

Principal Experience and Texas Elementary School Accountability Ratings: A Statewide Investigation

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Abstract

In this statewide, multiyear analysis, the extent to which differences were present in school accountability ratings of elementary schools by principal experience was determined. Specifically examined was the relationship of principals' years of experience and the accountability ratings of elementary schools in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years. Inferential statistical analyses revealed the presence of statistically significant differences in school accountability ratings as a function of the principals' years of experience. In every instance, schools that were led by Inexperienced or Moderately Experienced principals were outperformed by schools led by Experienced principals. Considering the growing numbers of principals who are leaving the profession and the greater emphasis on meeting state and federal accountability measures, these findings are of great concern. Implications of these findings and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords: accountability status, inexperienced, moderately experienced, experienced, elementary schools, Texas, STAAR

1. Introduction

The role of the school principal is very complex, often poorly defined from school district to school district and even from school campus to school campus. In fact, the principal's role has expanded to include more instructionally focused duties (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016; Neumerski, Grissom, Drake, Rubin). With the beginnings of No Child Left Behind Act (2001), the fact that principals were now being held accountable for adequate yearly progress added to the pressures of their position. These increased work demands and accountability requirements resulted in new principals leaving the profession in large numbers, especially in urban school communities (Beteille, Kalogrides & Loeb 2012). More than one fifth of first year principals exited the principalship within two years (School Leaders Network, 2012). Given the increased stresses, many principals have reported a lack of ongoing support and development from their school districts (School Leaders Network, 2012).

Although the link between principal experience and student achievement has been deemed to be indirect in nature, schools that lost a principal after just one year underperformed in the second year (School Leaders Network, 2012). In a recent investigation, Babo and Pastma (2017) examined the influence of principal tenure on student academic performance through an analysis of data from 172 elementary schools in New Jersey. They established the presence of statistically significant relationships between principal tenure and overall student achievement. In a similar study from Georgia, Huff et al. (2011) determined that principal tenure did not have a statistically significant effect on student achievement, but principal experience did have an effect when controlled for other school variables such as student economic status. One of the salient findings from both studies was that school districts needed to hire and retain experienced educators for principal vacancies, taking them from the classrooms where they are more often effective teachers.

Huff et al. (2011) conducted a study in which they examined the relationship of principal tenure, stability, and experience with middle school achievement. In Georgia, public-school districts were facing a tremendous principal shortage. Huff et al. (2011) revealed that principal tenure and stability did not statistically significantly affect middle school achievement. Regarding principal experience, however, student achievement was positively correlated. Schools with lower principal turnover had higher student achievement than those schools that had higher principal turnover.

School districts are making attempts to mitigate the effects of principal turnover by distributing leadership in the schools (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009). Mascall and Leithwood (2010) analyzed responses to a teacher and principal survey as well as achievement data from school campuses. In school campuses and school districts with high principal turnover, Mascall and Leithwood (2010) determined that a distribution of duties mitigated some of the negative consequences of turnover. This distribution of duties was highly influenced by the principal, the existing school culture, and contributed to the overall school improvement efforts. When distribution of leadership was coordinated and implemented, some of the negative consequences of principal turnover appeared to be mitigated. Principals have substantial ownership in the distribution of leadership on their campuses. This burden is often placed on a new principal who is learning the culture and traditions of the campus. One vital activity for the school district must be the provision of guidance and support during principal transition.

With the increasing numbers of principal departures, understanding the reasons for such leadership departures is vital to addressing the problem. Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011), in an analysis of the transitional career behaviors of school principals, examined how individual, school, and the conditions of the workplace influenced intentions to transfer among school principals in the United States. Revealed in the data analyses were several major trends. First, characteristics were identified such as gender, age, salary, and job satisfaction that might have commonly influenced mobility and departure. Mobility was also determined to be strongly related to working in urban areas, work-week hours, and professional development. Schools that had high principal turnover experienced undesirable outcomes such as the inability to grow and sustain improvements and change (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011).

Principal exits were also highly influenced by the sanctions-based accountability measures in the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Public schools were required by this law to make adequate yearly progress in reading and mathematics for all student sub-groups (Mitani, 2018). Schools, along with their principals, faced scrutiny as the results from these assessments were released to the public. Continuous failure led to measures such as a replacement of the staff, state takeover of the school, or even closure. Mitani (2018) determined that the No Child Left Behind Act sanctions were positively associated with principal job stress, turnover rates, and transfer rates. The hope was that the new federal law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, would offer more support for principals. The Every Student Succeeds Act does address leadership retention through funding allocations. Under Title II, Part A, districts can reserve up to 3% of funds to support principals through activities such as coaching or mentoring for school leaders (Grossman & Nagler, 2019).

