

Effects of a District-Managed Restart Strategy for Low- Performing Schools in Texas

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Effects of a District-Managed Restart Strategy for Low-Performing Schools in Texas

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The Texas Education Agency offers grants for districts to implement school turnaround strategies at low-performing schools. Districts that receive these grants can implement a school turnaround strategy (referred to as a district-managed restart strategy) that includes replacing most of the principals and teachers at schools that the district identifies as struggling and needing additional support. From 2015/16 to 2018/19, 29 schools across four urban and suburban districts in Texas implemented a district-managed restart strategy in three cohorts: one district began in 2015/16, another in 2017/18, and two in 2018/19. This study used longitudinal administrative data and interviews with district and school leaders to examine implementation of the restart strategy and its effects on teacher and principal mobility, student achievement, and student attendance.

Nearly 80 percent of the teachers at schools in the year before implementation of the restart strategy left before the beginning of the restart school year. Educators who arrived at restart schools were more likely to have more than three years of experience and to have an advanced degree than those who left or stayed. The restart strategy had a positive effect on student achievement in reading and math and on student attendance, but the effect on attendance was not sustained beyond the first year of implementation. Nearly all restart schools met accountability standards within the first three years of implementation. Finally, interviews with district and school leaders suggested that recruiting high-performing teachers to relocate to restart schools was time consuming and that the grant-funded salary stipend might not have been a large enough incentive for high-performing teachers to relocate. State leaders can use the results of this study to make decisions about continuing to offer grants for districts to implement the district-managed restart strategy in their low performing schools.

Why this study?

In November 2015, 603 Texas public schools (7 percent) received a rating of Improvement Required, indicating unacceptable performance (Texas Education Agency, 2015a).¹ In that same year, 27 schools (16 percent) in Dallas Independent School District received a rating of Improvement Required (Texas Education Agency, 2015b). In response, in 2015/16 Dallas Independent School District implemented a school turnaround strategy in seven of its low performing schools under which schools were reconstituted with new principals and teachers (referred to as the district-managed restart strategy). These schools had received a rating of Improvement Required for several years. In 2017/18 the Texas Education Agency began offering competitive state grants for Texas districts to adopt the Dallas Independent School District model of a district-managed restart strategy in their low-performing schools.² Two additional cohorts of 11 schools each implemented the district-managed restart strategy, one in 2017/18 and one in 2018/19, for a total of 29 schools across all three cohorts in four urban and suburban districts in Texas.

1. Districts, charter districts, schools, and alternative education schools received a rating of Improvement Required if they did not meet the target scores for all required indicators for which they had performance data. The indices included measures of student performance across all tested subjects, year-to-year student progress, performance of students with economic disadvantages, and postsecondary readiness.
2. Grant guidelines changed during the study period. Earlier grants had required schools to be Priority or Focus schools (see <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/TXTEA/bulletins/1e73e11>). Current guidance allows districts to develop their own definitions for a struggling school (see <https://www.centerforschoolactions.org/restart-struggling-school>).

For additional information, including background on the study, technical methods, and supporting analyses, access the report appendices at <https://go.usa.gov/xSTKH>

Nationally, many state education agencies provide funding to districts through the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 to implement school turnaround strategies. In the past two decades, however, research on school turnaround has produced mixed results on the effectiveness of these strategies (Peurach & Neumerski, 2015; Redding & Nguyen, 2020; VanGronigen & Meyers, 2019). A recent meta-analysis found that turnaround strategies that used the restart approach of replacing principals or replacing principals and at least half of the teachers were effective at improving reading and math achievement compared with similar schools that did not implement the strategy (Redding & Nguyen, 2020). Research on the effects of school restart in New Orleans, Louisiana, after Hurricane Katrina also found that replacing principals and teachers was associated with improvements in student academic achievement, especially among elementary and middle school students (Mirón, 2014). However, other studies have found that replacing principals and teachers is disruptive, leading to an influx of inexperienced teachers, increases in student mobility, and declines in school climate³ (de la Torre et al., 2013; Malen et al., 2002).

The district-managed restart strategy examined in this study differs from school turnaround strategies that focus largely on replacing principals and teachers. It is a comprehensive approach that includes five core components: replacement of most administrators and staff, instructional excellence and capacity building for teachers and leaders, additional learning time, social and emotional learning supports, and strong partnerships with families and community organizations (Center for School Actions, n.d.; see box 1 for a discussion of these five core components).

Members of the Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest School Improvement Research Partnership⁴ sought to better understand the implementation and effects of the district-managed restart strategy on principal and teacher mobility and student achievement and attendance. Leaders at the Texas Education Agency can use the results of this study to make decisions about whether to continue to offer grants for districts to implement the strategy in their low-performing schools. In addition, district leaders can use the results to inform decisions about implementing a district-managed restart strategy.

Box 1. Components of the district-managed restart strategy

The Texas Education Agency offers grants for districts to implement school turnaround strategies at their low-performing schools. Districts consider their local needs and assess a variety of factors to identify schools that would benefit from implementing a specific strategy. Districts that receive state funds to implement a turnaround strategy and that decide on a school restart strategy have two options: they can implement the district-managed strategy or they can partner with a charter management organization to launch and operate the restart school. The district-managed restart strategy requires that schools develop a new academic program with five core components (Texas Education Agency, 2022):

- *Strategic staffing.* This involves replacing most of the educators and offering incentives to district-identified high-performing principals and teachers (typically \$10,000-\$15,000 annually for three years) to transfer to low-performing schools. Districts may use their local principal and teacher performance evaluation system to identify staff. Districts without a formal evaluation system may use data such as educator experience and education, or staff interviews. State guidelines on the percentage of teachers required to restaff restart schools have varied over time. Current guidelines require districts to develop a strategic compensation and staffing plan to offer incentives to high-performing educators that includes adequate funding for additional staffing as needed (Texas Education Agency, 2022).

3. This study uses the National School Climate Center's definition of school climate, which is the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on students', parents', and school personnel's experiences at school and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures at school (<https://schoolclimate.org/about/our-approach/what-is-school-climate/>).

