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Revisiting Why Superintendents Turn Over: Understanding Pathways Out of School District Leadership

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Research has examined many facets of superintendent turnover but offers an incomplete understanding of superintendents' pathways out of the role. We pair administrative data on Tennessee superintendents over 15 years with hand-collected information about the reported reasons for their departures and jobs they took after leaving. Our data show that interpreting exits from state administrative data as synonymous with exits from the workforce (i.e., retirement) is misleading. More than a third of superintendents continue working after appearing to leave, including out-of-state. Even among superintendents for whom "retirement" is the publicly reported reason for leaving the superintendency, 22% hold future roles in or outside education. Age is the most important predictor of labor force exit. Superintendents are also more likely to exit following turnover on the school board. Low school district performance predicts neither exits nor moves within the superintendency but does predict "downward" moves into central office or school-level positions.

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Research has examined many facets of superintendent turnover but offers an incomplete understanding of superintendents' pathways out of the role. We pair administrative data on Tennessee superintendents over 15 years with hand-collected information about the reported reasons for their departures and jobs they took after leaving. Our data show that interpreting exits from state administrative data as synonymous with exits from the workforce (i.e., retirement) is misleading. More than a third of superintendents continue working after appearing to leave, including out-of-state. Even among superintendents for whom "retirement" is the publicly reported reason for leaving the superintendency, 22% hold future roles in or outside education. Age is the most important predictor of labor force exit. Superintendents are also more likely to exit following turnover on the school board. Low school district performance predicts neither exits nor moves within the superintendency but does predict "downward" moves into central office or school-level positions.

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Nationally, approximately 16% of school district superintendents leave their posts each year (White, 2023), with even higher rates in larger and more urban districts that often serve students with the most acute needs (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Natkin et al., 2003). Superintendent turnover can harm school districts via upheaval in district management, reductions in community morale, and disruption to ongoing reform efforts (Fullan, 2000; Yee & Cuban, 1996). Reflecting these challenges, recent research estimates negative impacts of superintendent turnover on student achievement that can persist for multiple years (Redding & Carlo, 2025).

Recognition of the negative impacts of superintendent turnover has motivated a small body of research on its drivers. Existing empirical research has emphasized the importance of individual factors, such as age, and district contextual factors, including salary, functioning of the school board, size, locale, and characteristics of students the school district serves, as factors in turnover decisions (e.g., Cuban, 1974; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016;

Schwartz et al., 2023). As Grissom and Andersen (2012) argue, existing research is largely consistent with a labor market model of superintendent turnover. In this model, turnover decisions can result from labor supply-side or labor demand-side considerations. Said more plainly, superintendents can decide to leave their role, or the employing district can decide the superintendent is leaving the role, so factors influencing either of those decisions are potential drivers of turnover. Superintendents' decisions regarding whether to continue in the role depend, in part, on the comparison they make between the utility (or enjoyment) they receive from their current role and the utility they expect from available alternatives. These utilities include both salary and the broad set of non-salary job and workplace characteristics often labeled *working conditions*. If they think that the alternative utility is larger, and thus moving into another role would make them appreciably better off, they do so. Similarly, if the school board thinks their own collective utility (in terms of meeting their goals for the district, the satisfaction they get from working with the superintendent, and so forth) would be higher with another superintendent, they may end the superintendent's employment.

This perspective suggests that we should take seriously pathways out of the superintendency. Not all turnover has the same causes, so treating turnover as a singular construct is likely to be misleading. Recognizing this complexity, several studies have used information about superintendents' pathways out to model turnover over multiple turnover categories. For example, Grissom and Andersen (2012) collected information on stated reasons for superintendents' departures in a sample of superintendents from California, finding that age was the main predictor of retirements but that other factors, including the functioning of the school board, predicted non-retirement exits. This latter category included terminations, resignations, and other exit types, which the authors were unable to separate in a relatively small

sample. Although they did not have information on stated reasons for turnover, Grissom and Mitani (2016) used administrative data from Missouri to differentiate turnover into moves to other superintendent positions in the state, moves into other district or school roles (e.g., a principalship), or exit from the Missouri public school system. Consistent with retirement being a major component of exit, they found that age predicted exit but not moves to other superintendent roles; other factors, including being hired from outside the district and length of time in the role, predicted moves but not exit.

