Repairing the Principal Pipeline: Does Hiring Type Slow the Leak?

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School principals’ have a significant impact on student achievement and positive educational outcomes (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2013; Miller, 2009; Miller, 2013; Supovitz et al., 2010). There are concerns regarding the high turnover rate and shortage of applicants for school leadership positions currently within the United States (Beteille et al., 2012; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Burkhauser, 2015; Jensen, 2014; Whitaker, 2003). According to research, this current state of affairs significantly impacts high poverty schools (Beteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013). This quantitative research study aimed to contribute to the body of literature regarding principal retention and investigate whether there is a significant relationship between hiring type (i.e., internal or external promotion) and principal retention in the state of Georgia when controlling for potential covariates. Using information obtained through the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA), 132 principals were included in the study cohort involving panel data from 2015-2019. Using a conceptual framework based on human resource theories and the internal promotion cycle, a random-effects logistic regression examined the relationship between hiring type and principal turnover. Principal race and CCRPI scores emerged as statistically significant variables in relationship to principal turnover. Although hiring type was not statistically significant, the practical significance of internal promotion in combination with other factors is supported. Insight is provided into identifying leadership candidates, the hiring process, and increasing principal retention rates despite the demands of the job. This knowledge could significantly impact school districts’ hiring practices and the development of leadership programs in the educational community.

Keywords: principal turnover, principal retention, hiring type
While there is a demand for school principals who can lead and transform educational organizations (Beteille et al., 2012; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Burkhauser, 2015; Jensen, 2014; Whitaker, 2003), school districts across the United States are facing challenges recruiting, hiring, and retaining school principals (Educational Research Services, 2000; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Fuller & Young, 2009). To make matters more complicated, principal leadership has progressed from decade to decade, eventually leading to the current climate of increased accountability, raising the stakes higher than ever before (Alvoid & Black, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2005). Despite these changes, one thing has remained consistent, “Leadership is vital to the effectiveness of a school” (Marzano et al., 2005, p.4). Previous researchers have noted that increased job complexity and stress will further accelerate retirement and attrition of the current principal workforce (Beteille et al., 2012; Miller, 2013).

High rates of leadership turnover in districts across the United States range from 15% to 30% each year; researchers highlight exceptionally high rates of turnover occur in schools serving low-income, minority, and low-achieving students (Branch et al., 2008; Fuller & Young, 2009; Loeb et al., 2010). During 2016-2017 the national average for principal tenure was four years, with a turnover rate of 21% in high-poverty schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Shockingly, a recent national study of public school principals found that approximately 18% of principals were no longer in the same position one year later (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

According to the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (2019), one of the top ten issues to watch in 2020 was the issue concerning principal leadership. The principal’s responsibility for creating conditions leading to the recruitment and retention of effective teachers to ensure successful classrooms (Levin & Bradley, 2019) makes principal retention paramount to the future of Georgia schools. On average, the annual principal turnover rate in Georgia is 19% (Georgia Department of Education, 2015) which is cause for concern considering school leaders are responsible for all aspects of student learning, both inside and outside the classroom.

Findings from educational leadership literature highlight concerns regarding 1) the shortage of qualified school leadership candidates, 2) the adverse effects of principal turnover, and 3) the desire of principals to achieve and improve education while working in schools with higher achieving, more socioeconomic advantaged students (Beteille et al., 2012; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). More pointedly, in 2012, Beteille et al. reported “more than one out of every five principals leave their school each year” to move to more desirable positions, often at the detriment of schools with high-poverty and low-achieving students (p. 904). These studies suggest that the desire to achieve and improve education, which attracts candidates to the principalship, may also influence them to move to schools with a better chance of achievement.

To underscore the principal’s impact on positive school outcomes, research demonstrates the importance of quality principal leadership and how it directly influences teacher retention and increases student achievement (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2013; Miller, 2009). Research firmly supports this relationship between principal longevity, retention of effective principals, and positive school outcomes (Miller, 2013; Papa, 2007), establishing the relevance of principal retention and the essential need to explore the influences of principal recruitment and hiring practice. While both internal and external candidate recruitment methods have garnered support from researchers (Carlson, 1961; Groysberg et al., 2008; Hargreaves et al., 2003; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Rao & Drazin, 2002), limited studies relate hiring type (i.e., internal or external promotion) to principal retention.

Given the imperative need for capable leadership in school improvement, the looming shortage of candidates, and the increasing demands on administrators, the task of principal selection is daunting. The process of selecting and hiring capable principal candidates could be one of the most critical tasks district administrators and school boards face during their tenure. Unfortunately, other factors (i.e., time constraints and lack of knowledge about the hiring process) contribute to the haphazard process of
recruitment and selection. In addition, many school districts do not have a systematic and structured process in place to recruit and select principals (Anderson, 1991; Clifford et al., 2012).

Within this current climate of school leadership, attention to succession planning has gained momentum within school districts. While some districts continue to seek external candidates, another potential solution to the leadership shortage is the creation of district-level aspiring principal training programs. School districts design “grow your own” preparation programs to prepare individuals for the principalship and increase the internal applicant pool. Through an analysis of the empirical literature, identified gaps led to the formulation of the following research question to explore if there was a significant relationship between hiring type and other relevant variables that impact principal retention.

