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First-Year Principals in Urban School Districts

How Actions and Working Conditions Relate to Outcomes

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Summary

Principals who are new to their school (*first-year principals*) are usually expected to improve or at least maintain prior levels of student achievement. In pursing this objective, first-year principals face a variety of potential challenges and opportunities, the nature of which vary by school and by district or CMO. First-year principals make decisions about how to allocate their time and what strategies to emphasize, and these decisions will influence principals' likelihood of improving their school's performance. A principal's ability to overcome challenges and improve performance in that first year will likely influence whether he or she remains at the school. Despite the importance of understanding principals' first-year experience, there is relatively little literature that focuses on this group. This report addresses that gap by examining the actions and perceived working conditions of first-year principals, relating information on those factors to subsequent school achievement and principal retention.

This report presents the results of a set of analyses examining the experiences of first-year principals in six of the districts partnering with New Leaders to provide new principals to serve in their schools: Memphis City Schools; Chicago Public Schools; New York City (NYC) Public Schools; Washington, DC, Public Schools; Baltimore City Public Schools; and the Oakland [California] Unified School District. In this report, we define *first-year principals* as principals in their first year at a given school, including those principals with previous experience as principals at another school.

The focus of this report is not on evaluating the New Leaders program or partner districts, but on understanding relationships among student achievement outcomes; new principals' likelihood of remaining at their schools; and their reports regarding their practices, attitudes, and perceptions of school conditions, including the capacity of their teachers. The report addresses the following research questions:

- How is the retention of first-year principals in the same schools associated with achievement in the schools where they work?
- What happens to achievement in schools that lose their first-year principals? How does this vary as a function of school performance under the principal who left?
- To what extent is principals' allocation of time associated with achievement or school-level retention?
- To what extent are principals' perceptions of teacher capacity and school and district environment associated with achievement and school-level retention?
- To what extent are principals' self-reports of their future plans associated with school-level retention?

Data and Methods

Our analysis draws on four primary data sources: district-level data on principal placements, student-level achievement test scores that allow us to calculate school-level achievement gains, principals' responses to a web-based survey administered in the spring of 2008, and a set of 20 school-level case studies of schools led by first-year principals conducted during the 2008–2009 school year. The case studies were conducted in four of the six districts mentioned above. Each data source includes both principals who completed the New Leaders principal preparation program and principals who did not. The percentages of non–New Leaders principals vary across the three data sources.

We use district data to provide a descriptive analysis of all principals who were in the first year in their school at the start of the 2007–2008 school year (425 non–New Leaders and 94 New Leaders). District data include information on principals placed in charter schools within the district, although student achievement data are often lacking for these schools. Some of the charter schools in these districts are managed by CMOs. We examine two main outcomes: retention of the principal through the start of the 2010–2011 school year and school-level average gain scores based on student-level achievement data for the 2007–2008 school years forward.[1] We relate these outcomes to the prior achievement history of the school.

After taking a broad look at the outcomes for all first-year principals, we focus more narrowly on the set of first-year principals who responded to our survey (9 non–New Leaders and 56 New Leaders). The survey was designed to collect information relevant to the New Leaders theory of action and to explore the school- and district-level conditions that are likely to influence principals' work. The survey gathered information from principals on how they spent their time, how they felt about how they spent their time (whether it was adequate or excessive), school and district conditions that might influence school leaders, sources of support, and future career plans. We examine (1) survey responses and (2) factors created on the basis of those responses and their relationship to retention and achievement outcomes described above. We supplement this analysis with an analysis of our case study data, which included 16 New Leaders and 4 non–New Leaders.

Findings

The analyses provided evidence related to the five research questions listed above.

Over One-Fifth of New Principals Leave Within Two Years, and Those Placed in Schools That Failed to Meet Adequate Yearly Progress Targets Are More Likely to Leave

Our analysis indicates that many first-year principals leave their schools after one or two years on the job. Of the 519 first-year principals in the study districts in the 2007–2008 school year, 61 (11.8 percent) left within the first year, and an additional 56 (10.7 percent) left within the second year. We observed substantial differences across districts in terms of principal retention,

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[1]   We created average gain scores for each school and each school year for math and reading scores based on student-level district standardized z-scores for statewide exams in reading and math. For each subject and student, we calculate the gain score as follows: We subtract the student's previous year z-score (regardless of which school the student attended in this previous year) from the current year z-score to create the gain scores for that year. We then average the student scores at each school by year to create the mean gain for students at each school.

with higher rates in New York and Chicago and lower rates in Baltimore and Washington, DC. Principals placed in schools that had achievement test scores that were high enough to meet the schools' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets[2] in the years prior to their placement or those placed in start-up schools were less likely to leave after one or two years compared with new principals placed in schools that were below AYP targets.

New principals were more likely to leave when test scores declined in their first year. Of the 61 schools that lost their first-year principals after one year, we were able to calculate average gain scores for 51 of the schools for the year that principal was in place. Forty out of the 51 had experienced clear achievement declines (meaning that the score on our gain score measure of school performance was in the lowest third of our sample in at least one subject), and 11 experienced gains or no change. The fact that 78 percent of the principals who left after one year and for whom we had gain score information had experienced declines in gain scores suggests that at least some of early career turnover among principals that is observed may be driven by concerns on the part of district leaders or other stakeholders about principals' performance. The direction of causality in this relationship cannot be determined from our data. Multivariate analyses confirm the statistical significance of this relationship between first-year achievement gains and retention. In spite of the fact that declines in test scores are associated with an increased probability that a principal will leave after one year, we also found that the vast majority of principals who experienced clear declines in gain scores remained in their schools through September 2011.

