Chronic Teacher Turnover in Urban Elementary Schools

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Abstract
This study examines the characteristics of elementary schools that experience chronic teacher turnover and the impacts of turnover on a school's working climate and ability to effectively function. Based on evidence from staff climate surveys and case studies, it is clear that high turnover schools face significant organizational challenges. Schools with high teacher turnover rates have difficulty planning and implementing a coherent curriculum and sustaining positive working relationships among teachers. The reality of these organizational challenges is particularly alarming, given that high turnover schools are more likely to serve low-income and minority students. The negative relationship between teacher turnover and school functioning, and the fact that turbulent schools are disproportionately likely to serve low-income and minority students have important implications for both district and school-level policies. Specifically:

1. Teacher turnover rates are one indicator of school health, which school districts should consider when focusing on school improvements. Districts need to begin by developing the means to identify individual schools that experience high levels of teacher turnover.

2. Current district policies in implementing professional development for teachers in low-performing schools are inefficient when teachers do not remain in the schools in which they are trained.

3. In order for low-performing schools to improve, districts need to consider providing incentive programs so that high quality teachers apply for, and remain in, these schools.

Future research is needed to address the causal link between turnover, organizational functioning and student outcomes. Additionally, there is a need for research examining district policies that may facilitate teacher turnover within a district, including how districts place and transfer teachers, as well as how teachers' salaries are budgeted.

I. Introduction and Background

Teacher turnover is receiving increased attention in education research and policy. The focus of this attention associates the turnover problem with the shortage of high quality teachers in low-achieving schools, suggesting that teacher turnover—due to teachers either quitting the profession or transferring to a higher performing school—leaves low-achieving schools with the least qualified teachers. (Haycock, 1998, 2000). In this way, it is acknowledged that teacher turnover contributes to the teacher gap—the "dearth of well-qualified teachers for those who need them most." (Quality Counts, 2003, p.7).

A second and much less discussed effect of teacher turnover is its impact on a school's ability to function as an organization. To address this shortcoming in the education literature, this study examines how turnover impacts the organizational capacity of schools that face high rates of teacher turnover every year. The idea that organizational capacity matters is consistent with research on "effective" schools, which demonstrates that factors such as staff trust and instructional cohesiveness influence student achievement (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Edmonds & Frederiksen, 1979; Hill, Foster & Gendler, 1990; Newmann, et. al., 2001).

While there have been a multitude of studies examining *why* teachers choose to leave a school, or the teaching profession altogether,[1] the education literature provides scant evidence of the impacts of teacher turnover on the school as an organization. Although there is little direct evidence on how and to what extent teacher turnover negatively affects schools, there are legitimate reasons why concern is warranted. If high teacher turnover negatively affects schools as organizations, it is likely that these schools will struggle to improve student learning.

Research findings from organizational theory and business literature suggest that the negative impacts of turnover include a loss of organizational productivity, a decrease in quality of service and an increase in direct economic and other intangible costs. While these terms are commonly used in business, it is not immediately clear how they should

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[1] For example, see Bobbitt, Leich, Whitener, & Lynch, 1994; Grismer & Kirby, 1987, 1992, 1997; Ingersoll, 2001.

be interpreted in relation to schooling. For example, researchers and policy makers are just beginning to address the economic impacts of turnover in schools. A recent study in Texas sought to quantify the cost of teacher turnover, utilizing various turnover cost models from business. The findings suggest that the cost of teachers leaving the teaching profession may range from a conservative estimate of 20 percent of the leaving teacher's salary to a high estimate of 150 percent of that salary, depending on the variables included in the definition of cost (Benner, 2000).

Although focusing on economic costs of teacher turnover is important, it fails to capture the importance of "intangible costs" or those that are difficult to quantify (Roseman, 1981). Intangible costs in schools with high teacher turnover may include a decrease in employee morale or an increased strain on working relationships. Such "intangible costs" of turnover are often linked to the concept of trust, which has been found to influence organizational functioning and student outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In schools, relational trust is defined as "the social exchanges of schooling as organized around a distinct set of role relationships: teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents and with their school principal" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p.20). Teachers are the linchpin of these social exchanges. As Bryk & Schneider note "contexts with strong relational trust benefit from clear understanding about role obligations that are routinely reinforced in day-to-day behavior. Individuals understand what is expected of them and the consequences that may ensue if obligations are not met." (pp.33-34).

Thus, one of the reasons high turnover may impact the ability of a school's staff to work as a team is that it may erode relational trust. In order to trust someone, a person must have some experience with another person on which to base trust. For schools that are constantly getting new teachers, it is difficult to establish trust because teachers, students and parents are always dealing with strangers, individuals with whom they have no experience.

In addition to the importance of trust, schools are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of turnover because it disrupts the team-based organizational structure and functioning of a school. Recent findings suggest the importance of a team-oriented strategy in order to improve school performance. This team orientation is predicated on the fact that the organization contains a group of individuals committed to the mission and goals of the organization (Lake, Hill, O'Toole & Celio, 1999). Turnover makes teamwork difficult, given the instability of key players. Because the job of teaching requires a significant amount of teamwork, turnover is likely to disrupt the momentum of the entire group.

Inequitable Impacts of Teacher Turnover
An important issue often raised with regards to teacher turnover is its disproportionate impact on minority and low-income students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1998), schools with 50 percent or more minority students experience turnover at twice the rate of schools with lower minority populations. Similarly, Freeman, and colleagues (2002) found that teachers who switched schools were more likely to have served a greater proportion of minority, low-income, and low-achieving students at their previous schools. In relation to income, Ingersoll (2001)

found that schools with poverty levels greater than 50 percent have significantly higher rates of turnover than low-poverty schools (schools with less than 15 percent poverty). Findings from a study of schools in the Philadelphia School District yielded similar results, with a higher teacher turnover rate in its highest poverty schools, compared to schools with the lower rates of poverty (Useem & Neild, 2002). The study found that in 1999-2000, 46 percent of teachers in middle schools with the highest poverty rate began teaching at their school within the past 2 years.

