

FOLLOW THE LEADERS

Recent Trends in Wisconsin's Principal and Superintendent Turnover

State data show that principals and superintendents turn over in Wisconsin public schools and districts at about the national average, but turnover is most prevalent for those serving the state's most vulnerable students. For now, at least, a pandemic-related surge in school leadership turnover has not yet emerged. Racial and gender diversity among principals and superintendents has trended upward since 2009 but, with the exception of female principals, still falls short of representing the state's student population.

As schools navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of strong district and school leadership has never been more evident nor seemed more at risk. Some feared there would be [mass departures](#) of school leaders in the pandemic's wake given the heightened risk and stress faced by school districts nationwide.

In this report, we explore turnover trends of Wisconsin public school district and school leaders, both pre- and mid-pandemic. Analyzing public school staffing data from the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI), we establish patterns of principal and superintendent turnover since 2009. We also use the available data to expand upon our previous work on teacher diversity by examining the racial and gender diversity of principals and superintendents across Wisconsin. We hope in the future to extend the present research on turnover to teachers as well.

"Turnover" refers to any instance in which leadership shifts, whether due to a leader taking a different role in the same setting, taking the same or different role in a new setting, or leaving the profession entirely. It is perhaps not surprising that in the 13 years studied, the most turnover occurred in the immediate aftermath of the adoption of 2011 Wisconsin Act 10, the state law that eliminated most public employee collective bargaining.

Encouragingly, we find that Wisconsin has yet to see an exodus of school and district leaders in the months following the onset of the pandemic, and recent turnover among principals in the state appears to be at or below national rates. However, the full impact of the

pandemic on leadership turnover remains to be seen. The 2021 turnovers that *did* occur had a disproportionate effect on schools and districts serving students already at greater risk in the pandemic.

With respect to race and gender, we find the principal and superintendent workforce has diversified somewhat since 2009, with some gains for superintendents of color and notable increases for women in both the superintendent and principal positions. However, persistent gaps in overall representation remain.

Methodology

WPF analyzed principal and superintendent turnover and demographic changes using the DPI [Public All Staff Report](#), which includes staffing information for all traditional and charter public schools. This file is compiled using data reported by districts on the third Friday of September and therefore represents a point-in-time snapshot rather than a full and complete picture of district staffing throughout the year. In cases of missing data, WPF consulted with DPI and applied a series of rules to reasonably interpret gaps. Any school not included in the 2021 data was excluded from our analysis. (2021 refers to the 2020-21 school year.) Student demographic data used to characterize school and district communities is from 2021.

PRINCIPAL TURNOVER AND STUDENT IMPACT

Parsing the many factors that contribute to a child's education is a complicated endeavor, but reputable national research indicates that [principals have a substantial impact on student learning](#), perhaps second only to teachers among school-based factors. Research



further suggests that principal *transitions* impact student achievement as well as related factors such as teacher retention and [school climate](#). The impact tends to be [negative](#) in the short term, with each transition generating an interruption of relationships, initiatives, and routines. [Conditions may bounce back over time](#), and some turnover may bring benefits, but [frequent turnover](#) may be so destabilizing as to negate potential gains for students.

According to DPI data, 4,089 instances of principal turnover across 2,155 schools in Wisconsin occurred between 2009 and 2021, for an average of 1.90 turnovers per school over the period in question. This rate equates to 17.6% of schools experiencing a principal transition each year on average, similar to the [national average](#).

Turnover can be caused by various factors and does not solely reflect those who depart their schools and do not reappear in the data as principals in other Wisconsin schools (“leaves”). For example, principals who depart one school to become principals at another school (“moves”) also are reflected in the DPI data. Furthermore, principals marked as “leaving” may have retired or left the profession entirely but also may have taken a different, non-principal role within the school system, left for a job out of state, or moved to a private school or other employer. Of all principal turnovers between 2009 and 2021, 61.5% were “leaves,” and 38.5% were “moves.”

The highest levels of principal turnover from 2009 to 2021 occurred in schools serving predominantly students of color and schools serving primarily students

from low-income households (see Figure 1). Schools serving over 50% students of color experienced an average annual principal turnover rate of 23.1%, compared to 16.5% at other schools. Over the period studied, this turnover rate equated to an average of 2.37 principal changes at each school serving a majority of students of color, or 31.8% more than the 1.80 changes on average at other schools.

