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More than Meets the Eye: Rural Principal Turnover and Job-Embeddedness before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic

David E. DeMatthews[a], Josh Childs[b], David Knight[c], Paul Cruz[b], and Kimberly Clarida[a]

[a]Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA; [b]Department of Educational Leadership and Policy, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, USA; [c]Department of Educational Foundations Leadership and Policy, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

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Principals play a critical role in improving schools, but high rates of principal turnover threaten improvement gains. In this study we used a mixed-methods design to examine school, district, and community factors associated with greater principal turnover, and explore how these factors differ for rural schools. We found that rural districts tend to have more first year principals, fewer veteran principals, and higher rates of principal attrition in comparison to their urban and suburban peers. We found that voluntary turnover is not always attributed to school and district working conditions, but also personal and community factors specific to a principal.

Introduction

Principals play a critical role in creating schools that meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students (DeMatthews, 2018; Grissom et al., 2021). Yet, increasingly high rates of principal turnover threaten school improvement gains during a principal's tenure. In 2015–16, almost one in five principals left their position and only about half remain at the same school by their third year (Goldring & Taie, 2018). Principals serving in low-income communities of color in both rural and urban areas were even more likely to leave their jobs (Grissom & Bartenen, 2019). Most research has relied on large state-level datasets to identify characteristics of principal turnover and the impact principal turnover can have on teacher turnover, teacher quality, and student achievement (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Bartanen, 2020; Beckett, 2021; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Grissom et al., 2017; Tekleselassie & Choi, 2021; for a review see, Rangel, 2018). Despite growing attention on principal turnover, relatively little is known about the following question: Why do principals voluntarily leave? Moreover, most scholarship focused on principal turnover examines urban or suburban districts and does not focus sufficient attention on rural districts and how their unique context (e.g., proximity to a city, student enrollment, and size) can impact retention and turnover.

A lack of insight into the personal, organizational, and community factors that drive rural principals to voluntarily exit their campuses is needed to inform retention policies. The COVID-19 pandemic may prompt more principals to voluntarily leave their campuses given increases in workload expectations and uncertainty (Collie, 2021; Weiner et al., 2021). In this study, we aim to examine principal turnover in Texas by district type (rural, urban, suburban) and voluntary principal turnover in 10 rural districts before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We focus on rural school contexts because principal turnover has been reported as a challenge in rural locales (Pendola & Fuller, 2018, 2021), but also because many aspects of rural school leadership have been relatively ignored in the literature (Johnson et al., 2014; Lavalley, 2018). Moreover, nearly one in five students live in rural areas (Showalter et al., 2019). Our study is anchored by two guiding research questions

CONTACT David E. DeMatthews ddematthews@austin.utexas.edu University of Texas at Austin, 1912 Speedway D5400, Austin, TX 78712

- What are the rates of principal turnover across urban, suburban, and rural contexts in Texas?
- What are the factors that rural superintendents attribute to principal retention and voluntary turnover?

The first question can only provide insights into turnover rates by district type, but not into voluntary turnover factors. Our second question focuses on rural superintendent perceptions of principal retention and voluntary turnover

We recognize that readers may initially question the selection of superintendents rather than principals for interviews. We considered interviewing current principals, but we recognized they could offer limited insights into why principals leave because: (1) they had not already left their current district or might not be forthright about their plans; and (2) they may not be privy to confidential non-voluntary personnel decisions that impact their peers' placements. Veteran superintendents could speak to the multiple personnel moves across their districts over numerous years. The COVID-19 pandemic also led many districts to eliminate studies that take time away from school personnel and in particular principals, but superintendents were not precluded from making decisions about their own participation in research (DeMatthews et al, 2020). Moreover, superintendents in rural districts are key informants because they are involved in human resource work and wear the hats of manager, planner, listener, communicator, and community-involvement coordinator (Copeland, 2013). Researchers have previously established that rural superintendents can offer unique insights into principal labor market dynamics (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009).

In the balance of this article, we provide an overview of principal turnover literature and a theoretical framework drawing upon the construct of job-embeddedness to understand employee retention and voluntary turnover. We then describe our mixed-methods approach, the use of publicly available principal data, and how we selected superintendents for participation. Next, we present findings outlining principal turnover trends in Texas and throughout urban, rural, and suburban districts. We also present findings from superintendent interviews to identify factors that promote principal retention and voluntary turnover. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of key findings and recommendations for policy and future research.

Theoretical Framework

Voluntary principal turnover is a critical topic in the field of educational leadership, and one tied to both the unique individual identity of a principal and the organizational and community context in which they live and work. To understand the drivers of principal retention and voluntary turnover in rural contexts specifically, we briefly review principal turnover literature to include broad insights and limitations. Next, we describe the construct of "job embeddedness" which helps to explain why employees choose to leave or stay. Finally, we review relevant literature on rural schools and school leadership because our use of job-embeddedness as a construct acknowledges that community and organizational factors influence voluntary turnover.

Principal Turnover

Among all U.S. public school principals in the 2015–16 school year, approximately 82% remained at the same school in the next year, 6% moved to a different school, and 10% left the principalship (Goldring & Taie, 2018). Only about half of newly hired principals stay at the same school for more than four years (Weinstein et al., 2009). Principal turnover broadly includes instances when a principal exits. An exit can be prompted by the district through termination, a transfer to a different school in the same district, or a promotion or demotion. Since principals have fewer protections relative to teachers, they are often more likely to be moved by a district than a teacher. An exit can also be voluntary and prompted by the principal, which include retirement, a requested transfer within the district to another school, a move to another school in a new district,

a promotion within or outside of the district, or a decision to exit the profession entirely. Research focused on principal turnover primarily utilize longitudinal administrative data to track changes in principals' employment status and placement over time (e.g., DeMatthews et al., 2021; Grissom & Bartenen, 2019), but these studies often cannot discern between voluntary and in-voluntary turnover and ignore individual reasons for voluntary turnover. For example, most studies do not provide insights into whether principals were unsatisfied with their jobs, if they were demoted, if a transfer was forced or voluntary, or if the principal decided to move because a spouse received a job offer in another region. Moreover, principals may opt to move for multiple reasons in combination. We have not identified studies focused specifically on principal-reported exit reasons because most turnover research is quantitative. Qualitative studies examining these topics would be labor-intensive and costly due to the need to track down and interview principals who left a campus, district, or the profession.

Some assumptions can be made about "why principals leave" because turnover is unevenly distributed across schools (Rangel, 2018). Turnover rates are elevated in schools that serve higher proportions of low-income students, students of color, and English learner (EL) students (Clotfelter et al., 2006; Gates et al., 2006; Loeb et al., 2010; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Podgursky et al., 2016). These findings may mean principals prefer working in schools that serve more affluent and White students, but it could also speak to the types of places inexperienced principals begin their careers or how workloads and job-related stress differ across contexts. For example, Fuller et al. (2007) found that Texas principals in schools where more than 50% of students were classified as "economically disadvantaged" were 16% less likely to stay at their campus after three years in comparison to principals at schools with fewer "economically disadvantaged" students. Another analysis of Texas data revealed that schools with more "economically disadvantaged" students were more likely to lose principals rated either the lowest or highest on measures of effectiveness, suggesting a "push and pull effect" (Branch et al., 2009). Several studies have also found principals with relatively low salaries can be lured to nearby districts that offer higher salaries (Baker et al., 2010; Cullen & Mazzeo, 2007; Pendola, 2021). Principal turnover has also been attributed to strenuous working conditions accompanied with little to no support or professional development, high-stakes accountability pressures, and lack of authority (Levin & Bradley, 2019). These studies highlight that principal turnover is more complicated than simply tracking where principals move because principal experience, workload, and salaries are not distributed equally among all schools and districts.