Another possible factor contributing to principal turnover, according to researchers in California (Young, Young, Okhremtchouk & Castaneda, 2009), was the relationship with principal compensation. Tran (2017) examined this relationship between high school principal pay satisfaction and turnover intentions. Using a pay satisfaction questionnaire, Tran received responses from over 150 high school principals. Congruent with a previous research investigation conducted by Baker, Punswick, and Belt (2010), principals who were not satisfied with their pay were more likely to seek other jobs. This relationship was especially important considering legislation in many states that incentivized principals for student achievement scores rather than longevity. Baker et al. (2010) highlighted the importance of pay as a contributor of principal turnover.

Many principals have reported a lack of ongoing support and development from their school districts (School Leaders Network, 2012). More than one fifth of first year principals left the principalship within two years (School Leaders Network, 2012). Goldring, Taie, and Owens (2014) revealed, in a national sample of private and public-school principals from 2011 to 2012, that 6% of principals moved to a new school and 12% left the principalship altogether. As accountability pressures increased under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), even higher rates of principal departures occurred at campuses that did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (School Leaders Network, 2012). Fullan (2001) revealed that it takes five to seven years for improvement to take hold in a school and principal churn resets the clock on these efforts.

As stated previously, principal tenure affects students from poverty at a higher rate than more affluent communities. The frequency of principal turnover was statistically significantly greater for urban schools with high numbers of students of color students and high levels of poverty (Sturgis, Shiflett & Tanner, 2017). In their study, principals with two or more years of principal experience had a positive influence on student outcomes. Unfortunately, Sturgis et al. (2017) revealed the difficulty of retaining highly effective principals at low-performing schools. Beteille et al. (2012) concluded that many new principals used their first position at a

low-performing school as a stepping-stone to future promotions. Consequently, they recommended hiring experienced principals at low-performing schools rather than hiring first year principals.

In contrast to other researchers, Boyce and Bowers (2016) investigated the extent to which different types, or sub-groups, of principals exited their schools. Using the 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey and the 2008-2009 Principal Follow-up Survey from the National Center for Education Statistics, Boyce and Bowers (2016) explored the factors that influence principal turnover between sub-groups of exiting principals. Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) laid the groundwork for Boyce and Bowers, who discovered some contrasting results. Specifically, when there were culture and climate problems that occurred, this one criterion was a clear factor in distinguishing satisfied and disaffected principals who subsequently exited their schools.

In respect to the effects of poverty on principal turnover, Branch et al. (2013) focused their research on Texas schools and reported that schools with higher percentages of students in poverty were more likely to have first-year principals than schools serving higher percentages of students who were not in poverty. Texas schools with higher percentages of students in poverty were also less likely to have principals at the same school for at least six years than schools with less disadvantaged student populations.

Further adding to the pressures that principal experience, the Texas Education Agency assigns accountability ratings annually to campuses and school districts. These ratings are predominantly based on student performance on standardized tests and graduation rates. Prior to the 2018-2019 school year, schools and school districts had been assigned two accountability labels: *Met Standard* or *Improvement Required*. The *Met Standard* label indicated acceptable performance and the *Improvement Required* label indicated unacceptable performance. During this same time, to receive a Met Standard or Met Alternative Standard rating, a district or campus must have met targets on at least three indices: Index 1 or Index 2 and Index 3 and Index 4. The ratings during the years prior to 2018-2019 school year were in four indices or domains: student achievement, student progress, efforts to close the achievement gap, and postsecondary readiness.