Schools That Lose a Principal After One Year Underperform in the Subsequent Year

Of those 40 schools that experienced clear declines in gain scores in the 2007–2008 school year under a first-year principal and then hired another principal in the 2008–2009 school year, we observed 9 cases in which the school clearly improved in the next year, and approximately half of the schools (20 cases) experienced clear declines in gain scores in the 2008–2009 school year. Among the 11 schools that did not experience declines in gain scores in the 2007–2008 school year but lost their principal and got another principal in the 2008–2009 school year, we observed a similar lack of improvement in 2008–2009. Seven of these schools experienced clear declines in gain scores and only one experienced gains in gain scores in the next year.

We Observed No Strong Relationships Among Principals' Time Allocation, Student Achievement, and Retention

The analysis of survey responses suggests no strong relationships between achievement and principals' allocation of time as measured by our surveys, nor were there relationships between principals' time allocation and their retention. The case study data suggest that spending time on an issue or area in and of itself was not associated with high levels of implementation or buy-in on the part of school staff. We found that all principals tended to name two to four strategies, which principals often referred to as "big rocks," on which they focused their time and effort:

- promoting data use
- conducting classroom observations

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[2]   Under the No Child Left Behind Act each state determines an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) definition and subsequent target to use each year as a rubric for assessing the academic achievement of schools and school districts (Paige, 2002).

- building culture/relationships among students, staff, parents, and the community
- forming leadership teams
- promoting teacher professional development.

All of the principals (seven) who experienced achievement gains in their first year placed a major emphasis on promoting data use. But so did many of the other principals. A key difference was in the success of implementing that strategy, as observed in the case study schools. The quality of implementation and the level of buy-in from staff were strongly associated with the probability that a principal continued with the school for a second year.

Teacher Capacity and Cohesiveness Were the School and District Conditions Most Related to Student Outcomes

Our analysis of the relationship between school and district conditions and retention and achievement outcomes revealed mostly non-significant relationships. Measures of teacher capacity and cohesiveness stand out as being related to student outcomes.[3] Principals reporting higher teacher capacity and higher levels of staff cohesiveness were more likely to experience achievement gains. The case study analysis suggests that successful implementation of the principal's strategies was not related to the capacity and characteristics of the teaching staff prior to the new principal taking over, but rather to actions taken by that first-year principal.

The case study effort suggested several promising examples of how principals can ensure buy-in for their key strategies and develop cohesiveness, including the following:

- recruiting strong staff immediately
- conducting one-on-one meetings with all staff
- respecting prior practices and culture
- being visible in the classrooms
- communicating clear and fair expectations.

We identified these practices as promising in schools that had achieved high levels of buy-in because principals reported and staff confirmed that these practices were instrumental in helping the principal to implement improvement strategies efficiently and successfully.

The other measures for which significant differences were observed across retention groups were the measures of perceived influence over decisionmaking. Although the differences were not as large as those for teacher capacity, all three areas—instructional content, personnel/management, and schedule and budget—tended to be associated with higher levels of perceived influence for principals who remained in their schools until at least the 2008–2009 school year than for those whose last school year was 2007–2008.

Principals' Reported Future Plans Were Not Strongly Related to Retention

Finally, we examined survey responses of first-year principals regarding their future career plans. Of the eight principals who left their schools at the end of the 2007–2008 school year,

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[3] Our use of the term "teacher capacity" in this study refers to measures derived from principal reports of how many teachers in their school shared a particular attribute or take particular actions with five options ranging from "None" to "Nearly All" teachers. Examples include "have the skills to help others improve practice," "are able to balance student social and academic needs," and "are able to promote learning among all students." Factor analysis suggested that all of these items could be included within a single factor that we label *teacher capacity*.

shortly after the survey was administered, only three indicated on the survey that 2007–2008 would be their last year. Despite widespread concerns that principals often seek positions in their districts in schools with higher-achieving or more affluent student populations, only one of the eight principals indicated a desire for another principalship within the same district or CMO.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that the outcomes achieved by first-year principals vary tremendously. Principals enter schools that differ in terms of context, but there is little evidence that this context drives outcomes. We find that new principals placed in low-performing schools are somewhat more likely to leave after one year, but that may be because these schools are under greater scrutiny by their districts, the state, and the public. Rapid turnover appears to stem from school, district, or CMO choices based on performance rather than individual choices on the part of the principals—in particular, a desire to "trade up" to a "better" school.

The secret to success for new principals cannot be distilled into a simple recipe that should be applied in the same way across all settings. We found no evidence that if principals would simply do more of a certain thing or allocate their time in a particular way, school performance would improve. To the contrary, the quality of their actions seems more relevant to outcomes than the amount of time spent.

Overall, schools that lose a first-year principal do not do well in the subsequent year, indicating that a poor match between a principal and a school can have lingering consequences. This suggests that improving the principal placement process to ensure that individuals are truly ready for and supported in their new roles could have important implications for student achievement—particularly in low-performing schools.

Principals who report higher levels of collaboration and cohesiveness are significantly more likely to remain in their school, and they are also more likely to experience achievement gains. Our case study research indicates that new principals can have a rapid effect on teacher capacity and staff cohesiveness. Those who succeed start working on these issues immediately.

Our findings on the importance of teacher capacity, staff cohesion, and buy-in for key strategies lend additional support to other research pointing to the critical role of principals in human capital management. Further research on first-year principals to explore these issues in greater detail is likely to be useful to the education field.