National Youth Advocacy and Resilience Journal

Volume 5 | Issue 2 Article 2

January 2022

The Relationship Between Principal Attrition and Academic Factors in Georgia's High-Needs Rural Schools

Summer Pannell
Stephen F. Austin State University

Juliann Sergi McBrayer

Recommended Citation
Pannell, S., & McBrayer, J. S. (2022). The Relationship Between Principal Attrition and Academic Factors in Georgia's High-Needs Rural Schools. *National Youth Advocacy and Resilience Journal, 5*(2).
https://doi.org/10.20429/nyarj.2022.050202

The Relationship Between Principal Attrition and Academic Factors in Georgia's High-Needs Rural Schools

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between principal attrition and academic factors in Georgia's high-needs rural schools. The research shows that principals have a significant impact on student outcomes, and principal attrition is a disruptive factor in schools. The findings from this study indicate a negative correlation between principal turnover and every academic component of Georgia's College and Career Readiness Index (CCRPI) at elementary, middle, and high schools in high-needs rural schools in Georgia. Implications for practice are the need to recruit and retain high-quality principals in Georgia's high-needs rural schools and the development of purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable professional learning to better prepare leaders for the unique challenges these schools face. Recommendations for future research include expanding the research to other rural schools and expanding the timeframe of the study to better understand the relationship between principal attrition and student outcomes.

Keywords

Principal attrition, student achievement, rural schools, instructional leadership

The Relationship Between Principal Attrition and Academic Factors in Georgia's High-Needs Rural Schools

Principal leadership is believed to be the second most influential school-related factor that influences student outcomes, second only to classroom instruction, and can account for up to 25% of all school effects on student achievement (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Grissom et al., 2021; Mendels & Mitgang, 2013; Pannell et al., 2018). Similarly, when there is high principal turnover, or a less-effective principal leading a building, student achievement is negatively impacted (Grissom et al., 2021). With such an impact on student achievement, leadership stability has gained increasing focus as a critical component to school success since most states include student achievement measures, in the form of high-stakes test results, as one of the determinants of school success. During recent years, however, principal turnover rates have been on the rise in U.S. public schools. Annual principal turnover rates in U.S. school districts range from 15% to 30%, and schools with the highest concentrations of low-income, low-performing students and students of color typically experience the highest turnover rates (Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Rangel, 2018; Yan, 2020). Further, Alenezi (2020) noted that 25% of principals left their schools every year and 50% of new principals quit their jobs during the third year. Similarly, Pendola and Fuller (2018) found that only about half of all newly hired principals stay at the same school for more than four years.

Research suggests that principal turnover is not evenly distributed across all types of schools (Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Rangel, 2018; Yan, 2020). Perpetuating the turnover cycle is the argument by Pendola & Fuller (2018) that schools likely to have the most principal instability are most likely to hire the least qualified replacements, who in turn, often transfer to lower-needs schools once they gain requisite experience. This turnover cycle exacerbates the staffing issues in rural schools as Pendola and Fuller (2018) noted rural districts receive less than one-half of the number of applications for leadership positions than neighboring larger districts. Given the impact of the principal on student outcomes, principal stability is necessary for continuous school improvement and increasing student achievement and thus, further research around principal attrition is needed.

Conceptual Framework

Principals directly or indirectly impact all facets of the school; thus, they hold the potential to substantially contribute to the success, or lack thereof, of the school. When schools consistently fail to meet standards, districts often rotate school leadership as a way to promote school improvement. Research, however, indicates that changing school principals regularly can produce more problems than solutions because high administrative turnover can result in organizational

instability (Alenezi, 2020). Research indicates that sustainable change takes five to seven years (Fullan, 2001, 2007); therefore, schools require a long-term commitment from all stakeholders to improve student outcomes. District administration must consider the recommended time frame before shifting principals around the district in an attempt to move more effective principals into struggling schools. Further, with the influences from federal and state accountability policies and the aging and retirement of the baby boom generations, principal turnover issues have been exacerbated and have raised nationwide concerns about school stability and student success. A growing body of research supports the notion that the principal, as an instructional leader, serves the pivotal role of ensuring teacher instruction is aligned with student outcomes (Taylor et al., 2015; Tremont & Templeton, 2019). However, the role of the principal as instructional leader in rural settings lacks empirical investigation, including the impact of principal turnover on academic factors that determine school success.