Under House Bill 22 and beginning in the 2018-2019 school years, schools and districts were assigned letter grades, with F representing a school or district under state sanctions. A–F letter grades are described as follows: A = exemplary performance; B = recognized performance; C = acceptable performance; D = performance that needs improvement; F = unacceptable performance. A–F letter grades are to be given for three domains: Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps (TEA Accountability Manual, 2017). Overall A–F letter grade will be calculated as follows: Considers best of Student Achievement or School Progress, unless the district or campus receives an F in either domain, in which case the district or campus may not be assigned a rating higher than a B for the composite for the two domains; The Closing the Gaps domain makes up at least 30% of the overall rating. Districts received an A–F rating beginning in 2018 and campuses began to receive an A–F rating in 2019.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Principal turnover is becoming an increasing problem in the United States and the reasons are multifaceted (Burkhauser et al., 2012; Mitani, 2018). Baby boomer principals have reached retirement age; increased demands for reform based on accountability standards exists; and the expansion of the role of principal includes a demand for instructional leaders more than managers (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). As a result, the responsibilities of principals have changed, and the job has become far more complex than in the past (Harris Interactive, 2012). Examined in several studies (e.g., Babo & Pastma, 2017; Huff et al., 2011; Norton, 2002) was the relationship between principal retention and student achievement. For many of these studies, the principal's length of service substantially influenced student performance and improved the culture and climate of the building. Although a multitude of factors influence a principal's intentions to change schools or depart from the profession altogether, school districts are under immense pressures to increase achievement scores. Taking into account that 12% of first year principals in high needs school districts leave after their first year on the job, school districts and principal preparation programs must address the factors that lead to departure and work to identify early the characteristics that lead to an effective and stable principalship (Burkhauser et al., 2012).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which differences were present in Texas elementary school accountability ratings as a function of campus principals' average years of experience. The accountability ratings derive from the STAAR assessments and focused on elementary schools that have Grades 4 and 5 students. Determining the factors that impact principal tenure, such as reading and mathematics achievement, can assist school district leaders in recruiting, developing, and retaining new campus principals.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Extensive research exists regarding the influence of principals on student achievement (Babo & Postma, 2017; Huff et al., 2011; Seigrist, Weeks). Many researchers (Mascall & Leithwood, 2011; School Leaders Network,

2014; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011) have reported data related to principal turnover. As a result of this study, school district administrators may be presented with evidence to craft differentiated support systems and tools to help new principals to grow and develop their skills. School district leaders and policymakers may be influenced to create layers of support to help seasoned principals to manage their workloads without burning out. Furthermore, leaders of education institutions may be motivated to institute practical, hands-on training to those individuals who are entering positions of educational leadership. Given the importance of principal effectiveness to the school culture and academic achievement levels, it is imperative that district leaders comprehend the influence of principal experience on student achievement and the school's ability to meet state and federal accountability targets. By reviewing the recommendations provided from this study, district and state education leaders may determine areas for further strengthening in their districts through principal coaching, training, and incentive pay systems. Finally, state legislators and the Texas Education Agency may be influenced to provide funding for improved principal training and resources to support campus level administrators and teachers who must maintain high levels of student achievement.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research question were addressed in this study: (a) What effect does the campus principals' average years of experience have on a Texas K-5 elementary school Accountability Ratings? and (b) What trend, if any, exist for the Texas K-5 elementary school Accountability Ratings by the campus principals' average years of experience? These questions were analyzed for the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

A non-experimental, causal-comparative research design (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2020) was used for this study. In this investigation, statewide archival data was obtained from the Texas Education Agency. The data included campus principals' average years of experience and the overall accountability rating of the K-5 campuses. The independent variable in this study was the average years of experience of all the campus principals, and the dependent variable was K-5 elementary school accountability ratings. For the 2017-2018 school year, schools were rated as "Met Standard" or "Improvement Required". For the 2018-2019 school year, schools were rated using a letter grading system A-F. Both the school accountability ratings and the average campus principals' years of experience had already occurred. Therefore, neither the independent variable nor the dependent variables can be manipulated (Johnson & Christensen, 2020).

2.2 Participants and Instrumentation

Campus data were analyzed from all Texas public K-5 elementary schools in the 2017-2018 and the 2018-2019 school years. Archival data were downloaded to excel files from the Texas Academic Performance Report located on the Texas Education Agency Website, and the excel files were converted to *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* data files. Data were then analyzed for the Campus accountability status by the principals' years of experience. For technical information regarding score reliability and validity of the TAPR data, readers are directed to the website at <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2017/download.html>.

Data from the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years were analyzed. For this study, only data from public elementary schools configured with Kindergarten through Grade 5 in the State of Texas were analyzed. Participants in this study were principals of traditional K-5 elementary public schools during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years. For the purposes of this study, Experienced Principals represented the average of all principals on a campus with more than 10 years of experience. Moderately Experienced Principals represented the average of all principals on a campus with 5-10 years of experience, and the Inexperienced Principals represented the average of all principals on a campus with less than 5 years of experience. The principals' average years of experience were defined as the number of completed years of experience as a principal, regardless of district or interruption in service. These amounts were added together and divided by the number of all principals reported for the campus (Texas Academic Performance Report Glossary, 2019, 2020).

