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Frequency of Principal Turnover in Ohio's Elementary Schools

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Abstract

One remedy for Ohio schools that fail to meet the state's test score criteria for "effectiveness" is to force a change in the principalship. Concerns have been raised that such a remedy may simultaneously undermine the organizational stability of the school. The researchers in this study examined the frequency with which elementary building principals in 109 southwest Ohio schools changed during the 7-year period of 1996-1997 (FY 1997) through 2002-2003 (FY 2003). The researchers found that urban and rural schools had a significantly higher turnover frequency than did suburban schools. Ways to counter frequent principal turnover while, at the same time, generating improved principal leadership, pose great challenges for those at the helm of many Ohio districts.

What effect does frequent principal turnover have on a school? Must a principal remain in the position for a given number of years to make a significant impact upon the school community? A building principal plays an important role in school reform (Hipp, 1997; Kowalski, 1999; Oberman, 1996; Ogawa & Hart, 1985). The idea that principal stability is related to school improvement is based on the belief that for reform to be meaningful, it must take place at the school level (Fullan, 1991, 1993; Hall & Hord, 2001); that change at the school level involves a cultural dimension (Deal & Peterson, 1990; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Stolp, 1994); and that a change in school culture takes time. Estimates of the time required for significant school reform at a given school are 5 to 7 years (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin, 1996). That principal turnover is seen as an important event is evidenced by some researchers calling it a "succession crisis" (Grusky, 1960).

Purpose of the Study

This study focused on the frequency of principal turnover in Ohio. To what extent is this a concern? The term "principal turnover frequency" refers to the frequency with which principals in Ohio public schools were replaced over a 7-year time span. These researchers examined both the phenomena of succession and turnover frequency in the literature. Succession (or turnover) can be understood by seeing how much it affects the school organization (Johnson & Licata, 1995). Principal succession is examined in schools for the consequences on school personnel, programs, culture, and student achievement. Some studies have explored the stages of principal succession and the reaction to principal succession (Gordon & Rosen, 1981; Hart, 1993; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985). In particular, there is a paucity of information about turnover rates in the elementary principalship in urban public schools across the nation. Urban schools in major metropolitan areas in this country experience differ-

ent problems than other schools (Balfanz & MacIver, 2000; Kozol, 1991). They have been the focus of far more school reform measures. For example, after *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, the public outcry for reform was so great that reforms occurred at an unprecedented rate; one study found an estimated 3,000 separate school-reform measures enacted during the 1980s (Hess, 1999).

The primary question guiding this study was: What is the profile of principal turnover in a selected group of elementary schools in one geographic region of Ohio that encompasses urban, rural, and suburban schools? Principal turnover frequency was defined as the frequency of changes in this position in a school over a 7-year period from the 1996-1997 school year (FY 1997) through the 2002-2003 school year (FY 2003). More specifically, we asked: What is the principal turnover frequency of selected urban, suburban, and rural elementary public schools in southwest Ohio during the 7-year period of 1996-1997 (FY 1997) through 2002-2003 (FY 2003)? Do differences exist in the principal turnover frequencies in urban schools as compared with suburban and rural schools?

These three settings were described as follows. Urban schools are located in large urban centers that have student populations with high concentrations of poverty. Suburban schools surround major urban centers. They are distinguished by very high income levels, almost no poverty, and a very high proportion of the population characterized as professional/administrative. Rural schools represent two categories: The first group tends to comprise rural districts from the Appalachian area of Ohio with high poverty and low socioeconomic status families as measured by average income levels and percentage of population with some college experience. Districts in the second group tend to be small and very rural outside of Appalachia. They have a work force profile that is similar to schools in the first group but with much lower poverty rates (Ohio Department of Education, 1996).