Review of Literature

Principal as Instructional Leader

Principal leadership has experienced a paradigm shift in recent years. Gone are the days when school principals' main responsibilities included the three B's: buildings, busses, and budgets. In the past, teachers were primarily tasked with ensuring that students received high-quality instruction in their classroom while principals assumed more of a managerial role; however, the recent shift to the principal as an instructional leader has tasked campus principals with the ultimate responsibility of ensuring all students receive a high-quality education. Furthermore, to achieve overall school success, there needs to be a continued focus on balancing the instructional leadership tasks and school management tasks of school administrators (McBrayer et al., 2018). According to Tremont and Templeton (2019), the manner in which a principal influences student achievement varies based on leadership capacity and school setting; however, researchers agree that effective schools typically have principals who stress the importance of instructional leadership (Brezicha et al., 2015; Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015; Rangel, 2018). While school administrators sought to balance the fulfillment of instructional leadership tasks and school management tasks effectively, there seemed to be disparities among school administrators' tasks and the amount of time they were able to commit to each type of task (Jackson et al., 2021).

Though the manner in which principals influence student achievement may vary based on school contextual factors, much of the principals' influence on

student achievement is a result of their influence over teaching and learning. According to Le Fevre and Robinson (2015), the quality of teaching and implementation of sound curriculum are the most powerful school-based determinants of student achievement, and the authors suggested that effective instructional leaders influence these two factors by setting and communicating academic goals for the school; providing necessary resources to teachers; planning, co-coordinating; and evaluating the quality of teaching and curriculum implementation; and ensuring a safe and supportive school environment. Similarly, Branch et al. (2013) found that principal interaction with teachers through coaching and evaluating were positively associated with student achievement gains.

Principal Turnover

In an exhaustive review of literature on principal turnover, Rangel (2018) identified specific ways in which principals affect student learning including hiring effective teachers; setting the vision and expectations for the school; creating a positive culture; supporting teachers' professional learning; and providing strong instructional and managerial leadership. Similarly, Bartanen et al. (2019) noted principals drive school improvement through their instructional leadership practices, implementing strategies to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, supporting teacher growth and development, and building a learning climate. The authors further raised concern about the frequency of principal turnover rate in U.S. public schools and the potential for a negative impact of these turnover rates noting that principals are surpassing teacher turnover rates (Bartanen et al., 2019). This is an alarming statistic given the impact on school outcomes credited to school leadership.

When considering the impact of principal turnover, one must consider, both, the disruptive effects as well as the replacement effects. Bartanen et al. (2019) identified the *disruptive effects* as those things that undermine important channels through which principals affect school outcomes and *replacement effects* as those associated with acquiring a new principal who is more or less effective than the outgoing principal. Disruptive effects could be the effects on school climate and culture that are associated with changing leadership. The principal is largely responsible for establishing the vision and aligning school resources to support that vision. Principals further impact the school climate and culture by cultivating and fostering relationships with community stakeholders and establishing schoolwide policies, practices, and structures that the faculty, staff, and students operate. According to Johnson et al. (2020), community interaction and involvement are specifically helpful in communities with large numbers of minority populations and in underserved communities as the more connected the leader is the more they will be able to embrace community values. Additionally,

skills acquisition necessary for successful engagement may change based on experiences such as the leader's background, district location, and/or school type. Further, Their and Beach (2019) contended leader and community values are less likely to align in rural communities because often school leaders in rural schools are from outside the community and have a different background than much of the community, thus magnifying the importance of trust between the school leader and the community. This commitment to engagement requires a time investment from the leader. According to Bartanen et al. (2019), the time it takes for a new leader to build relationships and establish positive relationships to enhance the climate and culture is a disrupting factor in and of itself.