4. The partnership members included the following leaders and staff at the Texas Education Agency: Laura Hyatt, manager, School Action Fund in the Division of System Support and Innovation; Steven Rachel, district support specialist in the Division of System Support and Innovation; and Christopher DeWitt, director of system support in the Division of System Support and Innovation.

- *Instructional excellence and capacity building for teachers and leaders.* Restart schools maintain professional learning communities that regularly monitor student performance, attendance, and discipline data.
- *Additional learning time.* Districts must either add more days to the school year or extend the school day by one hour, accommodating daily and free afterschool enrichment until 6:00 p.m. This extended learning time provides students with additional days or an additional hour per day of instruction and learning opportunities that include tutoring and enrichment such as dance, coding, cooking, music, robotics, and other classes. Although the enrichment programming varies by district, it must be free to all students at the restart schools, and transportation home must be offered. In addition, schools must offer breakfast, lunch, and dinner to students.
- *Social and emotional learning supports.* Social and emotional supports for students and training for educators include a focus on a safe and positive school environment that has routines and strategies for celebrating student and teacher successes. Schools must implement a new social and emotional learning curriculum or continue with an existing program that focuses on developing positive student-adult relationships, creating a safe learning environment, and emphasizing restorative discipline practices to address behavioral issues.
- *Strong partnerships with family and community organizations.* Families and community organizations are key partners for districts implementing the restart strategy. The approach a district takes to engaging parents and the community should fit the context of the district and the schools implementing the restart strategy.

Research questions

This study addressed six research questions.

1. What percentage of teachers who taught in a school the year before it implemented the restart strategy left the school before the start of the restart school year?
2. What were the characteristics (including salary, years of experience, education, gender, and race/ethnicity) of principals and teachers who stayed, left, or arrived at restart schools before the start of the restart school year?
3. What was the effect of the district-managed restart strategy on principal and teacher mobility at the start of the second year of implementation of the restart strategy?
4. What was the effect of the district-managed restart strategy on student achievement and attendance one and two years after the start of implementation?
5. What percentage of restart schools met accountability standards up to three years after implementation?
6. How did districts select restart schools, and what key activities did they implement in the first and second years?

Definitions of key terms used in the report are in box 2. The data sources, sample, and methods used to answer the research questions are summarized in box 3 and detailed in appendix A.

Box 2. Key terms

Arrivers. Principals or teachers who arrived at a district-managed restart school in the first year of implementing the restart strategy.

Comparison schools. Schools that were selected using a statistical matching procedure to pair each restart school with up to three schools that closely resembled restart schools on such school and district characteristics as academic performance measured by standardized test scores, student attendance rates, percentage of Black or Hispanic students in a school, and percentage of students who were eligible for the National School Lunch Program.

District-managed restart strategy. An approach to school turnaround in which a district replaces principals and most of the teachers of a persistently low-performing school with new staff. The strategy includes four other core programmatic components: instructional excellence and capacity building for teachers and leaders, additional learning time, social and emotional learning supports, and strong partnerships with families and community organizations.

Improvement Required. Designation from the Texas Accountability Rating System that identifies schools and districts that did not meet annual academic performance standards. Before the 2018/19 school year—the first year of the A-F Accountability System (see *low-performing schools*, below)—schools were classified as Improvement Required if they did not meet state standards. These schools or districts were required to take steps to improve academic performance. Additional sanctions were imposed for missing performance targets for three consecutive years.

Leavers. Principals or teachers who were employed at a school in the year before the restart strategy was implemented but who relocated to a different school or who could not be found in the staffing records submitted by districts to the Texas Education Agency before the first year of restart.

Low-performing school. Before 2018/19, low-performing schools were those with an Improvement Required rating (see https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/A%20F%20Resources_final.pdf). The current definition is based on ratings in the Closing the Gap domain in the state accountability system (see <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/chapter-4-2021-closing-the-gaps-domain.pdf>). Schools identified as needing improvement include Comprehensive-rated schools (those in the lowest 5 percent of schools that receive Title I, Part A funds in the Closing the Gap domain) and Targeted D/F-rated schools (schools that received a D or F rating and missed accountability targets for three consecutive years; Texas Education Agency, 2020).

Stayers. Principals or teachers who were employed at a school in the year before the restart strategy was implemented and remained at the restart school in the first year of implementation.

Box 3. Data sources, samples, methods, and limitations

Data sources. This study used data from the following sources (table A1 in appendix A shows a crosswalk of the data sources and research questions):

- *Texas Education Research Center*
 - School staffing records from the Public Education Information Management System, which included de-identified administrative data on staff role, school assignment, and characteristics (salary, years of professional experience, education, gender, and race/ethnicity).
- *Texas Education Agency.* Implementation data on the district-managed restart strategy for the 2015/16, 2017/18, and 2018/19 school years. This file contains the names and unique identification numbers of the schools implementing the strategy and the year of implementation.
 - Publicly available data from the Texas Academic Performance Reports on school average student attendance rates, student mobility rates, percentage of students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (an indicator of economic disadvantage), and percentage of students in each racial/ethnic group for the 2005/06–2019/20 school years.
 - Publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency aggregate testing files, including school average scores on the Texas state achievement tests in reading and math (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills for the 2005/06–2016/17 school years and State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness for the 2017/18–2018/19 school years).
 - Publicly available data from the Texas Accountability Rating System on school accountability ratings for the 2014/15–2018/19 school years.
- *Common Core of Data*
 - Publicly available data on district locale (city, suburb, town, or rural) from the Common Core of Data (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).
- *Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest*
 - Data from interviews that the study team conducted with seven district and school leaders about their experiences with the district-managed restart strategy.

Samples and methods. Additional details about the study data and methodology are in appendix A.

For research question 1, the study team used data from 2014/15 through 2019/20, with observations on 1,167 unique teachers in 29 restart schools in Texas. The study team calculated the percentages of principals and teachers at the start of the restart school year who stayed in the school, left for another school in the same district, left for another school in a different district, or left public education in Texas.

