

Mobility and turnover among school principals

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Abstract

This paper uses administrative data from two states covering the school years 1987–1988 to 2000–2001 to examine principal turnover and mobility. We use a longitudinal event history modeling approach to examine whether individual characteristics of the principal and the school in which they work are related to different types of principal turnover. We find that over the time period considered, turnover among all school principals was 14 percent in Illinois and 18 percent in North Carolina. Only 20 percent of this turnover was due to principals leaving the system in Illinois; and 13 percent in North Carolina. However, we observe some interesting variation by school characteristics. Specifically, we find that principals in schools with a larger proportion of minority students are more likely to change schools and to leave the principalship, but remain in the system.

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1. Introduction

Policymakers at the state and local level are concerned about turnover among school administrators. A higher level of turnover means that the state or district must find more individuals to assume administrative positions, so it impacts the demand for school administrators in any given year. While an assessment conducted by the American Association for Employment in Education in 2003 found that nationally the supply of and demand for principals seems to be in balance (Associated Press, 2003a), there are still news reports from across the country that indicate that some

school districts are having difficulty filling current openings in the principalship and are anticipating numerous retirements in the near future (Associated Press, 2002, 2003b; Bower, 2003). Some states have had to institute new programs or incentives to increase the supply of new principals (Paul, 2003). In some states, there is concern that the very accountability measures being put into place to improve school performance are hurting their ability to attract and retain qualified principals (Lambeck, 2003; Associated Press, 2003c).

There is also concern that high levels of turnover deny schools the leadership stability they need to succeed. A recent study showed that in Chicago, schools on probation that lost their principal were less likely to get off probation (Catalyst, 2002). Cleveland schools have started a leadership academy in response to turnover rates of 25 percent, with the hopes of

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improving the quality of principal candidates and the retention of new hires (Galbincea, 2003).

This paper provides empirical evidence that can improve our understanding of these challenges. It exploits the richness of state-level administrative data, analyzing principal turnover and mobility in Illinois and North Carolina. An analysis of principal mobility allows for an investigation of important trends in the level of administrative turnover, and whether particular types of schools within a state are facing substantially higher turnover than other schools.

The research objective is to identify characteristics associated with principal mobility and attrition. We examine the individual and school-level factors that are related to whether a principal remains in his/her position in the next year. This information can inform several questions of potential interest to state and local governments such as:

- What are rates of principal turnover in Illinois and North Carolina?
- Are these rates increasing?
- Are these turnover rates high relative to rates of turnover in other sectors?
- Are some districts (or schools) having a harder time than others in retaining principals?

2. Data

Our analysis of the careers of Illinois school administrators is based on an analysis of Teacher Service Record and Teacher Certification data provided to us by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). The analysis of the careers of North Carolina administrators is based on the Education File and the Payroll File, provided to us by the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

Each data set contains employment and certification information for every individual employed in public K-12 education in the states of Illinois and North Carolina. Individual records are linked across years for each state, allowing us to examine the career trajectory of individuals within the respective states.

The Illinois data cover the time period from FY 1978 to FY 2001 for personnel employed in Chicago and from FY 1971 to FY 2001 for personnel employed outside the Chicago school district. However, no data are available for FY 1985 in Chicago and for FY 1985 and FY 1986 in the rest of the state. The North Carolina data cover the time period from 1978 to 2001. For each individual, we have the following information for each year in which they were employed: age, gender, race, experience in the state public school system, the position held each year, regional information, the school and/or district in

which they were employed, salary,¹ contract length, the name of the undergraduate college attended,² and certificates held.³

This state information was merged with information from the US Department of Education's Common Core Data (CCD), which provides additional information about the school, district and local community such as student demographic information (from 1987 onward), and enrollment. We also used information from the 1986 Barron's ranking (Barron's Educational Series, 1986) to create a measure of the quality of the undergraduate institution that an individual attended.

3. Definitions

The data contain information on individual experience in the public school systems of Illinois and North Carolina⁴; they do not include those who work in private schools or some charter schools in the state of Illinois. Any use of the term "experience" must be understood in that context. Individuals may have worked in private schools, or in public schools in other states, but we have no information on that type of educational experience. An individual who stops working for the public school system simply drops out of our data set. That individual may have retired, died, left the workforce entirely, left to work in a private school or left to work in a public charter school.⁵

In the Illinois analyses, we use a five-part region-urbanicity variable that can take on the following values: urban Chicago, suburban Chicago, urban other, suburban other, and rural. In North Carolina, we use the simpler three-part urban/suburban/rural distinction.

Finally, we use the term "cohort" to refer to a group of individuals who enter the principalship (or in some cases, another positions) in the same school year.

¹The salary information obtained on North Carolina educators was incomplete. In addition to base pay from the salary schedule, total compensation may include several other state-level components and a local salary supplement.

²The Illinois data file includes the name of the undergraduate college attended only if that college is in the state of Illinois. For individuals who attended college outside of Illinois, we know only the state where they attended college. Twenty-five percent of the sample attended college out of state.

³The Illinois data include information on only two certificates per individual, and the ones recorded are those that are most relevant to the current position.

⁴The data from North Carolina lacked a usable measure of experience in the school system, so we constructed a measure using a combination of logical imputation and regression techniques. For details on the imputation procedure please see Gates et al. (2004).

⁵For both states, the state data system includes information on individuals who work in some, but not all charter schools.

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