

New Measures of Teacher Turnover Can Reveal Underlying Chronic Staffing Problems in School

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher quality is one of the most important predictors of students' educational and professional outcomes. But student success can be undermined by teacher turnover. Teacher turnover is particularly high in high-poverty urban schools, with some losing up to one-half of their staff in a single year. The authors term this chronic teacher turnover as instability.

Staff instability can be a significant drain on limited school resources because school leaders must perpetually search for, hire, and train new teachers. Staff instability can also lead to the loss of experienced and effective teachers and disrupt existing social ties and networks of support, leading to the loss of institutional knowledge. This instability can cripple school functioning and prevent improvement, which then can negatively impact student achievement.

Researchers and policymakers commonly measure teacher turnover using an annual turnover rate. While this measure can be helpful in flagging schools that have experienced recent staffing churn, it does not describe whether schools may be suffering from temporary (or even healthy) turnover or whether they have struggled with deeper turnover problems for years. Long-term measures, by contrast, help illuminate the nuances—and severity—of the turnover problems that schools face over time.

This brief describes a typology of teacher turnover measures and illustrates them with findings from ten years of administrative data in Texas. Measures include both those currently in use as well as new ones developed by the authors. These measures explain different ways in which staff instability can negatively affect schools. They can also help identify schools that suffer from particularly severe staff shortages.

KEY FINDINGS

- > Five long-term measures of teacher turnover were conceptualized: chronic instability, cumulative instability, instability entry and exit, “spell” of instability, and episodes of instability (*see figure*).
- > Across all measures, high-poverty and high-minority schools had higher rates of turnover compared with low-poverty and low-minority schools.
 - > The starkest differences were found in turnover rates were between schools that were rated “unacceptable” versus those rated “exemplary” by the state accountability system.
- > Rural schools experienced the highest rates of chronic instability, or high annual turnover for seven or more years (out of ten).
- > Schools that were high-minority, high-poverty, and rated “unacceptable” were more likely to enter into period of instability and were more likely to struggle to re-stabilize.
 - > High-poverty and high-minority schools experienced longer spells of instability, whereas low-poverty and low-minority schools experienced shorter spells of high turnover.
 - > Schools rated “unacceptable” experienced much longer spells of instability.
- > Schools with the highest rates of instability over time (highest chronic and/or cumulative rates; highest number of instability episodes; longest instability spells) have higher concentrations of low-income and minority students.
- > Schools with high concentrations of low-income and minority students also experienced multiple forms of instability with longer duration.

SHORT- AND LONG-TERM MEASURES OF TEACHER TURNOVER

Measure	Definition	Purpose	Key Findings
Short-term measure of turnover			
Annual turnover	Measured by the proportion of staff in year (t-1) who left the school by year t	Identify the proportion of teachers who leave from the end of one school year to the next	Annual turnover rates in Texas averaged just over 20% over the 10-year data period. Rates were higher for high-poverty schools and those serving large proportions of underserved minorities.
Long-term measures of turnover			
Chronic instability	High" annual turnover, measured both by absolute and relative rates, for a certain number or percentage of years in a given period of years	Identify schools that perpetually struggle with high turnover	Over 60% of schools experienced at least one year of high absolute turnover; 4.4% of schools lost 30% or more of their teachers each year for 7 or more years. High-poverty schools had chronic instability rates that were 2-4 times higher than low-poverty schools.
Cumulative instability	Proportion of staff lost over time (e.g., 20% each year, totaling 60% of original staff in 3 years)	Identify the schools that lose the majority of their staff over time and those that lose few staff over time	On average schools in Texas lost nearly 60% of their original staff after five years. High-poverty, high-minority schools, and schools with low accountability ratings had higher cumulative teacher loss.
Instability entry and exit	Low turnover one year but move into high turnover status another year or vice versa	Identify the schools that are more likely to fall into or recover from a period of high turnover	13% of schools became high turnover (unstable) schools in any given two-year period. Very high-poverty schools twice as often become unstable if they were not unstable the year before, as compared with low-poverty schools. Of schools that were unstable, 55% became relatively more stable the next year.
"Spell" of instability	The number of consecutive years schools experience high turnover	Identify the average length of time that it takes for schools to stabilize once they experience high turnover	On average, schools that experience high turnover tended to be in that status just over two years. High-poverty and high-minority schools experienced somewhat longer spells of instability compared to low-poverty and low-minority schools.
Episodes of instability	"High turnover" status temporarily (e.g., two or more consecutive years of turnover) but return to stability	Identify schools that experience relatively short bouts of high turnover	The majority of schools (65% to 74%, depending on the measure) experienced no episodes of instability. High-poverty and high-minority schools experienced more episodes than low-poverty or low-minority schools.

This figure¹ defines short- and long-term measures of teacher turnover in schools. When the authors applied their long-term measures to Texas data, they found deep inequities across schools in the state.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The authors' findings from Texas indicate concerning losses of human capital across all schools over time and particularly troubling disparities in turnover patterns for schools serving low-income and minority students. While the schools struggling most with teacher retention are those most in need of improvement, constant churn can potentially make sustained improvement more difficult. Identifying which schools experience different types of instability may generate more targeted policy solutions. Policymakers and school leaders are urged to consider the following interventions: target scarce funds to the relatively small number of schools experiencing the greatest instability over time; target support to schools that experience chronic instability because these situations require distinct policy remedies; and report different types of turnover rates in accountability reports in order for parents and the public to better understand how their campus is affected by turnover.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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REFERENCE

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