Other studies show that one driving factor may be that, when given the opportunity, teachers will leave low achieving schools to teach in schools with higher achieving students or a higher socio-economic status (Betts, Rueben & Danenberg, 2000; Bohrnstedt & Stecher, 1999; Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1999, 2001). Additionally, Lankford and colleagues (2002) found that teachers who leave poor urban schools are more likely to have higher skills than the teachers who choose to stay in those schools.

Given the findings from previous research, it appears that high rates of turnover among teaching staff could have a detrimental impact on the organizational functioning of a school and that turbulent schools serving poor and minority students are most likely to be affected. This paper seeks to explore these questions and to examine the commonalities among schools with high rates of teacher turnover. The paper is laid out as follows: Section II outlines the data and methods used in the study. Section III explores the results of the analysis, provides a district-wide analysis of turnover in the elementary schools of a major urban west coast school district and utilizes quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate the impacts of teacher turnover on individual elementary schools' climate and organizational effectiveness. Section IV discusses several policy implications for addressing the issue of teacher turnover, based on findings from the case studies. Section V concludes by outlining the weaknesses in the current study and identifying areas of additional research needed in order to address this important policy question.

II. Data and Methods

A snapshot of the school district
The school district in this study is a large urban district in which many schools are divided by income and race. The school district serves nearly 47,000 students in 97 schools; 70 are elementary and K-8 schools. The district employs 4,500 certified staff, 3,200 of which are currently in teaching positions. The district is divided into seven geographic clusters, which provide the basis for school assignments. Within the district, schools in the north-end clusters are largely white and affluent. Conversely, schools in the central city and south-end clusters have a much more diverse population and are more likely to serve low-income students. Many of the schools in the district's minority and low-income neighborhoods have struggled to improve their achievement levels, yet have had little success.

Demographic and performance data
Demographic and student performance data for both the district and individual schools were obtained from a statewide database. Variables used in this study include the percentage of minority students in a school and the percentage of students meeting

standard on the statewide math and reading assessments. In elementary schools, students are tested in the 4th grade. For the percentage of minority students in a school, five years of data were available. For the statewide assessment of performance , six years of data were available.

Turnover data
The district does not collect data on the rate of teacher turnover for individual schools. In the absence of district data, the rate of school-level teacher turnover used in this study was calculated using data from a state-mandated staffing form, which provides a snapshot of information on staff within schools in October of each year. The information collected includes the number of certificated staff working within a school, their education level, years of teaching experience, as well as additional variables. For the purposes of this study, the teacher turnover rates refer to the percentage of teachers who were new to a school in a given school year. Because this number does not capture teachers who enter a school after October, the figures most likely underestimate turnover since they fail to capture mid-year exits and entries. Seven years of turnover data were available for analysis.

Staff Climate Survey
To get a clearer picture of the correlates of teacher turnover, data from the Staff Climate Survey (administered by the district) were analyzed. The Staff Climate Survey is a subset of questions taken from a Teacher Survey developed by researchers at the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (CTP).[2]   Data from the Staff Climate Survey are used to determine if turnover is related to other differences between district schools. Survey data are taken from the 2000-01, 2001-02 and 2002-03 school year, the only three years data are available for this measure. The school district in this study administers the Staff Climate Survey each year in all of its schools. The questions on the survey are constructed as scales, with 5 being the highest score and 1 being the lowest.   The scales measure six major school climate concepts. These concepts include: *school climate, teacher climate, principal leadership, teacher influence, feeling respected,* and *teacher interactions*. Over 95% of staff in this district completes the survey each year.

Case studies
A purposive sample of 15 schools was selected, based on their geographic location, demographic characteristics and seven-year average rate of turnover. The study intended to represent schools in all areas of the district, with varying demographic and turnover characteristics. Unfortunately, only five schools agreed to participate in the study, resulting in a less diverse sample from a geographic, demographic, and turnover perspective. The five participating schools do, however, represent five of the seven geographic clusters in the district, with variation in their student demographics and turnover rates (See Table 2 in Section III for details). Two of the schools have turnover rates below the district average, while the other three have turnover rates that exceed the district average.

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[2] For more information on how the survey scales were derived, and their internal consistency, see: http://www.stanford.edu/group/CRC/survey_instruments.htm (Website accessed April 1, 2004)

In order to gain a better understanding of the day-to-day impacts of turnover on individual schools, interviews were conducted in the five schools. Principals at each school were interviewed for approximately one hour. Principals provided a list of teachers at their school, and teachers were contacted individually to request an interview. Teachers agreeing to participate were interviewed at the schools for approximately 30 minutes to one hour. Both teachers and principals were asked about the impacts of teacher turnover on their job and their school.[3] In order to obtain different perspectives, concerted effort was made to talk with both experienced and new teachers within each school. Participants did not receive compensation for being interviewed.

III. Findings

The District
The distribution of the seven-year average teacher turnover rate in the district's elementary schools is depicted in Figure 1. While most elementary schools experience turnover rates below the district average of 19 percent, there are several schools that experience teacher turnover at almost twice that rate.