Researchers have also found varying rates of rural principal turnover in comparison to suburban and urban districts (Chaplin Partlow & Ridenour, 2008). One study reported that Chicago principals were less likely to change schools or leave public education in comparison to rural and suburban principals in Illinois (DeAngelis & White, 2011). Urban principals in North Carolina were 32% more likely to leave education and 31% more likely to change schools than rural principals (Gates et al., 2006). Suburban principals in Utah were 59% more likely to stay in their positions than rural principals (Ni et al., 2015). Grissom and Bartenen (2019) found that urban and rural principals turnover rates in Tennessee were about the same. Podgursky et al. (2016) found that Wisconsin principals in non-urban schools were more likely to leave their school from one year to the next than principals in urban school. A more recent study in Wisconsin highlighted that most rural districts have adequate pools to fill principal job-openings, although rural remote districts and high-poverty districts are more likely to struggle replacing principals (Yang et al., 2021). These studies highlight the diversity of rural contexts and raise questions about how state and regional factors influence voluntary principal turnover.

Why principals voluntarily choose to leave or stay is complex and requires greater attention. Researchers who can gain insight into these complexities can provide important policy recommendations that may have an important impact on schools because principal departures often follow a decrease in student achievement for multiple years (Miller, 2013). Principal turnover is also associated with higher rates of teacher turnover, which help to explain lower student achievement in

future years (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Béteille et al., 2012). Given the importance of limiting voluntary principal turnover, we turn our attention to research focused on job attitudes, job satisfaction, and job-embeddedness to understand the multiple of factors that influence principal voluntary exits.

Job Embeddedness

Researchers have been very interested in answering the question: *Why do people leave their jobs?* Job attitudes and job satisfaction have long been found to predict voluntary turnover, especially when the job market presents multiple job alternatives (Farrell & Rusbult, 1981). The longstanding explanation of voluntary turnover is that it is driven by employee attitudes: an employee becomes dissatisfied, searches for alternatives, draws comparisons between job alternatives, and determines which option best meets their needs and current situation (Mobley, 1977). Many attitudinal constructs have been developed to measure job satisfaction, including perceived organizational support (Allen et al., 2003), burnout (Leiter et al., 2009), perceptions of justice (Aquino et al., 1997), and occupational commitment (Weng & McElroy, 2012). These constructs have predictive value, although the links to turnover are consistently weak (Maertz & Griffeth, 2004). In many cases, individuals with negative attitudes who job search and have job alternatives do not leave (Campion, 1991). As a result of the predictive limitations of job satisfaction, some researchers have investigated non-work factors. For example, family attachments and conflicts between work and family roles were often better predictors of turnover than one's job satisfaction and commitment to an organization (Lee & Maurer, 1999). Work groups and certain projects can also induce attachment that decrease voluntary turnover (Cohen & Bailey, 1997). Also, people who voluntarily leave their jobs may do so even if they are satisfied with their jobs and without searching for other jobs if they experience a "shock" event, such as a spouse receiving a job in a new location or needing to help a sick family member (Lee & Maurer, 1999).

Job embeddedness embodies a wider set of influences that impact voluntary turnover beyond job satisfaction. Job embeddedness has been described as "a net or a web in which an individual can become stuck" (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). Mitchell et al. (2001) identified three critical aspects to job embeddedness: (1) Links: the linkages that the employee has with their coworkers and/or work activities; (2) Fit: the degree to which an employee's job and community are similar or fit with other aspects of their lives; and (3) Sacrifice: the ease with which links can be broken if the employee left. Links, fit, and sacrifice are not only associated with an employee's organization, but also with their community and personal life circumstances. Mitchell et al. (2001) describe job embeddedness using a six-dimension, three-by-two matrix. Links are formal and informal connections between the employee and their job and community. Fit represents an employee's comfort in their job and community. Sacrifice is the employee's perceived cost of material and psychological benefits for leaving a job.

In a meta-analytic review drawing from 65 independent studies, Jiang et al. (2012) found that job-embeddedness is negatively related to turnover intentions and actual turnover after controlling for traditional explanations for turnover (e.g., job attitudes/satisfaction, job alternatives). However, their review also concluded that job embeddedness is more predictive of turnover in certain contexts than others, which highlights a need for more research in diverse fields across different contexts. Job embeddedness may be increased through long-term career development plans as well as community activities, such as volunteering or housing subsidies for desirable neighborhoods, to build both job and community embeddedness (Ramesh & Gelfand, 2010). Job-embeddedness continues to be a widely utilized construct to examine on and off the job influences of voluntary turnover across various work settings (Burrows et al., 2021; Fasbender et al., 2019; Porter et al., 2019; see, Lee et al., 2014 for a review). Several studies have utilized job embeddedness as a construct to examine teacher retention (Shibiti, 2019; Watson & Olson-Buchanan, 2016), but research on principal turnover has rarely considered influences on voluntary turnover generally or personal factors that exist beyond the

workplace. Rural schools and communities offer a unique opportunity to further explore job embeddedness and voluntary principal turnover given the contextual diversity and persistent challenges with principal retention.

Rural Schools and School Leadership

Contextualizing Rural Schools

Rural does not have one consistent definition nor are the schools, students, and communities that make up these areas monolithic. In the broadest sense, rural has been defined as a space that is not an urban area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) created a school locale classification system which outlined three rural subcategories: fringe, distant, and remote. Rural areas classified as fringe are at most 5 miles from an urban area and 2.5 miles from an urban cluster. Remote rural areas are more than 25 miles from urban areas and 10 miles from urban clusters. Distant rural areas fall within fringe and remote boundaries (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Rural schools in some states may be close to metropolitan areas but in other states rural districts can be more isolated. For example, roughly 80% of schools in South Dakota are in rural areas compared to just 6.5% in Massachusetts (Johnson et al., 2014).

The median enrollment for rural districts is only 494 students, but in Montana, North Dakota, and Vermont more than 90% of districts have fewer than 494 students (Lavalley, 2018). In other states, rural districts are made up of multiple communities and can serve several thousand students across many schools. Rural school demographics have become more racially diverse over the past 20 years (Kebede et al., 2021). White students make up roughly 72% of the rural student population while Hispanic (12%), Black (9%), Asian (1%) and American Indian/Alaska Native (2%) make up more than a quarter of rural school enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Some states have high proportions of students of color attending rural schools (e.g., New Mexico 85%; Alaska, 45%; Lavalley, 2018). As Showalter et al. (2019) noted, rural has many faces, "from remote Native American lands in the West, to small towns in the Great Plains and Midwest, to the Mississippi Delta and Southern 'Black Belt,' to Appalachia and New England" (p. 2). Rural academic performance varies by state and some states and districts perform well below or above national averages. Typically, rural students outperform their urban peers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and in graduation rates while underperforming relative to suburban students (Lavalley, 2018).

Each rural district and school are unique, but many confront common challenges. Students in rural schools often lag behind suburban peers in achievement, access to advanced placement (AP) courses, graduation rates, and college access (Lavalley, 2018). They also report higher levels of inexperienced and ineffective teachers relative to suburban schools (Player, 2015), and often confront difficulty recruiting and retaining particular teacher groups, including science (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012) and special education teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019). Perhaps, this is because many rural areas have a shrinking population, particularly as decades of disinvestment prompted rural people to seek education or employment in urban spaces (Maselli et al., 2020). Physical distance from universities and professional consultants limit access to student-teachers, new teacher recruits, and high-quality professional development opportunities (Goldhaber et al., 2021; Johnson & Howley, 2015). Rural districts may lack adequate resources, particularly in locales where students are geographically dispersed, transportation costs are high, and students have limited access to broadband internet and devices (Johnson et al., 2014; Lavalley, 2018). Yet, many rural schools benefit from smaller class sizes, a greater sense of student and family belonging, higher rates of school-family engagement, and access to extracurricular activities (Croft & Moore, 2019; McShane & Smarick, 2018).

Rural Principals

The construct of job-embeddedness suggests that links, fit, and sacrifice across an organization and community are important factors influencing voluntary turnover. These factors can be applied to rural principals and their work and personal lives. Rural schools have been described as "multifaceted,

place-conscious, and relationship-dependent" because principals are often asked to closely manage the multiple (and sometimes) competing priorities of students, families, teachers, school boards and superintendent, and state policymakers (Preston et al., 2013, p. 7). The place-conscious nature of rural schools can have implications for why some principals might choose to apply or avoid and stay or exit quickly. Commonly identified leadership challenges in rural contexts may also explain instances of voluntary turnover. Preston et al. (2013) identified five common challenges confronting rural schools: (a) personal history and community focus; (b) role diversity; (c) lack of professional development and resources; (d) gender discrimination, and (e) high stakes accountability pressures.

