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School Reform Efforts: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?

Educator Perspectives on the Rapid Life Cycle of School Reforms

The landmark 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk*, prompted both policymakers and practitioners to urgently look for ways to improve the quality of U.S. public schools. Over the ensuing 35 years, state and federal accountability policies—including signature legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act—have formalized incentives and sanctions aimed at improving student outcomes. In response, school reform efforts, large and small, have become a constant feature of the education system. School reform has become an umbrella term for initiatives and programs that aim to improve school functioning and student outcomes. These reform efforts range from specialized, targeted programs meant to improve specific aspects of instruction or school functioning to large, comprehensive programs that are meant to reorganize and revitalize an entire school.

Many researchers and educators have noted the emergence of a school reform “churn.” New initiatives and programs are adopted, only to be dropped when the next popular reform emerges.¹ Although experimenting with new approaches is important, continuity and stability also are important for the healthy functioning of a school, and studies show that many years of sustained implementation are necessary for reforms to yield lasting benefits.² In addition, reforms are more likely to succeed if given the time to develop educator support.³ The frenetic pace with which reforms

¹ Peck and Reitzug, 2014; Carter and Welner, 2013; Marschall and Shah, 2005; Borman and Hewes, 2002.

² Borman et al., 2003; Borman and Hewes, 2002.

³ Datnow and Castellano, 2000; Datnow and Stringfield, 2000.

The American Educator Panels (AEP) surveyed a nationally representative sample of teachers and principals and asked them to indicate their agreement with the following statements:

- There is real continuity from one program to another at this school.
- Many special programs come and go at this school.
- Once we start a new program, we follow up to make sure that it's working.¹

¹ These questions are based on the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's *5Essentials Survey* (University of Chicago, 1994). Research from the Consortium supports the notion that program coherence and continuity are needed to improve student achievement (Newmann et al., 2001). A four-point Likert scale was dichotomized into indicators of agreement (strongly and somewhat agree versus strongly and somewhat disagree).

are adopted may discourage educators from fully investing in them.

Data from the RAND Corporation's web-based AEP reveal the extent to which principals and teachers perceive continuity in the programs at their schools.

A Large Majority of Principals Report Continuity, but Teachers Disagree

As shown in Figure 1, a large majority of principals (89 percent) reported a sense of continuity in the programs at their schools; only 33 percent of principals thought that special programs “come and go” in their schools. Ninety percent indicated that they follow up on programs to ensure that they are working. These results suggest that principals do not see program churn as a significant issue in their schools; rather, they purposefully choose programs and monitor their effectiveness.

However, teachers were significantly more likely to report churn: Only slightly more than half agreed that there is continuity of programs in their schools, and 61 percent of teachers agreed that programs “come and go.” Fifty-three percent of teachers agreed that their schools follow up on programs to see whether they are working. These results—a 30- to 40-percentage-point difference in teacher and

principal responses—indicate a substantial disconnect in teachers' and principals' views.

The difference in perceptions persisted when we examined subgroups by school and district demographic composition and different experience levels for principals and teachers. The consistency of results by experience level suggests that reform “fatigue” is not a factor, as newer educators, who have likely not experienced as many reforms, responded in similar ways to their more-experienced counterparts.

Causes of Gaps in Perceptions Vary, But Are Important to Address

The fast, discontinuous pace of school reform documented by researchers is more evident in teachers' than in principals' responses to questions regarding program continuity. Because of their differing roles, teachers and school leaders may have different conceptions of what “continuity” and “special programs” are. Policy debates or popular initiatives also may affect educator attitudes toward school reform differently based on the educator's role. For example, teachers may be particularly sensitive to professional development or evaluation initiatives. Teachers also may report less continuity and more churn because they may not have the same overview of programs and reforms as school principals. Finally, principals

How This Analysis Was Conducted

To ease interpretability, we collapsed a four-point Likert scale into dichotomous indicators for whether the respondent expressed agreement with the statement (strongly and somewhat agree versus strongly and somewhat disagree). The primary analyses were conducted using weighted linear probability models to compare the responses of teachers and principals. We also conducted supplemental analyses that included many additional covariates and a vector of state fixed effects to better understand whether the associations found in the primary analysis were potentially confounded by characteristics of the schools or respondents. These weighted, multivariate linear probability models included a series of demographic control variables from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data.¹

¹ These included school-level variables, such as urbanicity; percentage free and reduced-price lunch; percentage white, black, and Hispanic; school size; an indicator for elementary school; district-level variables, such as percentage English language-learner students and special education students; and state-level fixed effects.

may be more likely to report continuity because negative perceptions of school functioning could implicate their leadership abilities.