Research Question

1. Is there a relationship between the internal and external promotion of principals and principal retention in the state of Georgia when controlling for potential covariates?

Literature Review

To gain insight and understand the relationship between the internal and external promotion of school principals and principal retention, this review of literature provides background on current succession planning practices, promotion types (i.e., internal and external promotion), and studies of principal retention. Additionally, the literature review explores a theoretical framework to support the relationship between hiring type and principal retention while underpinning this study’s conceptual framework.

Internal and External Promotion

Typically, there are two recruitment pools of candidates within school systems; internal and external (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Carlson (1961) asserts that choosing leader candidates from outside the school system would alter what already exists, and by contrast, leader candidates from within the organization stabilize existing structures. Regarding the organization’s health, both internal and external recruitment strategies have their own sets of strengths and weaknesses. Some school districts recruit exclusively internally, others solely recruit externally, and many utilize both strategies (Lee & Keiffer, 2003; Winter et al., 2002). The paucity of research regarding principal succession and hiring practices warrants an investigation of current succession planning practices, internal and external recruitment, and principal turnover factors.

Succession Planning in Education

Evidence of structured succession plans with components of a well-designed management development system is rare in school districts (Hartle & Thomas, 2003; Tucker & Codding, 2002). The field of education has been slower to embrace succession planning, creating an absence of measures to ensure a sustainable culture. Likewise, Zepeda et al. (2012) contend that principals’ rapid turnover (i.e., four years or less) results in adverse negative effects on student achievement and school culture. Through the early identification of potential candidates who are provided training, supplied with valuable feedback, and given job-specific experiences, an approach involving planned continuity can be beneficial to effect the change needed to turn around failing schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). However, Hargreaves and Fink
(2006) stated that most school succession cases are unplanned, and there is little regard for whether the change will bring continuity or discontinuity.

Although comprehensive succession planning may be absent in many school districts, school districts view certain succession practices and leadership development strategies as more prevalent (Brundrett et al., 2006). School systems implement initiatives such as leadership development programs, coaching, and the creation of executive principal positions to increase applicant pools of qualified future leaders (Hargreaves & Fink, 2011). While examining factors associated with achieving high retention levels among principals, Peters (2011) suggested the need for dynamic principal succession planning to be an integral part of a school’s improvement plan and part of the district’s expectations.

While a new administration can be a potentially valuable source of renewal, the process of school leadership change may be precarious and problematic. Frequent principal changes could negatively impact a school’s efficacy and prove to be disruptive. As an integral component of a school’s improvement plan, purposeful succession planning can allow school districts to proactively support leadership and continuity, increasing school effectiveness and sustainability.

**Internal Recruitment**

Closely related to the concepts of succession planning within an organization, school systems are looking inward to fill vacancies through internal recruitment strategies (Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985; Schlueter & Walker, 2008; Winter et al., 2002). Goodlad (2004) emphasized the need for an effective strategy for reducing principal turnover by school districts making a concentrated effort to identify employees who possess leadership potential. Many identify this internal recruitment process of candidate identification and hiring of a teacher or assistant principal from within the school or district organization as “tapping.”

When considering long-term leadership sustainability, school systems must consider tapping the best teacher leaders to create a pathway for skilled candidates willing to take on the added responsibilities of a school principal (Fink, 2011). Increasing the supply of successors when teacher perceptions concerning the role of the principal are shifting requires careful planning embedded in a structured support system (Davidson & Taylor, 1999; Kim, 2010; Myung et al., 2011; Rhodes & Brundett, 2005).

Some school districts are discovering a need for more formalized procedures aside from tapping to acquire more quality candidates. A “grow your own” approach that actively recruits internal candidates has become more prevalent nationally, demonstrating success in supplying leadership needs for local school districts (Lee & Keiffer, 2003; Winter et al., 2002). In cooperation with university partners, these “grow your own” preparation programs aim to develop and place candidates within the same school district (Gutmore et al., 2009; Versland, 2013) or combine efforts between school districts and university strategies to build principal pipelines (Gates et al., 2019; Myung et al., 2011). “Grow Your Own” programs may also be more effective solutions to help school districts solve their leadership crises due to the use of internal expertise aligned with school district goals and the cost-effectiveness of retaining talented individuals within the district (Joseph, 2009).

Researchers find evidence of support for the hiring of internal candidates throughout the literature on principal succession. They find that internal candidates are a better choice than external candidates because of the perception of an internal candidate’s ability to minimize organizational transition disruptions and maintain leadership continuity (Carlson, 1961; Hargreaves et al., 2003; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Furthermore, internal candidates are seemingly more entrenched in the community and school culture, enabling them to better manage status changes within social group boundaries while maintaining legitimacy (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Hargreaves 2005; Hargreaves et al., 2003). Buckman et al. (2018) study regarding principals in Georgia indicated that internal applicants were better
positioned for advancement within their school or district than external applicants. Additionally, the study concluded that many factors provide a hiring advantage to internal candidates, including the knowledge and experience specific to district protocols, culture, vision, and goals (Buckman et al., 2017).