Personal history and community focus can translate into factors that influence principals' decisions to enter and exit a rural school based on their perceived fit with a community and school. Principals are often viewed with suspicion in rural contexts when they are perceived as "outsiders" and do not share social, political, or cultural familiarity with their school communities (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; 2012). Principals raised in a community where they work often report a deeper appreciation of a community's values, priorities, and culture, which in turn enables them to "fit better" and be more strategic when dealing with community tensions (Foster & Goddard, 2003; Lock et al., 2012). Rural principals have reported beliefs that their personal and historic ties to a local community provided them with an advantage in obtaining their jobs (Montgomery, 2010; Schuman, 2010). Not surprisingly, rural superintendents have reported placing high value on the ability of principals to understand and fit into the social, cultural, and political context of a local community (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009), which in turn can influence their recruitment and retention efforts.

Organizational factors that influence decisions to enter or exit can be related to the job's expectations and roles. Rural principals often assume a wider range of roles relative to their urban and suburban peers, including teacher, instructional coach, assessment coordinator, community volunteer, and parent of a student enrolled in the school/district among many others (Canales et al., 2008; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). They can be called upon to work across multiple schools or be responsible for a PreK-12 campus. The small size of schools/districts, resource shortages, and a lack of additional administrative support can dictate that principals play the role of receptionist and assistant principal (Bard et al., 2006). Limited budgets and high parental expectations may also place principals in the constant role of recruiting new teachers due to high turnover and constantly responding to families.

Gender discrimination in hiring can also be a factor in shaping the rural principal population. Several studies have highlighted that women are less likely to be hired as principals in rural contexts and that women may feel a need to move to a larger community or city for career advancement opportunities (Hollingworth & Dude, 2009; Schuman, 2010). Limited professional development and resources are organizational factors that may also influence voluntary turnover, especially if the impact of limited resources does not build linkages, a sense of fit, and decrease the sacrifice necessary to opt for another job. Rural principals may enter schools unprepared and lack access to professional development to grow into their roles (Cortez-Jiminez, 2012). Due to additional demands in many rural schools, principals may need in-depth knowledge of financial management (Williams & Nierengarten, 2011; Williams et al., 2009) and insight into serving EL students in contexts where demographics are shifting rapidly (Lock et al., 2012). The context of high-stakes accountability further challenges rural principals already short-staffed and managing multiple challenges. Limited training and a lack of administrative capacity can make it difficult for rural principals to effectively and consistently engage in instructional leadership practices that support student achievement (Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Canales et al., 2008).

Close principal-community ties can make balancing personal/family time with work responsibilities difficult, especially in smaller communities (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). If principals feel they have strong external bonds with community members in a small town setting they may be more likely to stay, however, if they feel they cannot escape being in the role of principal in their community even when they want to spend personal/family time outside of that role, they may seek to move. In sum, the

job-embeddedness construct provides a useful framework for examining how principals relate to their school and community context across rural environments and how links, fit, and sacrifice can influence principals' decisions to stay or leave.

Methods

In this study, we used a mixed-methods design which, in our case, involved analyzing quantitative data first and then exploring the implications of the quantitative data with interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In the first phase, we examined school, district, and community factors associated with greater principal turnover, and explored how these factors differ for rural schools. The second qualitative phase was conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative phase to understand voluntary turnover of principals in 10 rural school districts. Below, we further outline the methods of this study.

Quantitative Data and Methods

For this study's first research question, we draw on school-level statewide longitudinal datasets from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) that include all public K-12 schools from school years 2017–18 to 2019–20. The data include information about each school's student demographics, enrollment classifications, and test score performance, teacher staffing and average experience levels, and the number of years the current principal has served in their role and in past principal roles. Because the TEA includes information about principal experience at their current school (school "tenure"), and we observe schools for multiple years, we can track principal turnover over time.[1] Because we measure principal turnover by observing principal tenure in the following school year, we can only measure principal turnover in 2017–18 and 2018–19 (we use data from 2019–20 to determine principal mobility in the year prior, so 2019–20 is not part of our analytic sample). The final analytic dataset includes 25,674 principal-year observations, for school years 2017–18 and 2018–19. We merge these data with school and district-level data from NCES, which include information about district urbanicity, neighborhood poverty rates, and the local cost of labor.

To assess factors associated with principal turnover, particularly with respect to rural and urban schools, we first present summary statistics of principal turnover disaggregated by urbanicity. We then estimate logistic regressions of whether a principal will leave their school at the end of the current year (Y_{sdt}), based on principal, school, district, and community factors. We estimate the following model, indexing for school s, district d, and year t:

$$Y_{sdt}=\beta_0+\beta_1 S_{sdt}+\beta_2 D_{dt}+\theta_t+\varepsilon_{sdt}$$

where S includes the following principal and school level covariates: current principal tenure in the school, grade level (elementary, middle, high, or alternative/other), log enrollment, percent of students classified as low-income, percent of students classified as English learners, percent of students receiving special education services, mean enrollment, and school level. The vector D includes the following district and community factors: whether the district is categorized as urban, suburban, or rural, child poverty rate within the district's residential boundaries, district size, and local cost of labor, estimated from the average salaries of college-educated non-educators in the local region (see on Taylor, 2006). We include these factors because prior studies show they each influence educator turnover (e.g., Rangel, 2018). θ_t represents year fixed effects and ε_{sdt} is an error term. To explore how factors associated with principal turnover differ in rural districts, we fit separate models for each urbanicity category. In alternate models, we exchange our main outcome measure, whether a principal leaves their school, with overall principal tenure at the school. All regressions are weighted by school enrollment so that larger schools contribute more to the estimated coefficients.

Qualitative

Qualitative data collection occurred during the fall semester of the 2020–21 school year. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, we conducted 10 interviews which ranged from 35 to 70 minutes with the average interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. Follow up e-mails were sent to participants to clarify and follow up on interviews. E-Mails were used rather than an additional interview given the significant time commitments and stress associated with district leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and the initiation of high-stakes testing in the spring semester. All interviews were audio and video recorded on Zoom and transcribed.

Data were coded using Dedoose software in multiple phases. First, we read interview data several times and organized data by superintendent/district. The initial coding phase involved low-inference codes derived from our literature review (e.g., community context, district policy, recruitment/retention initiatives, school improvement status of district campuses). Next, we reviewed these codes and wrote analytic memos to facilitate our understandings and engage in a critical discussion. Afterward, we looked to identify common and unique aspects of each district context related to principal burnout, which led to the generation of a group of more refined codes (principal-community matching, district resources and opportunities, regional principal labor markets, unique principal characteristics). This coding process allowed us to identify the many different reasons why superintendents believed principals worked in their districts as well as factors that promoted retention and turnover. Finally, we applied a member checking strategy to validate findings by discussing our findings with a group of Texas principals and superintendents who did not participate in the study. In addition, each participant was given access to their interview transcript and the final manuscript to provide feedback and comments. The minimal feedback provided was used to improve the final manuscript.

Setting and Selection

In Texas, where our study is situated, there are over 900,000 rural students across more than 450 rural districts (Texas Education Agency, 2014). Students of color make up 45% of the rural student population (Lavalley, 2018). Rural districts in Texas are defined as districts that do not meet the criteria of the "other" classifications. TEA also states that rural districts either have "(a) an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate over the past five years of less than 20%; or (b) an enrollment of less than 300 students" (Texas Education Agency, 2014). Superintendents were recruited from a broad set of Texas-defined rural districts aligned to the findings from the quantitative component of the study. Specifically, we sought rural districts with the following attributes: (1) a superintendent with at least 2 years of experience in their current role located in a rural district; (2) a mixture of rural district types (fringe, distant, and remote); and (3) higher or lower than average principal retention. To recruit superintendents who met these criteria we started with a previously-established network of rural superintendents. The first ten participants that met these criteria and agreed to participate were interviewed. Three of the ten superintendents selected for this study worked in schools classified as *Small City, Large City*, or *Midsize Suburban* according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which was a classification used in our quantitative analysis. However, these designations did not accurately represent all schools within the district. All superintendents had multiple schools within their districts classified by NCES as rural. For example, Edwards ISD was classified as a *Large City* but had multiple rural schools and served communities more than 35 miles away from an urbanized area that lacked access to broadband internet. Thus, all superintendents were responsible for hiring and retain principals in rural schools. Table 1 provides demographics for each district. The districts range in size from 553 students (Jones ISD) to 10,829 (Bucks ISD).

