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Toward the Continuous Improvement of Chicago Public Schools' High-churn Elementary Schools

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Overview

The aim of this brief is to describe a key contributor to the persistent disparities found in student learning outcomes in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and to show how this knowledge can help identify specific sources of inequities in CPS, particularly for schools with predominantly Black student enrollments.¹ We present a data-based approach to identifying and examining a prominent *type* of high-need school—the *high-churn school*—through publicly available administrative data.² Both the concept of “churn” and the initial data analysis presented here can inform current CPS efforts to strengthen the processes of continuous improvement at the system level.³

Although the approach we describe is based on data from CPS and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the literature suggests high-churn schools are common elsewhere. This brief may be of interest to other school districts and state departments of education seeking to better understand and support low-performing schools. The descriptive methods we use can readily be adapted by other localities and/or improved to employ local data resources.

This brief can also be of considerable use to principal preparation programs and school districts seeking to develop principal leadership to improve schools that seem resistant to improvement over time. It has long been recognized that such schools tend to have high concentrations of students of color, particularly Black students from under-resourced communities. We acknowledge here that poverty, race, and racism are some of the key variables that must be addressed by a range of social policies and school culture commitments.

¹ In this case, 105 of 125 high-churn schools fit this profile.

² Online data provided by CPS and the Illinois State Board of Education.

³ Whalen (2020). Available at <https://urbanedleadership.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CEOREport.pdf>

At the same time, the instability of student enrollment⁴ and attendance, which are related to racism and poverty, indicate distinctive problems of practice to which school and system leaders can respond more effectively.

This brief is drawn from two longer, more detailed studies conducted by the Center for Urban Education Leadership, which are available upon request.⁵ We have organized this brief into the following three sections:

1. Definition and Performance of High-churn Schools
2. Organizational Capacity Development as a Response to High Churn
3. Theory and Measurement to Inform Policy and Practice

1. Definition and Performance of High-churn Schools

We define high-churn schools as those schools exhibiting comparatively high instability in student enrollment and attendance; they are high-poverty schools that serve the students who are likely to have the most troubling educational outcomes. These schools face pervasive challenges at the intersection of school, family, and community needs—that is, students from under-resourced communities are most likely to need additional social-emotional and academic supports from schools that themselves are under-resourced. Such schools cluster at the upper extremes of rates of low-income schools—90% and above on the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) low-income indicator, which is typically higher for these schools than the commonly used free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) indicator.⁶ Instability

⁴ Specifically, within-year student mobility (late entries and early exits during the school year).

⁵ Walker, Tozer, and Zavitskovsky (2020); Walker and Tozer (2021).

⁶ Free and reduced-price lunch.

in enrollment and attendance is often related to families' experiences of living in poverty. In addition, instability can be related to school practices that do or do not respond well to family and student needs associated with enrollment and attendance problems.

High churn marks a large group of Chicago's elementary schools, approximately one-third, as distinctly different from the majority of schools regarding enrollment and attendance (see the section in this brief titled "Churn as a metric"). High churn describes a set of phenomena that negatively affect schools' efforts to improve and is typically not recognized in the literature, even those studies sensitive to school improvement challenges that are generally not well understood.⁷ However, recent studies have explored the relationship between student and family experiences of poverty, showing how these affect student mobility, attendance and homelessness, and addressing the challenges facing the schools serving these families.⁸ Moreover, although the combination of indicators we use for "high churn" is not described carefully in the literature, "churn" has been used in the field of education for some time to refer to turnover among teachers, principals, and system leaders, and it has also been used to refer to the instability of student enrollment and attendance in the popular press.⁹

Describing high-churn schools in CPS

Although there is no consensus measure of what makes a school "high-churn," a large group of CPS elementary schools have, on average, notably higher rates of the following:

- Student mobility (3 times as high as all other CPS elementary schools),
- chronic truancy (2.6 times), and

- homelessness (4 times).

Thirty percent of CPS elementary schools (n=125) have high rates of student mobility, chronic truancy, and homelessness compared with the remaining schools that are stable in enrollment and attendance.

Table 1. How much churn is high churn?

FACTOR	STABLE SCHOOLS Mean (SD)		HIGH-CHURN SCHOOLS Mean (SD)
Student mobility	7.5% (4)	3 times	23% (6)
Chronic truancy	15.5% (8.5)	2.6 times	40% (14)
Homeless students*	3% (1.5)	4 times	12% (7.5)

*Schools must have 10 or more students for state reporting. Numbers shown are for 20% of stable schools (n=49) and over 90% of high-churn schools (n=116).

Almost all high-churn schools have high rates of poverty (90% or greater ISBE low-income indicator). Most schools with poverty rates lower than 90% are stable. At the same time, not all high-poverty schools are high-churn schools. Most high-poverty, predominantly Latino schools tend not to be high churn, while high-poverty, predominantly Black enrollment schools are *not always* but often high churn. Most of the latter schools serve some Latino students, and some have substantial Latino populations. High-churn schools have higher rates of students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

Here, stability and high churn describe a continuum. Within both the stable and high-churn groups, some schools have greater churn than others.