Descriptively, both studies showed the propensity for superintendents to move to larger, less rural, and higher-paying districts. This pattern suggests that superintendents indeed consider the attractiveness, including the pay and prestige, of other employment options in making decisions to leave their districts. Yet at this stage, our understanding of superintendent pathways into alternative employment is mostly confined to employment as superintendents in other districts. We know very little about shifts into other kinds of roles, including roles outside districts, outside their states, or even outside the education sector altogether. A more complete rendering of moves into other employment can deepen our understanding of the superintendent labor market and may offer new insights into why superintendents turn over.

In more fully documenting superintendents' pathways out of the role, this study aims to provide the most comprehensive portrait of superintendent turnover in the literature to date, albeit for superintendents in a single state. To do so, we bring together different approaches used in prior studies. Using longitudinal administrative data over a 15-year period from Tennessee, we follow Grissom and Mitani (2016) by first cataloguing transitions to other educational roles within the state public education system. Next, we took Grissom and Andersen's (2012) approach to documenting stated reasons for leaving using newspaper articles and other sources

and merged this documentation with administrative data. Then, for superintendents who exited the state administrative data, we extended our original data collection to capture superintendents' next roles, if any, after exiting. This approach allowed us to differentiate "true" retirements from transitions into other employment inside or outside education.

Using this augmented data set, we first describe the pathways out of the superintendent's office are across the state. Then we ask: what factors predict superintendent turnover by different pathways, including superintendent background characteristics and characteristics of the districts in which superintendents work?

Combining administrative with hand-collected data allows us for the first time not only to establish the rate of out-of-state superintendent moves but to differentiate "true retirements" or exits from the workforce from transitions into other, post-superintendency work. It also permits more comprehensive modeling of superintendent turnover, potentially avoiding drawing inaccurate conclusions about predictors of job transitions from the misidentification of those transitions in prior studies.

Conceptualizing Transitions Out of the Superintendent's Office

We build on the simple labor market model of superintendent turnover described by Grissom and Andersen (2012). Their model emphasizes the "two-sided" nature of the decision for a superintendent to continue in the role or leave it.

On the labor demand side, the employing school board considers the relative costs and benefits of continued employment: Is the superintendent doing a satisfactory job, or could an available replacement potentially do better? And are the potential gains in performance large enough to compensate for the political, search, and transition costs of letting the current

superintendent go? If the answer to this latter question is yes, we would expect a turnover event from a termination or contract nonrenewal (*involuntary turnover*).

On the labor supply side, the superintendent evaluates the benefits he or she experiences from the role relative to available alternatives, asking: Would I be better off in my next available alternative—again, net of the job transition costs? If the answer is yes, we would expect a *voluntary turnover* event. The benefits the superintendent receives is a combination of the job's *pecuniary benefits*, which is monetary compensation, and *nonpecuniary benefits,* which are less tangible. Nonpecuniary benefits encompass the psychic rewards the superintendent experiences from doing the job, including job satisfaction, prestige, support, and feelings of fulfilment. We generally think of nonpecuniary benefits as being a function of the role's working conditions. More difficult or stressful job conditions will reduce the nonpecuniary benefits of that job.