For research question 2, the study team used data from 2014/15 through 2018/19, with observations on 2,085 unique principals and teachers in the 29 schools in four districts in Texas that implemented the district-managed restart strategy in at least one school. The study team compared the characteristics (salary, years of experience, education, gender, and race/ethnicity) of principals and teachers who stayed, left, or arrived before the start of the restart school year.¹ Differences that were considered substantively meaningful were those of 5 percentage points or more for the teacher characteristics that are represented as percentages (for example, the percentage of teachers who had more than three years of professional experience) and .25 standard deviations for characteristics that are not presented as percentages (for example, teacher salary and years of experience).

For research question 3, the study team used data from 2005/06 through 2019/20 to examine the effect of implementing the district-managed restart strategy on principal and teacher mobility (the percentage of principals and teachers who left the restart school) one and two years after beginning to implement the strategy. These data included observations in 116 schools in 33 districts in Texas: 29 elementary and middle schools in 4 districts that implemented the restart strategy in 2015/16, 2017/18, or 2018/19, and 87 comparison elementary and middle schools in 29 districts that did not implement the restart strategy. Comparison schools were selected using a statistical matching procedure that paired each restart school with three comparison schools that closely resembled the restart school on school and district characteristics including academic performance measured by standardized test scores, student attendance rates, percentage of Black or Hispanic students in a school, and percentage of students who were eligible for the National School Lunch Program. The effect of the restart strategy was obtained by comparing trends in outcomes in the restart schools with trends in outcomes in the matched sample of comparison schools in other districts that did not implement the restart strategy, using statistical procedures to adjust for school characteristics and district locale.

For research question 4, the study team used data from 2006/07 through 2018/19 for student achievement outcomes and through 2019/20 for attendance outcomes, including observations on the 29 elementary and middle schools in the four districts that implemented the restart strategy and the 87 matched comparison schools from research question 3. The study team examined the effect of implementing the restart strategy on school-level measures of student achievement (standardized reading and math scores on the Texas state achievement test for students in grade 3-8) and attendance (average percentage of enrolled days a student was in attendance during the school year). Statistical procedures adjusted for school characteristics and district locale. These analyses also accounted for prior trends in school-level student achievement and attendance. As a supplemental analysis, the study team estimated the effect of implementing the district-managed restart strategy on student composition. The findings of these supplemental analyses are in appendix C.

For research question 5, the study team used data from 2014/15 through 2018/19 for 29 schools in four districts in Texas that implemented the restart strategy. The study team calculated the percentage of schools that met accountability standards up to three years after beginning to implement the restart strategy. Beginning with the 2018/19 school year, the state transitioned to a new accountability system that rated schools using A-F letter grade categories (compared to Met Standard or Improvement Required rating categories). The new system includes changes to the underlying performance measures used to construct the ratings. For instance, the revised accountability system broadens the definition of school academic performance to include measures of student growth, including progress toward narrowing achievement gaps between student groups.²

For research question 6, the study team examined transcripts from audio recordings of 60-minute interviews with seven district and school leaders in three districts implementing the restart strategy. The team developed an initial set of codes for major and minor themes based on its review of state documents and research studies on the restart strategy. Interview transcripts were coded using both the initial codes and new codes that emerged during the coding process. The study team then met to reconcile findings and identify the final themes across individuals and districts. The full interview protocol is in appendix D.

Limitations. This study has the following main limitations.

- The district-managed restart strategy might not have been uniformly implemented across districts and schools. Although one core component of the strategy (strategic staffing) was prescribed, findings from the interviews revealed that districts had flexibility in how they implemented the other four components. Therefore, the findings from the study represent average effects of the strategy across different levels of implementation, and the study team was not able to determine whether some levels of implementation were more or less effective than others.
- The restart strategy is a comprehensive strategy that combines five distinct components. This study examined the effect of the comprehensive strategy but could not identify which components were effective and which were not.
- Only two years of data (at most) after schools began to implement the district-managed restart strategy were available to examine the effects on student outcomes. Because there were no state assessments in 2019/20 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, outcomes associated with the 2018/19 cohort are limited to a single year of implementation. This limited study findings related to school-level achievement in the second implementation year to the first two cohorts and reduced the statistical power to detect an effect of a second year of implementation.
- During the second year of implementation, two restart schools and three comparison schools closed. The study team did not know the reasons for the closures. If the schools were closed because of low performance, this could overstate the impact of the restart strategy in year 2.
- The study did not examine the school improvement activities implemented in the comparison schools. These schools might have implemented a variety of school improvement activities, some of which could have been similar to the district-managed restart strategy components. If these schools participated in similar school improvement activities, the estimates of the effect of the school restart strategy might be understated.
- Restart schools might have implemented other school improvement strategies that coincided with the restart period, such as adopting new curricula. If these reforms also improved school performance, the positive impact of the restart strategy might be overstated. Moreover, schools that implemented the restart strategy—particularly in cohorts 1 and 2—were among the lowest performing schools in the state and had failed to meet accountability targets for multiple consecutive years before implementation, reducing the potential pool of non-restart schools from which to select matched comparison schools. This increases the risk that comparison schools are different from participating schools in important ways that are not accounted for in the statistical models measuring the impact of the restart strategy on the outcomes examined in the study.
- A core component of the district-managed restart strategy was strategic staffing to recruit high-performing principals and teachers to restart schools, but the study team did not have access to data that would allow them to examine changes in the performance of principals or teachers after implementing the restart strategy.

Notes

1. The study team reported findings for principals and teachers together because the small number of principals would have required masking some calculations to comply with the Texas Education Research Center's data suppression rules to protect privacy.

2. For more details, see https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2019%20Overview%201%20page_fn1_accessible.pdf.