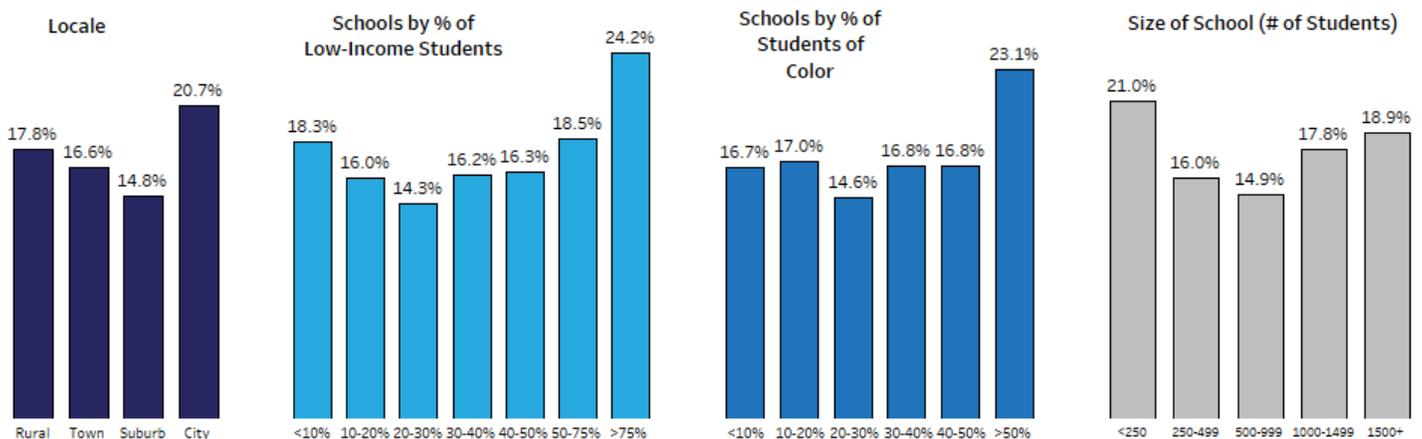
Schools with a student population of more than 50% from low-income households experienced a 20.1% average annual principal turnover rate, compared to 15.8% at other schools. The disparity was even more dramatic for schools where over 75% of the students are from low-income households: Those schools had a 24.2% average annual turnover rate, the highest of any subgroup that we examined.

Data nationally and in [other states](#) also show [principals at schools serving more students of color](#) and [principals at high-poverty schools](#) turning over at a higher rate than their peers. These groups often overlap in Wisconsin, given the correlation between race and income within the state. Possible explanations for these higher turnover rates include the intense challenges faced by principals at high-poverty schools, which tend to serve students with greater and more complex needs and which often lack the resources to effectively do so.

The overall effect in Wisconsin from 2009 to 2021 was that the state’s most vulnerable students experienced the most principal turnover. Given national research cited above suggesting that students at high-poverty schools may benefit most from stable and experienced

Figure 1: More Vulnerable Schools Experience More Principal Transitions

Average yearly principal turnover rate by type of school, 2009-2021



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, National Center for Education Statistics. Does not include private schools.



leadership, such rates of turnover may have exacerbated racial and economic achievement gaps.

Smaller differences in principal turnover emerged between schools based on their geography. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines and applies standardized labels of “rural,” “urban,” “suburban,” and “town” to categorize schools and districts. Urban schools saw the highest annual average turnover rate of 20.7%. This statistic may be partially accounted for by the majority of Wisconsin’s students of color and students from low-income households attending urban schools. Rural schools had the next highest turnover rate at 17.8% annually, just above the state average. Schools in towns saw an annual average turnover rate of 16.6%, and suburban schools experienced 14.8%.

The smallest schools (under 250 students) had an average annual turnover rate of 21.0%, which may reflect the additional responsibilities that fall to principals without large supporting staffs. Schools serving between 250 and 1,000 students (representing over half of all schools statewide) had the least amount of turnover, with 15.7% of schools experiencing a principal transition each year on average. Schools serving over 1,000 students experienced an annual turnover rate of 18.1%, below the smallest schools but still above average.

Some principals, especially those in rural communities, simultaneously serve as the principal of multiple schools. These leaders made up 13.7% of all principals in the years analyzed but accounted for 29.0% of all “moves,” in which a leader transitions from acting as

principal at one school to acting as principal at another school. These multi-school principals may have been more likely to leave their schools than their peers due to additional responsibilities and consequent stress.

SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER AND STUDENT IMPACT

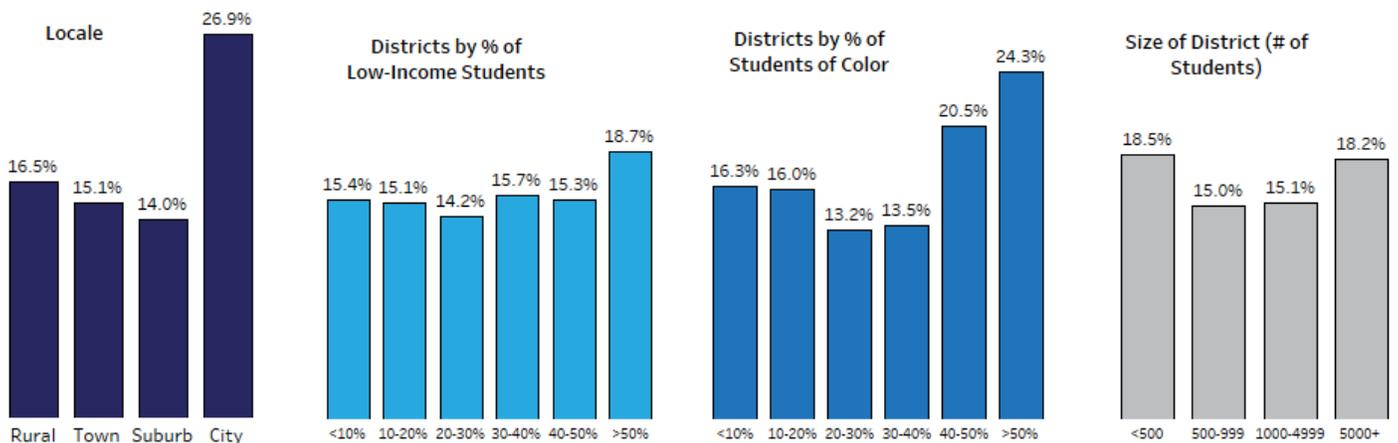
While we found strong national research linking high-performing principals and lower principal turnover to more positive student outcomes, we identified less conclusive research pertaining to superintendents. Nevertheless, most would agree that superintendents play a primary role in establishing the direction of a school district, and it is clear their transitions cost districts in both money and stability. A district and school board must invest in finding, hiring, and orienting a new superintendent, and ongoing initiatives are interrupted and often changed wholesale according to the priorities of the new leader. Change in a school district can be positive and even necessary, but frequent transitions can be destabilizing.

Between 2009 and 2021, Wisconsin districts turned over superintendents at the same rate that schools turned over principals: an average of 1.90 turnovers per district over the period, with 811 instances of turnover across 427 districts. This rate equates to 16.2% of districts experiencing a superintendent transition each year on average, which appears to track with [national average estimates](#), although data are limited.

Breakdowns of the district data by student demographics, geography, and size largely tracked with the principal findings (see Figure 2). Districts serving

Figure 2: More Vulnerable Districts Experience More Superintendent Transitions

Average yearly superintendent turnover rate by type of district, 2009-2021



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, National Center for Education Statistics. Does not include private schools.



student populations with more than 50% from low-income households saw higher-than-average rates of superintendent turnover at 18.7%, compared to 15.1% at other districts. Districts serving a majority of students of color also had higher annual average turnover rates: 24.3%, compared to 15.8% at other districts.

Applying the NCES geographic categories again, we find that the highest levels of superintendent turnover occurred in urban districts, which saw an average annual turnover rate of 26.9%, or the equivalent of 2.52 turnovers per district over the years in question. Principals also had higher turnover in urban environments, but not to such a degree.

Some amount of the superintendent variability may be due to a relatively small sample size: Wisconsin only contains 23 urban school districts, six of which are independent charter agencies. In addition to the challenges of leading systems serving high levels of student and community need, urban superintendents may face increased political scrutiny and a greater diversity of constituent viewpoints to manage in light of the size of their communities. Their surrounding districts may also be better resourced and therefore better able to attract and retain talent. For other geographies, average annual superintendent turnover mirrored principal turnover: 14.0% for suburban districts, 15.1% for town districts, and 16.5% for rural districts.

