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Principal flight on the rise in the age of accountability

Central Texas school districts losing principals to students' peril.

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Geneva Oliva estimates conservatively that she saw seven principals come and go while her children attended Johnston High School in East Austin from 1994 to 2003. The faces changed with such regularity that she says she didn't recognize the principal from year to year.

"Every time a new principal came in, they'd come up with a new program," she says, "but the new program was never completed because the principals left. What good is it to have good ideas if they aren't there to finish it off?"

School districts nationwide are finding it harder to hold on to principals as standards get tougher and the list of demands from the state and federal governments gets longer.

Statewide, high turnover is particularly apparent in high schools. About 61 percent of high school principals leave their schools or the field within three years; by the fifth year, that figure increases to 76 percent. Austin's turnover rates are slightly higher: 64 percent after three years and 82 percent after five years.

The district's annual high school principal turnover rate is just over 25 percent, a figure that is on par with other urban districts, where yearly turnover tends to average 18 percent to 25 percent.

When the principalship is a revolving door at a school, experts say, it trickles down to teacher retention efforts and school reform initiatives, which have vast implications for a district like Austin, where the 11 traditional high schools are in various stages of reform, with middle schools soon to follow. Local changes have included redesigning high schools to resemble colleges.

"We know that school reform takes time — much more than one year's time," said Ed Fuller, associate director of the University Council for Educational Administration at the University of Texas. "If a principal leaves within three to five years, the principal's vision for reform is left incomplete. Over time, teachers become jaded and simply ignore the reform effort. ... Teachers believe the principal will leave and all of their efforts will be wasted."

Principal flight at some campuses has been extreme: Johnston High went through 11 principals in 12 years before Celina Estrada-Thomas arrived in 2005, the same year that Reagan High in Northeast Austin had four principals in one year.

Education experts, principals and parents say the challenges of urban schools, combined with high-stakes testing demands, are driving the trend.

Nelson Coulter, principal of Hendrickson High School in Pflugerville, remembers when principals only had to be successful politicians to keep their jobs.

Now, Coulter says, they have to be like coaches. "You have to win," said Coulter, a 30-year veteran educator.

More pressure

The accountability system has changed expectations.

"While principals put stress on teachers to improve outcomes, teachers often do not lose their jobs over low accountability ratings," said Fuller, who has analyzed cumulative state turnover rates. "Principals do."

It's not always clear when principals leave whether they chose to walk out or were forced out, but what is certain is that in high-pressure situations at low-performing schools, they often don't last.

Consider the five Austin campuses that have appeared on the state's list of low-performing schools multiple times since the accountability system was enacted four years ago: Johnston and Reagan high schools, Pearce and Webb middle schools, and Pecan Springs Elementary School. Pecan Springs and Webb are no longer on the list.

There have been nine principal changes among them since 2003-04.

"I'm not saying we want to hold on to someone who is doing a bad job for the sake of stability, but I am really concerned about the pressure that is on principals," said Louis Malfaro, president of Education Austin, which represents 4,000 teachers and staff members. "I think it's crowding a lot of people out of school leadership."

Even high-achieving suburban districts, where turnover is generally expected to be lower, have not been shielded from the tumult.

Round Rock lost five of eight middle school principals in 2006 and four last year.

Rosena Malone was among the five who changed positions in 2006, receiving a promotion to assistant superintendent for secondary schools after serving less than eight months as Hopewell Middle School's principal. "We had an unusually high turnover that year in middle school positions due to promotions," Malone said.

Schools that traditionally do well on the state achievement test present their own challenges for a principal.

"The difficulty with running a campus noted for its top test scores is that the bar has been raised very high. You have to get your teachers behind you in order to maintain those expectations," said Linda Watkins, former principal at Westwood High School in the Round Rock district. "You also have a group of parents who ... expect their kids to be ready for college, and many of them are aiming for Ivy League universities. The rigor of the curriculum expected in a school like that is very stressful."

Michael Houser, Austin's human resources director, said the turnover rates reflect increased accountability in the education system. "The job is extremely demanding and even more so with redesign, high-stakes testing and ranking of schools," he said.

Michael Garrison, principal of McCallum High School in the Austin district, said principals aren't alone in feeling pressured to produce.

"It's a challenging job anywhere in the system," he said. "But the benefits are huge."

Experts: Support a must

To improve retention, school districts must provide leaders with adequate support, researchers say, in the form of well-qualified teachers, autonomy, solid mentoring and protection from community and political pressures.

When Brenda Burrell took over Austin's LBJ High School in 2000, some expected her toughest task to be getting the school off the state's low-performing list, which she did in her first year. More difficult to manage were what she called the three P's: "politics, pollutants and parasites."

The former principal recalled the arduous task of balancing the concerns of magnet parents and neighborhood parents and dealing with "sacred cows ... people and programs that are dead but keep hanging on."

Burrell was removed as principal in 2004 in the wake of a school restructuring plan.

Experts say superintendents must be more protective of their principals if they want them to stay. "Just like good principals buffer their teachers from outside pressures, good superintendents buffer their principals from outside influences," Fuller said.

Others say aspiring principals must become more knowledgeable about the realities of the position.

LBJ High Principal Patrick Patterson works six, sometimes seven days a week. That's the only way he can stay ahead of the 75-hour-per-week job that requires him to be building manager, teacher mentor, parent liaison, community builder, cheerleader, disciplinarian and fundraiser.

"If the individual is not willing to work the long hours, if they don't have a family to support them, if the individual is not willing to be at the top — and at the top, you're alone — then this is not the job for them," Patterson said.

The Austin district has for several years partnered with the University of Texas' Principalship Program, a master's degree program that provides training in campus leadership. The district has also raised salaries 15 percent to 20 percent over the past three years. Pay for high school principals ranges from \$100,000 to \$110,000, middle school principals make \$90,000 to \$100,000 and elementary school principals earn \$70,000 to \$80,000.


When principals stay, the difference is obvious, said Oliva, the Johnston parent.

Johnston's teacher turnover has been considerably lower since Estrada-Thomas' stint began, district figures show.

"I tell her, 'At least we know that you are here and that you care about our students.' Even the parents are finally coming out after 13 years," Oliva said.

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