Performance of high-churn schools

High-churn schools perform largely in the **lower half** of the CPS School Quality Rating Program (SQRP) accountability system, while stable

⁷ Payne and Kaba (2007); Mintrop and Sunderman (2009).

⁸ Welsh (2018); Chaudry and Wimer (2016); Sandstrom and Huerta (2013).

⁹ Atteberry, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2017); Finnegan and Daly (2017); Richards (2018).

schools almost uniformly perform in the upper half. Almost all schools identified for *intensive support*—or as “chronically low performing”—in recent years are high churn. Only 44% of predominantly Black enrollment schools that are high churn have sustained Level 2+ SQRP ratings by the end of a five-year period.¹⁰ This compares to 82% of schools with predominantly Black enrollment that were *not* high churn.

These descriptive data indicate that race and poverty by themselves are less explanatory of poor school performance than race, poverty, and churn combined.¹¹ This by no means diminishes the recognition of the effects of racism and poverty in our schools; to the contrary, it elaborates on those effects in terms that create problems of practice for teachers and leaders.

Although the evidence generated from CPS accountability measures indicates the characteristic of high churn is strongly associated with the problem of chronic low school performance, as measured by CPS *intensive support* status or the ISBE’s *lowest-performing* designation, it also suggests most high-churn schools are not chronically low performing and should not be characterized as such.¹² Between 2015 and 2019, most high-churn schools demonstrated improvement and/or strength on priority metrics of school organizational capacity; attendance or related measures such as chronic absenteeism; and/or student achievement, here as measured by the state PARCC/IAR exam. Because most stable

schools earn sufficient points on the accountability system to routinely default to a *good standing* status, evidence of improvement on the accountability system over time is actually strongest for high-churn schools, which have had to earn their way to *good standing* status.¹³

At the same time, sustaining and building on improvement is an ongoing challenge for high-churn schools. This is reflected in fluctuations in their accountability measures and student achievement data, leading to little progress over time for many schools. Related to these fluctuations, an important nuance is that stronger performing high-churn schools often start in a weaker performance position, while weaker performing high-churn schools often start in a stronger performance position.

Student achievement in high-churn schools

Distinct variations in achievement patterns are the norm for high-churn schools.¹⁴ Although *on average* these schools show a flat line for achievement in recent years, our analysis finds the following variations:

- Over the past five years on the state PARCC/IAR exam, 31% of high-churn schools have demonstrated substantial improvement in reading, 23% demonstrated substantial improvement in math, and 15% improved in both subjects.
- The performance of the remaining schools was flat or declining at the end of five years. Twice as many schools (42%) showed

¹⁰ A CPS Level 2+ rating and above is required for Good Standing accountability status. Level 2 and 3 ratings earn Provisional and Intensive Support status. “Sustained” means at least two years at the end of the five-year period (2015–2019).

¹¹ Fantuzzo, LaBoeuf and Rouse (2013).

¹² The ISBE *lowest-performing* designation identifies schools in the bottom 5% of performance statewide and qualifies a school for the highest levels of assistance under ESSA.

¹³ Walker, Lisa, Steve Tozer, and Paul Zavitkovsky. 2020. *Toward the Continuous Improvement of*

Chicago’s High-Churn Elementary Schools: Understanding the Data. Chicago, IL: UIC Center for Urban Education Leadership.

¹⁴ The variations reported in this brief are based on an analysis of distribution shifts in PARCC/IAR achievement over time, with the strongest school performers demonstrating the strongest shifts both at the top (0.5 grade equivalents and above) and bottom (-1.5 grade equivalent and below) of the distribution.

sustained declines in math achievement compared with reading achievement (19%).

- Among the lowest-achieving students concentrated in high-churn schools and who performed 1.5 grade equivalents or more below grade level, the gains were strongest in schools that also substantially moved students at the top end of the distribution, that is, 0.5 grade equivalents or above in achievement.

By end of the third grade, high-churn schools *on average* lag 1.5 grade equivalents behind CPS schools in reading and math achievement, on state and national norms.

Broadly summarized, our review of several interrelated literatures indicates that churn contributes to low school performance and student achievement by the following:

- Disrupting the learning and development of young children. Instability related to poverty—such as in housing and employment—affects both young mothers and their young children.
- Affecting the quality of instruction in a school. This leads to lower achievement outcomes for all students, even those who are stable in enrollment and attendance.
- Challenging the development of positive social relationships and trust in a school community and with families and the community, which are critical to school improvement processes.¹⁵

Schools where needs are the greatest

Data on schools where needs are the greatest can inform system-level responses.

- Schools with the greatest amount of churn on the stability–churn continuum, that is, have the highest rates of mobility, chronic

truancy, and homeless students, perform worse than **other** high-churn schools on priority performance metrics.

- Most high-churn schools are clustered in five out of Chicago’s sixteen geographic regions: West Side, South Side, Greater Stony Island, Greater Calumet, and Bronzeville/South Lakefront.
- *Thirty-six percent of Chicago’s kindergarten students attend schools in these five regions.*
- Eighty percent of schools that sustain low Level 2 or Level 3 ratings are located in Chicago’s South Side region, one-third (n=10) of them concentrated in a single CPS network.