As with schools, the smallest districts (fewer than 500 students) saw the highest superintendent turnover rates, with an annual average of 18.5%. These very small districts are heavily concentrated in rural areas and may require superintendents to shoulder

responsibilities that in larger districts might be delegated to other officials, such as a human resources director, school business officer, or transportation director. School boards at small school districts may be less hesitant to hire inexperienced superintendents, who may then leapfrog elsewhere after gaining experience. The largest districts (greater than 5,000 students) also saw an above-average annual turnover rate of 18.2%. Districts with 500 to 5,000 students experienced turnover of only 15.1% each year on average.

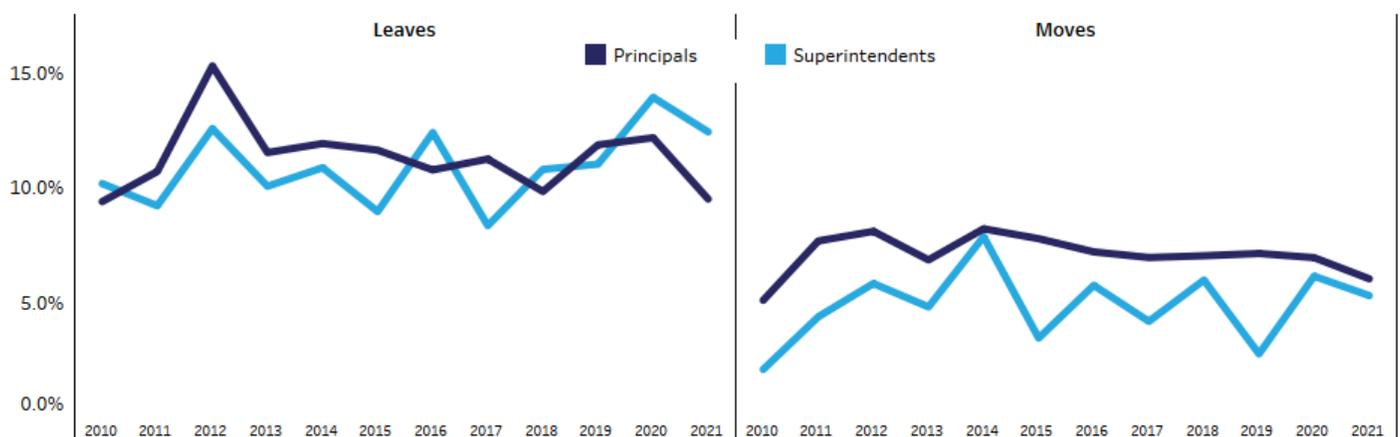
In summary, the students who were most likely to experience elevated levels of principal turnover – students of color, students from low-income households, and students in urban, very small, or very large settings – were also most likely to experience high levels of superintendent turnover, potentially compounding the instability of their overall educational experience.

DIGGING DEEPER

Our turnover analysis also compared the number of leaders moving to a similar position in another public school or district with those who left their public school role entirely. In every year studied, more superintendents and principals left their roles than moved to the same job elsewhere. On average, 11.3% of principals and 10.9% of superintendents left their respective public school roles entirely per year, compared to the annual average of 7.1% of principals and 4.9% of superintendents who simply moved to be equivalent leaders in a different building or district. (Note that these *principal and superintendent* numbers

Figure 3: Leadership Transitions Spiked Following Act 10, Declined During Pandemic

Move and leave rate among Wisconsin's public school leaders, 2010-2021



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Does not include private schools.



may not exactly match the average turnover statistics previously cited for *schools and districts* due to small methodological differences and cases where one leader simultaneously served multiple schools.)

Another area of deeper analysis was yearly comparisons of turnover numbers. The transition between the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years saw the highest percentage of principals (15.3%) and the second-highest percentage of superintendents (12.6%) leave their respective roles over the period (see Figure 3 on page 4). In addition, the second-highest percentage of principals (8.1%) moved from one school to another. These modest spikes may have been related to the 2011 passage of Act 10, the state law that eliminated most public employee collective bargaining and triggered broad changes within the public education system.

The smaller and more volatile superintendent data set saw a series of ups and downs following 2012, but principal transitions dropped and stabilized (in 2017, they nearly exactly matched the [national average](#)) before leaves began creeping back up in 2019. It is worth noting that the most recent peak for superintendent and principal turnover occurred prior to the 2019-20 school year and therefore before the pandemic originated. Growing numbers of retirement-aged Baby Boomers may help explain this uptick.

