A SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTING FACTORS AND EFFECTS OF PRINCIPAL TURNOVER

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Abstract

Principal turnover contributes to many factors and effects that school districts encounter. It is important to ensure that schools have leaders employed for a significant amount of time to bring about positive changes. Schools need stability to maintain progress, whether it is to foster a positive school environment, improve student achievement, or enhance school capacity. Research indicates that leadership is second only to classroom instruction regarding its impact on students' learning. (Leithwood et al., 2004). This paper summarizes studies examining the factors contributing to principal turnover and its effects.

A SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTING FACTORS AND EFFECTS OF PRINCIPAL TURNOVER

Leithwood et al. (2004) reveal that leadership is subsequent only to classroom instruction amid all school-related factors affecting what students learn. This finding implies that leadership must be significant considering this profound impact. Principal turnover has become an area of concern across the United States. Additionally, approximately 20% of public school principals in the United States leave their positions each year. (Miller, 2013). An attrition rate of this significance is alarming, considering that school principals are responsible for the daily operations of a school. Daily operations of principal involvement may include finances, curriculum, discipline, schedules, relationship building with stakeholders, and student achievement.

As with any organization, it is important to build trust so that others may assist in moving the organization forward. The principal may enhance building school capacity by entrusting and equipping others in the organization to be successful. Successful leaders depend on the contribution of others within their organization (Leithwood et al., 2004). This manuscript is a summary of studies that examine contributing factors to principal turnover as well as the effects of principal turnover. This manuscript defines principal turnover as a principal not returning to the same school from one year to the next. (Rangel, 2018).

Review of Literature

Heffernan et al. (2023) noted several factors contributing to principal turnover: lack of support, the increasing complexity of the role, overwhelming workload, and impact on health and well-being. They first identified the lack of support as an area. The respondents in their study noted a lack of systemic and individual support for leaders as an attrition reason. Moreover, respondents in their study also revealed that inexperienced principals needed better support in moving into the role. They also raised specific occasions where support was believed inadequate or unhelpful. The second area identified in their study was the increasing complexity of the role. Respondents in the study noted the growing difficulty of the role as another contributing factor. They described the challenges of recurring changes and the inability to develop sustainable practices within their schools. One respondent related it to changing policies and changing politics. This response is certainly relatable to what principals' face today. The third area identified in their study was the overwhelming workload. Respondents in the study suggested that the workload was a contributing factor, along with unreal expectations of the job. The study's respondents further noted that a principal's job was 24/7, with endless meetings, constant emails, paperwork, reporting, and accountability. Moreover, respondents in the study suggested that finding time to do things and prioritizing things were challenges. One respondent noted that the work was never finished regardless of the work contributed. This finding aligns with the sink-or-swim philosophy. Principals may retreat to shutting down if the workload becomes unmanageable. The final area identified in their study was the impact on health and well-being. Respondents in the study described themselves as being exhausted and leaving due to a combination of physical, mental, and emotional burnout. Additionally, respondents in the study described the job as lonely and isolating and emphasized the strain on their relationships,

including their families, as a contributing factor. Although the job requirements of a principalship are demanding, principals should discover ways to balance their workload and family. Principals need to ensure their health and well-being are in check.

Levin and Bradley (2019) described several reasons why principals leave their jobs. They cited five primary reasons: inadequate preparation and professional development, poor working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of decision-making authority, and high-stakes accountability policies. The first identified reason principals leave was inadequate preparation and professional development. They suggested that the lack of high-quality preparation programs, in-service training, mentoring, coaching, and collaboration were among the reasons for inadequate preparation and professional development. When a principal is employed for a school district, it is the school district's responsibility to ensure that the principal receives support. Whether this support is in mentoring, coaching, or training, the principal needs support to succeed. The second identified reason that principals leave was poor working conditions. They cited several reasons for poor working conditions, such as access to support, the job's complexity, the amount of time required to complete necessary activities, and relationships with stakeholders. Poor working conditions, whether building-based, support-based, or relationship-based, do not foster success for principals. The third identified reason that principals leave was insufficient salaries. Salaries matter to principals when choosing new positions and deciding whether to stay. They suggested that low wages that are not competitive with other jobs lead to higher principal turnover rates. Because of this, superintendents may consider principals' salaries in neighboring school districts. The fourth identified reason that principals leave is the lack of decision-making authority. They suggested that principals who believe they have greater control of their work environment and decision-making ability are less likely to leave. For example, they described decision-making as related to spending, teacher hiring and evaluation, and student discipline. This certainly comes as no surprise. Imagine a principal being responsible for student achievement but unable to have the final say on the teacher's recommendation to be hired. The final identified reason that principals leave was high-stakes accountability policies. They suggested that unproductive accountability policies may trigger disincentives for principals to remain in low-performing schools and may influence mobility decisions. In the case of unproductive accountability policies, superintendents and board members should conduct regular reviews of their policies to ensure that they promote productivity.