Research findings show that some schools are “stuck schools,” “confront much more severe problems,” or face a greater “degree of difficulty”¹⁶—and as a result are far less likely to improve, which poses perennially pressing challenges for urban school districts such as CPS. Because the churn of the student population has not generally been recognized as a key variable in poor school performance, districts have not developed specific responses to their challenges.¹⁷ *When as a field we continue to struggle to scale improvement to ensure successful student outcomes, it may be because of a gap in knowledge about the specific school contexts and how to apply practices, standards, and metrics to develop the capacity for improvement over time.*

Conclusion to Part 1

This work represents a starting point for CPS to identify the specific problems of practice that influence teaching and learning in high-churn schools and develop the district’s capacity to support systemic responses to these challenges.

¹⁵ Welsh (2018). Walker and Tozer (2021) is available upon request (see the references).

¹⁶ Rosenholtz (1989); Bryk et al. (2010); Nauer et al. (2014).

¹⁷ The McKinney-Vento Act is the policy response to homeless students. Measures of chronic

absenteeism are being included in accountability systems. Both responses reflect concerns at the student level. This is different from recognizing the strains of churn on school capacity.

In turn, this response will begin to address the sources of inequity that affect school and student outcomes in ways that are deeply intertwined but that the system has not recognized. We can expect continued educational disparities by race and poverty—particularly for students most at risk of educational disengagement—unless churn is taken into account and the challenges it creates for school improvement and the preparation and development of school leaders are addressed.

2. Organizational Capacity Development as a Response to High Churn

Schools with high rates of student “churn,” which can be defined by high rates of student mobility, chronic absence, and homeless students, face multiple organizational challenges that are not yet well understood in existing literature on improving schools. Although the contextual factors of poverty and racism are the primary influences on churn, practices inside the school can be responsive to how these factors affect student learning. However, this is unlikely to happen at scale without strong system supports, which, in turn, may require explicit recognition of the relationship of churn to poverty and racism and the ways in which system policies may contribute to or reinforce churn, including by not attending to it.¹⁸

A fairly robust stream of the literature has developed over the past three decades with such equity foci as social justice education, antiracist education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and leadership.¹⁹ There is a temptation to think that this is the literature that will best respond to the problems of high-

churn schools.²⁰ One of its values is in naming the pervasiveness of racism in the wider culture and in educational practices and elevating the awareness of educators, particularly white educators, to their own internalized racism.²¹ However, neither the organizational change nor the antiracist leadership literature has shown enough about how school leaders can more effectively counter the specific effects of racism in their schools.²² Raising awareness of how race and poverty work in schools and in teacher and leader mindsets is undoubtedly important and difficult. *However, it is critical to understand the wider range of institutional consequences of racism—from the physical and emotional health of students to how parents experience schools to who gets hired to teach and lead—so that responses can go beyond, for example, culturally responsive pedagogy.*²³ Leaders who do not understand the impact of race and poverty on student attendance and mobility and how their leadership practices might more effectively respond to these consequences will inevitably fall short of well serving their students and teachers. We note here that a recent, heralded study on how principals affect student learning specifies the impact of student attendance as one of the capacities that distinguishes more versus less effective leaders when an equity lens is applied.²⁴

Features and factors influencing organizational capacity development

Researchers who have attempted to better understand the problem of lower organizational capacity in school have coined terms such as “stuck schools” or “stagnating schools.”²⁵ Bryk et al. at the University of Chicago recognize that school organizational capacity (i.e., “essential

¹⁸ Milner IV (2013); Welsh (2019); Welton, Owens, and Zamani-Gallaher (2018).

¹⁹ Ishimaru and Galloway (2019); Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016); Khalifa et al. (2015); Shields and Hesbol (2020).

²⁰ The authors value this literature. One of the authors of this brief first published on anti-racist education in 1993, for example. See Tozer, Violas, and Senese (1993).

²¹ Bonilla-Silva (2003); Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016).

²² Welton, Owens, and Zamani-Gallaher (2018).

²³ See, for example, Lewis, A.E. & Diamond, John B. (2015) *Despite the best intentions: How racial inequality thrives in good schools*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁴ Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021).

²⁵ Rosenholtz (1989); Bryk et al. (2010).

supports for improvement” or the 5Es) does not develop in a vacuum; rather, it is influenced by features such as school size and enrollment stability and by external factors, including the local community context: “It is important to recognize that a school’s capacity to actually develop the essential supports depends on an array of structural, institutional, and local community factors.”²⁶ These factors are related to the underlying conditions of institutional racism, structural poverty, and community disinvestment that cause crime, violence, and what might be termed “extraordinary circumstances” for students. To say that the resulting challenges to the school are real because the impact on students is real does not pathologize the community.