Table 1. Study participants and district characteristics.

			Stu. demog. and characteristics						
Participant	Race/ Sex	District (num. of schools)	Bl	La	Wh	FRL	EL	Avg. prin. tenure	NCES district type
A. Qualitative sample									
Callahan	B/M	Jones ISD (2)	49%	22%	20%	92%	9%	5.0	Tn.-Remote
Lions	W/M	Vanders ISD (4)	0%	95%	4%	90%	7%	9.0	Tn.-Remote
Vela	H/F	Bucks ISD (15)	8%	85%	4%	88%	43%	4.4	Rural-Fringe
Rincones	H/F	New Ark ISD (7)	10%	70%	17%	78%	34%	4.0	Rural-Fringe
Saenz	H/M	Timber ISD (9)	3%	78%	18%	71%	29%	4.1	Town-Fringe
Cortez	H/M	Kogan CISD (15)	0%	97%	3%	79%	19%	6.0	Midsz. Sub.
Reyes	H/M	Vista ISD (7)	1%	97%	2%	87%	4%	4.8	Town-Fringe
Burton	W/M	Kotok ISD (6)	0%	42%	55%	64%	19%	5.4	Rural-Fringe
White	W/M	Howard ISD (17)	26%	45%	22%	76%	13%	3.8	Small City
Paloma	H/M	Edwards ISD (5)	8%	88%	3%	90%	8%	7.0	Large City
B. Statewide school demographics									
Urban	–	–	15%	63%	16%	71%	26%	5.5	–
Suburban	–	–	15%	47%	28%	56%	21%	5.5	–
Town	–	–	8%	53%	36%	68%	13%	4.7	–
Rural	–	–	5%	36%	55%	56%	9%	4.5	–

Bl = Black, La = Latinx, Wh = White, FRL = free/reduced price lunch, an indicator of student poverty, and EL = English learner. The Texas Education Agency classifies Kogan as a Consolidated Independent School District and all other districts in this table as an Independent School District. Student information and principal tenure are based on Texas Education Agency data from 2019–20. Avg. prin. tenure refers to the average number of years principals have served in their current school, as of the 2019–20 school year.

Findings

Quantitative Findings: Principal Turnover Across Geographies

Quantitative findings are organized into two sections. We first provide a summary of descriptive statistics of principal turnover across schools and geographic locales in Texas. We then describe results of regression analyses highlighting factors associated with principal turnover.

Principal Turnover across Urban, Suburban, and Rural Schools

Table 2 shows summary statistics for all schools in our sample, disaggregated into three groups, based on the number of years the current principal has served at the school: first year (21% of all school-year observations), 2nd-9th year (63%), or 10th or greater year (16%, "veteran principals"). Overall, students classified as low-income and who identify as Black disproportionately attend schools with first year principals. As shown in the final column of Table 2, compared to schools with veteran principals, schools with first-year principals have a higher percent of low-income students (4.7 percentage points), students in special education (0.7 percentage points), and students who identify as Black (2.6 percentage points), while schools with veteran principals have fewer English learners and fewer students who identify as Asian.

Table 2. Summary statistics by principal tenure in their current school, 2017–18 to 2018–19.

	All	Tenure at current school			Difference between 1st and 10th+ year
		1st year	2nd-9th	10th +	
A. Sample size					
School-year observations	25,674	5,405	16,137	4,132	–
	100%	21%	63%	16%	–
Mean student enrollment	630	495	653	716	–
B. Student classifications and race/ethnicity (%)					
Student classifications					
Free/red. price lunch	64%	66%	63%	61%	4.7%*
English learner	19%	19%	19%	21%	−2.1%*
Special education	11%	11%	10%	11%	0.7%*
Student race/ethnicity					
Am. Ind./Indig.	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%
Asian	3%	2%	3%	4%	−2.1%*
Black	12%	14%	12%	11%	2.6%*
Latinx	52%	52%	52%	52%	−0.7%
Pac. Islander	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%
White	30%	30%	30%	29%	0.2%
Two or more	2%	2%	2%	2%	−0.1%

Free/red. price lunch refers to students classified as low-income. Am. Ind./Indig. refers to student who identity as American Indian or Indigenous. Column 1 in Panel C sums to 100% vertically whereas in columns 2, 3, and 4, rows sum to 100%. District urbanicity variables and student race/ethnicity percentages sum to 100% vertically.
*$p < .050$.

Figure 1 displays summary statistics for principal turnover across schools in urban, suburban, town, and rural districts. Urban districts have between 14% and 16% principal turnover rates, depending on whether the district is further categorized as a large, midsize, or small urban district. Principal turnover for schools in suburban districts falls roughly within this range; midsize suburban districts have 17% turnover and small suburban districts have just over 10%. For schools in town and rural districts, principal turnover is generally higher, ranging from 18% up to 25%, depending on whether the district is categorized as fringe, distant, or remote.

Figure 2 shows distribution plots highlighting differences across the same geographic locales, this time combining rural and town into rural. The dashed gray line indicates urban schools, the dashed black line indicates suburban schools, and the solid gray line indicates rural schools. Panel A shows the

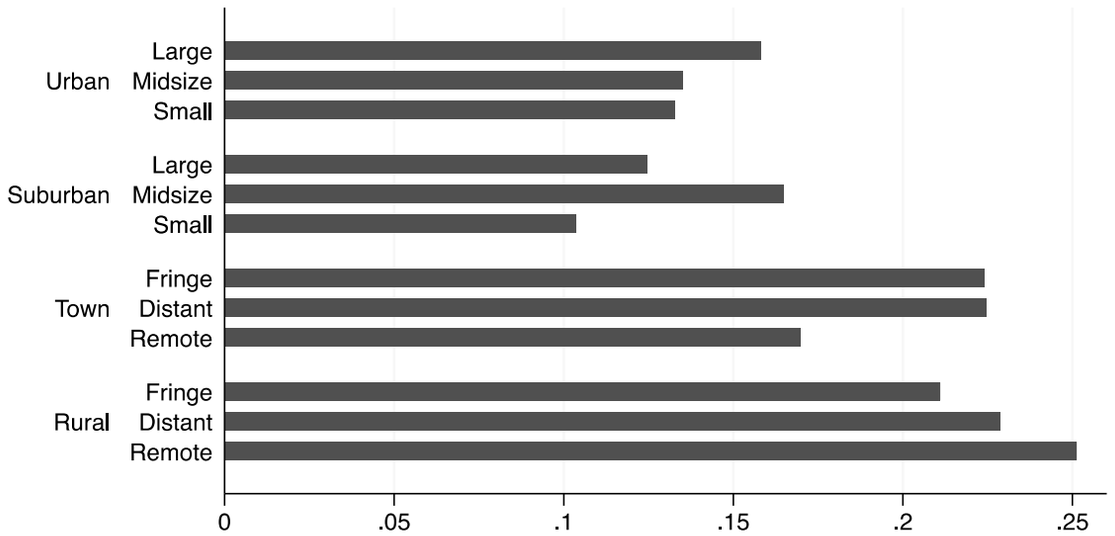

Figure 1. Percent of principals leaving their school at the end of the year, by locale, 2017–18 to 2018–19. Averages are weighted by student enrollment. The overall weighted average principal turnover is 15.7% and the unweighted average is 20.2% (in our sample, smaller schools have higher principal turnover rates). The sample includes 16,835 school-year observations (8,610 unique schools) including 6,661, 4,515, 2,078, and 3,581 school-year observations in urban, suburban, town, and rural districts, respectively.