**External Recruitment**

Bidwell (2011) defines internal promotion as a move upward within an organization, often resulting in a higher rank, pay, and skill requirements, while the definition of external promotion includes the hiring of a candidate who will be entering the organization (i.e., school district) for the first time. The increased human capital of external candidates provides support for the hiring, affirming that, on average external candidates have higher levels of education and experience than internal candidates (Chan, 1996; DeVaro et al., 2015). Using this line of reasoning in the educational setting, low performing schools would benefit from seeking principal candidates from high performing schools outside the district.

External candidates do not experience the issues associated with the internal promotion process (i.e., insufficient support, social isolation), fostering optimism toward a new role. As such, this assumption links a barrier of internal recruitment to a potential benefit of external recruitment (Acosta, 2010). Although some districts favor the promotion of internal candidates due to their knowledge of school district culture, Normore’s (2004) study involving two large Ontario school districts indicates the need for internal and external promotion.

**Factors that Influence Turnover**

Many factors contribute to principal turnover, with the highest turnover rates among principals serving in schools with low-income, high minority, and low-achieving students (Betelle et al., 2012; Miller, 2013). A growing body of research has examined the relationships between turnover and the principalship identifying likely determinants of turnover within the principal, school, and district (Donley et al., 2019). Though study methods vary, a wide range of factors (i.e., principal, school, and student characteristics) associated with principal turnover have emerged as statistically significant. Thus, understanding why principals leave is essential to developing strategies to increase retention.

Tekleselassie and Choi (2019) found that principal characteristics are related to principal turnover. Their study determined that the odds of principal turnover increased with the principal’s age and decreased with years of experience. Other researchers have identified several principal characteristics that are related to principal turnover, including a principal’s gender, race, age, level of experience, and education (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Donley et al., 2019; Papa, 2007; Rangel, 2018; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2019).

In addition to principal characteristics, several other conditions can influence a principal’s employment decision, including the job’s complexity, school climate, job satisfaction, level of effectiveness, and salary (Levin & Bradley, 2019). The demands of the job’s increased responsibilities and salary have also contributed to principal turnover (Papa, 2005). Likewise, researchers attribute insufficient compensation, stress, and time required to fulfill responsibilities as deterrents to remaining in the role of principal (Pijanowski et al., 2009; Pounder & Merrill, 2001).

Beyond principal demographics, researchers have analyzed school characteristics as a determinant of principal mobility and turnover. Focusing on the relationship between principal turnover and specific school and student characteristics highlights the negative consequences of principal turnover, particularly in schools with high concentrations of poverty and minority students, in addition to failing schools where the leadership turnover rate is one-third higher than at high achieving schools (Betelle et al., 2012). Research points to several school and student characteristics as significant predictors of
principal turnover. School and student level factors supported by research include school performance, school level and size, student achievement, and student socioeconomic status (Baker et al., 2010; Beteille et al., 2012; Fuller et al., 2007; Fuller & Young, 2009; Gates et al., 2006; Ni et al., 2015; Loeb et al., 2010; Papa, 2007; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2019).

Theoretical Perspective

This study utilized three existing human resource development theories to build a conceptual framework for understanding the linkages between internal and external promotion and principal retention. By exploring the characteristics of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Tournament Theory (Lazear & Rosen, 1981), and Organizational Commitment Theory (Meyer & Allen, 1997), one can further understand the potential benefits and challenges to the selection processes of school principals. Specifically, these theories highlight conceptual factors that support the practice of internal promotion which are tested to determine if hiring type impact principal retention.

Becker (1964) theorized the importance of three types of human capital investments (i.e., on-the-job training, schooling, and other knowledge) concerning employee rate of return. These investments in education and preparation through specific skill development with on-the-job training provide a rationale for organizations to invest in their employees, creating potential performance increases. More specifically, in the field of education, Human Capital Theory correlates advancement opportunities experienced by internal candidates, based on professional development and specific training programs, with increased employability and performance.

Tournament Theory describes internal career competitions and resulting wage winnings through promotion in connection to internal investments. Lazear and Rosen (1981) based their theory on employee incentives that encourage employees to work hard and perform well to win the ultimate prize of promotion and wage increases.

Stemming from Becker’s (1960) side-bet theory, Meyer and Allen’s (1997) Organizational Commitment Theory describes how an employee’s degree of dedication and psychological attachment to an organization results in employee retention (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Although the Organizational Commitment Theory has connections to Human Capital Theory through hidden investments as well as Tournament Theory in terms of financial motivation, the affective influence proposed by Meyer and Allen (1997) bases employee retention on more than economic factors.

Whereas the theories of Human Capital, Tournament, and Organizational Commitment all share organizational inputs that result in positive organizational outcomes, they also offer structural suggestions to improve employee retention. Despite each theory’s unique features, all three share an interrelated goal of employment at the foundation of human resources.

Conceptual Framework

The theories mentioned above related to human resource development have shaped the hiring process within organizations and serve as a theoretical framework that one can conceptually model using the internal promotion cycle. In addition to employee retention, researchers have used the theories highlighted in this section in previous research to explain different employee outcomes such as job satisfaction and employee productivity. As such, the proposed conceptual model, built from a multifaceted theoretical foundation, should assist in explaining why or to what extent promotion type (i.e., internal or external) influences principal retention.