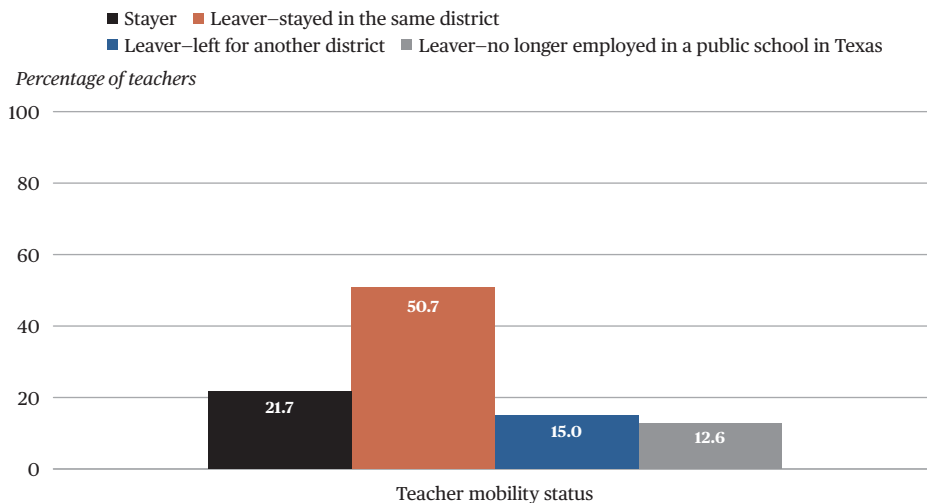
Findings

This section presents the study's main findings. Detailed findings are in appendix B and supplemental analyses are in appendix C.

Nearly 80 percent of the teachers who were at schools in the year before implementation of the restart strategy left before the beginning of the restart school year, and just over half of leavers moved to a different school within the same district

Consistent with the focus of the district-managed restart strategy on strategic staffing, 78 percent of the teachers employed at a school in the year before it implemented the restart strategy left the school before the start of the first year of implementation (figure 1). More than half (51 percent) relocated to a different school within the same district, and 15 percent moved to a school outside the district. An additional 13 percent could not be found in employment records, indicating that they were no longer employed in a public school in Texas.

Figure 1. Nearly 80 percent of teachers at Texas schools in the year before implementation of the restart strategy left before the start of the restart school year, 2015/16–2018/19 cohorts



Note: The sample included 1,167 teachers at 29 schools in the year before implementation of the restart strategy.

Source: Authors’ analysis of program records from the Texas Education Agency and staffing data from the Texas Education Research Center.

Educators who arrived at restart schools were more likely to have more than three years of experience and to have an advanced degree than those who left or stayed

The percentage of principals and teachers with more than three years of experience was larger among those who arrived at restart schools in the first year of implementation than among those who stayed or left restart schools (table 1). Arriving principals and teachers were also more likely to be White than principals and teachers

Table 1. Characteristics of principals and teachers who stayed, left, and arrived at Texas at schools before the start of the first year of implementation of the a school’s restart strategy, 2015/16–2018/19 cohorts

Principal and teacher characteristic	Principal and teacher mobility status		
	Stayers	Leavers	Arrivers
Average salary	\$56,350	\$56,139	\$58,085
Average total years of professional experience	7	9	9
Percentage with more than three years of professional experience	52	58	70*
Percentage whose highest degree was an advanced degree	28	30	35*
Percentage female	77	77	78
Percentage Black	49	43	46
Percentage Hispanic	24	20	24
Percentage White	26	32	25*
Sample size	258	937	890

* Indicates a meaningful difference between the reference category (stayers or leavers) and arrivers, defined as a difference of 5 percentage points or more for characteristics with two categories and .25 standard deviation for a characteristic with multiple response options.

Note: The total sample included 2,085 principals and teachers in 29 schools. Leavers included principals and teachers who left the school for another school in the same district, who left the school for another school in a different district, or who were no longer employed in a Texas public school. Arrivers included principals and teachers who arrived at a restart school in the first year of implementation. The characteristics of leavers and stayers were derived from employment records in the year prior to implementing the restart strategy. For arrivers, these characteristics were derived from employment records during their first year at a restart school because some arrivers could not be found in employment records in the year prior to restart implementation.

Source: Authors’ analysis of program records from the Texas Education Agency and staffing data from the Texas Education Research Center.

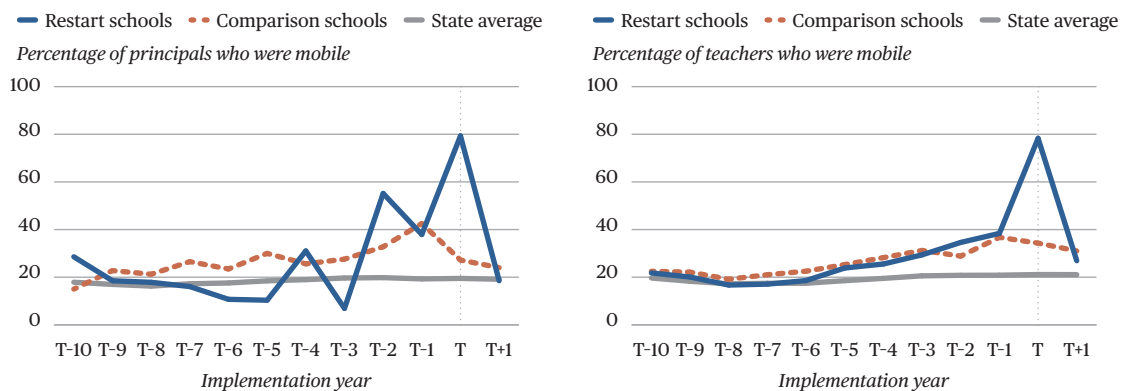
who left. The differences in experience and in the percentage with an advanced degree were largest between educators who arrived and those who stayed: 70 percent of new principals and teachers had more than three years of professional experience, compared with 52 percent of those who stayed, while principals and teachers who arrived were 7 percentage points more likely to have an advanced degree than those who stayed.⁵

Although the characteristics of arrivers might suggest that they were more likely to have higher performance than leavers, data on principal and teacher performance from the state or district educator evaluation system was not available for the study, and therefore it could not be empirically determined whether arrivers and stayers were higher performing than leavers. Other studies of restart strategies in the same districts as the current study have found evidence of an increase in the percentage of teachers rated as effective between the year before implementation and the first year of implementation (Hanushek et al., 2019). The share of high-performing teachers at these schools exceeded that of other demographically similar schools in the district.

