

COMMENTARY

Impacts of Strategic Involuntary Teacher Transfers on Equity and Teacher Productivity

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District policymakers often argue that rules in teacher contracts and [collective bargaining agreements \(CBAs\)](#), that limit their ability to transfer teachers to different schools unless the teacher initiates the move, handcuff them in achieving the right mix of teachers across the district. In many districts in California, for example, CBAs prevent districts from involuntarily transferring teachers except when schools lose teaching positions, and even then, seniority often governs which teachers can be moved. Could loosening those restrictions benefit students? On the one hand, maybe so. Districts could, for example, use transfers to move ineffective teachers out of disadvantaged schools or match teachers to positions where their skills could have a more positive impact. On the other hand, maybe not. If the district used transfers to shuffle ineffective teachers to other disadvantaged schools or moved them to positions where their skills are underutilized, greater involuntary transfer authority could be detrimental.

Up to this point, research has had little to say about the impacts of strategic involuntary transfers because there have been few opportunities to study them. In a study I recently conducted with Susanna Loeb and Nathaniel Nakashima, however, we were able to shed some light on the potential outcomes of a strategic teacher transfer policy using data from [Miami-Dade County Public Schools \(M-DCPS\)](#), the nation's fourth largest school district. Prior to the start of the 2009–10, 2010–11, and 2011–12 school years, M-DCPS exercised a clause in its CBA allowing for the transfer of teachers—identified by their principals—involuntarily within the district, provided those moves could be deemed “in the best interest of the school system.” Approximately 375 teachers were moved involuntarily over these three years. The district provided us with the involuntary transfer list in each year, which we merged with other district administrative data on schools, personnel, and students. We use this dataset to investigate how the transfer policy impacted the performance and distribution of teachers in the district.

We found that schools that utilized the involuntary transfer policy served larger populations of low-income and African American students and were also lower-performing, scoring a D on Florida's accountability grading system, on average. The involuntarily-transferred teachers tended to be relatively low performers in those schools in the sense that they were absent from work more often and their students had lower math gains in the year prior to the transfer. They also tended to have experience and tenure profiles more similar to staying teachers than to voluntary exiters, suggesting that schools used the transfer policy to remove less productive teachers who were unlikely to leave otherwise.

We uncovered no evidence that the involuntary transfer policy in M-DCPS was used to shuffle teachers from one low-performing school to another (the so-called “dance of the lemons”); the receiving schools were rated approximately a B and had much higher math and reading achievement than sending schools, on average. In their new schools, transferred teachers had fewer absences (nearly 2 per year), suggesting a gain on one measure of productivity, though their performance as measured by contributions to

student test score growth continued to be low in their new schools (interestingly, they were more often placed in untested grades or subjects in their new schools). Also, those disadvantaged “sending” schools replaced the transferred teachers with new teachers who were higher performing in terms of both work absences and student growth.

On the whole, Miami-Dade’s involuntary transfer policy appears to have improved equity of the distribution of teacher effectiveness for disadvantaged and advantaged students across the district. There is also some evidence of overall gains to teacher productivity. These results suggest that districts, teachers, and students can gain from targeted, strategic use of teacher transfers, particularly if transfers are implemented with an eye towards getting better teachers into classrooms with underserved students.

The [*full study*](#) can be found in Jason A. Grissom, Susanna Loeb, and Nathaniel A. Nakashima, “Strategic Involuntary Teacher Transfers and Teacher Performance: Examining Equity and Efficiency”, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Volume 33, Issue 1, pages 112–140, Winter 2014.

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