Figure 1: Distribution of Teacher Turnover Rates
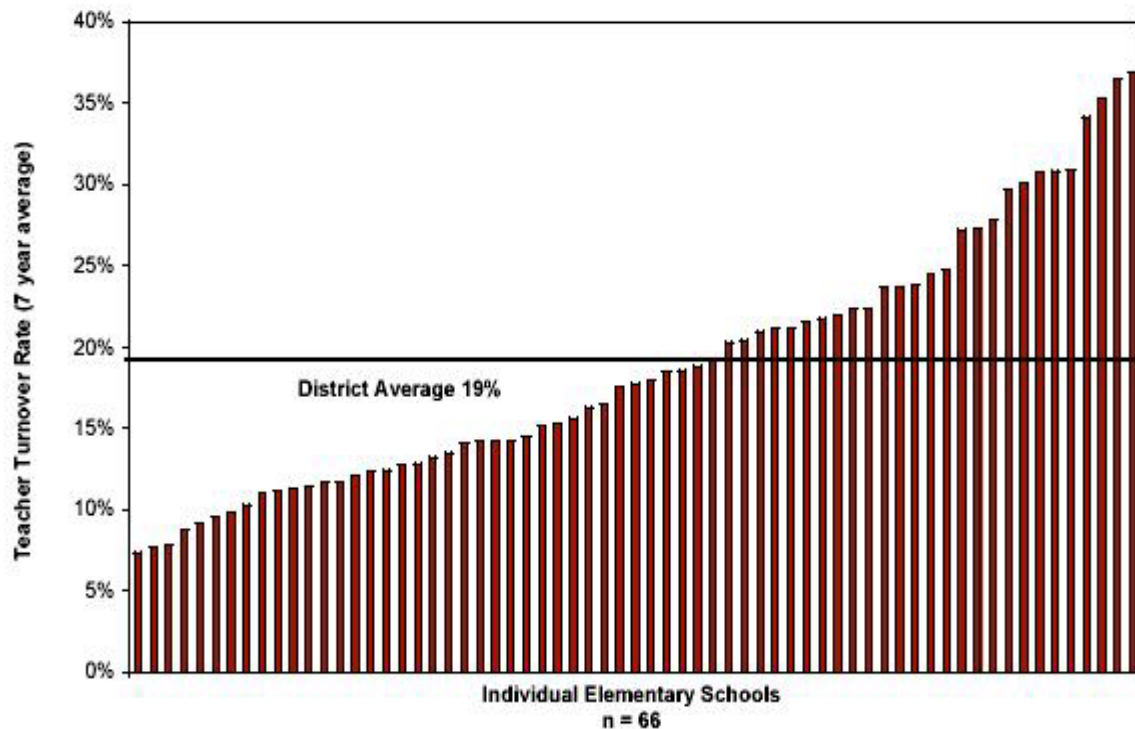
To explore the relationship between teacher turnover rates and other quantifiable characteristics of elementary schools within the district, correlations between teacher

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[3] See Appendix for the complete principal and teacher questionnaire.

turnover rates and student demographics and achievement were examined. Results indicate several significant relationships. With regard to student demographics, there is a significant and positive correlation between teacher turnover rates and the percentage of minority students within a school, as depicted in Figure 2.[4] Schools that have higher percentages of minority students experience higher levels of teacher turnover. These findings corroborate findings from previous research, indicating that schools with predominately minority students are disproportionately impacted by teacher turnover.

Figure 2: Correlation between Teacher Turnover Rates &
Percentage of Minority Students Within a School
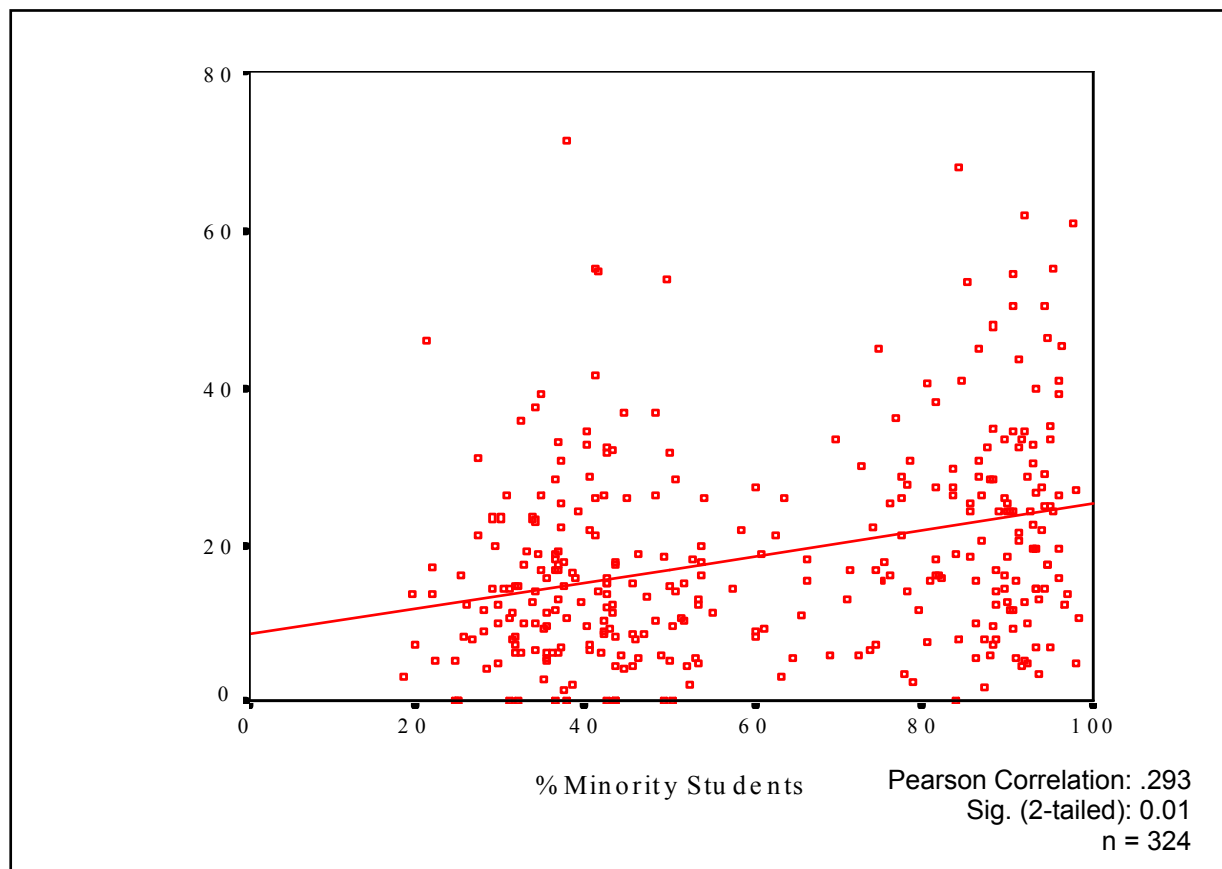
Correlations between student performance and turnover rates were also significant, but negative. Schools with higher rates of turnover had fewer students meeting standard on statewide assessments in both reading (Pearson Correlation: -.306, Sig. (2-tailed): .000, n = 418) and math (Pearson Correlation: -.282, Sig. (2-tailed): .000). While these correlations are important to acknowledge, additional statistical analyses beyond the scope of this study are necessary in order to determine the causal effects, if any, between turnover and student performance.