While disruptive effects tend to negatively impact outcomes, replacement effects depend largely on the quality of the replacement in comparison to the principal being replaced. When replaced with a less effective principal, replacement effects tend to be negative, but the replacement effects tend to be positive when replaced with a more effective principal. However, Pendola and Fuller (2018) argued that organizations that experience frequent leadership turnover, even with quality replacements, undergo a period of instability distributed across the institution. The extent of this positive effect can sometimes outweigh any disruptive effects (Bartanen et al., 2019). Further, the authors argued it may take several years for positive replacement effects to outweigh disruptive effects, making principal turnover harmful in the short-term but beneficial in the medium- to long-term. In these cases, the replacement principal would have to stay in the role long enough to outlast the disruptive effects, something that is becoming less common in today's schools.

Georgia High-Needs Rural Schools

Traditionally, schools were classified into eight locale codes based on their geographic isolation and population sizes. Inconsistency in the definition of *rural* led to confusion as to which schools should be classified as rural. The inconsistencies could have also contributed to the lack of research on rural schools. Without clearly delineating what constitutes *rural*, the scope of the rural education system could have been diminished and the issues of these communities would be difficult to identify. In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reclassified these categories into 12 locale codes, supported by the United States. Census language, based on geographic data. Rural schools are designated by the United States Census Bureau as those areas that do not lie inside an urbanized area or urban cluster (NCES, n.d.). An urbanized area is a territory with 50,000 or more people, and an urban cluster is a territory of at least 2,500 but less than 50,000 people (NCES, n.d.). (According to Ankeny et al. (2019), 50% of all school districts in the United States are classified as rural, and one-third of all U.S. public schools are located in a rural area.

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) defined *rural* schools as those that served fewer than 25 students per square mile and *high-needs* schools as those located in counties with high unemployment rates, low per capita incomes, and high percentages of residents whose incomes are below the state poverty level (GaDOE, n.d.). Nearly 27% of all students in Georgia attend a rural school (NCES, n.d.), and the vast majority of these schools are further classified as high-needs by the GaDOE. The state identified 92 counties as rural, high-needs counties. Based on GaDOE College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) data, nearly two-thirds of Georgia's rural students are classified as economically disadvantaged and 62.2% of rural students belong to a racial minority group. Further exacerbating the poverty issues in rural Georgia are the levels of educational attainment. According to NCES (n.d.) data, only 14% of rural Georgia students go on to attain four-year college degrees, and just under eight percent complete graduate or professional degrees. Given that nearly 60% of Georgia's counties are classified as rural and high-needs, the state's educational leaders and policymakers must find effective ways to address the issues facing rural schools.

A growing body of research supports the notion that rural schools face a wide variety of challenges. Thier and Beach (2019) described rural communities as complex places because residents often demonstrate a deep connection to place and places can vary enormously based on their defining, contextual features. Despite their differences, the common challenges rural schools face is well-documented in the literature and include attracting and retaining high-quality teachers and leaders, lacking financial resources, lacking access to technologies, lacking professional learning opportunities due to isolated environment, overlapping roles of school leaders and teachers, and increasing English Learner (EL) populations (AASA, 2017; Ankey et a., 2019; Azano & Biddle, 2019; Klocko & Justice, 2020; Pendola & Fuller; Yan, 2020).

Georgia School Accountability

For the past two decades, legislation emphasized the role of student achievement as a measure of school effectiveness. Georgia's tool for measuring the effectiveness of schools and districts is the CCRPI. The GaDOE (n.d.) defines CCRPI as a comprehensive school improvement, accountability, and communication platform for all educational stakeholders that will promote college and career readiness for all Georgia public school students. Georgia schools and districts receive an overall CCRPI score based on academic factors measured by student achievement data as well as graduation rate for high schools. Additionally, schools and districts receive a subscore in each of the categories related to student achievement including content mastery of English Language Arts (ELA), mathematics, science, and social studies; student academic growth

(progress) in ELA, mathematics, and English Language Proficiency (ELP); rates at which they are closing achievement gaps among student subgroups; and readiness levels for the next grade level and college and/or career readiness. Non-academic factors such as climate score and financial efficiency are reported on the CCRPI report as a one to five star rating. Climate scores are based on four components including stakeholder perceptions of school climate, student discipline data, safe and substance-free school data, and school-wide attendance data. Financial efficiency is based on per-pupil spending and overall student performance ratios.