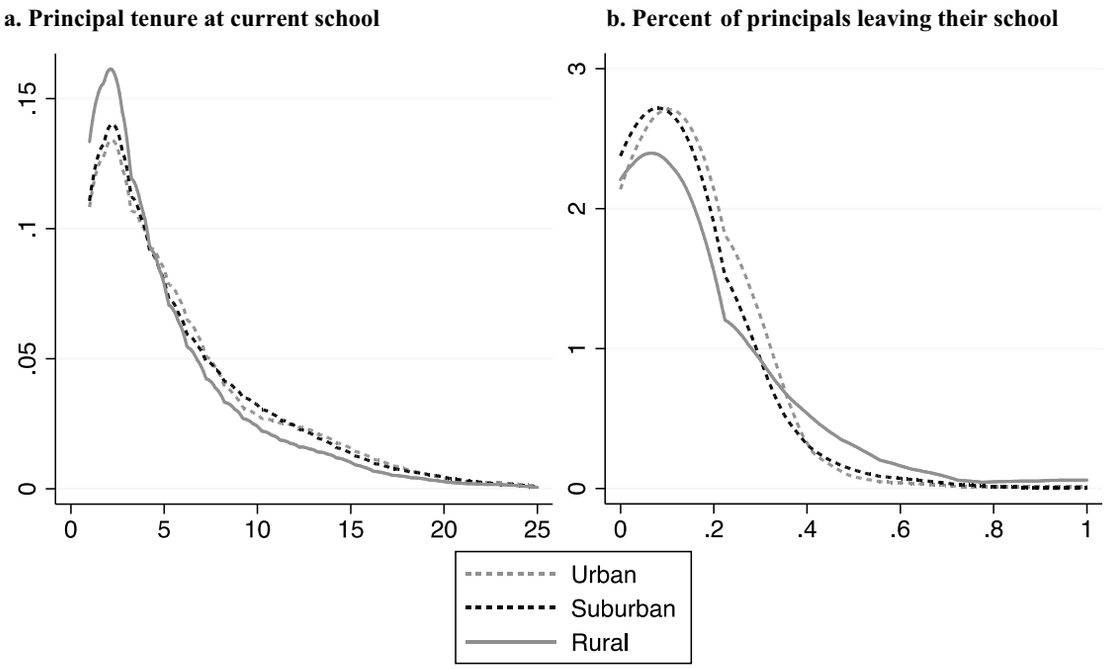

Figure 2. Distribution of average principal tenure and the percent of principals in a district leaving their school, three-year average, Texas elementary, middle, and high schools, 2017–18 to 2019–20. (a). Principal tenure at current school. (b). Percent of principals leaving their school. Figure 2 shows distributions of kernel density (Epanechnikov kernel function). Panel A includes 25,674 school-year observations from 2017–18 to 2019–20 (8,781 unique schools), with equal weight to each school-year observation, which includes 97.5% of all schools included in the Texas Academic Performance Reports data system (about 2.5% of schools each year do not report principal tenure or do not have a full time principal at the time of data collection, Texas Education Agency, 2020). Panel B uses data from 2017–18 to 2019–20, but we do not observe principal turnover in the final year of data, so exit rates are based on 2017–18 and 2018–19 data, which include 2,397 district-year observations and 1,204 unique districts, weighted by district enrollment.

distribution of principal tenure at the principal's current school. Across all regions, the average principal is in their fifth year in their current school, but almost half of all schools (48%) have a principal with three or fewer years of experience. As shown in Panel A, rural schools have a disproportionately greater share of principals with three or fewer years at their schools (demonstrated by the higher peak for the rural, solid gray line).[2] Urban and suburban schools are relatively more likely than rural schools to have a principal in their 10th or greater year at the school.

Panel B of Figure 2 shows the average principal turnover rate across districts, again disaggregated by locale. On average, 17.4% of a district's principals leave their school each year, but rural districts tend to have a higher percent of schools with a principal exiting (20.1%, compared to 17.3% and 15.4% for urban and suburban districts, respectively).[3] While some degree of principal turnover may be manageable and even beneficial, districts that lose over half their principal workforce in a given year may face unique challenges. As demonstrated by the wider tail of the distribution in Panel B, a greater share of schools in rural districts lose at least half their principals (14%), compared to urban (2%) and suburban districts (1%). These figures are shown in Table 3, which provides greater context for the types of districts experiencing high principal turnover. The key takeaway from Figures 1 and 2 and Tables 2 and 3 is that high principal turnover is a problem in districts across urban, suburban, and rural settings, but the phenomenon is more severe among rural districts.

Factors Related to Principal Turnover

Table 4 shows regression coefficients for factors related to principal turnover. We fit regressions separately for elementary, middle, and high schools, to show how principal turnover in rural contexts differs at each level. For each school level, we first include models with principal factors and district urbanicity (odd numbered columns) and then add student covariates (even numbered columns), which allows us to directly assess how principal turnover differs within rural districts, with and without accounting for student demographics. The constant, shown toward the bottom of the table,

Table 3. Summary statistics by district average principal turnover, 2018–19.

		Principal exit rate			
	All	< 10%	10% to 24%	25% to 49%	> 50%
A. Sample size					
Districts	1,199	540	164	233	262
Mean district enrollment	4,528	2,714	16,662	4,239	930
Students	5,429,554	1,465,689	2,732,577	987,693	243,595
Percent of students	100%	27%	50%	18%	4%
B. District urbanicity					
Urban	43%	16%	62%	19%	2%
Suburban	34%	37%	51%	11%	1%
Town	10%	28%	30%	29%	13%
Rural	13%	36%	24%	26%	15%

In Panel B, the first column sums to 100%, but for columns 2 through 5, rows sum to 100%.

Table 4. Regression coefficients predicting the likelihood a principal leaves their school at the end of the school year, by school level, 2017–18 to 2018–19.

	Elementary		Middle		High school	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
A. Principal factors						
First year principal	0.031*	0.024+	0.000	−0.002	0.034+	0.031
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.020)
2nd – 5th year	0.003	0.001	0.009	0.008	0.017	0.016
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.015)	(0.015)
6th – 9th year (ref. is 10th+)	0.006	0.007	0.013	0.01	0.014	0.011
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Had prior exper. as principal	0.035+	0.031+	0.038	0.036	0.007	0.007
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Years of prior experience	−0.001	0.000	−0.001	−0.001	0.004	0.004
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.003)	(0.003)
B. School Community and District factors						
Suburban	−0.022*	−0.011	0.005	0.006	−0.004	0.000
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Town	0.017	0.011	0.060*	0.060*	0.040*	0.048*
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.020)	(0.021)
Rural (ref. is urban)	0.043***	0.048***	0.025	0.028	0.060**	0.066***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.019)	(0.020)
Log enrollment	−0.052***	−0.048***	−0.066***	−0.066***	−0.059***	−0.060***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.008)	(0.008)
% low-income		0.076***		0.023		−0.03
		(0.019)		(0.038)		(0.031)
% EL		−0.069**		−0.005		0.161*
		(0.025)		(0.063)		(0.075)
% SPED		−0.517***		−0.317		0.183
		(0.119)		(0.241)		(0.177)
Constant	0.169***	0.164***	0.189***	0.190***	0.165***	0.180***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.018)	(0.019)
N	9,388	9,388	3,272	3,272	3,210	3,210
R-squ	0.009	0.013	0.015	0.015	0.047	0.049

Student classifications and enrollment are mean-centered, so the constant can be interpreted as the mean principal turnover rate for urban districts with average student characteristics, and a principal in their 10th year who was hired with no prior principal experience.
+p < .10, *p < .050., **p < .010., ***p < .001.

provides a reference point as the turnover rate for urban schools with average student characteristics, and with a principal in their 10th or greater year who entered the school with no prior experience as a principal. Row 1 shows that in elementary schools, principals in their first year at a school as principal are 3.1 percentage points more likely to leave their school compared to principals in their 10th or greater year, and 2.4 percentage point more likely after accounting for student characteristics (model 2). Middle school principals in their first year have similar exit rates as more experienced principals, while high school principals in their first year are 3.4 percentage points more likely to leave

their school compared to high school principals in their 10th or greater year (row 1, column 6). Across all school levels, a principal in their second to ninth year at the school is no more likely to leave their school than a principal in their 10th or later year. Interestingly, elementary school principals who enter their role with prior principal experience from another school are 3.1 to 3.5 percentage points more likely to leave (row 4), while the coefficients for prior principal experience are not statistically significant for middle and high school principals. The number of years of prior principal experience (row 5) is also not related to principal turnover after accounting for the number of years at the current school and whether the principal has any experience as a principal at a prior school.