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[4] Correlations are based on five years of data for each of the variables.

In addition to demographic variables and student performance, the correlation between turnover rates and measures of organizational climate from the Staff Climate Survey were also examined, using three years of data (2001-2003). As indicated in Table 1, all of the correlations between teacher turnover rates and the six school climate concepts were negative. More importantly, all correlations, with the exception of "Teacher Interactions" were found to be significant.

Table 1
Staff Climate Survey and Teacher Turnover Correlations

Climate Measure	Correlation Coefficient
School Climate	-.168**
Teacher Climate	-.155**
Principal Leadership	-.173**
Teacher Influence	-.139**
Feeling Respected	-.163**
Teacher Interactions	-.086

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

These correlations demonstrate important relationships between teacher turnover and staff's perception of the school climate, but do not provide a clear picture of how high rates of turnover may impact a school. A more in depth look at several schools within the district seeks to shed light on these numbers.

The Schools
In order to make sense of the quantitative data, interviews were conducted to examine the day-to-day impact of teacher turnover on a school's climate and organizational functioning. As previously described, five schools were selected for a more in depth look at the impacts of teacher turnover. A summary of quantitative data from the five schools is shown in Table 2.[5] A district average, composed of all elementary schools within the district, is provided for comparison. The data from these schools mirror the findings in the district-wide analysis. Schools with higher rates of turnover appear to have a disproportionately high rate of minority students, as well as higher levels of poverty. As was the case in the district data, schools with higher rates of teacher turnover score below the district average on the Staff Climate Survey indicators.[6] Additionally, schools with higher rates of turnover over a seven-year period have fewer students meeting standard on the state-mandated student assessments.

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[5] Names of all schools have been changed.
[6] Stone Elementary School is an exception on several of the Staff Climate Survey measures. Some possible reasons for this discrepancy will be discussed in the case studies below.

Table 2
Summary of Data from Individual Schools

	Stone Elem. School	Harris Elem. School	Webster Elem. School	Lovett Elem. School	Preston Elem. School	District Average
Turnover Rates (7 year average)	35%	28%	22%	17%	14%	**19%**
% Minority	93%	91%	98%	29%	31%	**61%**
% Free/ Reduced Lunch	85%	97%	82%	14%	14%	**45%**
School Climate	3.90	3.55	3.68	4.09	4.40	**3.95**
Teacher Climate	3.93	3.27	3.67	4.31	4.31	**3.93**
Teacher Influence	3.66	3.33	3.27	3.90	4.13	**3.82**
Feeling Respected	3.41	3.20	3.17	3.45	3.45	**3.33**
% meeting standard on state reading assessment	20%	43%	35%	80%	76%	**61%**
% meeting standard on state math assessment	8%	11%	23%	57%	58%	**44%**

Stone Elementary School: Reversing the Impacts of Chronic Turnover
Stone is small elementary school located in the central part of the city. This school is unique, in that it is the site of a large-scale reform effort, partially funded and administered by a private foundation. The current principal is in her second year at Stone and was brought in specifically to take charge of the school during the transition phase. As outlined in Table 1, 85% of the students at Stone qualify for free and reduced price lunch. Additionally, over 90% of students are minorities. Over the past four years Stone has had three different principals and extremely high turnover among the teaching staff. During this time, the school has been struggling to improve its academic performance on the state-mandated assessment tests.

The principal and four teachers agreed to be interviewed. All four of the teachers interviewed at Stone have been teaching at the school approximately four years, with three of the four having less than five years of teaching experience. The fourth teacher interviewed, the school's head teacher, had 33 years of education experience. Each teacher noted that since the arrival of the new principal, the turnover rate had markedly decreased.

Disruptions in Teaching
Teachers at Stone Elementary openly discussed the negative impacts of high staff turnover. Having a constant stream of new colleagues prevented them from establishing any kind of order within their daily activities. One teacher expressed her frustration:

> Every time we lost a teacher, nine times out of ten it was a first year teacher we had brought in. Well, the first year is always sheer chaos and you feel like you are not doing anything appropriately. So we would constantly be getting a set of new teachers. Having perpetual chaos.

She went on to say that the constant stream of new teachers impaired her ability to do her job effectively. Time normally spent with her students was spent helping new colleagues acclimate to their new school environment. Such help included aiding in the organization of classrooms and the control of disruptive students. One teacher recalled taking a particularly difficult student from a lower grade into her class for the first half of the school year, in order to allow the new teacher to gain control of his classroom. While she was unable to quantify the impact on that student's learning, she acknowledged that spending half a year in a classroom two grade levels above was not an ideal learning situation for that student, nor for the regular students in her class.

Another teacher expressed similar frustrations when describing the reality of high turnover.
> I am willing to give my time to new teachers because it needs to be done. If their classroom is running smoothly then I don't have to spend that much time with them. If they know the routines of our school, then I am not spending time dealing with their kids. But it

> can take a lot of energy, especially the first couple of months of
> school.