Methods

A correlational research design was used in this study to explore the relationships between principal turnover and academic factors contributing to Georgia's College and Career Ready Index (CCRPI) score in the state's rural, high-needs school districts. Correlational statistical tests were utilized to describe and measure the degree of association, or relationship, between two or more variables making it an appropriate method for this study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Population and Sample

The target population for this study is rural, high-needs districts in the U.S. public school system. A convenience sample was used for this study because the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) has identified high-needs, rural school districts in the state, and student achievement data regarding content mastery of multiple subjects, academic growth, closing achievement gaps, and academic readiness is clearly delineated in the state CCRPI reports. Ninety-two school districts in Georgia were identified as high-needs rural districts, and all 92 districts are included in this study.

Procedures

For this study, we identified high-needs rural districts in Georgia based on labels provided by the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). We obtained a list of all school principals in the state for three consecutive years and identified the school principal for each of the schools in each of the high-needs rural school districts for each of the three years. Based on the number of schools in the district, we calculated the number of principal slots the district had each year. For example, a district with 10 schools would have 10 principal slots each year, 20 principal slots during a two-year timeframe, and 30 principal slots over the three-year span. We then determined the number of times there was a change in principal in the district during the three-year timeframe and divided that number by the overall number of principal slots to determine the one-year and two-year turnover rate for each district.

Additionally, we gathered CCRPI scores for each school and district for 2018 and 2019, from the publicly available CCRPI reports and calculated an average score for overall CCRPI and for each component of CCRPI including content mastery, progress, closing gaps, readiness, and literacy for elementary, middle, and high schools. It is important to note these two years were the first two years of the updated CCRPI calculations, and both years were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lastly, we conducted a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation on the district principal turnover rate and the respective CCRPI scores for each school level during the three-year timeframe to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between principal turnover and student achievement in Georgia's high-needs rural schools because this is the appropriate test to identify such relationships (Laerd Statistics, 2016). Schools classified as high-needs, rural schools that did not receive a CCRPI score from the state were excluded from this study.

Findings

Of the 92 school districts in this study, 23.9% (n = 22) did not experience a change in principal at any school in the district during the three-year timeframe, and 76.1% (n = 70) of the districts experienced a change in principal at one or more schools. In the 70 school districts that experienced at least one change in principal, 45.7% (n = 32) of districts experienced a turnover rate greater than 25% in year one of the study, and 20% (n = 14) of districts experienced a two-year turnover rate greater than 25%. Table 1 presents an overview of principal turnover rates.

Table 1

Principal Turnover Rates by Year

Turnover Rate Range (%)	One Year		Two Years	
	n	%	*n*	%
0	22	23.9	22	23.9
1-25	31	33.7	48	52.2
26-50	27	29.3	18	19.6
51-75	11	11.9	4	4.3
76-100	1	1.2	0	0

*Note: $n = 92$

Further, in districts that experienced principal turnover, 51.9% of principal attrition was in elementary schools, 24.7% of principal attrition was in middle schools, and 23.4% of principal attrition was in high schools.

Descriptive data revealed the average CCRPI score in Georgia's high-needs rural districts is 69.6 out of 100 points. The data was further disaggregated by school level and academic factors. The average elementary school CCRPI score was 67.8 while the overall CCRPI scores for middle and high schools were 70.1 (+3.3) and 70.7 (+2.9), respectively. Elementary schools had the highest content mastery score with 57.1 followed by high schools with 56.0 (-1.1) and middle schools with 55.3 (-1.8). Middle schools had the highest progress scores, which is a student growth indicator, at 80.6 followed by high schools and elementary schools with scores of 79 (-1.6) and 77 (-3.6) respectively. Middle schools and high schools performed at nearly the same level in the closing gaps category with scores of 64.4 and 64.3, respectively. Elementary schools trailed in closing gaps with a score of 62. High schools trailed in the readiness category with a score of 71.3 while elementary and middle schools scored 72.3 (+1) and 77.9 (+6.6), respectively. High schools scored the highest of all school levels in literacy with a score of 53.6 while elementary schools trailed the others in literacy with a 41.6 (-12) literacy score. Table 2 provides an overview of disaggregated CCRPI scores by school level.

