



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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Wisconsin Schools Seeing Limited Leadership Turnover So Far Amid Pandemic

School leadership is diversifying, but not at a pace that matches Wisconsin's student population

Amid the turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wisconsin did not see a spike in school principals and superintendents leaving their jobs going into the 2020-21 school year, but the turnover that is occurring is disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable students, according to a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report.

The report offers evidence that Wisconsin may, thus far, have averted a significant exodus of leadership from its K-12 school systems as it faced an unprecedented challenge of educating children during a global pandemic. It remains to be seen whether schools will maintain this stability as the full impact of the pandemic continues to unfold.

Leadership turnover that did occur had a greater impact on schools with high-risk student populations. These schools also experienced disproportionately high levels of principal and superintendent turnover in the preceding years.

Meanwhile, the state's school principal and superintendent workforce has diversified since 2009, with some gains for leaders of color and notable gains for women in both positions. Yet, with the exception of female principals, persistent gaps in overall representation remain.

Research indicates school principals have a tremendous impact on student learning, perhaps second only to teachers among school-based factors. While some principal transitions may bring benefits, research also suggests they negatively affect student achievement and teacher retention in the short term, disrupting and destabilizing relationships, initiatives, and routines. Research pertaining to superintendents is somewhat less conclusive, yet most would agree they help establish the direction of a school district – and that their transitions cost districts in both money and stability.

Historical turnover on par with national average

Data from the state Department of Public Instruction show that 17.6% of Wisconsin public schools experienced a principal transition each year on average between 2009 and 2021, similar to the national average. In the same time span, 16.2% of school districts experienced a superintendent transition each year on average, which also tracks with available national estimates.

Notably, the report found Wisconsin students who were most likely to experience elevated levels of principal and superintendent turnover were from demographic groups already at risk due to other factors, including students of color and students from low-income households, or who were educated in urban, very small, or very large settings. These turnover rates may have exacerbated racial and economic achievement gaps in the state.

Looking at 2021 alone, data show that Wisconsin principal turnover entering the 2020-21 school year was at its lowest level in more than a decade. Superintendent turnover going into the 2020-21 school year was slightly elevated above the average for 2009 through 2021 but also decreased from the previous year.

Leadership more diverse but still lags students

[Research indicates](#) that racial diversity among school staff is important for students, particularly those of color, as well as in successful recruitment and retention of teachers of color.

We find Wisconsin's superintendent and principal workforce has slowly become more diverse, although not to the extent of its 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.

Leaders of color have also gained ground but face greater gaps. In 2009, 1.2% of superintendent positions and 7.7% of principal positions were occupied by people of color. By 2021, the number of superintendents of color had quadrupled but still only amounted to 4.6% 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, neither set of leaders is representative of their students.

Examining turnover causes and taking action

The good news is that the currently available data do not show a pandemic-related increase in leadership turnover rates. Some practitioners and policy observers have noted early warning signs, however, that turnovers may now be on the rise. Complete turnover data for the 2021-22 school year are not yet available.

To the extent that high rates of principal and superintendent turnover are occurring in some districts, their leaders may find it beneficial to determine the reasons behind it and, as appropriate, take action. Options may include establishing networks of support, providing high-quality professional learning opportunities, 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.

As our state's schools navigate and recover from the harm and instability wrought by COVID-19, strategies to retain effective leaders and mitigate the impact of leadership transitions on students will become even more critical.

[Click here to read the full report: "Follow the Leaders: Recent Trends in Wisconsin's Principal and Superintendent Turnover."](#)

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