The implication for a school leader of a “stuck” school is that together with attempting improvement strategies, the leader must attend to the features and factors that affect the school’s social organization and how these create organizational needs and leadership challenges related to capacity development. For example, the literature indicates that challenges in these schools include the following²⁷:

- teachers work in isolation to address student needs and challenges and perceive that they lack support from parents and families, both of which can have an impact on their commitment to the school and their retention (teacher retention rates are lower for high-churn schools than stable schools);
- formative assessment practices are weak or lacking, which impairs effective instructional responses to mobile students;

- teachers default to traditional whole-group instruction because the implementation of small group methods—for example, reading and writing workshops in literacy—with a mobile population is challenging in the absence of support;
- teachers reteach in response to low student achievement levels, which depresses curricular challenges within classrooms and flattens the curriculum across grades, lowering the achievement levels for all students, including those whose attendance and enrollment are stable; and
- teachers lack the skills to differentiate instruction to support the learning and achievement of high-achieving student populations.

Specifications such as those above can enable school leaders to maintain a focus on developing the core capacities for teaching and learning while engaging with questions about how to respond to the challenges churn creates regarding capacity development. Recent recommendations for schools to advance in their social, emotional, and academic development, for example, from the Aspen Institute, support a broad framing of these concerns, including attention to students, families, and communities, including their needs and assets. Importantly, not all high-churn schools experience the same challenges or the same intensity of challenges. The specific challenges will vary depending on each school’s unique context. Homelessness may be at the root of chronic absence in one school but not another. Family transportation may be a problem in one school but not another. It falls on school leaders to understand and adapt to these variations and build local capacity that

²⁶ Rosenholtz (1989); Bryk et al. (2010), p. 68. In abbreviated form, the Five Essential Supports are represented in Bryk et al. (2010) as: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Supportive

Environment, Involved Families, and Ambitious Instruction.

²⁷ Kerbow (1996); Allensworth, Ponisciak, and Mazzeo (2009); Simon and Johnson (2015); Raudenbush, Jean, and Art (2011).

enables school communities to respond effectively.

If school leaders and teachers are to be deployed to high-need schools to serve as catalysts for improvement, training and supporting them for the organizational capacity and instructional challenges of this work is of critical importance. High churn is a characteristic of schools and school communities that creates the dimensions of complexity for virtually all aspects of the school improvement process. It is not a discrete problem to solve nor a metric against which to gauge school or leadership progress. Our data analysis indicates that high-churn tends to be a consistent characteristic of schools and school communities, but it can be modified in the following ways:

- Some evidence indicates student mobility can be reduced through organizational capacity development²⁸ and intervention.²⁹
- Additionally, chronic absenteeism rates are recognized as a significant metric related to long-term student outcomes that schools can impact directly, hence its inclusion as a metric in accountability systems under the Federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).
- At the student level, within-year mobility and chronic absenteeism are risk markers that can serve to provide early warning of possible later dropout and support early interventions.

Teacher retention and organizational capacity

Teacher and principal retention are notable challenges for high-churn schools and are worse in schools with the highest levels of churn.

An analysis of 27 high-churn schools that received additional resources under turnaround policies or ISBE school improvement grants indicates that teacher retention is stronger in schools with stronger/more improved organizational capacity measures and is related to *effective leadership* and *collaborative teacher* scores on the 5Es. An analysis of these same 27 high-churn schools shows, compared with all other high-churn schools, stronger improvement patterns on SQRP measures but **weaker** improvement on PARCC third-grade achievement in literacy and math. Although these 27 schools have strong organizational capacity and attendance measures that contribute to higher SQRP measures, higher teacher turnover may make it more difficult for leaders to build and sustain teacher capacity for instructional improvement. These schools improve achievement when teacher retention rates stabilize, but this is more likely to occur at the lower levels of student mobility.

Higher principal turnover is associated *both* with high-churn schools showing strong improvement in achievement *and* with high-churn schools showing the strongest declines. This suggests that successive new leadership can help build organizational capacity and destabilize what capacity exists.

Conclusion to Part 2

Although it is tempting to believe that the comparative performance differences among high-churn schools will illuminate some set of “best practices” in these schools, it is too early to reach that conclusion. Comparing the highest-performing with the lowest-performing high-churn schools reveals observable differences in the demographic profiles of these schools. That is, the lowest-performing high-churn schools have the greatest concentrations of Black students and severity of churn,

patterns to school characteristics:
https://education.wayne.edu/detroit_ed_research/mobility_report_2.pdf.

²⁹ Fiel, Haskins, and Turley (2013).

²⁸ See the work of the Detroit Education Research Partnership at Wayne State University on mobility and attendance patterns and specifically the following report on the relationship of these

including the highest rates of absenteeism and homelessness. We re-emphasize that this is not a comment about “Blackness” or even the effects of poverty in the Black community, but rather, it is about the capacity of schools in a deeply racist culture to respond effectively to the educational needs of Black, high-poverty students. This point was made emphatically by socio-linguist William LaBov in 1972, and it is telling that we have to restate it nearly 50 years later.³⁰

3: Theory and Measurement to Inform Policy and Practice

Responding to chronic low school performance effectively requires us to understand high-need schools more specifically than the common descriptors of *high minority* or *high poverty* allow.

Why we need a new way to characterize high-need schools

An identification approach that provides greater specificity about the common problems of practice in high-need schools is a starting point for learning about the particular or specialized organizational capacities to develop in schools and how to apply successful leadership and teaching practices in specific contexts.