Table 2

CCRPI Score Means by School Level

Academic Factor	Elementary Schools *M*	Middle Schools *M*	High Schools *M*
CCPRI Score	67.8	70.1	70.7
Content Mastery Score	57.1	55.3	56.0
Progress Score	77.0	80.6	79.0
Closing Gaps Score	62	64.4	64.3
Readiness Score	72.3	77.9	71.3
Literacy Score	41.6	50.2	53.6

Pearson's product-moment correlation results indicated significant correlations in principal turnover rate and several academic factors related to CCRPI scores. There was a statistically significant, moderate negative correlation between principal turnover rate and district CCRPI score, $r(90) = -.28$, $p = .008$,

with principal turnover explaining 7.6% of the variation in district CCRPI scores. CCRPI scores at the elementary and middle school levels were also statistically significantly correlated with principal turnover. There was a statistically significant, weak negative correlation between principal turnover rate and elementary school CCRPI score, $r(90) = -.24, p = .02$, with principal turnover explaining 5.9% of the variation in elementary CCRPI scores. Further, there was a statistically significant, moderate negative correlation between principal turnover rate and middle school CCRPI score, $r(90) = -.3, p = .005$, with principal turnover explaining 8.3% of the variation in middle school CCRPI scores. Although there was a weak negative correlation between principal turnover rate and high school content mastery score, $r(90) = -.19, p = .07$, this was not a statistically significant correlation.

There was a statistically significant correlation between principal turnover and content mastery scores at all three levels of schooling. There was a weak, negative significant correlation between elementary principal turnover rate and content mastery scores, $r(90) = -.24, p = .023$, with 5.6% of the variation in content mastery scores explained by principal turnover. Middle school principal turnover rate showed a weak, negative significant correlation with content mastery score, $r(90) = -.27, p = .009$, with principal turnover explaining 7.4% of the variation in content mastery scores. Similarly, there was a statistically significant correlation between principal turnover rate and high school content mastery scores, $r(90) = -.21, p = .048$, with 4.3% of the variation in content mastery scores attributed to principal turnover.

In addition to correlations between principal turnover rate and content mastery scores at all levels, there was also a statistically significant correlation between principal turnover rate and literacy scores at all three levels. There was a weak, moderate significant correlation between principal turnover rate and elementary literacy scores, $r(90) = -.26, p = .012$; middle school literacy scores, $r(90) = -.27, p = .009$, and high school literacy scores, $r(90) = -.24, p = .02$. The principal turnover rate accounted for 6.9% of the variation in elementary literacy scores, 7.4% of the variation in middle school literacy scores, and 5.6% of the variation in high school literacy scores.

Readiness score was significantly correlated with principal turnover at, both, the middle and high school levels. There was a statistically significant, moderate negative correlation between principal turnover and middle school readiness score, $r(90) = -.31, p = .002$, with principal turnover explaining 10% of the variation in readiness score. Principal turnover rate was also significantly correlated with high school readiness scores with a moderate, negative correlation, $r(90) = -.37, p = .02$, with principal turnover explaining 13.6% of the variation in readiness scores. Although there was a negative correlation between

principal turnover and elementary readiness scores, this correlation was not statistically significant, *r(90) = -.19, p = .064*.

Both, progress scores and closing gaps scores were negatively correlated with principal turnover rates in elementary, middle, and high schools, none of the correlations were statistically significant at any level. Tables 3, 4, and 5 provide an overview of the correlations between principal turnover and academic factors in Georgia's high-needs rural schools.

