key area of concern for many local and state education agencies. In an effort to improve the retention of school leaders, state education agency officials in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah are implementing new statewide leadership support initiatives. To inform these efforts, these state education agencies partnered with the Regional Educational Laboratory West to better understand principal retention patterns in traditional public schools.

Key findings

- Fewer than half of the principals in each state remained at the same school from fall 2016 to fall 2020 (see figure).
- Principals who changed schools but remained in the principalship tended to move to a new school in the same local education agency rather than to a new school in another local education agency.
- Certain retention patterns differed across the three states from fall 2016 to fall 2020:
 - Each state experienced its lowest four-year school principal retention rate at a different grade span: high schools and middle schools in Arizona, elementary schools in Nevada, and middle schools in Utah.
 - Arizona and Nevada had lower four-year principal retention rates in schools in towns and rural areas, while Utah had lower retention rates in cities and suburban areas.
 - In Arizona and Nevada four-year principal retention rates were higher in schools where more than 50 percent of students were White; the converse was true in Utah.
 - Arizona and Utah had lower four-year principal retention rates in schools with higher proportions of students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (an indicator of poverty), while Nevada did not.
- Across all three states, three-year principal retention rates were lower at schools with lower average proficiency rates on state standardized tests than at schools with higher average proficiency rates from fall 2016 to fall 2019.

These findings, which suggest that state and local education leaders will continue to grapple with longstanding staffing challenges, can help leaders better direct resources and supports to where they are most needed. Workforce leaders in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah could use the results as a baseline reference for research on principal retention as well as to help target resources to improve retention. They could also explore environments with lower retention rates to determine whether certain retention incentives, such as expanding professional learning opportunities, improving working conditions, and supporting decisionmaking authority, combined with careful monitoring of outcomes, might reduce principal turnover.