By utilizing a conceptual framework that emerges from aspects of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), Tournament Theory (Lazear & Rosen, 1981), and Organizational Commitment Theory (Meyer &
Allen, 1997), this study explores the internal promotion process of school principals. The graphical representation shown below in Figure 1 represents the described process of internal promotion leading to retention by depicting the human resource development cycle of school principals through the interrelated theories of Human Capital, Tournament Theory, and Organizational Commitment Theory. This representation of the hiring process and strengthening of the principal pipeline could lead to leadership retention and positive school outcomes.

**Figure 1**

*Graphical Representation of Conceptual Framework*

![Graphical Representation of Conceptual Framework](image)

**Methodology**

As a notable difference from previous research studies, this study utilized panel level data at the principal level across five years to address the research question regarding the relationship between the internal and external promotion of principals and principal retention in the state of Georgia. The use of panel data is significant due to the abundance of information provided, which captures changes in outcomes relative to changes in predictors as compared to cross-sectional studies that only provide snapshots for a single period in time.

Considering the focus of this study was on the retention of traditional public school principals, the study did not utilize data for principals from other types of schools (i.e., private and charter schools).
Traditionally, these types of schools differ from public schools, and therefore their compensation structures, student demographics, and achievement data likely vary from public school principals in nonrepresentative ways. School-level data obtained included school characteristics such as school level, school type, student achievement, student characteristics (i.e., SES, race), and enrollment.

Procedure

The researchers obtained individual principal data as well as school and district information from 2016 through the 2019 academic years from the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) and the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) to address the focus on first-year public school principals. To acquire the population of first-year principals for the study, the researchers also requested assistant principal data from 2014 from the GaDOE to identify assistant principals who transitioned from assistant principal to principal across the data sets.

According to research by Boyce and Bowers (2016) on the influence of principals on student achievement, their study showed the principal’s effect within schools increases over time. Additionally, effective school leaders need time, usually about five years, to build trust with staff and parents, set a vision for improvement, and hire quality teachers (Miller, 2013). Thus, the research supports the retention metric of five years as minimal and greater than five years as optimal. Using the metric mentioned above, the researcher removed any newly appointed principal who had less than five years of data.

Considering the criteria for inclusion in this study, the researchers identified a total of 230 principals. As a result of lacking school performance data or data errors, which produced missing years of principal level information, the researchers removed 16 principals from the cohort. More interestingly, a significant number of principals disappeared from the data set prior to 2019, and this group of principals resulted in 82 exclusions, which is approximately 38% of the total number of assistant principals promoted to the principalship in 2015. Significantly, this substantial portion of the population depicts a potential lack of leadership stability within schools. However, from the data itself, it cannot be determined if these principals disappeared from the data due to retirement, a form of turnover (e.g., resignation, involuntary termination), or transferred to other positions (e.g., promoted or demoted).

To determine the necessary statistical power needed to address the study’s research question, the researchers applied Cohen’s (1988) a priori power analysis. By considering the number of independent variables, covariates, level of significance, effect size, and power, a power analysis determines the number of participants needed to reduce potential type-1 or type-2 error within a study. For this study involving eleven covariates and one independent variable, a medium effect size ($f^2 = .15$), a level of significance set at ($\alpha = .05$), and the specific power level at ($\beta = .80$), the analysis recommended a minimum of 127 participants. Notably, the population of principals included in the study consisted of 132 principals, and due to the compounded data over five years, there were 660 data points. As such, statistical power would not be a concern in interpreting the results of the analysis.

Variables

Previous researchers have identified and utilized covariates (i.e., control variables) in principal retention studies (Beteille et al., 2012; Fuller & Young, 2009; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). This study also utilized covariates for reducing the probability of Type I and Type II errors (Huck, 2012). Without covariates, misinterpretation of the relationship between the dependent and independent variables could exist, resulting in inaccurate findings.
Covariates

Following an extensive review of the literature, eleven relevant covariates impacting principal retention were identified in this study: 1) age (Fuller & Young, 2009; Rangel, 2018); 2) gender (Baker et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2007; Gates et al., 2006; Rangel, 2018); 3) race (Gates et al., 2006; Oberman, 1996); 4) years of experience (Tran & Buckman, 2017; Podgursky et al., 2016); 5) highest level of education (Baker et al., 2010; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2010); 6) salary (Baker et al., 2010; Tran & Buckman, 2017; Whitaker, 2003); 7) socioeconomic status (SES) (Beteille et al., 2012; Fuller & Young, 2009; Gates et al., 2006; Loeb et al., 2010; Papa, 2007); 8) school size (Baker et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2007; Gates et al., 2006; Ni et al., 2015; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2019); 9) school level (Baker et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2007); 10) student race/ethnicity percentages (Baker et al., 2010; Branch et al., 2008; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Papa, 2007; Podgursky et al., 2016; Yan, 2020); and 11) student achievement (Azaiez & Slate, 2017; Baker et al., 2010; Branch, 2008; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Papa, 2007; Podgursky et al., 2016; Yan, 2020).

The analysis controlled for factors likely to predict principal retention to determine the statistical relationships between internal and external promotion and principal retention. Personal attributes (i.e., age, gender, and race) served as covariates because of the large amount of research documented in empirical literature supporting their relationships with principal turnover (Baker et al., 2010; Fuller & Young, 2009).

