Retention, Mobility, and Attrition among School and District Leaders in Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota

Education decisionmakers in Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota share concerns about and need more information on changes in school and district leadership (principals, assistant principals, superintendents, and assistant superintendents), including mobility (when leaders move to a different school or district within the state public school system) and attrition (when leaders stop serving in a leadership position in the state public school system). In collaboration with educators in those states, the Regional Educational Laboratory Central used administrative data for 2015/16 to 2018/19 to identify the percentages of school and district leaders who remained in a leadership position in the same school or district (stayers), who transferred to a leadership position in a different school or district (movers), and who took a nonleadership position or left the state public school system (leavers) after one year and after three years. The study also examined the characteristics of principals, schools, and districts that were associated with principal mobility and attrition.

Across the three states the percentage of school and district leaders who were stayers ranged from 77 percent to 82 percent after one year and from 51 percent to 56 percent after three years. After three years younger principals were more likely to be a mover than a stayer, and older principals were more likely to be a leaver than a stayer. Principals who identified as a racial/ethnic minority and those who earned a lower salary were also more likely to be a mover or a leaver. In addition, principals were more likely to move from or leave low-performing schools that the state identified as needing additional support for improvement and schools in lower-performing districts (districts with lower average student academic achievement). The findings suggest that decisionmakers may wish to better understand the causes of school leader mobility and attrition and enhance supports for younger principals, principals who identify as a racial/ethnic minority, and principals in low-performing schools.

Why this study?

Educators in Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota partnered with the Regional Educational Laboratory Central to examine the percentages of school and district leaders who remained in a leadership position in the same school or district (retention/stayers), who transferred to a leadership position in a different school or district (mobility/movers), and who took a nonleadership position or left the state public school system (attrition/leavers). Decisionmakers are concerned about the mobility and attrition of school and district leaders because these phenomena have been associated with negative outcomes for students and schools. Research on the retention, mobility, and attrition of school and district leaders has focused on principals, identifying negative consequences associated with principals leaving schools, such as lower student achievement, higher teacher mobility, and a less positive school culture and climate.[1]

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1. Snodgrass Rangel, V. (2018). A review of the literature on principal turnover. *Review of Educational Research, 88*(1), 87–124. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1166231.

There is little information about school and district leader retention in Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota. Recent research conducted by the Regional Educational Laboratory Central[2] and by education agencies in two of these states[3] focused on teacher retention, mobility, and attrition. That work and prior research have suggested that teacher retention, mobility, and attrition and related factors vary substantially within and across states and have led Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota leaders to seek a better understanding of these phenomena among school and district leaders, who can also influence school and student outcomes.

The report describes the rates of retention, mobility, and attrition among school and district leaders in Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota and the characteristics of principals, schools, and districts that are associated with principal mobility and attrition.

What was studied and how?

The study used administrative data from Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota to address three research questions in those states over one year (2017/18 to 2018/19) and three years (2015/16 to 2018/19):

1. What percentage of school leaders (principals and assistant principals) remained in a school leadership position in the same school (stayers), what percentage transferred to a school leadership position in a different school (movers), and what percentage left a school leadership position (leavers)?

2. What percentage of district leaders (superintendents and assistant superintendents) remained in a district leadership position in the same district (stayers), what percentage transferred to a district leadership position in a different district (movers), and what percentage left a district leadership position (leavers)?

3. What characteristics of principals, their schools, and their districts were associated with the likelihood of principals moving to a different school or leaving a school leadership position rather than staying in a leadership position in the same school?

Study data for education leaders included employment position, school and district assignment, birthdate, gender, race/ethnicity, highest education degree, and salary. School and district data were obtained from state education agencies and supplemented with data from the Elementary/Secondary Information System (https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/). Primary assignments to districts or schools and employment positions were used for determining education leaders' status as stayers, movers, or leavers over one year (2017/18 to 2018/19) and three years (2015/16 to 2018/19). For leaders with multiple assignments the primary assignment was the one in which they spent the most time.

Findings
- *Four out of five school and district leaders remained in a leadership position in the same school or district after one year, and about half remained after three years.* For all three states combined after one year, 77–80 percent

2. Espel, E. V., Meyer, S. J., & Weston-Sementelli, J. L. (2019). *Factors related to teacher mobility and attrition in Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota* (REL 2019–008). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Central. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED597776; Meyer, S. J., Espel, E. V., Weston-Sementelli, J. L., & Serdiouk, M. (2019). *Teacher retention, mobility, and attrition in Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, and South Dakota* (REL 2019–001). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Central. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED593492.
3. Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2018). *Recruitment and retention of teachers in Missouri public schools: A report to the Missouri General Assembly.* https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/2018-RR-Report.pdf; South Dakota Department of Education. (2015). *Trends in educator preparation and employment: A report for the Governor's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Teachers and Students.* http://blueribbon.sd.gov/docs/9-9%20SEPT%202015%20Educator%20Analysis%20Report.pdf.