3. Results

To address whether differences were present in accountability status (i.e., Met Standard, Improvement Required) by principal experience (i.e., Experienced, Moderately Experienced, and Inexperienced), Pearson chi-square procedures were conducted. This statistical method was the optimal statistical procedure because of the presence of frequency data for the three levels of principal experience (i.e., Experienced, Moderately Experienced, Inexperienced) and for the school accountability status. When both the independent variable and the dependent variables are nominal in nature, Pearson chi-squares are the statistical technique of choice (Slate & Rojas-LeBouef, 2011). With a large sample size, the criteria for using Pearson chi-squares were met.

Concerning the 2017-2018 school year, the result approached but did not reach the conventional level of

statistical significance, $\chi^2(2) = 5.45$, $p = .065$, a below small effect size, Cramer's V of .04 (Cohen, 1988). As delineated in Table 2.1, Inexperienced principals were more than twice as likely to have led Improvement Required schools than were Experienced principals. Moderately Experienced principals were more than one percentage point less likely than Inexperienced principals to have led schools that were labeled Improvement Required. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for this analysis.

Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages for the Elementary Campus Accountability Status by the Principals' Years of Experience for the 2017-2018 School Year

Principal Experience Groups	Met Standard		Improvement Required	
	<i>n</i> of schools	%	<i>n</i> of schools	%
Inexperienced	1,268	97.24	36	2.76
Moderately Experienced	914	98.28	16	1.72
Experienced	559	98.76	7	1.24

With respect to the 2018-2019 school year, a statistically significant result was revealed, $\chi^2(6) = 22.53$, $p < .001$, a below small effect size, Cramer's V of .06 (Cohen, 1988). As revealed in Table 2.2, a higher percentage of D rated schools were led by Inexperienced Principals, 8%, than by Experienced Principals, 5%. Of the A rated schools, a higher percentage of them were led by Experienced Principals, nearly 30%, than by Moderately Experienced Principals, nearly 24%. The lowest percentage of A rated schools were led by Inexperienced Principals, 21%. Delineated in Table 2 are the descriptive statistics for these analyses.

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages for the Elementary Campus Accountability Status by the Principals' Years of Experience for the 2018-2019 School Year

Campus Accountability Status	Inexperienced		Moderately Experienced		Experienced	
	<i>n</i> of schools	%	<i>n</i> of schools	%	<i>n</i> of schools	%
A	273	21.6	219	23.7	165	29.9
B	489	38.7	367	39.6	223	40.4
C	401	31.7	273	29.5	136	24.6
D	101	8.0	67	7.2	28	5.1

4. Discussion

Analyzed in this investigation was the extent to which differences were present in the school accountability status of elementary schools in Texas by the average years of experience. Two years of Texas statewide accountability results were examined for principals in three categories: Inexperienced, Moderately Experienced, and Experienced. Concerning both school years, the difference in accountability status of the elementary schools was statistically significantly related to the average years of experience of the principal. Effect sizes for the school accountability status were small each year at each category of principal experience.

In each of the two years analyzed, higher percentages of Inexperienced principals were leaders of schools that were rated as Improvement Required or a D than Experienced or Moderately Experienced principals. In the State of Texas in the 2017-2018 school year, 36 Inexperienced principals led schools in the Improvement Required category in contrast to only 7 schools in this category being led by Experienced principals. Similarly, in the 2018-2019 school year, 101 D rated schools were led by Inexperienced principals in contrast to only 28 schools in this category being led by Experienced principals. Experienced principals were 10 percentage points more likely to have led schools rated as A or B than Inexperienced principals. The gap between Moderately Experienced principals and Inexperienced principals was twice as large as the gap between Moderately Experienced and Experienced principals. Portrayed in Figure 1 are the results of A-rated elementary schools by principal years of experience.