This additional time spent with new teachers, and their students, also caused a strain on teacher relationships. Several teachers expressed resentment for having to do their jobs, as well as continually having to take on responsibilities for new teachers and their students. This resentment, however, was assuaged by the realization that their extra time would pay off in the future, *if* that new colleague decided to stay. As one teacher noted, "you have to provide support to new teachers, because you know if you don't help that teacher get their class stabilized and learning, when you get the kids you will have missing skills and will be doing double time."

Professional Development
The impact of turnover on professional development was also a concern among the teachers and the principal in Stone Elementary. Most agreed that the previous high turnover rate at the school made professional development an ineffective tool for improvement. One teacher discussed the need to repeat the same professional development, because of the constant churning of the teaching staff. For teachers who remained in the school, the idea of repeating the same professional development was viewed as a waste of their time, and therefore often skipped. This meant that although all staff members might receive comparable training, they were not training together as a team. Nor were the staff members who chose to stay at Stone able to participate in new professional development opportunities, which they felt limited their professional growth.

Another teacher expressed frustration with the continual loss of resources and knowledge when talking about turnover and professional development. She said:

> In years past there have been trainings and then people leave. So
> they take that experience with them. They might use that training at
> another school and we have paid the money at this school for that
> person. So then you have to rehire and retrain.

Impacts on the Instructional Program and Student Learning
Similar to the impacts on professional development, turnover was perceived as being detrimental to the school's instructional program. The continual loss of teachers had a negative impact on the momentum of instruction at the school. This impact was described both in terms of morale among remaining staff, as well as the day-to-day instructional activities. One teacher painted this picture of the different impacts of turnover and stability on student learning at the school:

> When you have a stable environment, the kids can let their guard
> down, they can come here and no matter what their troubles are in
> their home life or neighborhood environment, they can come here
> and have a sense of calm. They can leave that baggage at the door.
> But in years past, when you were wondering whether your
> administrator was going to show up that day…when teachers are just
> so burned out that they are interviewing for other jobs and just trying

to get out of here while they can, then the kids' focus is not on the instruction. They can instantly feel that, this chaotic environment. They cannot focus because they can see that everyone is on edge…if those kids are not in a stable environment it is affecting them constantly. The quality of learning that went on my first couple of years here is so miniscule compared to what is happening now. Now the kids are on a level playing field and can come in and have their focus on learning.

Creating Stability at Stone Elementary

Since all of the teachers interviewed had experienced several turbulent years at Stone Elementary, the benefits of the school's recent stability couldn't be touted enough. Everyone believed that the quality of education had increased with the experience of the teachers and with the stability within the school structure. That quality, they believed, was reflected in increases of academic achievement, based on standardized test scores and classroom assessments. One teacher noted that having a stable teaching force over the past two years helped increase her confidence and competence in the classroom.

When asked about the recent stability in the teaching staff at Stone the resounding explanation was school leadership. This sentiment was reflected in Stone's rating of Principal Leadership above the district average on the Staff Climate Survey. All of the teachers interviewed expressed both their gratitude and admiration for their new principal. One of the major factors noted was their trust in the principal. While previous principals' lack of direction and style was blamed for the school's previous turnover, the new principal's style of leadership was credited for making the difference in how teachers feel they are valued in the school. Several other above average measures on the Staff Climate Survey indicated that Stone may be reversing the impacts of high teacher turnover, as their staff stabilized and they were able to build a more cohesive school environment. This new sense of value and purpose among the staff undoubtedly impacted every teacher's voiced intent to remain in the school for the following school year.

Harris Elementary School: Running in Circles

Harris Elementary School is located southwest of downtown, near a large public housing project. Harris serves one of the poorest student populations in the district, with nearly 100% of students qualifying for free and reduced price lunch. The average rate of teacher turnover in the school each year over the past seven years was 28%.

The principal of Harris was in her third year at the school and had been an educator for over 20 years. During her short tenure, approximately 5 teachers, out of a total teaching staff of 25, left every year. One teacher noted that 4 teachers had already left during the current school year.[7] The explanation given for such an alarming mid-year departure rate is the uncertainty of the school's future. Earlier in the year the district was wavering on closing the school for the next school year. The principal believed that this caused several teachers to seek what they considered to be a more stable employment option. Unfortunately, only two teachers in this school agreed to be interviewed, which provide

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[7] Interviews were conducted in early March, 2003.

limited insight. One teacher had 15 years of teaching experience, seven of which were at Harris. The other teacher was in her fourth year of teaching, all years at Harris.

Impacts of turnover on instruction
When asked how turnover impacted the school's instructional program, all answers were the same: "You have to start the planning and implementation process over." For example, planning for the upcoming school year took place in the spring. This meant that, with high rates of turnover, many of the teachers who would be working to implement the plan in the fall were not present for its inception. It also meant that an understanding of the instructional focus and planning from previous years would be lost on a large portion of the staff. When the principal was uncertain who would be in the school the following year, both the planning and implementation process was disrupted, because the school was unable to plan around individual teacher's strengths. Such challenges made it very difficult for teachers who remained in the school to keep a positive attitude toward developing the school's instructional plan. One teacher said she was beginning to think the planning process is futile, when a large portion of the school's staff is new each year.

Additionally, implementation became extremely challenging, while trying to bring all of the new teachers up to speed. For example, the principal noted that she would have four openings for the upcoming school year (2003-04), and that meant she had to ensure those four teachers received training so that they could be on the same page as her remaining staff in terms of the school's instructional focus. The continual loss of teachers also had a negative impact on the momentum of instruction at the school. This impact was described both in terms of morale among remaining staff, as well as the day-to-day instructional activities. One teacher likened the turnover cycle to being in a race and constantly finding yourself back at the starting line. For the teachers who stayed in the school, and tried to develop and implement the school's program plan each year, the sentiment was the same: overwhelming frustration. One teacher noted:

> We are constantly reinventing the wheel. And for those of us that
> stay, it drains our energy. You know you can't constantly be starting
> over. It leads to burnout.