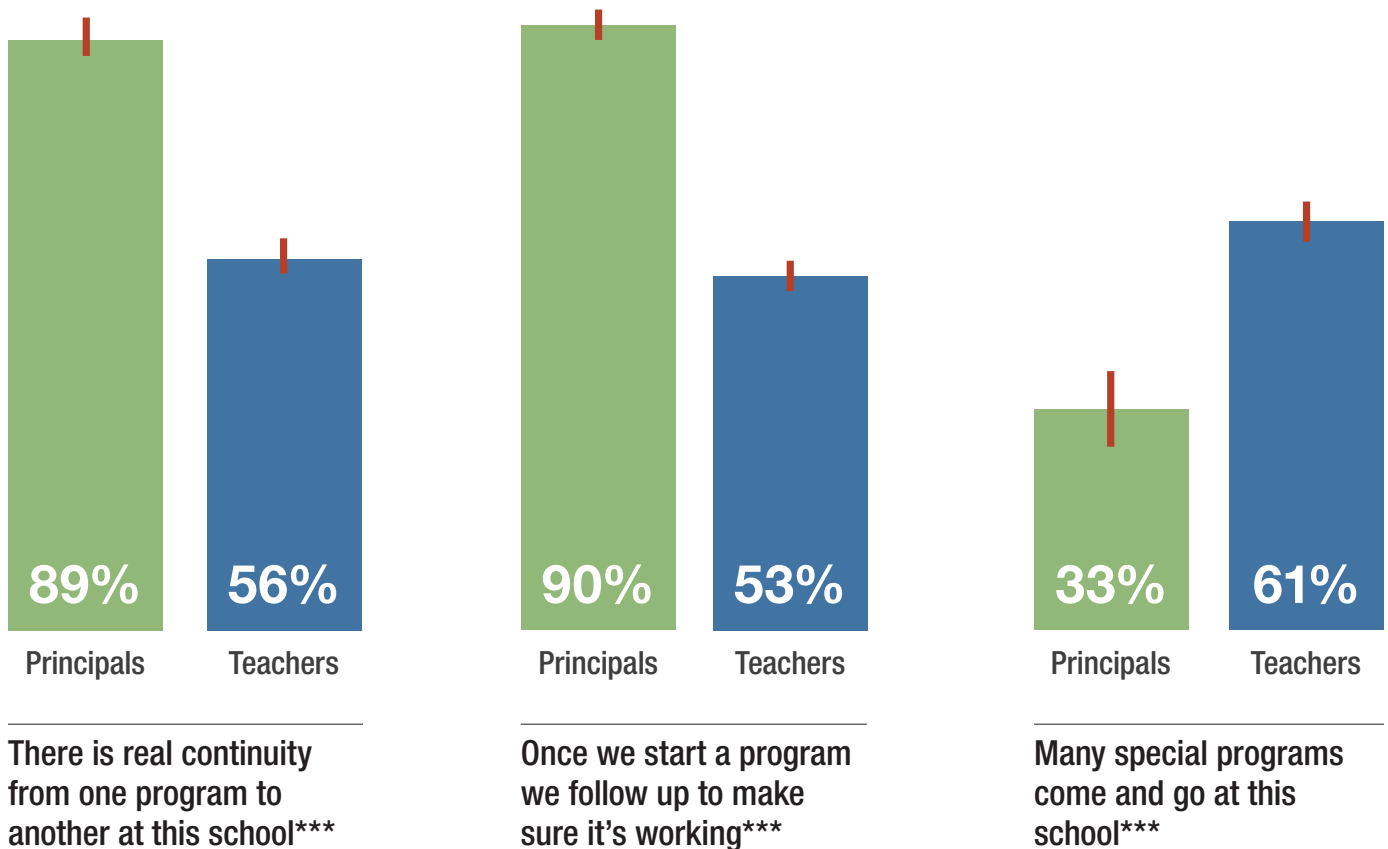
This disparity in perceptions can have implications for the success of reforms, even if the underlying reasons for the disparity are varied. The evidence suggests that teacher buy-in and ownership of new programs is essential, but principals

may have a hard time cultivating buy-in and ownership if teachers do not have a similar perception of ongoing reforms. Principals may want to investigate whether such disparities exist in their schools and, if these disparities do exist, examine their underlying causes. Closing perception gaps may lead to greater teacher buy-in and higher rates of program success.

FIGURE 1

Principals, Teachers Have Different Perceptions of School Reform “Churn”

Weighted Percentages of Educators Agreeing with Statements Concerning the Continuity of School Programs



NOTE: Vertical red lines represent weighted 95-percent confidence intervals. Asterisks indicate results of a linear probability model used to estimate differences among teachers and school leaders. *** $p < 0.001$.

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The AEP Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of teacher and school leader survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see the Technical Appendix, (RR-2575/1-BMGF, www.rand.org/t/RR2575z1) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email aep@rand.org.

About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers and school leaders across the country.

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and decisionmaking. This study was sponsored by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which focuses on ensuring that all students graduate from high school prepared for college and have an opportunity to earn a postsecondary degree with labor-market value. For more information, please visit www.gatesfoundation.org.

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