Differentiating among the school need-types is a first step toward enabling practitioners to learn from variability in outcomes across similar schools and how to take innovations to scale. The ability to accurately identify school characteristics that make schools harder to improve can 1) help focus district and state ideas, resources, and personnel to develop/support interventions on these schools’ specific needs and 2) “create momentum for deliberate and well-articulate improvement processes...for districts and schools stuck in low-performance.”³¹ It is already widely acknowledged, for example, that a school with high percentages of English learners (ELs) or diverse learners (DLs) must

develop the capacity to address needs that would not be the same as the capacity developed in schools with virtually no EL or DL students. Indeed, these schools have different need-types. High-churn schools are one example of a school need-type through which to explore these possibilities—and churn intersects with poverty, race, EL, and DL challenges.

Limitations of indicators of socioeconomic status (SES) and racial/ethnic categories

Low-income rates, usually based on eligibility for FRPL, have long been an accepted way to identify *need* in educational policy making. Racial/ethnic categories, for example, the percentage of students who are Black and/or Latino, are also commonly used to identify need. The identification of high-need schools using these indicators lumps large numbers of schools together. In CPS, approximately 85% of students are low income, and 85% are Black and Latino. The federal definition of high-poverty schools as enrolling 75% of students from low-income families would identify three-quarters of CPS elementary schools—or 310 regular public (non-charter) schools—as high need. However, the leaders and teachers who serve in these schools know schools vary in their improvement challenges, and some are far more challenging to improve than others. Additional problems of using income and racial/ethnic categories include the following:

- Although their use can signal a concern for educational inequities and social justice, it can also reinforce common stereotypes that the source of low performance in schools lies in family poverty and racial/ethnic characteristics.
- Family income levels or racial/ethnic categories contain little to no relevant information for school leaders to identify

³⁰ Labov (1972).

³¹ Mintrop and Sunderman (2009).

the *specific challenges* in the development of school organizational capacity.

- There may be different kinds of—as well as different degrees of—school need. High-need schools may have different features that are not captured by income and racial/ethnic categories, even when these are precisely defined. Schools are not necessarily arrayed along a single continuum of *school need* that is defined by the presence or intensity of the same variables. The needs of two high-poverty schools with different student populations—one largely Black and the other a mix that is predominantly Latino and Black—may be similar in resisting improvement but for potentially different reasons.

Limitations of accountability systems in identifying high-need schools

Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed in 2002, and reaffirmed by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, the nation’s evolving accountability policies have served to identify high-need schools for the purposes of policy and program intervention. These policies exclude income status and race as relevant variables. They prioritize instead measures of academic growth and achievement, increasingly incorporating school organizational process measures and nonacademic measures, such as chronic absence. However, a lack of school capacity signaled by reading scores or attendance does not explain why capacity is lacking in the first place. Not unlike the low-income and racial/ethnic categories, accountability measures provide little to no information about the barriers to capacity development.

Inconsistencies in how different accountability systems identify schools for interventions raise questions about definitions of need: How much improvement is enough before an

accountability system determines a school is no longer high need? Is a high-need school no longer high need when its performance improves? More importantly, if academic outcomes remain too low to support positive life outcomes for most students, should this not qualify a school as high need, even if it has demonstrated improvement?

Consistent with a school effectiveness perspective, we expect the performance outcomes of high-need schools can and will vary. The standard of “chronic low performance,” which is commonly used to identify high-need schools, excludes schools with high-need characteristics, where leadership has developed the school’s organizational capacity. For example, we have found that most chronically low-performing schools are high churn, but at the same time, most high-churn schools are not chronically low performing. Any approach to conceptualizing *need* should allow us to identify similar schools with different outcomes to learn about variability in performance.

Specifying school need-types

We propose that the concept of *school need-type* can be generative for improving the practices in high-need schools by specifying the kinds and range of problems of practice in these schools. *School need-type*, in contrast to the nonspecific descriptors of *high-need* or *high-poverty schools*, highlights the following propositions:

- The problems of practice endemic to high-need schools are diverse because “high need” may reside in high churn or not; in second-language acquisition or not; in a high proportion of special education students (diverse learners) or not; in a shortage of qualified teachers or not; or some combination of these and other contextual factors. This diversity supports the identification of schools as different

need-types based on school (and potentially community) data.

- The low performance of schools can be understood as an outcome of the interactions of school and student needs and the organizational capacity to address these needs.
- Different organizational capacities may be necessary for different school need-types.
- School need-types hold promise for school improvement networks to learn how to improve high-need schools at scale by identifying strategies to improve student learning outcomes.

The approach to high-need schools that is described in this brief finds a ready application within a policy framework of *targeted universalism*, where universal standards are coupled with differentiated supports for specific populations or need-groups.³² The primary purpose of the concept of *school need-types* is to inform the continuous improvement work of practitioners and administrators at the school, district, and state levels by identifying features that offer clues about the common problems of practice. This calls for CPS to focus on the distinctive needs of high-churn schools and the students they serve while ensuring that instructional coherence initiatives are tethered to coherence in the support of students' social and emotional development under stressful conditions.³³ A priority for this focus should be the early education grades, PK through third grade, where churn tends to be high and the leverage is the greatest to build literacy and numeracy foundations. Effective early interventions are required to prevent later

school disengagement, for which students who attend high-churn schools are at risk.³⁴ This will require tapping into the strength of cross-sector partnerships in the early childhood education sector.³⁵ Strong and effective school, district, and civic leadership are required to support this priority and approach.