Principal and teacher mobility decreased in the second year of implementing the restart strategy

After an initial spike in principal and teacher mobility before the start of the restart school year, which is consistent with the intended design of the restart strategy, principal and teacher mobility in the second year of the strategy returned to levels that were consistent with mobility in matched comparison schools with similar characteristics. Average changes in principal and teacher mobility at the start of the second year were comparable in restart schools and comparison schools after district and school characteristics were adjusted for (figure 2; see tables B1 and B2 in appendix B). Most principals and teachers at schools in the year before implementation of the restart strategy left before the start of the restart school year (79 percent of principals and 78 percent of teachers). In the second year of implementation, 19 percent of principals and 27 percent of teachers left restart

Figure 2. Teacher and principal mobility increased following implementation of the district-managed restart strategy in Texas but declined at the start of the second year of implementation, 2015/16–2018/19 cohorts



Note: Mobility is the percentage of principals or teachers employed at a school in the prior year who left the school. T is time and refers to the first implementation year (2015/16, 2017/18, or 2018/19). T-1 refers to the year before implementation, and T+1 refers to the year following implementation. The sample included 29 restart schools, 87 matched comparison schools, and 5,753 unmatched schools across Texas. Statewide averages at each time point included schools not participating in restart strategy cohorts 1, 2, or 3 that were not included in each cohort’s matched comparison. Statistics are unadjusted.

Source: Authors’ analysis of program records and publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency, and staffing data from the Texas Education Research Center.

5. Research on the teacher-level professional characteristics associated with students’ academic outcomes points toward a positive relationship between teacher professional experience and student test performance, but there is little evidence that having a teacher with an advanced degree is related to student achievement (Harris & Sass, 2011; Ladd & Sorensen, 2015).

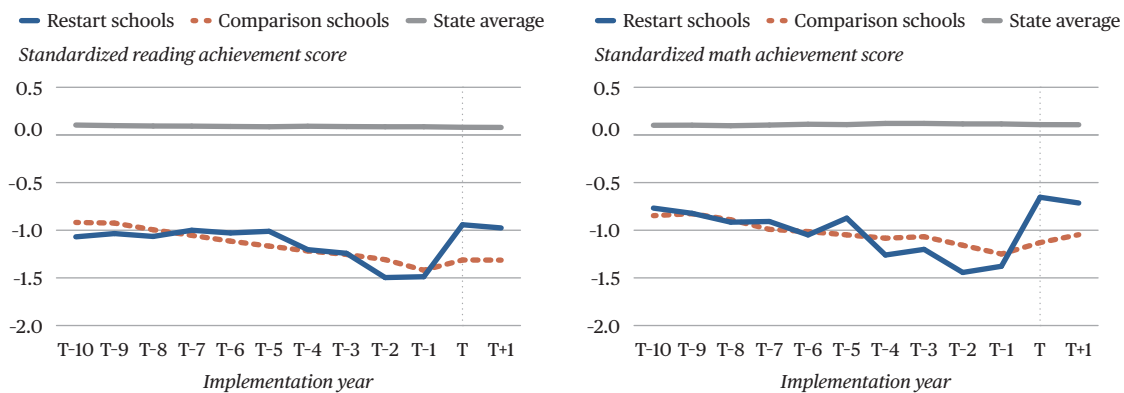
schools. Principal mobility rates in the second year resembled the statewide average, but teacher mobility continued to be higher than the statewide average, with one in three teachers leaving each year.

Student achievement and attendance improved after schools implemented the restart strategy

In the first two years of implementation of the district-managed restart strategy, average student reading and math achievement increased more in restart schools than in matched comparison schools, after school characteristics, district locales, and prior trends were controlled for (figure 3). In spring of the first year of implementation, restart schools performed .4 of a standard deviation greater in reading and .5 greater in math than comparison schools relative to achievement before implementation. In the second year of implementation, estimated effects increased to .7 of a standard deviation in reading and .8 in math. These effects were estimated only for the first two cohorts because of disruptions in state testing in 2019/20 caused by Covid-19. All effects related to student achievement were statistically significant (see tables B3 and B4 in appendix B) and are considered large according to Kraft’s (2020) schema for understanding the magnitude of effect sizes in education research.⁶

Compared with matched comparison schools, restart schools also had small but statistically significant increases in average student attendance rates of 0.5 percentage point in the first year of implementation and 0.7 percentage point in the second year, after school characteristic, district locale, and prior trends were controlled for (figure 4; see table B5 in appendix B). These estimated increases in student attendance were equivalent to approximately 9 days of instruction per student in year 1 and 13 days in year 2. Although restart schools appeared to be more effective than similar matched comparison schools, they had statistically significantly lower student achievement and attendance than the state as a whole (see figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Student achievement in reading and math improved more in restart schools than in comparison schools in Texas after schools implemented the restart strategy, 2015/16–2018/19 cohorts