Table 3

Correlation Between Principal Turnover and Academic Factors in Georgia's High-Needs Rural Elementary Schools

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Principal Turnover	–	-0.24*	-0.24*	-0.14	-0.08	-0.19	-0.26*
2. CCRPI Score	-0.24*	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Content Mastery Score	-0.24*	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Progress Score	-0.14	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Closing Gaps Score	-0.08	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. Readiness Score	-0.19	–	–	–	–	–	–
7. Literacy Score	-0.26*	–	–	–	–	–	–

** Correlation in significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 4
Correlation Between Principal Turnover and Academic Factors in Georgia's High-Needs Rural Middle Schools

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Principal Turnover	–	-0.29**	-0.27**	-0.18	-0.17	-0.31**	-0.27**
2. CCRPI Score	-0.29**	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Content Mastery Score	-0.27**	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Progress Score	-0.18	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Closing Gaps Score	-0.17	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. Readiness Score	-0.31**	–	–	–	–	–	–
7. Literacy Score	-0.27**	–	–	–	–	–	–

** Correlation in significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 5
Correlation Between Principal Turnover and Academic Factors in Georgia's High-Needs Rural High Schools

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Principal Turnover	–	-0.19	-0.21*	-0.05	-0.03	-0.37**	-0.24*
2. CCRPI Score	-0.19	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Content Mastery Score	-0.21*	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Progress Score	-0.05	–	–	–	–	–	–
5. Closing Gaps Score	-0.03	–	–	–	–	–	–
6. Readiness Score	-0.37**	–	–	–	–	–	–
7. Literacy Score	-0.24*	–	–	–	–	–	–

** Correlation in significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Discussion

A growing body of research suggests principal turnover negatively impacts student outcomes and since school effectiveness varies with the capacity of the school leader (Tremont & Templeton, 2019), we must consider, both, the disruptive and replacement effects of changing principals. With principal leadership influencing hiring procedures, vision setting, organizational culture as well as instructional and managerial leadership, changing principals can disrupt many aspects of the school environment. This is especially true when the changes come in short periods of time or in districts where principal attrition is high and can be magnified in rural schools where the community often remains embedded and invested in the school. Less than 25% of the high-needs rural schools in this study did not experience principal attrition in the two-year timeframe. Furthermore, principal attrition rates in elementary schools more than doubled attrition rates in, both, middle and high schools. This is especially troubling given the impact of school leadership on student outcomes and the notion that elementary school provides a solid educational foundation for students to progress through their educational journey.

When examining the relationship between principal turnover and students' academic outcomes, it is important to note principal turnover negatively

correlated with each of the 19 student achievement categories examined in this study, and more than half of those correlations were of statistical significance. Of the CCRPI student achievement categories, elementary schools had the lowest overall scores in four areas, including overall CCRPI, progress, closing achievement gaps, and literacy. Elementary schools led the scores in only content mastery. This magnifies the concerns of principal attrition being highest in elementary schools among Georgia's high-needs rural schools. Bartanen (2019) noted school leadership drives school improvement and we further argue principal stability is necessary for sustainable school improvement and highlight the importance of principal stability in Georgia's high-needs rural schools since they scored the lowest in four of the six CCRPI score categories.

High schools scored highest in literacy followed by middle schools and elementary schools, respectively. This provides an optimistic outlook on literacy in the upper grades. Despite the fact that elementary schools in Georgia's high-needs rural schools are earning 41 out of 100 points in the literacy subcategory, middle and high schools are increasing literacy scores by more than ten points above elementary literacy scores.

Georgia's CCRPI readiness score is a measure of student readiness for the next level, college, or career (GaDOE, n.d.). High schools scored lowest in readiness. This warrants further inquiry since high school readiness scores are tied to college and career readiness standards. There is no additional level to prepare students for the next step in their college or career journey beyond high school. Also of concern is the loss of 6.6 points in readiness points from middle school to high school, especially given principal attrition rates are lowest in high schools among Georgia's high-needs rural schools.