Grissom and Andersen (2012) argued that we can identify likely predictors of superintendent turnover by considering factors that might affect the demand-side employment consideration, the supply-side employment consideration, or both. Indeed, numerous predictors of turnover that researchers have identified empirically appear to fit this model. Very low district test score performance is associated with higher superintendent turnover rates (Grissom & Mitani, 2016), which is consistent with school boards becoming displeased with inadequate performance and removing the superintendent. Relatedly, research employing a dissatisfaction theory perspective suggests that low or declining district outcomes may rouse the public to vote out school board incumbents in pursuit of leadership change, inducing a sequential relationship between district performance, board turnover, and superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2008), though evidence linking board and superintendent turnover is mixed (Weller et al., 1991). On the other hand, superintendents are less likely to turn over when their salary is higher (DeMatthews

et al., 2025; Grissom & Mitani, 2016), suggesting that higher compensation raises the value of the current role relative to potential alternatives. In contrast, factors that may be associated with more challenging working conditions—thus reducing nonpecuniary benefits of a given superintendent role—appear to make turnover more likely, including having a less functional school board, insufficient district fiscal resources to meet community needs, and contentious local political environments (Byrd et al., 2006; DeMatthews et al., 2025; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; White & Jerman, 2025).

Also consistent with the predictions of this supply–demand framework are patterns researchers observe in superintendents' mobility across superintendent roles. Moves within the superintendency appear to fit a "stepping-stone" pattern in which superintendents tend to move from smaller, more rural districts towards larger, more urban districts (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). This tendency suggests that superintendents are attracted to positions with relatively higher prestige, implying that they make comparisons between their current and potential or offered roles in their transition decisions.

The Multidimensionality of Superintendent Turnover

Existing research taking a supply–demand perspective has proven useful for understanding superintendent turnover. Yet the model also suggests that superintendent turnover is multidimensional, which many empirical studies ignore, flattening turnover into a binary construct. The treatment of superintendent turnover as either staying in their current role or leaving it is incomplete and may obscure important empirical insights, as several studies have argued (e.g., Alsbury, 2003; Grissom & Andersen, 2012).

We articulate two dimensions of a superintendent's pathway out of their role in a district that are underdeveloped in current research. The first is *separation type*, or the reason for the job

transition. The second is *post-separation destination,* which is the next role the superintendent takes after the transition.

Separation Type

As the voluntary–involuntary distinction in the labor market model makes apparent, superintendents can separate from their jobs for multiple reasons. Yet few studies document separation types for superintendents. Via newspaper and school board meeting searches and contacts with school districts, Grissom and Andersen (2012) identified reasons for leaving their roles among 93 superintendents in California as of 2005–06. They found that 40% retired, 45% resigned, and just 2% were terminated by the district. The remainder of turnover incidents were among interim superintendents appointed on a temporary basis or position eliminations (e.g., from district mergers). Overall, their results suggest that involuntary transitions are relatively infrequent, though the authors acknowledged that some resignations may have been resignations under pressure, making them conceptually more like terminations.

Grissom and Andersen (2012) also demonstrated the empirical utility of distinguishing separation type. In multinomial models, they found that different factors predicted retirement than predicted other separation types. Specifically, superintendent age was a main predictor of retirement but did not predict other separation types, which were instead a function of the proportion of low-income students in the district, whether the superintendent was an internal hire, and the functioning of the school board.

National data analyzed by White and Muñiz (2025) suggest that the rates of different separation types which Grissom and Andersen (2012) found in California two decades ago roughly generalize in the present day. Discarding interim leaders and superintendents for whom they could not identify a separation type, White and Muñiz (2025) uncovered that in 2023–24,

roughly 44% of superintendents retired, 48% resigned, and 6% were terminated or did not have their contract renewed. Their analysis did not examine predictors of different separation types.

Post-Separation Destination

Fundamental to the labor market model is that superintendents take their potential job alternatives into account when making job transition decisions. This assumption suggests that tracking superintendents into their subsequent roles may help illuminate turnover's underlying mechanisms.

In tracking post-separation destinations, it is useful to consider both subsequent *job roles* and, if relevant, *location* (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012). Distinguishing these two characteristics is important because a superintendent can change one or both. That is, a superintendent can stay in the same role (i.e., remain a superintendent) but move to another district. Alternatively, a superintendent can change roles but stay in the same district, which occurs if, for example, the superintendent shifts into another central office or principal role. Or a superintendent could change both role and location (e.g., moving to be a principal in another state).