LEADERSHIP TURNOVER IN 2021

Recent data provide the first clue as to whether an increase in leadership transitions has materialized as a consequence of the pandemic. COVID-19 wrought havoc on school stability, and there are [strong signs](#) that it caused material losses in student learning. Many practitioners and observers predicted that education professionals would leave the field in droves under the stress of COVID-19, further exacerbating instability and learning challenges for students.

The data thus far, however, show that principal turnover entering the 2020-21 school year was at its lowest level since 2010. On average between 2010 and 2021, 18.4% of principals turned over. In 2021, only 15.5% of principals moved to other schools or departed the principal role. Few national points of comparison are available thus far, but Oklahoma's draft [2021 Educator Supply and Demand Report](#) shows an almost identical 2021 principal turnover rate in that state, and a [RAND](#)

[survey](#) suggested relatively unchanged principal turnover nationally.

Superintendent turnover going into the 2020-21 school year was not quite as rosy: 17.7% of Wisconsin superintendents moved districts or departed the superintendent role, slightly above the 15.7% average for the period studied. Still, this percentage is a decrease from the previous year's uptick.

To explain the retention thus far during COVID-19, some key informants we interviewed pointed to leaders' dedication and recognition of the need for consistent leadership during the turbulent time. Other observers noted that the economic recession and overall social instability occasioned by the pandemic may have made the relative stability of the profession more appealing, at least in the short term.

As in the full data set, turnovers in 2021 were not evenly distributed among school and district types. Schools and districts serving the most students of color and students from low-income households experienced principal and superintendent turnover rates higher than the state average.

Importantly, we do not yet have data on the transition from the 2020-21 school year into the 2021-22 school year or any future years. Any superintendent or principal who may have deferred retirement at the onset of COVID-19 out of a sense of responsibility to their school or district will presumably retire in the near future, but whether those retirements come in a flood or spaced out over the next few years remains to be seen. Some state and national associations have tracked elevated numbers of superintendents planning to leave before the next school year. Many policy observers predict a spike in turnover in upcoming years as leaders burn out from the stress of pandemic responsibilities and managing community conflict. We hope that this study provides a baseline of data from which future impact can be measured.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN THE LEADERSHIP WORKFORCE

As policymakers continue to track these workforce trends, the demographics of principals and superintendents also merit consideration. Research indicates that racial diversity among school staff is important for students, particularly those of color. Our 2020 report, "[A Teacher Who Looks Like Me,](#)"

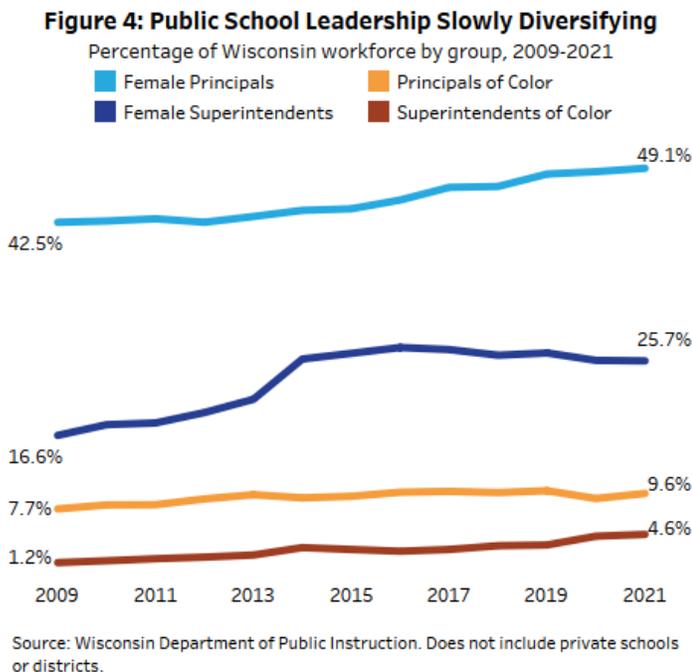


summarized the benefits for students taught by teachers of color, and our [follow-up 2021 report](#) cited school leaders of color as a factor in the successful recruitment and retention of teachers of color.

Wisconsin's superintendent and principal workforce has slowly become more diverse, although it trails the diversity of the state's student population. In 2009, 16.6% of Wisconsin superintendents and 42.5% of Wisconsin principals were women. By 2021, the share of female superintendents had increased to 25.7%, and principals had achieved near parity with 49.1% women (see Figure 4).