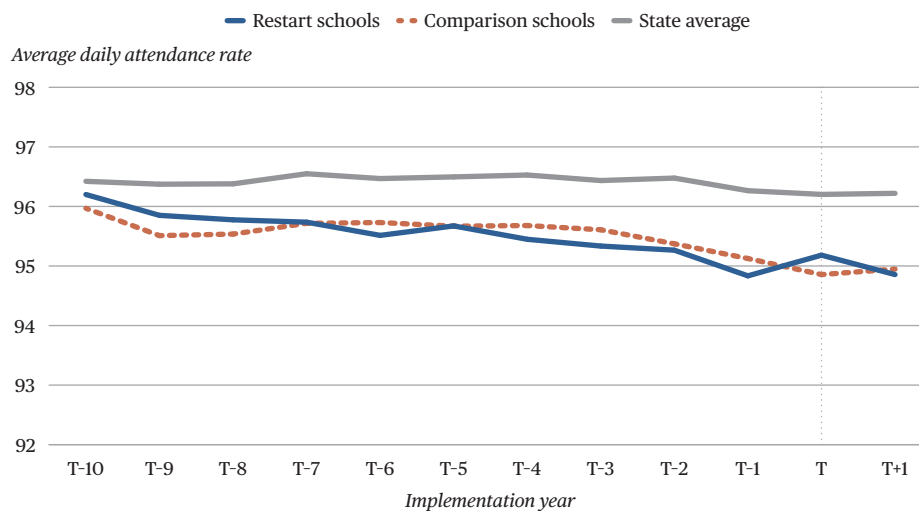


Note: T is time and refers to the first implementation year (2015/16, 2017/18, or 2018/19). T-1 refers to the year before implementation, and T+1 refers to the year following implementation. The sample included 29 restart schools, 87 matched comparison schools, and 5,753 unmatched schools across Texas. State-wide averages at each time point included schools not participating in restart strategy cohorts 1, 2, or 3 and schools that were not included in each cohort’s matched comparison. Statistics are unadjusted.

Source: Authors’ analysis of program records and publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency.

6. In Kraft’s (2020) schema, effect sizes of less than .05 are small, .05 to .20 are medium, and greater than .20 are large. However, effect size estimates in the current study are not directly comparable to these benchmarks for several reasons. First, Kraft’s schema is informed by the distribution of effect sizes obtained from studies estimating a causal effect from randomized controlled trials, which are systematically smaller than those obtained from quasi-experimental studies such as this one. Second, the denominators in the current study’s effect size calculation (school-level test score standard deviations) are smaller than those calculated at the student level, which further reduces the comparability between effect sizes estimated in the current study and the chosen benchmarks.

Figure 4. Student attendance rates improved more in restart schools than in comparison schools in Texas in the first year of implementing the restart strategy, but attendance rates were not statistically different from that of comparison schools at the start of the second implementation year, 2015/16–2018/19 cohorts



Note: T is time and refers to the first implementation year (2015/16, 2017/18, or 2018/19). T-1 refers to the year before implementation, and T+1 refers to the year following implementation. The sample included 29 restart schools, 87 comparison schools, and 5,753 unmatched schools across Texas. Statewide averages at each time point included schools not participating in restart strategy cohorts 1, 2, or 3 and schools that were not included in each cohort’s matched comparison. Statistics are unadjusted.

Source: Authors’ analysis of program records and publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency.

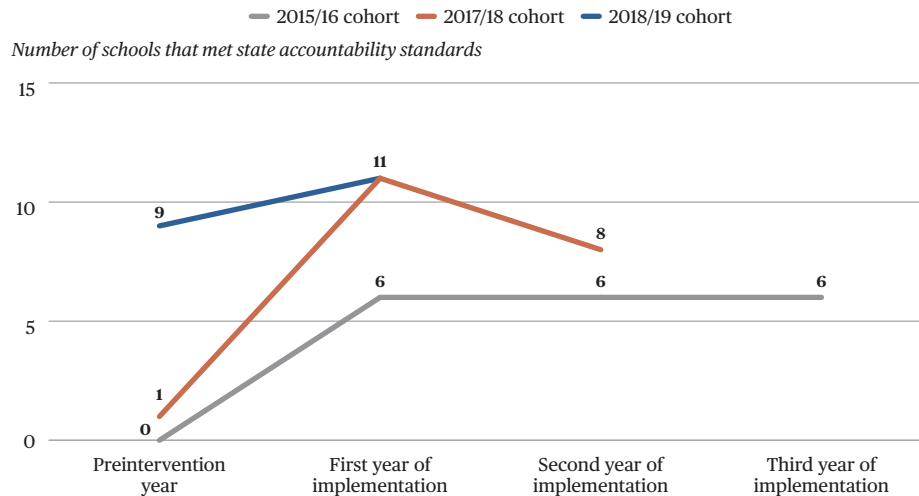
Nearly all schools that did not meet accountability standards before implementing the restart strategy met standards within the first three years of implementation

In the year before implementing the restart strategy, few schools in the first two restart cohorts met state accountability standards. In the 2015/16 cohort, no schools had met state accountability standards in the prior year, and in the 2017/18 cohort, only one school had met state accountability standards. However, most schools (9 of 11) in the 2018/19 cohort had met state accountability standards in the year before implementation. This pattern is consistent with findings from interviews with district leaders. For the first two cohorts (2015/16 and 2017/18), district leaders reviewed school performance data in the spring semester before the implementation year and selected schools that were classified as Improvement Required for multiple years. However, for the third cohort (2018/19), district leaders selected schools that received accountability letter ratings of C, D, or F, suggesting that, on average, the schools selected for the restart strategy in 2018/19 were higher-performing than in prior years.

After one year of implementation, 6 of 7 schools in the 2015/16 cohort and all 11 schools in the 2017/18 and all 11 schools in the 2018/19 cohorts met state accountability standards (figure 5). For the 2015/16 cohort, the only cohort for which data were available for three years after implementation, this improvement was sustained. For the 2017/18 cohort, 8 of 9 schools⁷ met state accountability standards after two years of implementation.

7. Two schools in the 2017/18 cohort closed before the second year of implementation (2018/19).

Figure 5. For all three cohorts, nearly all district-managed Texas restart schools met state accountability standards after one year of implementation of the restart strategy, 2015/16–2018/19 cohorts



Note: The sample included 29 restart schools: 7 in the 2015/16 cohort, 11 in the 2017/18 cohort, and 11 in the 2018/19 cohort. The total number of schools with accountability ratings in each postimplementation year varied by cohort because of inconsistent availability of accountability rating data in late-implementing cohorts and school closure. Two schools in the 2017/18 cohort closed before the 2018/19 school year and therefore are missing accountability data for 2018/19. Data for the 2017/18 cohort were not available for the third year of implementation. Data for the 2018/19 cohort were not available for the second or third year of implementation.