As suggested in this brief, the concept of the high-churn school can contribute to a district's equity agenda³⁶ by enabling the systematic use of data to support progress toward the district's vision goals³⁷ for students in neighborhood schools. Improvement science—a recent advance in the long-standing continuous improvement models—provides the principles, processes, and tools to productively guide data use toward such targets, notably through the two key structures of networked improvement communities (NICs) and the network hub.³⁸ Using improvement science methods can ensure attention to educational improvement in predominantly Black communities in Chicago's South and West sides, which have been scarred by historic racism and related economic disadvantages. The needs of these communities are currently being intensified by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. High-churn schools, which have faced significant challenges before the pandemic, will be responsible for addressing these needs. There is greater urgency than ever to be responsive to their core problems of practice.

Paying greater attention to the unique characteristics of high-churn schools can pay especially high dividends in pre-K through third grade. Absenteeism, mobility, and homelessness tend to be highest among the youngest students in the elementary school

³² Powell, Menendian, and Ake (2019).

³³ The National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development provides guidance for SEAD in *From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope*. <http://nationathope.org/>

³⁴

<https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/programs/chicago-student-success-initiative>

³⁵ Kauerz and Coffman (2013).

³⁶ See equity framework at <https://bit.ly/38QOmka>

³⁷ <https://www.cps.edu/about/vision/>

³⁸ <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/>

population. These interruptions greatly affect opportunities to learn curricular content, develop social skills, and build positive, supportive relationships with peers and adults. However, these factors have typically been viewed as nonacademic, family-based factors that schools need to engage in only if expected or required by laws such as the McKinney-Vento Act for homeless students.

Metrics, data tools, and strategies to identify need in schools and communities

“Churn” is supported by the literature identifying the levels of school “risk.” Data and technology tools are being developed to inform the following: 1) awareness at both the school and neighborhood levels of the inequities related to race and poverty and 2) the targeting of policy and resources toward areas of the greatest need. The commonly used measure of poverty in education, that is, eligibility for Free and Reduced Lunch Programs, captures family disadvantage better than income reported to the IRS, but it is imprecise at identifying high needs for purposes of policy and resource allocation.³⁹ Identifying need through school performance alone brings about the problem of sorting schools on factors unrelated to school quality; student mobility is a notable example.⁴⁰ Following up on the work of Bryk et al.⁴¹, Nauer et al.⁴² have developed a method to identify “truly disadvantaged schools” in New York using 18 school and neighborhood indicators from administrative and census data; they find that higher levels of school disadvantage—or risk load—correlate with higher levels of chronic absenteeism.⁴³ Higher levels of school risk load are also related to lower levels of school-wide achievement through both individual risks and

cumulative risks at the school and neighborhood levels.⁴⁴

Student mobility stands out as a distinctive risk for its influence on school improvement.⁴⁵ School risk factors that receive attention in the literature, in addition to student mobility, include the following: teacher experience, teacher mobility, teacher absences, principal turnover, homelessness, student engagement, school safety, suspensions, and diverse learners, including minority students and students with disabilities. Neighborhood risk factors include levels of income, unemployment, and the education of adults in a community; neighborhood residential conditions and housing, including homeless shelters; and the use of public benefit programs and involvement with public service systems.⁴⁶

Churn as a metric

School “churn” is based on indicators that are publicly available and readily accessible. “Churn” is less comprehensive than other measures of school “risk,” which use geographically bound census data that can be complicated to apply to schools when most students and families do not attend their neighborhood schools, as is the case in Chicago for the Black population. The concept of churn excludes indicators that are not actionable on the part of schools; for example, it does not include measures of housing quality. It is a *practical measure* to inform improvement more than it is a scientific and precise measure for research purposes. This distinction is discussed in the book *Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can get Better at Getting Better*.⁴⁷ Churn can be understood as an indicator of the

³⁹ Domina et al. (2018); Cookson (2020).

⁴⁰ Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy (2011); Rhodes (2005); Adams et al. (2017); Adams et al. (2016).

⁴¹ Bryk et al. (2010).

⁴² Nauer et al. (2014).

⁴³ The long-term education impacts of chronic absenteeism can be traced to the elementary school

years starting in prekindergarten. Ehrlich, Gwynne, and Allensworth (2018); Ehrlich et al. (2014); Balfanz and Byrnes (2012); Chang and Romero (2008).

⁴⁴ Whipple et al. (2010).

⁴⁵ Richards (2018); Kerbow (1996); Bryk et al. (2010)

⁴⁶ Bryk et al. (2010); Nauer et al. (2014); Whipple et al. (2010).

⁴⁷ Bryk et al. (2015), p. 102.

complexity of the work of leading and teaching under specific conditions. The high-churn category has formative value. That is, it signals actionable changes; requires considerable expertise to use well (in fact, we have yet to develop a comprehensive understanding of this expertise); and makes it possible to assess the extent to which system changes specifically have an impact on these schools.