Benchmarking against the rest of the country, Wisconsin is currently just below the [2020 national average](#) of 26.7% women superintendents, which reflects a gain after lagging the national average by over 5 percentage points in 2010, as reported by the School Superintendents Association. For principals, the national average is higher than Wisconsin's: Women made up [54% of principals nationally in 2018](#), the most recent year for which the National Center for Education Statistics provides data. With [women making up 77% of the teaching workforce](#), men still appear to be more likely to be promoted into leadership roles in schools and districts.

Leaders of color have also gained ground but face greater gaps (see Figure 4). In 2009, 1.2% of superintendent positions (five total) and 7.7% of



principal positions (160 total) were occupied by people of color. By 2021, the number of superintendents of color had quadrupled to 20 but still only amounted to 4.6% of these leaders statewide. Principals of color, meanwhile, increased to 9.6% of the principal workforce in 2021, a gain of only 1.9 percentage points in 13 years. With 31.7% of Wisconsin public school students identified as children of color in 2021 DPI data, neither set of leaders is representative of their students, and both trail the national averages of [8.6% superintendents of color](#) in 2020 and [22% principals of color](#) in 2018.

White men held the most principal positions in both 2009 and 2021 (54.5% and 47.4%, respectively), followed by white women (37.8% in 2009 and 42.9% in 2021). Women of color held the next highest number of positions (4.7% in 2009 and 6.2% in 2021), while men of color held the fewest (2.9% in 2009 and 3.4% in 2021). White women therefore account for the majority of recent gains among female principals. The slightly greater representation of female as compared to male principals of color may reflect the larger pool of female teachers, although the relatively small group sizes preclude firm conclusions.

The statewide data do not show a disparity in principal turnover rates by gender. Regarding race, the turnover data show that 24.2% of principals of color turned over per year, compared to 17.8% of other principals.

This elevated turnover rate for the state's principals of color requires more context to properly interpret, however. The majority of these school leaders of color are located in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), which is a high-turnover district overall. MPS principals of color actually turned over at a lower annual average rate than white MPS principals (24.4% compared to 32.2%). These turnover rates are still high but indicate that MPS does not specifically struggle to retain principals of color.

Continuing to track these numbers matters not only because of the inherent value of removing potential barriers to access for women and people of color in any profession, but also because of the potential impact on students. Without greater and sustained racial diversity among superintendents and principals, our research has suggested that districts are at a disadvantage for recruiting and retaining teachers of color and leveraging their contributions to student learning.



TAKING ACTION DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

The demographic findings for principals and superintendents amplify a key point from our [previous series on teacher diversity](#) that, at each stage of the potential educator workforce pipeline, individuals of color are underrepresented compared both to the general populace and to the K-12 student population.

School or district leaders of *any* background are better positioned to positively affect student outcomes when they are not turning over quickly. A school system may absorb some positive turnover for the sake of school improvement or career advancement, but it carries risk for potential negative impacts on students.

Principal and superintendent transitions affecting the most vulnerable students merit particular attention. System leaders may find it beneficial to determine the reasons behind this turnover and, as appropriate, take action. State association leaders [cite](#) working conditions, compensation and available resources, preparation and professional development opportunities, and community relations as frequent causes for turnover and therefore potential focus areas for retention efforts. Specific ideas may include establishing networks of support, providing high-quality and job-embedded professional learning, offering retention incentives, or targeting higher compensation for effective and experienced principals who take charge of schools serving primarily disadvantaged students. Principal and superintendent preparation programs may also wish to examine and reflect upon their graduates' outcomes, including their turnover rates.

Strategies to retain effective leaders and mitigate the impact of leadership transitions on students will become more critical as schools navigate and recover from the harm and instability wrought by COVID-19. The good news is that, in the currently available data, the pandemic does not so far appear to be associated with especially high leadership turnover rates. Turnover data for the 2021-22 school year are not yet available, however, nor can we definitively predict what future years will bring. It further remains to be seen whether the turnover findings for principals and superintendents apply to teachers as well.

For the sake of student learning, we hope this analysis provides new insights for policymakers and school

district officials, spurs consideration of which schools and districts are at most risk of leadership turnover in these critical years and actions to alleviate that risk, and acts as a benchmark against which to measure progress in the future.