Source: Authors’ analysis of program records and publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency.

Interviews with a subset of district and school leaders on implementing the district-managed restart strategy suggested several challenges and successes

District leaders shared that the primary goal motivating superintendents and senior district leaders to implement the district-managed restart strategy was to substantially improve the performance of schools with a history of low performance. District leaders reported that most of the schools selected had been rated Improvement Required for three or more years before the restart year, and they felt that drastic and immediate actions were required to quickly improve performance and accountability ratings. District leaders reviewed a variety of data sources on a variety of characteristics, including historical trends in school performance, neighborhood poverty, teacher mobility, school climate, and community resources to identify schools in which to implement the restart strategy. Some leaders also discussed taking an equity approach to selecting schools. For example, one district leader shared:

“When I went to [schools selected to implement the district-managed restart strategy], I would walk them and look at the instructions [on chalkboards] and the facilities to figure out what work we needed to do in the summer, and I was just shocked that they had old chalkboards. They didn’t have dry erase boards. There was no technology. They were absolutely not given the best. They seem to always be the last in line without an advocate and so that has changed for the entire district. We look at these high-priority schools [restart schools] which are a subset of those as being first in line, give [restart schools] the best we have. When the air conditioner is not working or when there’s a plumbing issue they’re always elevated, so it’s created just a district commitment to that [equity].”

District leaders described the school selection process as driven mainly by superintendents and senior district leaders. Schools were identified and selected the winter or spring before the first year of implementation of the restart strategy. After schools were selected, district leaders began a communication campaign to inform students, families, community members, school administrators, teachers, and school staff at the selected schools of the changes that would occur the following fall. To explain the restart strategy and gather feedback, district

leaders held community meetings and town hall forums and conducted surveys of parents. One school leader noted the following:

“The first few rounds of schools had been low performing for so many years that the decision was really top-down. We had community meetings, we explained the [restart strategy], [and] we explained the benefits. We had an extra hour added to the school day. We had uniforms. We had this exciting climate and culture of welcoming and excellence, so it was more about explaining the program and the benefits and creating a lot of positive attention around the [restart strategy].”

District leaders indicated that the reactions from families and communities to implementing the restart strategy were mostly positive, with parents expressing an appreciation for changes in school leadership and teaching staff and for free afterschool programming and free school uniforms for students.

After deciding which schools would implement the restart strategy, district and school leaders focused on implementing the five components of the restart strategy, beginning with the strategic staffing component. Strategic staffing involved replacing a school’s principal and most of the teachers. Principals and teachers at the restart schools who wanted to stay at the schools were required to reapply for their jobs. All principals and teachers were guaranteed employment in the district, but only a small percentage would be rehired to stay at restart schools. One district leader explained the staffing process as follows:

“One thing that I did was I looked at the data of all the teachers in the existing buildings, and because I felt it was important to still have somebody—some people—there that were from the previous—just from the original school. Just so that we have that context of the community and the kids and families and things, and so, I selected—I would say I kept—about 15 [percent] to 20 percent of the folks on the campus. They might have not been Tier 1 teachers, but they were teachers that from observing and from looking at their data, I knew that one, they could either grow in this system [and] be developed or that were getting some growth with kids. We’ve kept those folks. Then as a district, the district identified [via the district’s teacher evaluation system] the top 300 teachers in the entire district that were getting results with kids. We invited them to come to this—like we wine and dined in one night and invited them to come to this dinner—and basically told them the vision and ‘This is what we’re trying to do and we want you to come on board.’ We offered a \$10,000 stipend on top of their salaries, and we had them interview with the principals that we had selected right then and there. I mean there are people that were hired that night.”

District leaders described identifying and recruiting principals and teachers as an intensive process that took six to eight months. Districts offered additional stipends of \$15,000 for principals, \$12,000 for assistant principals, \$10,000 for teachers, and under \$10,000 for instructional coaches and other school staff. District leaders discussed beginning the staffing process by examining principal performance data and identifying principals in the district who were successful at improving school performance or who were experienced leaders at schools with similar student populations. Principals were then invited to apply for the position, and many were invited to dinners and other events to learn about the restart strategy.

District leaders did not experience challenges with identifying, recruiting, and hiring principals and other school administrators for the restart schools, but recruiting and hiring teachers was much more time consuming. District leaders from districts with teacher evaluation systems discussed reviewing teacher performance data and inviting teachers with high performance scores to apply. Districts without a teacher evaluation system held job fairs and advertised the positions through social media, partnerships with institutions of higher education, and regional education service centers. District and school leaders reported focusing on teacher candidates who had experience in school improvement or who taught at schools with student populations similar to those in the restart schools. Leaders shared that recruiting teachers took time. Some leaders suggested that the

grant-funded salary stipend was not enough to convince teachers who might have felt that a three-year commitment to stay at the restart school was too demanding, and some remarked that the schools' reputations also might have inhibited teachers from moving to the restart schools. One district leader shared having instructional coaches and interventionists take on classroom teaching roles in the first year of the restart strategy because not all teaching positions at the school were filled before school started:

“. . . we were asking for a three-year commitment because part of the challenge was we had [school staff] that were coming and going. We had the highest turnover rates in the district. We were asking that you [teachers] commit for three years when you got your golden ticket, right? Which meant no transferring inside the district. You can stick it out, and we tried to be as upfront and honest about the work we were doing. It was going to be hard. It's going to be worth it, but it's going to be difficult, and some of the teachers did not have experience. They showed high [student] growth, but they didn't have experience doing the work that we were asking them to do. We kept being honest about, 'Hey, we're really going to ask you—it's going to be a change, right? We're going to be in your classrooms on a regular basis. We're going to give you direct feedback. We're going to ask you to implement the feedback. In the moment, we're going to give real-time coaching, we're going to have data meetings every week, collaborative planning sessions every week.' Some [teachers] thought we were kidding.”

