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EFP Takeaways

Effects of Replacing School Principals on Student Achievement

Background

Previous research has established the importance of effective school leadership on student performance. Studies examining turnover in school leadership have generally focused on typical principal turnover or rotation across schools. Fewer studies have explored the effectiveness of policies aimed at principal dismissal or replacement. A research study in *EFP* volume 15, issue 3 by Elias Walsh and Dallas Dotter of Mathematica Policy Research examines the effects of a large scale principal turnover in the District of Columbia.

The Study

Following the 2007 Public Education Reform Amendment Act, 39% of principals in the District of Columbia were dismissed. Walsh and Dotter examined shifts in schoolwide student achievement following changes in principal leadership in the years after this policy shift. The authors measured the impact of replacing these principals on student achievement in math and reading by comparing shifts in student achievement in schools that experienced principal replacement to those that did not. Through a comprehensive analysis, the authors examined schoolwide student achievement in the District of Columbia from the 2003-04 through the 2010-11 academic school years.

For more details:

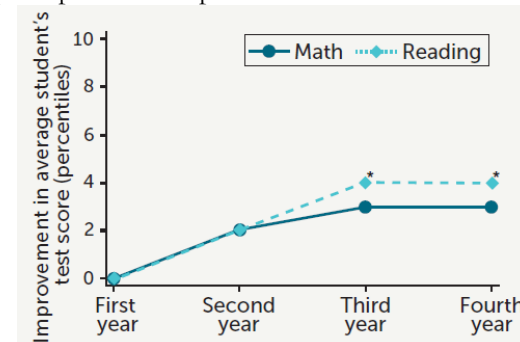
- View the [full issue](#).
- See the [full article in Education Finance and Policy](#).
- [Sign up here to receive future EFP Takeaways](#).
- Summary of:
Walsh, E., & Dotter, D. (2020). The impact of student achievement on replacing principals in District of Columbia public schools. *Education Finance & Policy*, 15(3), 518-542.

Findings

The study found that:

- New principals improved student achievement: In their third year, new principals improved the average student's reading score by 4 percentile points.
- It took three years for new principals to realize statistically significant achievement gains: When a new principal led a school, there were, on average, no gains after one year, some evidence of improvement after two years, and meaningful gains after three and four years.
- Student achievement gains in both math and reading were larger and happened faster in middle schools than in elementary schools.

The figure below demonstrates shifts in student achievement following changes in principal leadership.



Given the unique historical context and student demographics in DC public schools, these findings may not be generalizable to all school districts across the United States. Nevertheless, these findings speak to the importance of effective school leadership in improving student achievement.