Additionally, the study included principal experience and operationalized it as the total number of years an individual principal had worked in any education agency. The total number of years of experience working in any education agency is how school districts report principals’ total experience to the GaDOE.

Professional experience can be a factor connected to principal salary due to the principal’s ability to earn an additional step increase on a traditional fixed-rate salary schedule. In Georgia, according to the public educator salary schedule, districts determine pay using two factors: 1) educational level and 2) years of experience defined by each service year completed (GADOE, 2019). Regarding job stability, researchers have heavily analyzed principal salaries, and the influence of compensation on principal retention is significant (Fuller & Young, 2009). Ordinarily, when a principal earns an advanced degree (e.g., Master’s Degree, Educational Specialist Degree, Doctoral Degree), they will receive an increase in salary (GADOE, 2019).

School characteristics are also a consistent variable used in empirical educational research (Beteille et al., 2012; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Gates et al., 2006; Papa et al., 2005; Taie & Goldring, 2017). Likewise, the school environment has significant effects on principals’ decisions to stay in the profession or transition to a different school, district, or career. Therefore, SES, school size, school type (i.e., elementary, middle, high), student race/ethnicity percentages, and student achievement data help determine the relationship between internal and external promotion and principal retention.

Independent variable

The independent variable manipulated in this study was hiring type, which the researchers identified as either the internal or external promotion of an assistant principal to the role of principal. Internal hires were those assistant principals whom the district promoted within the district where they served as an assistant principal, and external hires were assistant principals hired from outside the school district to the role of principal. As an independent variable, this study identified if hiring type impacted principal retention.
Dependent variable

This study’s dependent variable was principal turnover operationalized by the number of times a principal changed schools during the observation period. The researchers used a logistical regression analysis to determine whether there was a significant relationship between the principal’s hiring type and principal retention.

Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to address the research question and describe the data in this study. The researchers utilized descriptive statistics (i.e., central tendency and frequencies) to summarize and describe the independent, dependent, and control variables. Inferential statistics served to identify the relationship between the independent variable, dependent variable, and all covariates.

Descriptive Statistics

Principal level data collected from the Georgia Department of Education included race (i.e., White, African American/Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, Multi-racial), gender, level of education, and school level. Due to the low response rate of races other than white or black, the researchers categorized race into two groups (i.e., white and non-white). The population of newly hired principals in 2015 included 56.8% females and 43.2% males (see Table 1). While there is a historical trend of males holding the majority of school principal positions (Matthews & Crow, 2003), females accounted for the majority of the principal group, which is consistent with literature concerning gender and females holding the employment majority within the educational workforce (Ellis & Bernhardt, 1992; Moore, 2012; Perie & Baker, 1997).

The researchers operationalized the education level of principals by degrees earned (i.e., Master’s, Specialist’s, or Doctorate). It is important to note that the educational degree percentages reflect 660 data points capturing over five years of data for each participant with the opportunity for principals to earn degrees and change educational levels over time (see Table 1). Likewise, the data representing the school level of present employment by each principal from 2015-2019 was also subject to change over time. Elementary, middle, high, and combined were the four categories used by the researchers to define school level.

To capture hiring type, the researchers identified the participants serving in the role of assistant principal in 2014 and subsequently promoted to a principalship in 2015 and coded them as internally or externally promoted. Internally promoted are those principals hired within the same school district where they worked as assistant principals. Thus, the researchers coded Georgia assistant principals who moved from one district to another to gain employment as a principal as external. In 2015, Georgia school districts predominantly hired first-time principals from within the district where they were currently employed (90.2%, see Table 1).

As shown in Table 1, the researchers captured principal turnover from 2015-2019 using dummy codes to represent the movement of principals between school districts within the state of Georgia. The researchers coded principals that remained at the same school during the given year as “0”, indicating no turnover, while principals who moved to a different school within the same district or to another district within the state of Georgia were coded as “1”, indicating a turnover during the year that the movement took place. Over the five years, 95.9% of principals hired in 2015 exhibited no turnover by either intra-district or inter-district moves (see Table 1).
Table 1

Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies and Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>Specialist</td>
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<td>Turnover</td>
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In addition to personal demographic information, education level, and school level of employment, the study analyzed other individual and workplace information through continuous variables associated with both the individual principal characteristics (i.e., age, years of experience, salary) as well as characteristics of the schools (i.e., SES%, school size, student race, CCRPI) in which the principals worked from 2015-2019.

Principal age ranged from a minimum of 32 to a maximum of 60 years, with years of experience ranging from 0 to 38 years. The total number of years of experience working in an education agency is how school districts report personnel experience to the Georgia Department of Education for salary and certification purposes and define principal experience. Lastly, principals’ annual salaries ranged from a minimum earning of $52,964.00 to a maximum compensation of $153,571.68. It is important to note that these ranges take place over 660 data points and a period of five years (see Table 2). A principal’s salary can increase with years of experience, level of education, and local supplements.