With such high frustration levels among staff, collaboration among teachers at the school was not common. One teacher attributed this to a lack of trust among the staff, noting that with new people coming in each year, it took a while to understand how a person works, both personally and professionally. The energy required to build a relationship with a new teacher, paired with the uncertainty of the length of time one would be working with that person, made collaboration in the school extremely difficult.

Filling Frequent Vacancies
On average, Harris Elementary had 5 teachers leave each year and received approximately 3-5 applications for each open position. This small applicant pool was a problem for a school that faced many vacancies. For example, Harris had a position in the special education resource room that had been open for six months, since the previous teacher left shortly after the school year started. This meant that not only were children who usually received supplemental services underserved, but were also spending

that time in the regular classroom, which the teachers found to be counterproductive for both children in need of special help, as well as their regular students. While some 20 applications had been submitted for this particular job, the principal was quick to note that the quantity of the applicant pool was not a reflection of applicant quality, which she felt was largely inadequate.[8]

Positive Turnover?
While the principal was in her third year at the school, she said attrition didn't bother her at this time, because she was "looking forward to building a strong team." For her, turnover was a way to weed out the teachers she didn't feel were effective. She believed that by the end of the year she would be able to hire quality staff and form a team that could most effectively serve the student population. This optimism may be misplaced, given the history of a small and ill-qualified applicant pool and the failure of the school to retain teachers.

Webster Elementary School: Contradictions and Uncertainties
Webster Elementary Schools is located in the southeast cluster of the district and has been led by the same principal for the past eight years. For the majority of students who attend Webster, English is a second language. This student population requires the teachers to take a specialized approach to curriculum in order to meet many of the students' instructional needs. Additionally, the school serves a predominately low-income population, with over 80% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Of the five schools, Webster's turnover rate most closely approximated the district's average turnover rate.

Four teachers in this school agreed to be interviewed. Three of the teachers were in their second year at Webster, although they each had varying levels of prior teaching experience, ranging from two to ten years. The fourth teacher had seven years of teaching experience, and had been at Webster for the past five years. Interviews with the principal and teachers at Webster Elementary produced many conflicting answers regarding the realities of teacher turnover and its impact on the school.

Impacts of turnover when serving a bi-lingual population
Teacher turnover seemed to have a particularly negative impact on instruction at Webster, given the specialized population it served. The principal stated, "teacher turnover impacts our instructional program tremendously. Because of our population specific staff development, if somebody leaves then you have to start from scratch and the kids lose out. And each year a teacher builds his or her strengths."

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[8] "Attracting qualified people who do not stay on the job is dysfunctional from the organization's point of view because this kind of turnover uses up money, time, and resources. Attracting unqualified people is costly because they have to be processed and ultimately rejected, frequently resulting in their forming a negative impression of the organization." (Porter et al, 1975, p.143).

In fact, all the teachers believed that the longer they stayed in a school the better they got at working with a particular population. One teacher summed up this sentiment by saying the following:

> My first year here I did not really understand how to teach here. It was so different from teaching in a north-end school. The population was so different. I really feel it takes you a year to teach at a new location. As a second year teacher I can feel how last year impacted my feeling of comfort and understanding of how the school works. If you are always faced with new teachers you will always have a school on the edge.

Both the principal and teachers also discussed how turnover among paraprofessionals had a negative impact on the school. Paraprofessionals working in the school often served as the translators for both students and parents. One teacher noted that the district, not the school, had control over if and who they got as paraprofessionals, and to lose a key translator was very disruptive to her classroom.

Lack of Collaboration?
While collaboration was viewed as important for the school's instructional program, there were very different opinions on the level and effectiveness of the current collaborations within the school. One teacher noted that there wasn't much teaming going on at the school, and that collaboration wasn't a priority among the teachers.   She attributed this to a lack of trust among the teachers, noting that with new people coming in, it took time to understand how a person works.

One teacher noted the importance of collaboration, and her current frustration stating the following:

> Team meetings make such a difference in teaching, if people are willing to come to the meetings. If I could get people to really sit down, people that want to work together. I mean we have these early release days so that people can be collaborative, but I don't' feel that we get much collaboration out of it.

Another teacher, who was more optimistic about the current level of collaboration in the school but who felt that turnover was definitely a detriment to current efforts, said:

> This year we know each other, which makes it easier to work together. But if we get new teachers next year, we have to start all over again. It takes a while just to get one group to work together.

Although interviews provided conflicting reports on teacher relationships and collaboration efforts, results from the Staff Climate Survey rate Webster low on "Teacher Climate" and "Teacher Interaction" indicating that while teachers may be

taking positive steps toward collaboration, there still seems to be problems regarding the working relationships among teachers at the school.

An Uncertain Future
Several teachers who had been at Webster for the past several years noted that the turnover rate seemed to have decreased recently, and they felt the school was improving every year. One teacher noted, "it is becoming a better school every year. Our test scores are improving and the teachers are becoming cohesive." Additionally, all of the teachers expressed their desire to remain in the school, mainly to continue serving the diverse student population. Both teachers and the principal noted that the district had repeatedly recruited top teachers from the school to work in the central office.

Lovett Elementary School: A Well-Oiled Machine
Lovett Elementary School is located in an affluent neighborhood just north of the city. The average rate of new teachers in the school over the past seven years was approximately 16%. The student population at Lovett does not denote a "high needs" school, with less than 15% of the students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch and only one student classified as in need of bilingual education.

The principal and four teachers agreed to be interviewed. One teacher had been at Lovett for 21 years, two teachers had been at the school for four years, and the last teacher was in her first year at Lovett, although she had seven years of teaching experience in another state. The principal was in her seventh year at Lovett.