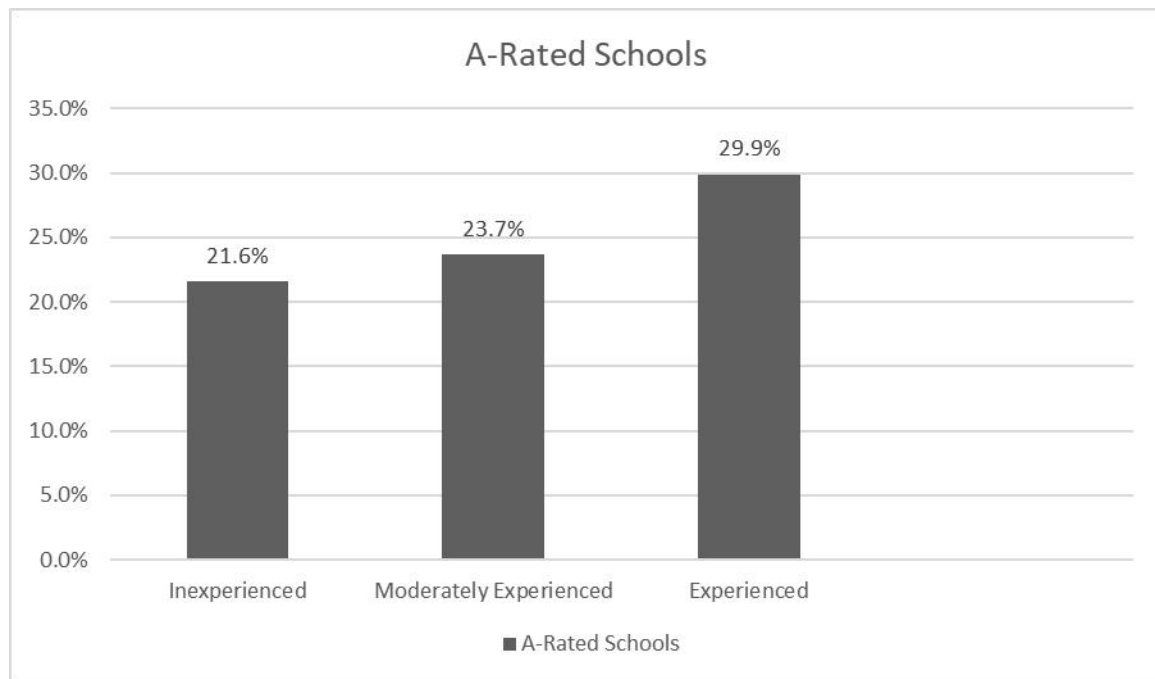


Figure 1. Texas elementary schools rated an A by the average years of experience of the principal for the 2018-2019 school year

In each of the two years, the total number of Experienced principals was more than twice the total number of Inexperienced principals. Experienced principals were more likely to have led higher-rated schools, followed by Moderately Experienced, and then by Inexperienced principals. Depicted in Figure 2 are the results of the elementary schools that were rated Improvement Required for the 2017-2018 school year by average years of principal experience.

