PACE

COMMENTARY

Two Types of Principals Who Exit Their Schools

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Principal turnover is an important national issue with as many as 18% of principals in the United States exiting their schools in a single year, and there is evidence that this rate has been recently increasing. Principal turnover is associated with lower student achievement, higher teacher turnover, various direct and indirect financial costs (some estimates placing this number at $75,000 each time a principal leaves a school), and decreased morale among teachers, staff, students, and parents. Researchers and policymakers in general have studied principal turnover using a predictive approach: can we identify the factors that are likely to predict whether or not principals are likely to leave their schools? Many studies have produced meaningful results toward answering this question; however, most of them are predicated on the assumption that there is only one type of principal who is exiting their schools. Past qualitative research with limited samples has shown that there are different groups of principals who are leaving their positions for different reasons, so perhaps with a larger dataset we could find that nationwide there are multiple types of exiting principals.

To answer this question, in this study we turned to the 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and its companion 2008-09 Principal Follow-up Survey (PFS) from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). NCES, an organization within the U.S. Department of Education, collects and reports a wide variety of nationwide education data related to students, teachers, administrators, families, and more. This dataset is uniquely suited to explore this question for three reasons. First, SASS is a nationally generalizable dataset, meaning that when sampling weights are applied its results can be extended to the national population of the United States. Second, the PFS measures actual principal turnover behaviors rather than whether or not principals think they are going to leave their schools in the upcoming year, as most other surveys do. Third, SASS asks a robust set of questions of principals' attitudes and perceptions.

We used Latent Class Analysis to explore whether or not there were different groups of principals who were exiting their schools based on their self-perceptions of influence in their schools, frequency of school climate problems, attitude toward their school and their job, and their salary disposition. We discovered that there were two groups of exiting principals. Approximately two-thirds of principals were *Satisfied* when they exited their schools, overall reporting high levels of influence, satisfaction, and low rates of school climate issues. In contrast, approximately one-third of principals were *Disaffected* when they exited their schools, reporting significantly lower levels of influence in their schools, worse attitudes about being a principal, and higher rates of school climate issues.

In particular, disaffected principals felt they had much less influence in their schools around establishing curriculum and setting performance standards for their students than the satisfied principals. The disaffected principals reported having less enthusiasm for bring a principal, not feeling that the stress of being a principal was worthwhile, and more frequently thought about transferring out of their current school. Female principals were almost twice as likely to be disaffected rather than satisfied when leaving their schools compared to male principals, and similarly principals working in cities and towns were approximately twice as likely to be disaffected compared to principals working in suburbs or rural settings.

These findings have several potential policy implications. First and foremost, principal turnover should likely not be addressed through a "one size fits all" policy approach. As mentioned at the beginning of this post, many researchers and policymakers have been trying to predict principal turnover much like they have been working on early warning systems for students who may drop out of school. Given that two-thirds of principals are overall satisfied when they exit their schools, it may be that these systems can only effectively predict the one-third of principals who are disaffected when they leave. Which then begs the question: would you want to retain disaffected principals in your schools? More targeted efforts are likely required to best address principal turnover.

The full study is in Boyce, J., & Bowers, A.J. (in press) "Principal Turnover: Are there Different Types of Principals Who Move From or Leave Their Schools? A Latent Class Analysis of the 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey and the 2008-09 Principal Follow-up Survey." Leadership and Policy in Schools.

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