The researchers obtained percentages of socioeconomically disadvantaged students from the reporting of students qualified to receive free and/or reduced-price lunches each year. Vast economic disparities between schools ranged from a minimum of 4% of students to a maximum of 100% of students enrolled in the free/reduced program and categorized as economically disadvantaged. In addition, school
sizes ranged from a minimum enrollment of 97 students to a maximum size of 4,099 students (see Table 2). Furthermore, student race percentages (i.e., white and non-white students) represent a diverse range of school demographics, ranging from 6.9% non-white students to 100%. Finally, College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) scores served as proxies for student achievement, and the GaDOE calculates the indicator using a 100-point scale. The state combines four main components of CCRPI (i.e., achievement, progress, achievement gap, and challenge points) for a total CCRPI score on a scale of 0 to 100, with a possibility of 10 additional points, which accounts for the maximum score (i.e., 110). Student performance scores ranged from a minimum of 29.6% to a maximum of 110%, with an average of 75.35% (see Table 2).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics: Central Tendency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>5.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of experience</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19.65</td>
<td>6.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES %</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>66.175</td>
<td>28.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>52964.00</td>
<td>153571.68</td>
<td>99899.00</td>
<td>141132.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School size</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>4099</td>
<td>868.35</td>
<td>557.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Race</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>63.45</td>
<td>27.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRPI</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>75.35</td>
<td>12.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inferential Statistics

To address the study’s research question (i.e., the relationship between hiring type [i.e., internal or external] and principal retention), the researchers used a random-effects logistical regression mode, entered the variables into the analysis using a simultaneous order of entry (Huck, 2012), and set the minimum level of statistical significance at $p < 0.05$.

The researcher used a logistical regression analysis to analyze the categorical or binary dependent variable, independent variable, and covariates to address the research question. A Hausman Test determined the need for a random-effects or fixed-effects panel data model. The result of the Hausman Test demonstrated no statistically significant differences between the estimators. As such, the researchers used a random-effects model. In terms of statistical assumptions, an accepted variance inflation factor (VIF) of less than 3.0 determined multicollinearity, and no variables in the analyses exceeded this threshold.

When examining the ability of the independent variable and covariates: (hiring type, race, gender, age, degree level, years of experience, salary, SES%, school size, school level, student race, CCRPI) to predict the dependent variable of principal turnover, the analysis found hiring type was not statistically significant (see Table 3). However, the variables of principal race ($b = -26, p \leq 0.01$) and CCRPI scores ($b = -0.36, p \leq 0.05$) did present statistical significance. The race of the principal had a negative slope, indicating that non-white principals were less likely to turnover than white principals. Likewise, the school CCRPI scores (i.e., school achievement) also had a negative slope, indicating that principal turnover decreased as CCRPI scores increased.
Table 3
Random-Effects Logistic Regression Model of Principal Turnover

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coef.</th>
<th>Robust Std. Err.</th>
<th>z</th>
<th>P &gt; [z]</th>
<th>[95% Conf. Interval]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ID</td>
<td>0.0083726</td>
<td>0.0059261</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.158</td>
<td>-0.0032424 to 0.0199876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-25506</td>
<td>0.4710953</td>
<td>-2.66</td>
<td>0.008**</td>
<td>-2.17839 to -0.3317301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.0105147</td>
<td>0.2591818</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.968</td>
<td>-0.4974723 to 0.51850169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.0138414</td>
<td>0.009785</td>
<td>-1.41</td>
<td>0.157</td>
<td>-0.330196 to 0.0053368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree Level</td>
<td>0.2237489</td>
<td>0.4760439</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.638</td>
<td>-0.70928 to 1.56778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>-0.0658592</td>
<td>0.0646794</td>
<td>-1.02</td>
<td>0.309</td>
<td>-0.1926285 to 0.0609102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>-0.0000263</td>
<td>0.0000214</td>
<td>-23</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>-0.0000682 to 0.0000156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES %</td>
<td>-0.0073351</td>
<td>0.0222226</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>0.741</td>
<td>-0.0508905 to 0.0362204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Size</td>
<td>-0.0000585</td>
<td>0.0001947</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td>0.764</td>
<td>-0.00044 to 0.003231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Level</td>
<td>0.8490857</td>
<td>0.4650057</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>-0.0623088 to 1.76048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Race</td>
<td>0.0044496</td>
<td>0.0042112</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.291</td>
<td>-0.0038041 to 0.0127033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCRPI</td>
<td>-0.0357388</td>
<td>0.0170016</td>
<td>-2.10</td>
<td>0.036*</td>
<td>-0.0690613 to -0.0024164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Type</td>
<td>0.5817256</td>
<td>0.9412761</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.537</td>
<td>-2.63142 to 2.426593</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Std. Err. adjusted for 5 clusters in Fiscal Year)
Note.  **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
      * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Sub-Analysis of Removed Participants

Although 132 principals met the criteria (i.e., 2015 promotion, 2015-2019 data) for inclusion in the study cohort, school districts promoted 82 principals in 2015 but disappeared from the dataset before 2019. Overall, the principals included in the sub-analysis displayed similar characteristics with those in the study cohort. The descriptive data, including race, gender, education level, and school level, is comparable with that of the study group.

While the descriptive data of principal characteristics in the sub-analysis mentioned thus far was similar to the panel data used in the research study, the independent variable of hiring type depicts a difference in the sub-analysis group. Internal hires represented 80.5% of the subgroup. With this increase in the percentage of external hires represented in the group of principals who disappeared from the dataset before 2019 (e.g., from 9.9% to 19.5%), these findings suggest externally hired principals have a greater propensity to turnover.
Of the 82 principals in the sub-analysis group, 23.2% turned over after one year in the principalship, 15.9% after two years, 25.6% after three years, and 35.4% after four years. With 38% of the total number of principals hired in 2015 represented in this sub-analysis population and the percentages of turnover each year, this data regarding turnover further substantiates principal stability concerns.