This study was limited by several factors. Generalizing the findings of the study was limited to the schools in a 19 county region of Ohio that served as the population. Another limitation addresses reasons for the turnover of the principal. Principals leave for positive and negative reasons. Positive aspects are promotion and opportunities for higher levels of leadership. Negative reasons are removal by superiors of principals who are ineffective, or principals who leave because of unsatisfactory conditions (Miklos, 1988). No evidence about reasons for principals leaving their positions was included in the study. In addition, to determine the number of principals at each designated school, the database included school years FY 1997 to FY 2003 and the principals during those years. The data were limited to these years and did not show whether or not the principal at a school in FY 1997, the first year included in the count of principals, had been in place for a number of years prior to that date. Similarly, the end of the frequency count, FY 2003, did not take into account the length of future service of those principals in place that final year.

Other boundaries of the study included the fact that schools included in the database were those that were open continuously from FY 1997 through FY 2003. Schools that were consolidated, changed names, or closed as well as any school opened after FY 1997 were eliminated from the database.

Although findings of the effects of principal turnover are varied and inconclusive, educational researchers believe that administrators and policymakers need to have a better

understanding of the dynamics of principal turnover and the implications of change in the principalship (Macmillan & Meyer, 2003).

Selection of the Sample

The following process was used to select the sample which included multiple steps. In the first step, the 19-county geographic region of Ohio was identified as the population area (See Figure 1). Those nineteen counties included: Butler, Champaign, Clark, Clermont, Clinton, Delaware, Fairfield, Fayette, Franklin, Greene, Hamilton, Licking, Madison, Miami, Montgomery, Pickaway, Preble, Union, Warren. We justified this bounded region because it is in relative close proximity to us should we decide to visit the schools in a follow-up study; also, the region includes urban, suburban, and rural districts.

The eight category Ohio typology of school districts (Ohio Department of Education, 1996) created a typology (or classification) so that a rational basis for making data driven comparisons of “like” districts would be available. ODE used four dimensions –(1) Rural, Small Town, Urban/ Suburban, Major City; (2) Socioeconomic status (as defined primarily by level of education and work force profile); (3) Poverty level; and (4) Size. These four dimensions tended to cluster school districts into eight groupings (See Table 1). Because we were interested in comparing urban, suburban, and rural schools, only certain categories from the typology were used.

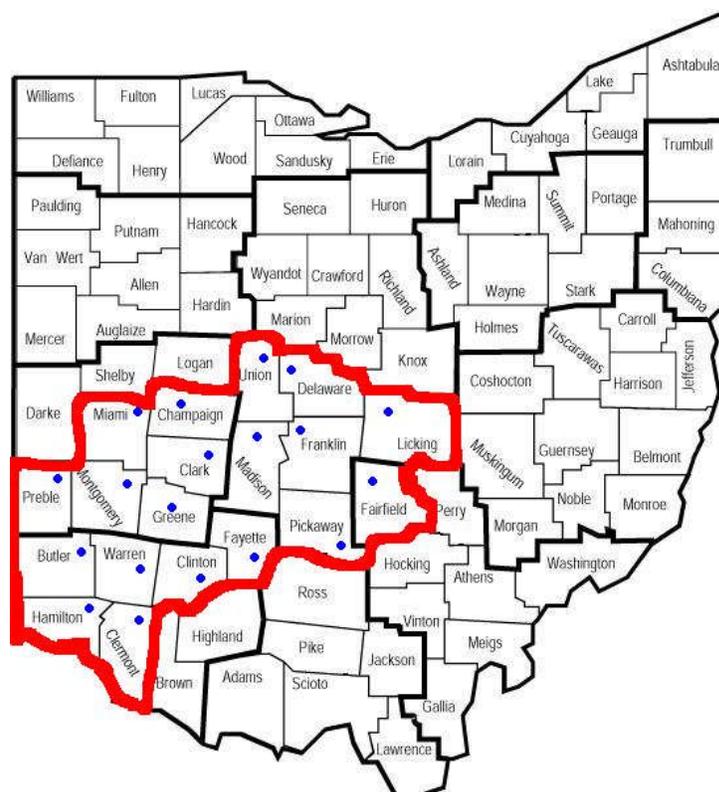


Figure 1. 19 Counties in Ohio in the selected population

(Partlow article continued on page 21)