A school of systems
The main theme emerging from the interviews at Lovett was that of systems within the school: Systems of support, systems of teaching and systems of learning. Having a stable staff allowed the school to develop and maintain these various systems. As one teacher new to the school noted, the school is highly organized, which makes her job extremely easy. Young teachers at Lovett found the stable core of teachers extremely supportive in helping them acclimate to the school. These opinions support the results of the Staff Climate Survey, where measures of School and Teacher Climate were above the district average. When facing a new task, young teachers had the option to seek the advice of a veteran within the school. In one teacher's words, these systems of support within the school, be it at the individual teacher or organizational level, kept her "from reinventing the wheel over and over."

One teacher believed that the "systems of learning" within the school *"added to consistency, which facilitates learning for all students."* Another credited the school's stable core of teachers for ensuring the cohesive planning and consistent implementation of the instructional plan for future years.

> When the same teachers have worked on the plan from its
> conception, it makes a difference. They understand what has been
> implemented and what changes need to be made. A big turnover in
> the teaching staff would force us start the planning process over
> again. Obtaining instructional consistency is much easier when you

> have that core base of teachers. So when a couple of new teachers
> come, it is easier to incorporate them into the plan

Teachers at Lovett all highlighted how a stable teaching core impacts the work they do in the classroom.

> We do a lot of teamwork here. Our first grade team has worked
> together for many years. That time allows you get used to other
> teachers' learning styles or teaching styles. Then we can use each
> other's expertise. It makes our job a lot easier and we all get better at
> what we are doing.

Teaming in the school went beyond individual grade levels, in order to create a consistent instructional plan throughout the grades. As one teacher stated:

> We meet with teachers in the grades below us so there is a lot of
> cohesion in curriculum ideas and planning. We try to make the
> transition from kindergarten to first grade as smooth as possible.

For teachers at Lovett, both the school and the teachers were organized in order to maximize the strengths of individuals, as well as the school as a whole.

Turnover as opportunity
At Lovett Elementary, staff turnover comes infrequently, and was most often the result of a retirement or relocation. When faced with a staff vacancy, there was an emphasis on the positive aspects of hiring new teachers. One teacher said that turnover allows the school to have a great combination of new teachers and veteran teachers who share similar beliefs, and who continually change and grow together. Another teacher concurred, noting that new teachers brought in new instructional ideas and techniques that benefited everyone in the school.

When asked if turnover ever had a negative impact on the instructional program at Lovett one teacher's response summed up the sentiment at the school regarding turnover. She said:

> I don't think turnover has a negative impact on us because lots and
> lots of people apply here and we can be pretty selective. We can
> match the teachers and their credentials to what we need here. In that
> regard we are really fortunate at this school.

For the principal and teachers at Lovett, the applicant pool is rich with qualified teachers, from which they can select the one who best matches their school's needs. And because turnover happens so infrequently, it is viewed as an opportunity, rather than a challenge.

Preston Elementary School: Stability and the Changing of the Guard
Preston Elementary School is located in an affluent neighborhood in the northeast section of the city. Almost 70% of the students are white, with fewer than 15% qualifying for free and reduced price lunch. The principal is in her second year at

Preston and described the school as being extremely stable, with a seven-year average turnover rate of 14%. This year was an exceptional year for turnover at the school, in that six new teachers were hired, due to the addition of new classrooms, several retirements, and one teacher on medical leave. When there is an opening at Preston, and this past year was no exception, the principal receives over 150 applications. With so many applicants to choose from, the principal acknowledged that she is able to select the cream of the crop and get the teacher that best suits her school's instructional philosophy and practices. Three teachers in this school agreed to be interviewed; one veteran teacher who had been at the school for over 20 years, and two brand-new teachers who were in their first year at the school.

Stability and instructional quality
The principal described a stable staff as critical in maintaining the school's educational philosophy and curriculum from year to year. She noted that each year the school develops an instructional focus, and centers its professional development in that area. For example, she notes "if math is your focus this year and writing is your focus next year, you need to make sure the same folks are around to carry on the math piece. Otherwise you have to start over all the time."

One teacher described how stability contributed to instructional quality. She stated:

> In this school the teachers have been around for a while and being
> around and in the same space makes a difference. I think that
> teachers have really been able to make their teaching more quality.
> Each year I have the same population of kids so I can really focus my
> teaching on them. Now if I were to move every couple of years I
> would have to start over with a new population and I have to work to
> tweak my teaching to fit that new population. So the teachers that
> have been here for a while have really learned how to best teach here.

Impacts of stability on teacher's jobs
The stability within the school ensured that teachers are able to rely on each other for instructional guidance. One new teacher said that having a veteran teacher in the same grade level had been an invaluable resource to her throughout her first year teaching. Additionally, both of the new teachers interviewed discussed how the organizational structure of the school made their jobs significantly easier.

> Even something as basic as the way lunch duty or recess duty is set
> up and stable makes a difference. In some schools with a lot of
> turnover, even those things get messed up and need to be sorted out
> when people should be focusing on instruction. In that way it is nice
> to be able to hop right in. Here is your schedule, here you go, no
> questions about that stuff. You can just go and focus on the
> instructional portion. That makes it easier.

While the stable operations of the school were comforting to new teachers, there was some sense that the "old guard" within the school sometimes made it hard for new teachers to try different things within the classroom.

> In one way it is hard to teach in a school where things are so stable because teachers are set in their ways. Some teachers just aren't willing to change and aren't supportive if you're trying. In that way it stability can be difficult.

This reality may have been the result of the large age gap among the teachers at Preston. The principal noted that while half of the teachers were in their fifties and early sixties, the other half were in their late twenties and early thirties. There were few teachers in between. It will be important to see if such a wide discrepancy in age and the reality of the changing of the guard will have an impact on the school's organizational climate and effectiveness in the coming years.