There was a statistically significant negative correlation between principal turnover and, both, content mastery and literacy scores at all three levels, elementary, middle, and high schools. Given the principal's role in teacher recruitment, selection, development, and retention (Rangel, 2018, Their & Beach, 2019), principal stability is necessary to ensure effective recruitment and retention plans are developed and implemented to equip classrooms with high-quality teachers. Since teacher quality has the greatest direct impact on student achievement (LeFevre & Robinson, 2015), it is critical classrooms are filled with high quality teachers and those teachers need to continue to grow and improve. Branch et al. (2013) argued principals contribute to teacher growth and development through coaching and evaluation techniques, thus principal attrition can limit the effectiveness of teachers as they transition from one leader to another, even if the replacement leader is more effective. Teachers will still need time to build relationships and trust, adjust to coaching and evaluation styles, and adjust classroom practices in an effort to advance student achievement. Continual principal attrition can create an adjustment cycle in which teachers may not be

able to reach their fullest potential as the outcome of attrition causes teachers' disruptive experiences that negatively impact their success in today's classrooms.

Although there was a negative correlation between principal turnover and, both, progress and closing achievement gaps scores, neither of these correlations were statistically significant. The lack of statistical significance must not diminish the practical significance as any factor that negatively impacts student outcomes must be considered for further exploration. Progress scores on the CCRPI are a measure of student growth, and student growth is critical for the student and the teacher. Student growth is often considered a crucial component in the evaluation of both the teacher and the school. Moreover, progress and closing gaps are critical areas of importance for traditionally marginalized student populations. Principal stability becomes immensely important when considering the potential negative impacts on student populations whose needs are already not adequately addressed in the school.

Implications for Practice

According to Tremont & Templeton (2019), school effectiveness is largely due to the capacity of a school's leader. Principals play an integral role in school outcomes including student achievement. High attrition rates in a school can mitigate principal effectiveness because research suggests it takes approximately five to seven years for effective change to take place (Fullan, 2007, 2001). Bartanen et al. (2019) argued even if the replacement principal is a more effective leader, the time it takes for new structures and procedures disrupt the school environment. Changing principals before they have had the necessary time to build relationships and effectively implement change could diminish the effect a principal has on school improvement. Given that more than 75% of Georgia's high-needs rural school districts experienced principal turnover during the three-year timeframe of this study, it is imperative Georgia educators and policymakers work together to address principal attrition.

Bartanen et al. (2019) noted principals drive school improvement through instructional leadership practices by implementing strategies to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, supporting teacher growth and development, and building a positive learning climate. This can be done for example, by developing purposeful, collaborative, and sustainable professional learning opportunities (McBrayer et al., 2018) could help to prepare school leaders more effectively for the specific challenges they might be faced with in high-needs rural schools and could potentially play an integral role in retaining high-quality leaders. Georgia's high-needs rural districts must ensure they are recruiting the most effective principals to serve these schools and ensure incentives are in place to retain effective school leaders. Since, both, rural and high-needs schools are traditionally hard to staff, districts should work with state and local leaders to develop recruitment and retention plans to successfully attract and retain high-

quality school leaders. Only when principals retain their position for long enough to effectively address change can a true measure of principal impact be determined.

Future Research

Although the correlation between principal turnover and negative outcomes is documented in the literature, the question remains of whether principal turnover drives the negative effects or whether increasing negative outcomes drive principal turnover. To gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, our future research will investigate the relationship between principal attrition and academic outcomes over a longer timeframe while still focusing on these academic factors that impact principal attrition. Additionally, the study will be expanded to other rural school settings to investigate the relationship between principal attrition and student outcomes. Further, we plan to also explore the relationship between principal attrition and non-academic factors of schooling in rural school settings, such as school climate, social emotional well-being factors, and of a high importance teacher attrition.

References

Alenezi, A.S. (2020). Risk of turnover among U.S. principals based on personal and school characteristics. *Journal of Research in Education, 29*(1).

American Associate of School Administrators. (2017). *Leveling the playing field for rural students*.

Ankeny, R., Marichal, N., & Coady, M. (2019). Emerging teacher-leaders for English learners: A professional development model in rural Florida. *School Leadership Review, 14*(2).