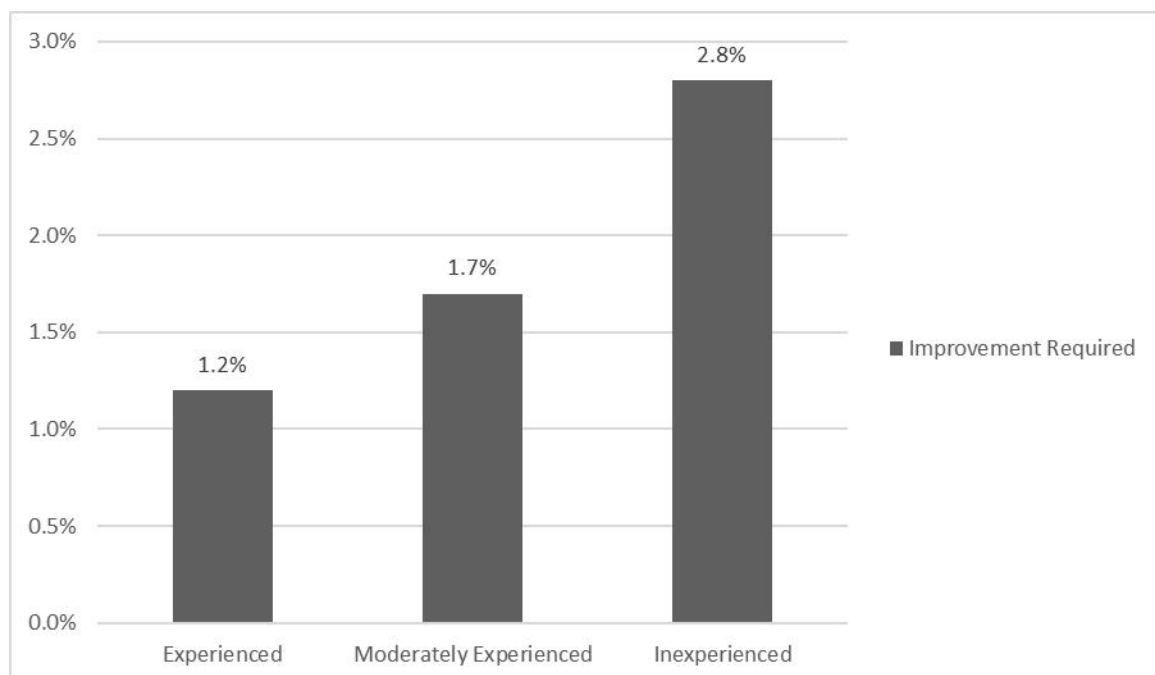


Figure 2. Texas elementary school accountability status by the average years of experience of the principal for the 2017-2018 school year

4.1 Connections with Existing Literature

In this multiyear, statewide analysis, connections were established between principal experience and the accountability status of the campus. In previous articles, researchers (e.g., Babo & Postma, 2017; Huff et al., 2011) have documented statistically significant differences between principal tenure and experience and the academic achievement of the students in the school. Results delineated herein were consistent across grade levels and ethnic/racial backgrounds.

Researchers (Beteille et al., 2012; Branch et al., 2013; Sturgis et al., 2017) have examined links between schools with higher percentages of students from poverty and principal turnover. Schools with higher rates of principal turnover underperformed those with more stable principals (School Leaders Network, 2012; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Increased demands on the principal were influenced by more stringent sanctions-based accountability measures (Mitani, 2018) and a lack of support and mentorship in the early years on the job (Grossman & Nagler, 2019).

4.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on the analysis of two years of Texas statewide data, several implications for policy and for practice can be recommended. With respect to policy implications, during the fall of 2013, the State of Texas published a document outlining principal standards. From this, a new evaluation tool for principals, the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System was established which focused on a system of continuous professional growth (www.tpess.org, 2020). Although this evaluation system is designed to allow principals opportunities to reflect on their practice and implement best practices, it has been implemented sporadically and is highly subjective, relying heavily on the experience and time given from the principal supervisor. Few to no requirements have been present from the Texas Education Agency or the state legislature in regard to principal support and mentorship programs. With the upcoming legislative session, funding for quality, effective principal support programs should be allocated.

Regarding implications for practice, school districts should evaluate their own principal turnover, especially in schools with higher percentages of students from poverty. Empowering superintendents and principal supervisors with training in coaching and development and providing actionable feedback is necessary to ensure principal turnover rates, especially in urban schools, do not increase in future school years. Furthermore, school district leaders should assign experienced mentors to every first-year principal and provide release time and stipends to encourage greater collaboration and commitment.

4.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of this empirical multiyear investigation, several recommendations for future research can be made. First, this study was conducted on data on only elementary schools. The degree to which findings obtained herein would be generalizable to secondary schools is not known. Accordingly, researchers are encouraged to examine the accountability status based on average principals' years of experience at middle schools and at high schools. Second, because accountability status at the elementary level is based on only STAAR performance, researchers should examine the degree to which principals' years of experience is related to other accountability measures at the secondary level such as College, Career, and Military Readiness and graduation rates. Third, researchers should ascertain the extent to which results from this Texas statewide analysis would be generalizable to principal turnover and accountability status in other states. The extent to which the results of this investigation can be generalized to other states is unknown. Finally, researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies in which they follow effective principals of urban campuses who remain at their campuses for longer than five years. The results would allow researchers to analyze the conditions and resources necessary and the leadership qualities that affect principals' decisions to remain.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this research investigation was to determine the degree to which differences were present in the school accountability status of Texas elementary schools as a function of the principal average years of experience. Inferential statistical procedures for both school years revealed accountability status of elementary schools was statistically significantly related to the average years of experience of the principal. Elementary schools with Experienced principals performed at the Met Standard or achieved A status more than schools with Moderately Experienced or Inexperienced principals. As such, principal experience was clearly established to be positively related to school accountability results. School district leaders and education policymakers are encouraged to develop programs to retain principals. As clearly established in this empirical investigation, principal experience matters.

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