The continuous variables describing individual principal characteristics (i.e., age, years of experience, salary) depict a few noteworthy findings concerning age and salary. Although a principal's salary increases as a result of experience, education, and local school district supplements, the maximum age of 66 as well as the maximum years of experience of 41 are both higher in the subgroup population than those in the study group, which could attribute turnover to retirement. Another difference noted is the minimum salary of the subgroup was higher than that of the study group (i.e., $52,964.00- $66,650.00) while the maximum earnings for the subgroup were lower (i.e., $153,571.68- $127,196.07). This finding could suggest principal movement is associated with the pursuit of higher salaries.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the empirical literature on the practices of internal and external promotion and principal retention by investigating whether there was a significant relationship between hiring type and principal turnover for public school principals in the state of Georgia when controlling for potential covariates. Though the effect of the logistic regression analysis when including the independent variable, hiring type, \( b = .581, p \leq 0.05 \), was not statistically significant, the variables of principal race \( b = -26, p \leq 0.01 \) and CCRPI scores \( b = -.36, p \leq 0.05 \) yielded significance.

The covariate of principal race \( b = -26, p \leq 0.01 \); see Table 3) indicated that non-white principals had higher retention rates than white principals. Research by Oberman (1996) supports a higher turnover rate in white principals, and another study linked principal race with student demographics as a possible reason for decreased turnover among non-white principals (Gates et al., 2006). Further findings suggest that white principals were almost 60% more likely than principals of other races to leave the principalship for a promotion, which could account for the increased turnover among white principals found in this study (Fuller et al., 2007).

The study’s findings also indicated school CCRPI scores were statistically significant \( b = -.36, p \leq 0.05 \); see Table 3), indicating that as CCRPI scores increased, principal turnover decreased. This finding is consistent with numerous previous studies connecting principal movement to low-performing schools (Burkhauser et al., 2012; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Fuller & Young, 2009; Loeb et al., 2010). Likewise, research has linked principal retention to increased academic achievement (Ni et al., 2015). By building organizational capacity through professional learning aligned with the instructional mission and vision of the school district, an organization can establish a belief system and employ tenets of Organizational Commitment Theory (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Though the study did not find hiring type to be statistically significant with principal turnover, the practicality of the findings supports developing internal candidates and promoting internal hiring initiatives to increase the stability of the principal workforce.

Before discussing the implications of the research findings, it is essential to discuss the difference between statistical significance and practical significance. Hypothesis testing accounts for statistical significance, which is strongly related to sample size. Whether the effect has practical importance is an entirely different question, be it significant or not. For this study, it is worth considering if the main findings are practically significant enough to change school district hiring practices.

The sub-analysis of the 82 principals removed from the cohort study revealed a larger percentage of externally hired principals who turned over prior to 2019. In addition, with the absence of statistical significance in the logistic regression, it is worth noting that the coefficient was positive for hiring type (i.e., external promotion), indicating externally promoted principals included in the study were more likely
to turnover than internally promoted principals ($b = .581$; see Table 3). Finding statistical significance of sample data is vital. After all, significant findings indicate the study’s results are likely representative of the population; however, this study using population data as opposed to sample data removes the need for statistical significance because the results display real population trends. Due to the argument raised when analyzing a population versus a sample, this data suggests externally hired principals are at greater risk of turnover. In combination with the sub-analysis, the findings from the study cohort provide strength to the conceptual framework embedded with human resource development theories (i.e., Human Capital Theory, Tournament Theory, and Organizational Commitment Theory) and constructed around the internal promotion cycle.

**Implications**

The job of the school principal has become increasingly complex, evolving into a role where districts require a significant amount of expertise for effectiveness. These factors contribute to leadership complexity and the expectation that principals are now business managers, instructional leaders, community engagement experts, data analysts, and marketers for the school. Even so, the job structure remains the same, and the level of support does not differ from decades past (Fuller & Young, 2009). Findings in this study, developed from examining the data and current literature, are informative to all stakeholders (i.e., aspiring and existing school leadership applicants, district human resources officers, legislators, and researchers) and contribute to the literature on principal hiring and turnover.

By providing quality professional development, leadership preparation programs (i.e., grow your own programs), and school support initiatives, school districts can enhance the principal’s likelihood of retention (Donley et al., 2019). Furthermore, Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) assert the access to internships, mentoring, and preparation programs significantly reduce a principal’s turnover intentions. Such programs that furnish specific preparation to groom principals to work in challenging schools and also offer a continuance of support and development for those principals increase the odds of producing leaders who will remain in those school settings (Davis et al., 2005; Sutcher et al., 2017).

Along with the practical significance of internal promotion, the study identified the variables of principal race and CCRPI scores had a significant relationship with principal retention. Previous studies support the finding regarding principal race, linking principal’s race with the students' race, and higher principal retention (Gates et al., 2006). There is also sufficient evidence in studies pertaining to succession planning to support a “good fit” while increasing diversity among administrators (Greer & Virick, 2008; Jones & Webber, 2001).