Panel B of Table 4 shows school community and district factors associated with principal turnover, including our variable of interest, an indicator for rural school district. Elementary school principals in suburban districts are 2.2 percentage points less likely to leave their school compared to those in urban districts. This coefficient is not significant after controlling for student demographics, suggesting that principal turnover is lower in suburban than in urban districts, but similar among suburban and urban districts serving similar student populations. In contrast, we find greater principal turnover in rural districts even among schools serving similar student populations. Elementary school principals in rural districts are 4.8 percentages points more likely to leave their school (model 2). Given the unweighted overall average principal turnover rate of 20.2%, this finding suggests that rural districts have 23.8% greater principal turnover compared to urban districts even after accounting for the principals these districts tend to hire and the students they serve (and even greater turnover compared to suburban districts). At the middle school level, principals in districts categorized as located in a town have 6.0% greater turnover than those in urban districts, while rural principals have 2.8% greater turnover than urban school principals (which is not statistically significant). High school principals in town and rural settings have 4.8% and 6.6% greater turnover than urban high school principals, respectively, while turnover for suburban high school principals is similar to their urban counterparts. In short, Table 4 demonstrates that town and rural districts experience relatively greater principal turnover, especially in the upper grades, and even after accounting for student and principal characteristics.

Table 5 shows how factors related to principal turnover differ for rural principals, compared to those in urban, suburban, or town settings. We start with a model that includes the entire sample, controlling for school level. The next four models are run separately for urban, suburban, town, and rural districts. Within urban districts, several factors are associated with greater principal turnover. First year principals, and principals in alternative schools, smaller schools, and schools serving a greater number of students in special education tend to have greater principal turnover, holding other factors constant. In suburban districts, principal turnover is higher for principals with prior experience as a principal in another school, and among smaller schools and schools serving a greater number of low-income students and fewer English learner students. Interestingly, we do not see similar patterns for town and rural districts, other than school size. Within rural settings, principal turnover is higher for smaller schools, but other principals and school factors are not correlated with principal turnover and our models predict less than 1% of the variation in turnover (based on the r-squared value). Understanding the drivers of principal turnover in rural contexts may thus require a broader set of quantitative variables, or deeper analysis of qualitative data, which we turn to next.

Qualitative Findings: Community Context, District Context, and Personal Factors

In what follows, we present findings organized by community and district context and personal factors. While we tease these three areas apart, in reality, much of these factors were interrelated. Finally, we conclude this section with COVID-19 specific factors that superintendents reported as additional triggers to turnover.

Table 5. Regression coefficients predicting the likelihood a principal leaves their school at the end of the school year, by district urbanicity, 2017–18 to 2018–19.

	All	Urban	Suburban	Town	Rural
A. Principal factors					
First year principal	0.036***	0.056***	−0.018	0.053+	0.030
	(0.009)	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.031)	(0.025)
2nd – 5th year	0.01	0.002	0.004	0.016	0.006
	(0.008)	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.028)	(0.023)
6th – 9th year (ref. is 10th+)	0.011	0.018	−0.011	0.018	0.022
	(0.009)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.032)	(0.026)
Had prior experience as principal	0.021+	0.019	0.049*	0.009	−0.045+
	(0.012)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.032)	(0.025)
Years of prior experience	0.002	0.005	0.000	−0.001	0.004
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.005)	(0.004)
B. School Community and District factors					
Middle school	0.019*	0.013	0.026+	0.051*	−0.006
	(0.008)	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.024)	(0.019)
High school	0.001	−0.004	0.003	0.012	0.005
	(0.009)	(0.015)	(0.020)	(0.025)	(0.018)
Other (ref. = elem)	0.082***	0.169***	0.000	0.017	0.006
	(0.017)	(0.025)	(0.042)	(0.095)	(0.028)
Log enrollment	−0.068***	−0.068***	−0.075***	−0.056***	−0.027*
	(0.005)	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.017)	(0.011)
% low-income	0.045**	0.033	0.067**	0.013	0.026
	(0.014)	(0.022)	(0.025)	(0.066)	(0.040)
% EL	−0.036+	−0.001	−0.090*	−0.010	0.027
	(0.021)	(0.029)	(0.044)	(0.083)	(0.061)
% SPED	−0.324***	−0.399***	−0.106	−0.429	−0.194
	(0.082)	(0.113)	(0.164)	(0.313)	(0.227)
Constant	0.593***	0.588***	0.643***	0.508***	0.386***
	(0.034)	(0.061)	(0.078)	(0.107)	(0.069)
N	16,835	6,661	4,515	2,078	3,581
R-squ	0.025	0.037	0.024	0.011	0.005

Continuous variables are mean-centered, so the constant can be interpreted as the mean principal turnover rate for elementary schools with average student characteristics, and a principal in their 10th year who was hired with no prior principal experience. +p < .10, *p < .050, **p < .010, ***p < .001.

Community Context

The ten superintendents frequently acknowledged that aspects of their community could support retention or prompt voluntary turnover. Each superintendent emphasized the importance of principal "fit" within the community and described a preference for hiring from within their district and current residents. In Howard ISD, Superintendent White found that some principals hired from the outside "didn't know what they were getting themselves into" and had lower expectations of the school community. As a result, outsider principals often left quickly. Principals who had worked for an extended period of time in rural schools or were from the area were more comfortable and could easily engage with families and recognize that the school was a "community hub" and a place where: "Everybody knows everybody and everybody knows everybody's business" (Superintendent Lions).

Beyond community fit, one primary reported cause of voluntary turnover in more remote rural districts was related to stable housing and quality of life. Superintendent Callahan of Jones ISD noted that some principals opt to stay because: "They have built their homes here … they get real comfortable," but also noted that few external high-quality candidates seek positions in the district and those recruited in [the district] often leave when another opportunity presents itself. In Vanders ISD, Superintendent Lions noted, "It's difficult to find people that are willing to move to rural America … We don't even have a Wal-Mart … don't have a movie theater … We do have a Family Dollar and a grocery store with exorbitant prices." He added that the district had to purchase an RV park and an apartment complex because during oil booms housing prices, apartments, and RV spaces made their small community entirely unaffordable for a principal or teacher. Some principals move into the community or commute long distances for their first principalship to gain more

experience, but they often leave when a better job alternative is available. The superintendents of Vanders and Vista reported that a principal's personal and family life can trigger turnover. In more remote districts, if a principal is single, the sparse population can make it difficult to find a partner. If a principal is married, superintendents reported it can be difficult for their spouse to find work.

Superintendents also noted that the ebb and flow of board politics can be disruptive, create uncertainty, and contribute to principal turnover. In Howard ISD, the district had four superintendents over five years before hiring Superintendent White. The superintendent noted that board infighting and contested elections led to short superintendent tenures. Superintendent White said, "When I arrived, we had a 30% principal attrition rate." Howard ISD's turnover rate declined during his tenure as the board became more unified. In Edwards ISD, Superintendent Paloma described previous boards as the "Hatfields and McCoys, always feuding about something."[4] In Vanders ISD, Superintendent Lions explained that "school board politics" and "inappropriate interactions" with principals and teachers contributed to turnover. He noted that a board member may visit a school, demand certain information, or give orders to a principal or teacher, which is inappropriate behavior for a board member. Superintendent Lions also described instances when "teachers . . . related to school board members clique up . . . " against the principal, especially if that principal is trying to make necessary improvements that disrupt the status quo. Several superintendents felt that principals confronting these situations would opt to work in a district that is less political.

Other geographic factors also had implications for principal turnover. For example, Howard ISD was near a large military base. The base brought economic opportunities and potential employees to the district, but as Superintendent White noted, it also meant that a deployment or transfer of a spouse could mean a principal quickly leaves the district. In Vista ISD, Superintendent Reyes's district did not have fracking or oil refining facilities, but several nearby districts financially benefitted from these businesses. Districts with access to oil companies often received additional tax and philanthropic dollars to improve their facilities and pay higher salaries. Thus, Vista ISD was less competitive for principal recruitment and retention and would lose principals to nearby districts. For rural districts on the fringe of large metropolitan areas, like Bucks ISD and New Ark ISD, superintendents reported principals are more likely to stay for several reasons: (1) they can still live in or easily access the amenities of the metropolitan area; (2) they can benefit from a "reverse commute" since most traffic flows into the city in the morning and out of the city in the evening; and (3) the metropolitan area provides a spouse and/or adult child with greater employment opportunities than remote rural areas. Urban/suburban fringe districts might also have to compete with larger urban and suburban districts that have higher principal salaries, more employment opportunities, excellent school facilities, and quality of life amenities. For example, Howard ISD had several nearby districts with similar pay scales that created competition over recruiting and retaining principals. This meant principals could quickly move to another district without moving their families or making very much personal sacrifice.