Rangel (2018) reviewed 36 empirical studies on principal turnover determinants. Of these 36 empirical studies synthesized, four areas were discussed as determinants of principal turnover. These explanatory factors of determinants of principal turnover were as follows: principal characteristics, characteristics of the position, school, and student characteristics, and policy. The author further discussed each determinant and divided them into subcategories. The first factor of the discussion was principal characteristics. Principal characteristics included a discussion of principal sex, principal race, principal age, principal experience, principal education, and principal satisfaction. Although some studies produced similar findings to support these principal characteristics as determinants of principal turnover, the studies mostly had inconsistencies. Because of this, conducting more research related to the previously mentioned principal characteristics may be helpful. The second factor discussed was the characteristics of the position. These included the degree of autonomy, relationships, and the changing nature of the position. According to Range, these characteristics of the position were areas where more research is needed. The third factor of the discussion was the school and student characteristics. The school and student characteristics included discussing school performance, school

conditions, school level and size, school urbanicity, and student characteristics. Based on reviewing these schools and student characteristics, the author suggested that school performance was significant as related to principal turnover. Moreover, it was noted that research consistently indicates that lower performance on standardized tests is linked to higher principal turnover. This finding implies that schools with higher standardized test scores may foster a lower principal turnover. This finding comes as no surprise. A principal with lower standardized test scores may not feel confident in their ability or have the desire to tackle a challenging task for whatever reason to raise the standardized test scores. Rangel noted that school conditions (e.g., student discipline problems) were significant concerning principal turnover. It was also suggested that school conditions (however defined) were associated with more mobility and less stability among principals. Principals may face a hard work environment when poor school conditions lead to more turnover. Although studies had been conducted on school level and size, school urbanicity, and student characteristics, Rangel noted that the evidence across studies appeared inconsistent. However, regarding student characteristics, Rangel suggested that student socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity were consistent in that principals with higher proportions of minority and low-income students were likelier to leave those schools. This finding implies that school principal turnover may be greater in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. The final factor of Rangel's discussion was related to policy. The policy included a discussion of principal salary, accountability policy, district expenditures, challenges in hiring and firing teachers, teachers, school type, district retirement incentives, and professional development initiatives. Although studies were conducted in these policy areas, limited studies related to these areas were included. Moreover, Rangel cited that the relative effect of some of the studies was weak, or policy-related factors had not been studied. This finding implies that more research may need to be conducted on the effects of policy on principal turnover.

Understanding the relationship between principal turnover and teacher turnover is important for examining the effects of principal turnover. DeMatthews et al. (2022) analyzed data from a student- and employee-level statewide longitudinal dataset from Texas that comprised all public K-12 schools from 1999–2000 to 2016–2017. They investigated two guiding research questions: How does the probability of a teacher leaving their school change when a new principal is hired? And to what extent are teacher, principal, and school characteristics related to the relationship between leadership turnover and teacher attrition? They found that teacher turnover increased in schools that experienced leadership turnover. Moreover, they discovered that these increases are greater in high-poverty and urban schools with low average teacher experience and chronic principal turnover. This suggests that principal turnover and teacher turnover are related. Additionally, they implied that enhancing leadership stability, particularly in urban schools experiencing chronic principal turnover, may effectively decrease teacher turnover. These findings illustrate the importance of retaining experienced leadership and the effects of teacher turnover when experienced leadership is not maintained.

Buckman (2021) conducted a review of research and data on principal turnover and teacher turnover. The review of findings addressed the influence of principal retention and turnover on the percentage of returning teachers from 2016 to 2020 in South Carolina. Although the study was only generalizable to South Carolina, the author suggested that retaining principals and reducing principal turnover can significantly reduce teacher turnover. The analysis of results recognized that high-poverty/high-minority schools had great attrition for teachers and leaders. These findings align with other research findings. (DeMatthews et al., 2022). These results support the clear relationship between teacher turnover and principal turnover.

Furthermore, Løkke and Sørensen (2021) conducted a study on the effect of top management turnover in public organizations on employee absenteeism, examining school principal turnover in Danish municipal primary schools. They discovered that employee absence rose subsequently when a new principal had assumed subsequently when a new principal had assumed the reigns. On the contrary, their findings revealed that the effect of a new principal on employee absence diminishes over time. They also implied that new principals may not initially be an advantage to the schools. As a result, they suggested that HR managers may need to provide new principals with extensive support in the beginning. These findings and implications come as no surprise. Employees may experience a roller coaster of emotions when change occurs at top management positions, whether in a school or industry setting.

Conclusion

As noted at the beginning of this article, research reveals that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that affect what students learn (Leithwood et al., 2004). As a result, effective leadership is a top priority. Therefore, we must be able to identify the contributing factors to principal turnover and the effects of principal turnover to retain effective leaders. Hence, school districts would benefit from finding a way to mitigate principal turnover so that effective leadership can thrive. Additionally, school district leaders should consider utilizing their leadership to mentor neophyte principals to minimize teacher turnover and employee absenteeism and influence students' learning.

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