Figure 1. Retention rates for Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota school and district leaders ranged from 77 percent to 82 percent after one year and from 51 percent to 56 percent after three years, for periods ending in 2018/19
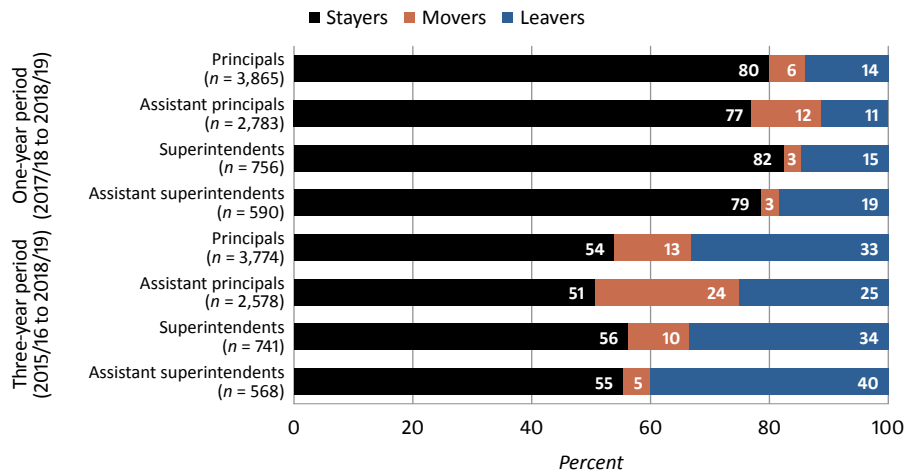
Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. The sample included all school and district leaders whose primary school or district assignment could be identified.

Source: Authors' analysis of state education agency data from 2015/16 through 2018/19.

of school leaders remained in a school leadership position in the same school, and 79–82 percent of district leaders remained in a district leadership position in the same district (figure 1). After three years 51–54 percent of school leaders remained in a school leadership position in the same school, and 55–56 percent of district leaders remained in a district leadership position in the same district. The retention rate for principals after one year was 82 percent in Missouri, 78 percent in Colorado, and 74 percent in South Dakota. The retention rate after three years was 56 percent in Missouri and 51 percent in Colorado and South Dakota.

- *Principals who were younger, principals who identified as a racial/ethnic minority, and principals who earned a lower salary were more likely to be a mover than a stayer after three years.* Compared with principals age 52 or older, principals younger than age 40 were 144 percent more likely (nearly 2.5 times as likely) to be a mover after three years, and principals ages 40–44 were nearly 50 percent more likely to be a mover after three years. Principals who identified as a racial/ethnic minority were 53 percent more likely to be a mover after three years than were principals who identified as White. Principals who earned a salary of $88,669–$105,999 were 45 percent more likely to be a mover after three years than were principals who earned a salary of $106,000 or higher.

- *Principals who were older, principals who earned a lower salary, and principals who identified as a racial/ethnic minority were more likely to be a leaver than a stayer after three years.* Principals age 52 or older were 61–66 percent more likely than younger principals to be a leaver after three years. Principals who earned a salary of less than $75,084 were 40 percent more likely to be a leaver after three years than were principals who earned a salary of $106,000 or higher. Principals who identified as a racial/ethnic minority were 28 percent more likely to be a leaver after three years than were principals who identified as White.

- *Principals in schools identified for improvement, principals in lower-performing districts (with lower average student academic achievement), and principals in districts with higher enrollment were more likely to be a mover than a stayer after three years.* Principals in schools identified by state education agencies for improvement were 200 percent more likely to be a mover after three years than were principals in schools not identified for improvement. Principals in lower-performing districts were 74–100 percent more likely to be a mover after three years than were principals in the highest-performing districts. Principals in districts with 1,339 or more students were 77 percent more likely to be a mover after three years than were principals in districts with fewer than 220 students.

- *Principals in schools with lower average teacher salaries, principals in smaller districts, and principals in schools identified for improvement were more likely to be a leaver than a stayer after three years.* Principals in schools with an average teacher salary of less than $39,139 were 138 percent more likely to be a leaver after three years than were principals in schools with an average teacher salary of $53,590 or higher. Principals in districts with fewer than 220 students were 122 percent more likely to be a leaver after three years than were principals in the largest districts. Principals in schools identified for improvement were 89 percent more likely to be a leaver after three years than were principals in schools not identified for improvement.

Implications

State and district decisionmakers might want to explore approaches for supporting education leader retention in their schools and districts as well as in their profession. The study found that nearly half of school and district leaders in Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota leave their school or district within three years and that about 20 percent leave leadership positions from one year to the next. The findings suggest that decisionmakers might want to enhance supports for younger principals, focus recruitment and retention activities on racial/ethnic minority school leaders, and further examine how salary affects principals' decisions to stay or move. The findings also suggest that supports could be enhanced in lower-performing districts, in schools identified for improvement, and in schools with lower average teacher salaries. Further investigation into the associations between the characteristics of principals, schools, and districts and principals' mobility could inform strategies to support retention. The findings of this study support efforts to better understand the factors associated with mobility and attrition and approaches to support retention of education leaders.[4] Studies suggest that strategies for supporting principals might include providing professional learning opportunities, improving working conditions, ensuring adequate and stable compensation, supporting decisionmaking authority, and ensuring that accountability systems are fair and useful.[5]

4. Gates, S. M., Baird, M. D., Master, B. K., & Chavez-Herrerias, E. R. (2019). *Principal pipelines: A feasible, affordable, and effective way for districts to improve schools.* RAND. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED594225; Levin, S., & Bradley, K. (2019). *Understanding and addressing principal turnover: A Review of the Research.* National Association of Secondary School Principals, Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved September 25, 2019, from https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/nassp-understanding-addressing-principal-turnover-review-research-report.
5. For a discussion of strategies, see Levin, S., & Bradley, K. (2019). *Understanding and addressing principal turnover: A review of the research.* National Association of Secondary School Principals, Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved September 25, 2019, from https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/nassp-understanding-addressing-principal-turnover-review-research-report; For a discussion of practices that enhance principal sense of efficacy, see Seashore Louis, K., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K. L., Anderson, S. E., Michlin, M., Mascall, B., & Moore, S. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning.* University of Minnesota, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement. Retrieved September 25, 2019, from http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/investigating-the-links-to-improved-student-learning.aspx.