District Context

Each district's size and resources had potentially positive and negative impacts on turnover. Each superintendent viewed their smaller size as a strength and weakness for principal recruitment and retention. Superintendents reported being able to build relationships with principals and develop a leadership pipeline of teachers and assistant principals that would reduce turnover. In Bucks ISD, Superintendent Vela noted that most principals were "homegrown" because the district was small enough where central office staff could "identify and cultivate talent." Superintendent Rincones in New Ark ISD believed that it was important to "try to grow our own" and given the size of her district, she felt able to identify talented teachers and assistant principals for promotion. Several superintendents felt it was important to bring assistant principals into some of the principal meetings and professional development opportunities to build their capacity so current principals could lean more on them and to promote their development and commitment to the district.

Superintendents also felt smaller districts meant superior communication and healthier relationships among principals. Superintendent Rincones said, "A good cohort of principals adds stability." She recognized that if principals could work together and count on each other for support, they would be more likely to improve and less likely to leave." Several superintendents with experience in urban schools felt larger district principals often competed because they had their schools' outcome data publicly compared, which often pitted principals against each other. For Superintendent Cortez and several others, this type of competition was toxic and could lead to turnover. Superintendent Cortez invested time to ensure his principals worked together rather than viewing themselves as competitors. He said, "Our principals, there's so much harmony within the group. We work together towards a common goal. There's not a principal that tries to outdo the other, and so there's really a brotherhood and sisterhood." Other superintendents called their central office staff and principal group a "family" or a "team" to emphasize their relationships and bonding. One factor the superintendents did not mention was principal race, either in relation to their peers or to their campus communities.

Superintendents commonly believed that principals who were not professionally supported would leave their district either because they would fail in their position and have a lower sense of self-efficacy or would not be inspired sufficiently to do the hard work of the principalship. They shared a common belief that if principals did not grow, they would be unsuccessful and ultimately leave. Thus, each superintendent emphasized continuous learning. The constant focus on growth was a double-edged sword, however, because the encouragement to grow made principals feel supported but also prompted them to desire promotions and new opportunities. Each superintendent noted that small districts had limited opportunity for promotions. Superintendent Saenz stated that the main turnover concern was "where [a principal] might jump ship for a promotion into a central office role." In Vista ISD, the last two instances of voluntary turnover were promotions: one to the district's central office and one to another district's central office. In Kogan ISD, a principal that "grew up in the community" left for a promotion to central office in another district. Still, several superintendents, including Superintendent Vela and Saenz, believed promotions were a good sign because that meant they were supporting their principals' growth which was important for keeping them in the first place.

Personal Factors

The superintendents could not speak to all personal factors that influenced turnover because each principal has their own set of circumstances, which they may or may not openly share. However, the superintendents had been principals and reported having conversations with principals about their personal lives. As previously noted, family often prompted principals to leave their district and campus and had nothing at all to do with the district or job satisfaction. For example, a spouse could be transferred or receive a position in another city, a parent could be sick and living in another region, or the principal's family may want to benefit from the amenities of a large metropolitan area for many reasons. Several superintendents noted that principals who recently received doctorates often felt that they entered a new phase in their careers where it is time to move on. Principals closer to retirement were reported to have more health problems that could trigger a quick or previously unforseen retirement. Beyond these reasons, the superintendents were able to identify a set of feelings that prompted voluntary turnover.

One of the most common work-related voluntary turnover factors superintendents identified was a sense of uncertainty. When principals were not sure what was going to happen in the next school year, they were often stressed and sought other positions. For example, in Howard ISD, as the politics of the school board shifted, the superintendent reported that more principals were likely to check their options rather than wait and see the fate of the current superintendent. In New Ark ISD, Superintendent Rincones was concerned after the district needed to make deep budget cuts, including some campus positions. She noted, "Cutting . . . scaling back . . . that creates some real stress [for principals]." The smaller size of the district meant principals would be impacted by either having to personally lay off staff or by absorbing additional work into their own schedules.

Several superintendents noted that they took special efforts to make principals feel valued and part of the decision-making process to keep them informed, empowered, and reduce a sense of uncertainty about the future. For example, in Kotok ISD, Superintendent Burton believed that principals needed to have both an individual and collective voice in district decision-making. He said principals were "highly involved in district decision-making" partly to make them feel valued and included. In New Ark ISD, the superintendent noted that the district's small size meant that she had ample opportunities to talk with each principal individually and engage with all principals collectively on a regular basis. She noted there was less of a need for "more bureaucratic oversight" of principals and more opportunities for "authentic relationships." In remote rural districts, like Vanders ISD, very close bonds grew between campus and district leaders that supported retention. Superintendent Lions noted, "It becomes lonely [in remote rural areas], and you start not liking it after a while . . . But then your family becomes your school campus staff . . . " He noted that these bonds become very powerful over time. Relatedly, many of the rural campuses have high levels of family engagement. Superintendents in New Ark, Timber, and Vanders noted that their principals often formed bonds with families over time, which made voluntary turnover very difficult emotionally.

Work-related stress was also a factor that superintendents identified as a cause of turnover. In Kotok ISD, Superintendent Burton spoke to the importance of supporting principals' professional development while also deemphasizing standardized test scores. He brought his principals together to study and grow as "culture builders" Culture building also included bringing in assistant principals who were the district's next principals. The rejection of test scores as a primary motivator and the promotion of culture building was driven by Superintendent Burton's belief that it was unnatural and unhealthy to use testing to prioritize school leadership and improvement efforts. He spoke about valuing each principal, teacher, and student, which he believed could not happen through narrowly focusing on testing outcomes. He also recognized that his approach was uncommon and principals would recognize that in other districts the testing performance pressure would be greater. In Kogan ISD, Superintendent Cortez acknowledged the stress of school leadership and put mental health initiatives in place for principals specifically. He noted, "We want to make sure that those who take care of our kids are taken care of."

COVID-19

The superintendents did not report any immediate turnover stemming from COVID-19 but had concerns about the upcoming 2020–21 school year. Personal factors were of the most immediate concern. Several superintendents noted that veteran principals closer to retirement were concerned about their health. As previously noted, health issues could trigger an effective principal to leave their position quickly. COVID-19 made that concern more worrisome. The superintendents in Timber, Vanders, and Howard noted that older principals may retire sooner due to COVID-19. In addition, the superintendents noted that principals with newborn babies were also concerned, especially at a time early in the pandemic where information was limited about the impact of the disease on children.

COVID-19 also increased the workload of principals. The superintendents reported that all principals were working very hard and were stressed. District size and capacity had an impact on principals' workloads because smaller districts had less central office staff to offer schools with support. Principals had to close schools, transition classrooms to distance learning, engage in communication with families and staff, and stay closely connected with their supervisors. They also needed to make sure students had food and access to internet and devices. In Bucks ISD, which was larger than most districts in this study and close to a major metropolitan area, the central office was able to provide significant support in ensuring students received access to internet and devices. The district went as far as building cell towers in remote regions of their district. Superintendent Vela noted that central office staff was able to take a lot of this burden off the backs of principals. Timber ISD, although smaller, was able to collaborate with several businesses to build cell towers. In other districts, principals had to be on the frontlines of providing internet and devices to

students or confronting the reality that many students would be unable to access distance learning curriculum. They worked with the small district staff to offer support as best as possible. Several superintendents noted that the increase in principal workload and their reduced power to positively impact students increased burnout.