School leaders indicated that fostering positive relationships among students and staff was the second most important component of the restart strategy. District and school leaders indicated that developing school routines that fostered positive relationships among staff, students, and families was their main area of focus after hiring principals, teachers, and staff. School leaders mentioned hiring behavioral specialists, counselors, and family liaisons to address behavior and discipline issues in nonpunitive ways and develop routines that support social-emotional learning, including designating circle time for building relationships between teachers and students and among students and instituting restorative justice practices. Describing the school's climate before implementation of the restart strategy, one school leader remarked as follows:

“Kids were not used to just staying in class or sitting down. They will just run out all over the building. They weren't used to it. They didn't understand. That's what they've always done. Fights would break out in the classrooms. . . . First and foremost, I had to start with the teachers building like these family communities within the class. So, a lot of work around that like, 'We're a family. We're going to [implement the] circle [routine] every day.'”

School leaders approached the other restart components—instructional excellence and capacity building for teachers and leaders, additional learning time, and partnerships with parents and community organizations—in intentional and creative ways. School leaders had flexibility in their approach to these components, which were not prescribed by the district or the state. School and district leaders discussed implementing instructional excellence and capacity building for teachers and leaders by holding frequent data check-in meetings with principals, teachers, and interventionists to review formative data, such as teacher observations, formative assessments, and student work; summative data from benchmark tests; and district and state assessments examining changes in student performance in three- to six-week cycles. One district leader reported as follows:

“So, we call that [data-driven instruction] instructional excellence, and it has different components, but I would say that, specifically the data part, we would break it down into first, understanding data and the accountability system; second is making data visible to students and to staff in the classroom; third, using data very strategically for reteach, acceleration, remediation, and then goal setting with students to create a growth mindset. It's not about the exact score. It's about growth time with every form of assessment. That was something we weren't doing as a district, so the first year, we made our own six weeks assessments, and then we put them through an Excel sheet.”

For the third component—additional learning time—all restart schools offered afterschool enrichment programming, which was typically provided by an external partner. Some schools also offered tutoring. Schools in the early cohorts extended the school day by adding an hour of instructional time. Some school leaders, however, found the additional hour was not helping students because they were tired by the late afternoon and could not sustain their attention for learning. District and school leaders discussed changing their approach to this component by modifying the schedule and providing more time for core subjects or more time for intervention blocks. Some leaders approached this component by requiring teachers to work an additional hour to participate in professional development or professional learning communities.

Not unlike the strategic staffing component, several leaders found partnering with families and community organizations to be challenging. The leaders worked in schools that served primarily students in families whose members worked nontraditional hours or had multiple jobs. Schools struggled in the first year of implementation with promoting parent involvement. In addition, many schools did not have a history of parent-teacher associations (PTAs), so school leaders had to be intentional and creative in their outreach and family engagement efforts. Some school leaders mentioned hiring parent support specialists or community liaisons or bringing in external providers to host parent workshops. One school leader remarked as follows:

“For us, having partnerships [with parents and community organizations] was extremely important. I know each of the campuses work really hard to try to develop PTAs, which would still, I think, struggle just trying to get parents consistently engaged. Being intentional about having at least the one or two community members seated on our site-based committee teams so that they would know, again, what’s happening within the school so that they are also communicating that to the community as needed. I know our social media presence increased tremendously. That’s where we were able to connect to many of our parents more easily.”

Implications

This study has four primary implications.

First, given the emerging evidence of the approach’s effectiveness, leaders at the Texas Education Agency might want to consider expanding the district-managed restart strategy to additional schools that are not meeting performance expectations. The study found that the restart strategy had positive effects on student achievement within the first two years of implementation. Nearly all the restart schools also met state accountability standards in the first year of implementation of the restart strategy. The majority of the schools continued to meet accountability standards in the second and third years of implementation, suggesting that the restart strategy can sustain improvements in student academic performance during the first three years of implementation.

Second, in light of teacher recruitment challenges during the restart process identified by school leaders, district leaders might consider plans for increasing the supply of high-performing teachers who can staff low-performing schools that are participating in the restart strategy. These plans might involve improving the human capital management systems used by districts for identifying, recruiting, and retaining high-performing principals and teachers. Before implementing the restart strategy, a district will need to assess the number of high-performing teachers in the district and determine how many are needed to staff a restart school. If the need is greater than the supply, the district might want to consider the regional labor market and possibly offer incentives beyond the salary stipend to recruit high-performing teachers. District and school leaders who participated in interviews shared that it was challenging to recruit and retain teachers at restart schools. For some teachers, the \$10,000 annual grant-funded stipend was not enough of an incentive for them to relocate to or stay at restart schools. Teachers at restart schools were required to work an extra hour a day or additional

days and attend frequent data meetings and professional learning community meetings. District leaders might consider other relocation incentives that might be more attractive to high-performing teachers.

Third, district leaders might consider the implications of scaling up the restart strategy, including potential unintended consequences for other schools in the district. The study found that about half of the teachers in schools left for other schools in the same district before implementation of the restart strategy. This is consistent with recent research that, similarly, has found that low-performing teachers rated as failing or needing improvement often moved to schools serving students experiencing poverty or identifying as Black or Hispanic (Dillon & Malick, 2020). Research is needed to understand the effect of the restart strategy on other schools in the same district, and how teachers who move to new schools within the district can be supported in their transition and provided opportunities to strengthen their instructional practices.

Finally, leaders at the Texas Education Agency might consider collecting additional data and conducting additional research on implementation of the restart strategy. A more in-depth examination of implementation of the five components of the district-managed restart strategy could provide useful lessons for districts that are considering implementing the strategy or that are in the early phases of implementing it. In the future, leaders at the Texas Education Agency could also consider examining additional years of data from restart schools to learn whether improvements in student achievement and attendance are sustained beyond the three years of grant funding for the staff stipends. Future research could also examine changes in principal or teacher performance using classroom observation scores from the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System or measures of principals' or teachers' contribution to student test score growth.

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