School CCRPI scores were statistically significant ($b = -.36, p \leq 0.05$; see Table 3), indicating that as CCRPI scores increased, principal turnover decreased. Researchers have directly linked efforts to uncover motivating factors to become a school administrator to the principal’s desire to impact students' lives and the perceived ability to initiate change (Harris et al., 2000; Moore, 2000; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). School districts could emphasize the ability to initiate effective change or positively impact others by highlighting vision setting, school improvement processes, and efforts in professional development (Hancock et al., 2006). The theory of organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997) supports the idea that establishing common beliefs with potential leadership candidates is a means of motivating positive change while enhancing self-efficacy promotes retention.

A noteworthy finding involving principal salary in the subgroup analysis contributes to a growing knowledge regarding the influence of adequate compensation on employee retention. The maximum salary of the subgroup who left the principalship was lower than the study cohort (i.e., $153,571.68 - $127,196.07), indicating those principals potentially left in search of higher wages. Tran and Buckman (2017) found principals could leverage higher salaries if they moved to positions in other districts.
Conversely, districts limited the principals’ salaries if they remained in the same district, concluding that a principal’s long-term earnings will not differ substantially from their initial earnings if they choose to remain in the same district (Tran & Buckman, 2017).

Also, Hancock et al. (2006) conclude that increased compensation, positional advancement, and enhanced prestige or status were significant in attracting potential candidates to the principalship. With the increase in compensation, school districts could incentivize highly effective principals to move to high-need schools by providing increased decision-making autonomy, allowing strong leaders to bring their teams, and allocating resources toward targeted professional development.

Stressful working conditions, inadequate job incentives, ineffective hiring practices, and perhaps unreasonable expectations for success are deterring prospective candidates from entering the field of educational administration. Strategies focusing on adding more certified people to the principal pipeline through the expansion of training programs or increasing internal recruitment and mentoring programs will not completely solve the leadership challenge. Although hiring agents often tout efforts to attract the best possible candidates, district leaders should explore improving working conditions and providing adequate incentives as methods to improve retention (Mitang, 2003).

**Limitations**

With the communication of the study findings, there is also an interpretation of the study’s limitations. The primary limitation of this study is the researchers’ exclusion of 16 principals from the cohort due to an absence of school data. While these 16 participants may not have had a critical impact on the study, their inclusion could have contributed to the findings and impacted the results. Also, the researchers’ limited the study’s population to principals in the state of Georgia who were first-year principals in 2015 and tracked through 2019. Acknowledging that data errors could have changed the outcome of the findings, with 132 participants, the population was sufficient to yield adequate results, and therefore those excluded principals were not part of the turnover conversation.

Another limitation of similar studies is the variance in variable definition. Researchers can operationally define variables differently, yielding different data outcomes. For example, the use of CCRPI data to define school performance rather than other specific content (i.e., reading or math proficiency scores) data or coding turnover as a dichotomous variable are discretionary decisions of the researcher and hence subject to differing results.

An additional factor is the existence of an “unwritten” school district policy for internal hiring. Without awareness of which school districts employ internal recruitment strategies, the full understanding of how hiring type impacts principal retention limits a study. Non-monetary strategies employed by school systems (i.e., leadership academies, mentoring, professional development) build attachments to the organization fostering organizational commitment. However, the researchers could not control individuals who left the principalship resulting in their removal from the data set; therefore, this study focused on decisions made about those that remained in the dataset.

Since the primary finding of this study was unable to establish statistical significance, grounds for future research could include the differentiation between voluntary and involuntary turnover by capturing turnover differently. As such, the focus of this study was on the position of principal and did not track or account for turnover into other school district positions, which would include district promotions to roles other than school principal (e.g., directors, assistant superintendents) that researchers could document and influence findings. Insight concerning why one chooses to leave the principalship could lead to future research on the types of turnover, creating a better understanding of the decisions surrounding principal movement while also impacting the prevention of principal turnover within school districts.
Conclusion

This body of research intended to add to the limited empirical literature regarding the relationship between hiring practices of school principals and principal retention. Principal turnover continues to be a significant problem facing district leaders and public policymakers. Likewise, the impact of the principal on the school environment is substantial, and the need for well-qualified principals committed to leading today’s schools will continue. While this study did not indicate a statistically significant relationship between the hiring type of Georgia principals from 2015 and principal turnover, it is important to note that 90.2% of the principals in the study cohort were internal hires, and 95.9% of those principals had no turnover during the five years from 2015-2019.

In line with previous research, the analysis of these findings supports formal succession planning and internal leadership development practices. Principal turnover is a complex issue combining the need to understand organizational leadership, systems, change, and human motivation. It is further complicated by a profession under intense pressure to reform with even more intense pressures to succeed. District leaders can enhance the future of education by providing current school leaders and future school leaders ongoing support, competitive compensation, and a job structure that allows them more time to focus on school and district goals and priorities. Most importantly, these efforts may also result in keeping effective principals at their current schools.
References


Fuller, E. J., & Young, M. D. (2009). *Tenure and retention of newly hired principals in Texas*. Austin, TX: University Council for Educational Administration, Department of Educational Administration, University of Texas at Austin.


Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. ASCD.