The uncertainty of COVID-19 was also a variable that superintendents felt would influence principal turnover moving forward. As data collection concluded for this study, many policymakers and journalists were concerned that the upcoming legislation would have a dramatic negative impact on school funding, leading to substantial cuts. As a result, the superintendents reported that they heard some of their principals were questioning staying in their position and even considering exiting the profession entirely. Four of the ten superintendents also acknowledged that they thought about leaving due to stress and uncertainty. One noted, "I've thought about it [leaving] . . . I'm not sure if it's worth it . . . the stress . . . the workload . . . I think you are going to see an exodus of superintendents next year."

Discussion

Our quantitative analyses show that while many types of districts face high rates of principal turnover, the policy challenge is disproportionately concentrated in rural areas. Yet, the distribution of principal experience is nuanced. Like suburban districts, urban districts have a larger share of veteran teachers, but urban districts also have a larger share first year principals. Rural districts in contrast have more first year principals and fewer veteran principals. Low-income students and Black students are more likely to attend schools with first year principals, while English learner, Latinx, and White students are disproportionately less likely to have a first year principal. High principal turnover in rural districts results in part from characteristics of the rural principal workforce. For example, first year principals are more heavily concentrated in rural schools, and these principals have greater career mobility and are generally more likely to leave their schools. Rural schools also serve a different student population, which may influence principal turnover. Yet, even when we account for these factors in a regression framework, we find higher principal attrition in rural districts, suggesting that other less tangible factors may pose unique challenges for rural district leaders.

In our qualitative analysis, we found that the ten rural districts sometimes struggled to retain effective principals. However, the reasons why principals voluntarily leave are complex and not always attributed to working conditions or other singular factors previously identified in the literature (e.g., student demographics, salary). Instead, superintendents reported that each principal was unique and had a different set of circumstances tied to community, district, and/or personal factors. Table 6 summarizes the community, district, and personal voluntary turnover factors. At the community level, superintendents reported that the specific school type (e.g., high school, elementary), quality of life and cost of living, access to amenities and spousal job opportunities, and community and school board politics could all be potential factors that help to retain or drive principals out of the district. The rural district geographic location was relevant, because some superintendents noted that their principals were able to commute easily from a larger city which meant leaving their district and school community was more difficult than for principals in more remote districts with fewer amenities.

At the district level, the organization's size and promotion opportunities were common factors related to voluntary turnover. Most superintendents reported losing good principals primarily because of a lack of upward promotion opportunities given the small size of their district. Organizational culture was also noted as an important factor for retaining principals. Several superintendents felt it was important that principals had access to high-quality professional development, a supportive culture, and a sense of certainty about the future of the district, which is aligned to prior studies related to job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, and healthy working conditions (Allen et al., 2003; Leiter et al., 2009; Mobley, 1977). Salaries were also brought up as common factors that could cause a principal to leave, although most superintendents noted they made sure salaries were not necessarily optimal, but close to nearby districts. This finding highlights the superintendents' recognition that principals are likely willing to accept making less money if the pay gap is not too large.

Table 6. Community, district, and personal voluntary turnover factors.

Dimension	Factors
Community	• Sense of fit within community • Quality of life factors and amenities • Housing access and affordability • School district and school board politics in personal/social life • Geographic factors (e.g., military base, oil refinery/fracking) • Commuting times
District	• Size (opportunities for transfers and promotions) • Relationships with supervisors, peers, teachers, staff, school board • Perceptions of uncertainty within district • Professional development and growth opportunities • Culture related to competition and accountability
Personal	• Family emergencies (e.g., sick family member) • Family members wanting access to different set of amenities or job opportunities • Relationships with community members • Sense of autonomy and empowerment in role • Desire for promotion opportunities

Personal factors were specific to the personal and professional lives of each individual principal, which has typically been ignored in principal turnover research. The superintendents viewed their principals as people with personal needs, lives, and families. They spoke about their need to have relationships, family connections, and feelings of personal and professional fulfillment. The superintendents also reported how a sick family member, a principal's family's desire for amenities, and professional goals to have autonomy, promotion opportunities, and a sense of empowerment or certainty could drive voluntary turnover decisions. Some of these factors could cause a principal with limited job opportunities and a high level of job satisfaction to still decide to leave. COVID-19 highlighted the degree to which unique personal factors can further drive voluntary turnover, especially when their sense of sacrifice becomes elevated by the risk of severe illness to themselves or family members. Several superintendents noted that a principal's age and years to retirement, family composition and if they had a particularly vulnerable family member, and the increased stress and workload contributed to the potential of voluntary turnover.

Finally, many of the factors we identified were interrelated and were aligned to job embeddedness. For example, we considered a principal with a spouse looking for a job to be a personal factor, but this same factor could be tied to community if the locale had limited access to job opportunities that fit the spouse's preferences. Or, a principal may be dedicated to their job and community, but a spouse in the military may be transferred across the country. The potential for a spouse's job in a far-off locale or in commuting distance also relates to the notion of sacrifice and how much the principal (or a family member) is willing to give up. In a rural remote district, the commute may be too difficult, such as in Kotok ISD. However, in New Ark ISD, which is close to a large metropolitan area, a principal with strong links to the community may feel it is not worth the sacrifice to leave their district if they can commute to or from the large metropolitan area so their spouse can also pursue career opportunities.

Conclusion and Implications

Principal turnover literature has too often failed to capture the complexity of the question: *Why do people leave?* Principals are people with unique preferences and circumstances that help to explain their decisions to leave or stay on a campus. Rural principal turnover has largely been overlooked, although researchers are beginning to shift their attention to this important topic. Additional research is needed to understand how community, district, and personal factors impact principal recruitment, retention, and turnover in diverse contexts so that state and local policymakers and district leaders help principals stay on the job longer. In our study, we selected a diverse set of districts with varying levels of principal tenure. Future studies might seek to identify rural districts with exceptionally high and/or low principal retention to understand contextual dynamics,

approaches to recruitment and retention, and other job-embeddedness factors that influence voluntary turnover. Also, the superintendents in this study humanized their principals and shared that many principals cared deeply about the opportunities available to their families. We strongly encourage future studies that acknowledge the challenges principals confront as they seek to raise families and balance work-family priorities.

This study also has important implications for policy. State policymakers require information on factors that influence rural principal turnover, especially since many states have made investments into building urban principal pipelines. Our study makes clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to increasing rural principal retention is unlikely to have a significant impact. The factors that drive rural turnover can be quite different relative to some urban and suburban districts, but a set of incentives or policies might support retention, such as housing vouchers in remote areas, added commuting expenses, or spousal hire programs that can increase the level of sacrifice for a principal exit. Policymakers would also be wise to recognize that turnover challenges are mediated by context. They should also recognize the importance of teacher stability and create similar types of retention policies for rural teachers. Teacher turnover can contribute to principal burnout, especially if principals are forced to spend significant time and effort on recruiting and training new teachers each year. The constant churn can make the principal feel like their efforts are not leading to sustainable improvements, which in turn can contribute to a sense of uncertainty and limited control over the future. In addition, high rates of teacher turnover do not enable principals to form tight links with their teachers, which can make voluntary turnover less of a personal sacrifice. In sum, we believe our study highlights that no singular policy can fully address rural principal turnover challenges, but we hope that policymakers and researchers recognize the challenges of rural principal turnover are context-specific and develop retention policies that acknowledge that principals are people who make job decisions based on a myriad of factors, including what is best for their families and personal relationships.

Notes

1. In the Texas Education Agency school-level data, a school's principal tenure increases by one each year. When principal tenure in any year is equal to one (indicating a principal in their first year in that school), we assume that school had a principal exit in the prior year. We exclude newly opened schools from the sample.
2. While 48% of all schools have a principals with three or fewer years at their schools, 53% of rural schools have principals with three or fewer years, compared to 44% and 45% in urban and suburban schools, respectively.
3. We weighted all district-level averages and figures by student enrollment so that larger districts contribute more to the overall mean. Thus, this mean exit rate for rural districts, when weighted by student enrollment, is interpreted as the principal turnover rate that the average student in an urban, suburban, or rural district experiences (rather than the simple average across districts).
4. The Hatfield-McCoy feud occurring during the 1800s and involved two rural families in West Virginia and Kentucky. The feud has become part of American folklore depicting a bitter and violent rivalry.

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ORCID

David Knight http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4067-155X

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