The churn categories summarize annual churn codes in a three-year period based on CPS-reported rates of student mobility, chronic truancy, and homeless students (see Appendix: Creating Churn Totals and Codes). Each school is coded for churn in the school years 2016, 2017, and 2018 based on the following process: 1) numerical points assigned on a 5-point scale to indicate the rate bands from low to high; 2) points summed to categorize a school's churn from *stable* to *extreme churn*; and 3) further reduction to the three categories of stable, borderline high churn, and high churn.

Schools tend to be consistent in their levels of churn over time. Eighty-one percent of elementary schools (n=334) received the same code for each of the three years, and 16% of schools (n=66) received the same code for two years. The codes for 2014 further verify consistency over time. Eighty-seven percent of schools received the same code in 2014 and for the three-year period of 2016–2018.

The churn categories can enable an analysis of administrative data for patterns and trends to characterize high-churn schools, including demographics (race/ethnicity, poverty, English learners, students with IEPs), accountability measures (2014–2018), third-grade standardized test scores (2015–2019, PARCC/IAR), principal tenure (2014–2019), and measures of organizational capacity, teacher retention, chronic absenteeism, and school

enrollment. The findings from these analyses are summarized in Parts 1 and 2 of this brief.⁴⁸

Policy and practice in CPS: Questions for further inquiry

Principals who lead high-churn schools report having to dedicate substantial resources to the following:

- teacher capacity development to instruct students achieving two to three grade levels apart;
- Multi-tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) to meet the needs of low-achieving students;
- attendance supports, particularly for the PK–kindergarten area;
- PK–3 supports for a coherent continuum of curriculum and instruction, particularly in literacy learning;
- family communications; and
- behavioral and SEL supports for the school-wide community.

As CPS attempts to address the problem of student learning in high-churn schools, our system improvement map (see page 13) illustrates that the problem is rooted in diverse system dimensions such as instruction, human resources development, governance, and the kinds of data collected. The map was generated by the Networked Improvement Community (NIC) of UIC-trained school leaders who collaborated to inform the analysis of high-churn schools over a two-year period from 2018 to 2020. It is based on a scan of the literature, interviews with experts, and leaders' experiences under high-churn conditions. It is a provisional document representing the perspectives of one stakeholder group (school and system leaders with experience in high-churn schools), and it is intended to be illustrative of possibilities only.

⁴⁸ Full documentation of data findings is available in Walker, Tozer, and Zavitkovsky (2020).

System Improvement Map (June 2019)

A Product of the UIC School Leaders' NIC Problem of Practice: High-churn (HC) Schools Are Difficult to Lead to Improved PK-3 Learning Outcomes

Instructional	Information/Data	Human Resources	Governance
<p>Patterns of chronic absenteeism begin in PK</p> <p>Transfer students usually achieve well below their grade level</p> <p>Early education lacks a culture of and resources for formative assessment</p> <p>Assessment tools and practices inconsistent across schools in early grades</p> <p>Teachers require the skills to work with struggling readers and support proficiency for advanced learners</p> <p>Efforts to develop teacher capacity compromised by teacher mobility</p> <p>Schools/teachers insufficiently proactive in reaching out to families</p> <p>Behavioral and mental health issues across the school community disrupt/distract from PK–3 learning</p> <p>HC challenges the MTSS capacities of a school and adult/student SEL</p>	<p>Leaders do not see/name churn as impediment to school improvement</p> <p>Data systems and supports specific to HC conditions are lacking at school and network levels to assess and respond to teaching and learning challenges.</p> <p>Data on tier 2 and tier 3 interventions for mobile students are not accessible to receiving schools</p> <p>Data on mobile families/ students are much more difficult to collect, track, access, etc.</p> <p>The accountability system does not prioritize data collection for PK–3 literacy and mathematics</p> <p>PK–3 teachers do not learn to use collaborative cycles of inquiry that incorporate data on student learning PK–3.</p>	<p>HC schools not recognized as an important training context</p> <p>Programmatic efforts do not exist to prepare principals for distinctive HC challenges</p> <p>No system-wide entry planning process specific to HC schools and the PK–3 T&L continuum</p> <p>“Fit” of leaders and teachers not adequately assessed</p> <p>Principal supervisors lack leadership experience under HC conditions and/or with the PK–3 continuum.</p> <p>The hiring, development, and retention of teachers not sufficiently intentional</p> <p>School engagement with community agencies not systematically developed</p>	<p>Accountability for “continuity of care” in early education is lacking</p> <p>PK enrollment is citywide, encouraging transitions to different schools between PreK and K</p> <p>System-level policies have unintended consequences that adversely affect HC schools (e.g., moving in/out of charter and neighborhood schools)</p> <p>Data on high-churn contexts do not inform leader decisions about resource allocations and policies, contributing to systemic inequities</p> <p>Field of school reform lacks coherent and elaborated practice frameworks for leadership of HC schools</p> <p>Dramatic differences in PK–3 curriculum, instruction, and assessment and in pacing system wide create discontinuities in student learning when moving from school to school</p>
<p>CHALLENGES AT: Classroom level Organizational Level Governance/Field Level</p>			

The map illustrates that a range of policies and practices are implicated in addressing the needs of high-churn schools.⁴⁹ The problems of practice introduced by high churn affect classroom instruction and school organizational capacity and are related to school and district information and data systems. These problems can be overlooked and/or exacerbated by district/state policies. Our school leader NIC also identified the preparation of school leaders as a key element in securing the quality of school leadership that high-churn schools need.

