



Preventing Principal Turnover From Squashing Equity-Based Reforms



Succession planning is a norm in the business world.

In K-12 education, not so much: School and district leader hiring is often reactive and last-minute, leading to the disruptive disappearance of key initiatives each time a leader walks out the door. This approach disproportionately impacts schools that serve low-income families and students of color, according to a [2019 Learning Policy Institute report](#).

“Overall, the relationships between school and student characteristics and a principal’s likelihood of leaving are much stronger than relationships between principals’ personal characteristics and principal turnover,” the report notes.

The most robust evidence from the studies reviewed indicate that schools with higher percentages of students from low-income families, students of color, and low-performing students are more likely to experience principal turnover. The root of the problem, however, may be the school characteristics—such

as low levels of resources, less competitive salaries, and problematic working conditions—that are often concurrent with student disadvantage.

In a recent [article](#) in the peer-reviewed journal *Frontiers in Education*, NEPC Fellow [Terrenda White](#), along with [Monica Obregon](#), [Alison Fox Resnick](#) and [Caitlin Farrell](#)—all of the University of Colorado Boulder—propose a solution that may be especially important for schools that serve historically marginalized communities: equity-based succession planning. The model is similar to more traditional approaches, only it more clearly prioritizes community engagement and equity-oriented leadership.

The model aims to reduce turnover and minimize disruptions to operational continuity. It also incorporates equity-based and community-relevant approaches that can help address the resource and working condition challenges that are more common in higher-turnover schools that serve lower-income communities. Without succession planning, such initiatives may abruptly end each time a new principal is hired.

Here’s how equity-based succession planning differs from more traditional approaches.

1. Forecasting

Traditional models: Anticipate vacancies by preparing people to assume roles.

Equity-centered models: Also redefine who is seen as “leadership material” by, for instance, recognizing the value of lived experience and cultural knowledge. Draw upon sources of information such as community input and equity audits.

2. Retention

Traditional models: Provide professional development and mentoring for leaders.

Equity-centered models: Add training and mentoring that includes culturally responsive, antiracist approaches. The focus shifts from the individual to the group (e.g., professional learning communities

consisting of peers) to recognize the emotional wear and tear that equity-focused leaders often face, especially when they are people of color.

3. Transitions

Traditional models: Carried out via internal administrative processes, often behind closed doors.

Equity-centered models: Transitions are participatory and involve the community. For instance, the transition might include a period in which departing leaders work with their replacements to familiarize them with the neighborhood, introduce them to community stakeholders, and explain ongoing equity-based initiatives. The focus is not just operational continuity; it is also a means of embedding equity-based approaches in the school's DNA so they do not live and die based on the preferences of individual leaders.

“Ultimately, this approach envisions succession planning as a means of continuously cultivating leaders who are not only effective administrators but also stewards of the communities they serve, reinforcing the school's role as a hub of cultural, social, and relational capital,” the researchers conclude.

NEPC Resources on School Leadership and Management

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