Azano, A.P. & Biddle, C. (2019). Disrupting dichotomous traps and rethinking problem formation for rural education. *The Rural Educator, 40*(2), 4–11. DOI: https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v40i2.845

Bartanen, B., Grissom, J.A., & Rogers, L.K. (2019). The impacts of principal turnover. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 41*(3), 350-374. DOI: 10.3102/0162373719855044

Branch, G.F., Hanushek, E.A., & Rivkin, S.G. (2013). School leaders matter: Measuring the impact of effective principals. *Education Next,* 62–69. Retrieved from http://hanushek.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Branch%2BHanushek%2BRi vkin%202013%20EdNext%2013%281%29_0.pdf

Brownell, M. T., Bishop, A. M., & Sindelar, P. T. (2018). Republication of "NCLB and the demand for highly-qualified teachers: Challenges and solutions for rural schools". *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 37*(1), 4–11.

Davis, S.H., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2012). Innovative principal preparation programs: What works and how we know. *Planning and Change, 43*(1-2), 25–45.

Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change (4th ed)*. Routledge.

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. Jossey-Bass.

Georgia Department of Education, (n.d.). *College and career ready performance index*. https://www.gadoe.org//Pages/default.aspx

Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research. The Wallace Foundation.

Johnson, A.D., Clegorne, N., Croft, S. J., Ford, A.Y. (2020). Professional learning needs of school principals. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 1–34. DOI: 10.1177/1942775120933933

Grisson, J.A., Bartanen, B., & Mitani, H. (2019). Principal sorting and the distribution of principal quality. AERA Open, 5(2), 1–21. DOI: 10.1177//2332858419850094

Johnson, A.D., Clegorne, N., Croft, S.J., & Ford, A.Y. (2020). The professional learning needs of school principals. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 1–34. DOI: 10.1177/1942775120933933.

Klocko, B., & Justis, J.J. (2019). Leadership challenges of the rural school principal. *The Rural Educator, 40*(3), 23–34. doi: 10.35608/ruraled.v40i3.571

Laerd Statistics (2016). *Statistical tutorials and software guides*. Retrieved from https://statistics.laerd.com/

LeFevre, D.M., & Robinson, V.M. (2015). The interpersonal challenges of instructional leadership: Principals' effectiveness in conversations about performance issues. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 51*(1), 58–95. DOI: 10.1177/0013161X13518218

McBrayer, J.S., *Jackson, T., Pannell, S. S., Sorgen, C., Gutierrez, A., & Melton, T. (2018). Balance of instructional and managerial tasks as it relates to school leaders' self-efficacy. Journal of School Leadership, 28(5), 596-617.

Pannell, S., Peltier-Glaze, B. M., Haynes, I., Davis, D., & Skelton, C. (2015). Evaluating the effectiveness of traditional and alternate route principal preparation programs. *Journal of Organizational and Educational Leadership, 1*(2).

Mendels, P., & Mitgang, L.D. (2013). Creating strong principals. *Educational Leadership, 70*(7), 22–29.

National Center on Education Statistics, (n.d.). *Rural education in America*. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/definitions.asp

Pannell, S., White, L., & McBrayer, J.S. (2018). A comparison of principal self-efficacy and assessment ratings by certified staff: Using multi-rater feedback as part of a statewide principal evaluation system. *School Leadership Review, 13*(1).

Pendola, A. & Fuller, E.J. (2018). Principal stability and the rural divide. In E. McHenry-Sorber & D. Hall (Eds.), The diversity of rural education leadership [Special issue]. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 34*(1), 1–20.

Rangel, V. S. (2018). A review of literature on principal turnover. *Review of Educational Research, 88*(1), 87–124.

Thier, M., & Beach, P. (2019). Stories we don't tell: Research's limited accounting of rural schools. *School Leadership Review, 14*(2).

Tremont, J.W., & Templeton, N.R. (2019). Principals as instructional leaders: An embedded descriptive case study of one rural school's effort to improve student outcomes through Reading Plus. *School Leadership Review, 14*(2).

Yan, R. (2020). The influence of working conditions on principal turnover in K-12 public schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 56*(1), 89–122.