We see promise in recognizing high-churn schools and the variability in their outcomes for strengthening system, network, and school policies and practices to support high-quality, rigorous, and equity-oriented instruction and services that meet whole-child needs. The data in this report can help inform the decision-making in specific policies and practices at the district level, as well as the building level, in such areas as the following:

- 1) How to translate state accountability mandates into a district system that rates schools less on local context factors such as student mobility and more on internal factors such as how effectively schools respond to local context.
- 2) How to prepare and support principals for high-churn schools and address the training and support of principal supervisors who may not have led such schools.
- 3) How to investigate causes of principal and teacher turnover and retention to develop more effective retention strategies.
- 4) How to design, implement, and support curriculum, instruction, and instructional leadership for high-churn settings both system-wide and at the building level. Specifically, how is the high-leverage

interventions of high-quality P-3 programs being led in every elementary school?

- 5) How to develop stronger, more trusting relationships with families and communities and deliver student-level supports to ensure opportunities to learn.
- 6) How school enrollment management, budgeting, and school choice can at the very least not exacerbate stresses on school communities—and potentially be used to strengthen them. Specifically, how can district policies support the much stronger development of a P-3 continuum for all students, particularly those students in vulnerable high-churn schools?

Conclusion

The effort to provide equitable educational opportunities in high-need schools is obviously a complex challenge. The intent of this brief is to apply the concept of school need-type—specifically the high-churn school need-type—to inform the processes of continuous improvement that employ good data and a root cause analysis to identify specific problems of practice and prompt further inquiry to better understand the challenge. Data on the performance of high-churn schools in CPS, whether viewed through an accountability system lens or through third-grade test score comparisons, can support problem-identification, analysis, and intervention in new ways.

Therefore, this report is intended to inform research, policy, and practice in school systems, as well as in principal preparation programs. It can inform the development of school leadership practices that will improve student learning outcomes in schools that are confronted with challenges of racism, poverty, and student churn. Although it is difficult for

multiple dimensions of the system context that contribute to that problem.

⁴⁹ The template for this map is drawn from Bryk et al. (2015) as an attempt to understand how a particular problem of practice is grounded in

schools and districts to confront racism and poverty in the wider culture, problems of student churn can be addressed by district and school policies and practices.

Appendix: Creating Churn Totals and Codes

Process: Assign points based on the rate bands in Table 3; the total creates the Churn Total; assign Churn Categories per Table 4.

Notes: Chronic truancy was used instead of chronic absenteeism because the Illinois chronic absenteeism measure was first implemented in 2018.

Regarding the point assignments, these are given as follows: 1 point for rates below the overall rates for the district, 2 points for rates that include district rates (these are moderate), 3 points for rates somewhat above district rates, 4 points for rates well above district rates, and 5 points for the most extreme rates. See Table 2 for the district rates overall.

Table 2. Chicago Public Schools rates (all schools)

Year	Student Mobility %	Chronic Truancy %	Homeless Student %
2016	19	32	4
2017	11*	34	4
2018	11*	31	4

Table 3. Point assignments

Mobility (2016)	Mobility (2017 & 18) ⁵⁰	Chronic Truancy	Homeless
0 to 17 = 1 point	0 to 7.9 = 1 point	0 to 24 = 1 point	0 to 3.0 = 1 point
17.1 to 23 = 2 points	8 to 12.9 = 2 points	24.1 to 35 = 2 points	3.1 to 6.0 = 2 points
23.1 to 29.5 = 3 points	13 to 17.9 = 3 points	35.1 to 47.5 = 3 points	6.1 to 9.5 = 3 points
29.6 to 40 = 4 points	18 to 22.9 = 4 points	47.6 to 75.0 = 4 points	9.6 to 15 = 4 points
40.1 and up = 5 points	23 and up = 5 points	75.1 and up = 5 points	15.1 and up = 5 points

Table 4. Churn codes for elementary schools

Churn Total	5 Category Assignment	3 Category Assignment
3	Stable	Stable
4 to 6	Borderline Stable	Stable
7 to 8	Borderline Churn	Borderline Churn
9 to 11	High Churn	High Churn
12 to 15	Extreme Churn	High Churn

⁵⁰ The ISBE changed its calculation of student mobility in the 2017 school year to only include *unique* students who enroll late and leave a school early within the school year. We adjusted our coding for consistency from 2016 to 2017. Notably, the median reduction in the mobility rate between 2016 and 2017 was 15 percentage points for high-churn schools, 11 percentage points for borderline churn schools, and 5 percentage points for stable schools. These differences indicate that some students contribute to more than one mobility event when all the events for a school are included.

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