Summary of Case Studies

Table 3 provides a summary of the commonalities in schools that face low vs. high levels of teacher turnover. Similar to the Staff Survey findings, schools with high rates of teacher turnover are less likely to have high levels of trust and collaboration among teachers. Additionally, high turnover requires a school to restart their instructional focus each year, resulting in a less comprehensive and unified instructional program. Finally, the schools that most frequently need to hire teachers have the smallest applicant pool on which to draw from.

Table 3
Commonalities in Low and High Turnover Schools

School Characteristic	Low Turnover	High Turnover
Instructional Program	Consistent within and across grade-levels	Disrupted by constant churning of teaching staff
Professional Development	Targeted to meet designated school-level goals	Often repeated when new teachers arrive Piecemeal approach
Teacher Collaboration	Teachers collaborate on both planning and implementation of curriculum	Teachers find it difficult to collaborate when they have new co-workers each year

Trust	High levels of trust among staff	Lack of trust among teachers
Average number of Applicants per opening	Over 150	Typically 5 or less[9]

IV. Policy Implications

Gaining an understanding of the challenges high turnover schools face on a day-to-day basis begins to fill the gap in the current literature, which overlooks the impact of high teacher turnover rates on the school as an organization. Acknowledging and addressing this issue is particularly important, given the disproportionate impact on teacher turnover on low-income and minority students. Such knowledge has significant implications for both district and school-level policies.

Identifying Turbulent Schools
It is difficult to successfully address the problems of low-achieving schools if the potential roots of the problem are not readily recognized. Given the negative impacts described in this study, school districts and school boards that are genuinely concerned with improving low-performing schools should begin paying attention to teacher turnover rates at the school level. Turnover is probably a symptom of a deeper problem—a school's negative reputation among teachers, a contentious relationship between school staff and the community, or some other factor that leads teachers to avoid the school. Whatever its cause, high turnover is a clear sign of trouble within a school. However, in many districts, there is no data collection at the individual school level to provide decision makers with important information and understanding of the schools facing potential staffing problems. Greater attention to turnover rates may allow districts to intervene earlier when they detect a school is having staffing problems.

Districts should also make this turnover data readily available to the public. Recently, the Denver Public Schools began publishing school level teacher turnover rates on the their website, along with other key demographic and achievement statistics. This information allows the district, as well as parents and the broader community, to see when a school is in potential trouble. Transparency about teacher turnover can identify a school in trouble and help motivate corrective action.

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[9] The difference in applicant numbers echoes Ingersoll's (2001) findings, where schools that have difficulty filling teaching positions are almost twice as likely to experience high turnover rates.

Ineffective Improvement Strategies
Broad policies aimed at improving teacher quality are not likely to be successful if they ignore the reality of teacher turnover. If teachers continue to use low-performing schools as a point of entry into a district, but leave them as soon as they gain even a little seniority, the schools and the students in them will continue to suffer. School districts that try to fix low performing schools through professional development alone may be disappointed since teachers leave these schools soon after acquiring new skills.

Incentives to Eliminate Inequities
School districts need to consider incentives for teachers to remain in low-performing schools. Such incentives may include signing bonuses, tuition reimbursement, or loan forgiveness programs for teachers who commit to teaching in low-performing schools for a minimum number of years. Districts might also consider deviating from the standard salary schedule and paying higher salaries for teachers in low-performing schools. These incentives would allow such schools to build the experience and momentum necessary to make real gains in organizational capacity and student achievement.

V. Final Thoughts

While the current analysis provides valuable insight into the relationship between teacher turnover and other school characteristics, it is only a brief snapshot. In order to gain a better understanding of the cycles and impacts of teacher turnover it would be necessary to have data and observations over multiple years. Such data would allow researchers to devote more attention to the effects of teacher turnover, both on a school's ability to function effectively and on student outcomes.

Two other related areas are also exposed through the research contained in this paper. First, more research is needed regarding district policies that may inadvertently facilitate the turnover cycle, such as union transfer agreements and the practice of using average teacher salaries for budgeting purposes.[10] Second, research examining the impacts of various turnover patterns within school is needed. For example, a school that has the same third of their staff turn over every few years, while maintaining a core majority of teachers is likely to look very different, and have very different policy responses, than a school whose has a different third leave each year, resulting in the complete turnover of school staff over a three year period.

It is critical for school districts and school boards to recognize that high rates of teacher turnover may result in significant costs at both the school and district level. While turnover is normally associated with discrete questions of teacher supply and quality, it is important to acknowledge that teacher turnover may have a negative impact on schools as organizations. Based on the case studies in this report, schools with high rates of turnover do face serious organizational challenges, including the failure to establish a

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[10] See Betts, Rueben & Danenberg, 2000; Bohrnstedt & Stecher, 1999; Hanushek, Kain & Rivkin, 1999; Krei, 2000 and Ochoa & Jerjis, 1996 on teacher transfers. See Roza & Hill, 2004 on the consequences of salary averaging in districts.

coherent instructional program and a lack of trust among teachers. Unfortunately, these high turnover schools are most likely to serve the students in most need of help. District and school level policies, including tracking turnover and providing incentives for teachers, will help identify and aid these turbulent schools in establishing the stable teaching staff necessary for building the personal relationships and organizational capacity needed for school improvement and student achievement gains.

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Appendix

Teacher Turnover Study
Principal Interview Questions

1) Tell me about teacher turnover and/or teacher stability at your school. Has this changed over time and if so, why?

2) Why do teachers want to leave/stay at your school?

3) How does this affect your instructional program?

4) What have you (or the district) done to address this issue? (or what can you do?)

5) How does turnover/stability affect your school's ability to connect with students, parents and your community?

Teacher Turnover Study
Teacher Interview Questions

1) Tell me about teacher turnover and/or teacher stability at your school.

2) How does this affect the instructional program at your school?

3) How does this affect your job (what you do in the classroom)?

4) Why did you/ do you choose to work in this school?

5) How does turnover/stability affect your school's ability to connect with students, parents and your community?

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