One large-scale study reported on superintendents' moves into subsequent jobs, albeit incompletely. In administrative personnel data from the universe of Missouri districts from 1992 to 2010, Grissom and Mitani (2016) categorized turnover into mobility within the superintendency (25% of turnover), position changes (i.e., moves to non-superintendent positions in the same or another school district; 20% of turnover), and exits from education positions in the state (55% of turnover). A significant limitation to this categorization, however, was that their reliance on state administrative data meant that anyone who left the state's public education system was classified as an "exiter," regardless of whether they moved to an out-of-state superintendent role, moved into another line of work, or left the workforce altogether. In

other words, the authors almost certainly undercounted movement within the superintendency (since they could not observe out-of-state movers), and they lumped retirements together with transitions to work in other sectors states, or even with transitions to work at the state level in Missouri, as state-level positions were not captured in the state's school personnel data. This combining of potentially dissimilar pathways out of a superintendency may lead to drawing misleading conclusions about the drivers of turnover.

Nevertheless, Grissom and Mitani (2016) showed that even partially differentiating turnover by post-separation destination adds empirical leverage. Consistent with much of their *exit* category representing retirement, they found that age and total experience were positively associated with exit but generally not with movement or changing positions. In contrast, being hired into the superintendency from within the district correlated negatively with moving but was uncorrelated with other categories. They also found that isolating movement to other superintendent positions could uncover patterns in the characteristics of districts superintendents left vs. took new jobs in, helping infer potential reasons for leaving (e.g., higher pay, greater prestige). Such patterns are consistent with conclusions drawn from interviews with superintendent movers in other contexts, who tended also to transition to districts that were larger and higher paying (DeMatthews et al., 2025).

Contribution

In extending analysis of superintendents' pathways out of the role to consider separation type and post-separation destination, our study makes several contributions. First, we analyze predictors of separation type in a new state context—Tennessee—that has numerous institutional differences from the California context studied by Grissom and Andersen (2012), including fewer school districts, fewer large school districts, and a larger proportion of rural districts.

Second, with a more comprehensive original collection of information on departing superintendents' subsequent jobs, we better identify moves to new superintendencies and other educational roles and examine characteristics associated with those moves, filling an important gap in existing research. Third, with this data collection we document, for the first time, the kinds of roles superintendents take after leaving the state public education system, offering a window into post-superintendency employment that has not been available in prior studies. Fourth, and relatedly, separating superintendents who move to new employment from those who do not allows us to more precisely examine true exits from the workforce (i.e., retirement) and factors that predict those exits. Overall, we are able to build out substantially from Grissom and Mitani's (2016) analysis of a less complete set of post-separation destinations in Missouri, potentially identifying new turnover determinants or better understanding the role of factors uncovered in prior studies.

More generally, our analysis offers new tests of Grissom and Andersen's (2012) labor market model of superintendent transitions. These new tests go beyond simply looking in a new state, drawing on more complete data to better incorporate superintendents' alternative options in empirical analysis.

Data and Methods

Setting

We draw on longitudinal data from Tennessee. The state's 147 school districts, which serve nearly 1 million students, encompass a range of district types representing the diversity found across the United States. Tennessee's two largest districts, Memphis-Shelby County Schools and Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, are both urban districts that are among the 40 largest in the United States, educating a combined 200,000 students. At the other end of the

spectrum, four regular districts serve fewer than 400 students each. Approximately two-thirds of Tennessee districts are county-wide districts, and more than 75% are classified as rural or town locales, making the state particularly informative for understanding superintendent turnover outside the large urban districts that often have been the subject of turnover research. Approximately 60% of public-school students in Tennessee are White, 25% are Black, and 15% are Hispanic, placing the state near the national median on key demographic dimensions.

Each Tennessee school district is led by a *director of schools* or, colloquially, a superintendent. As in most states, superintendents are appointed by the local school board and considered an employee of the board. According to state law, superintendents in Tennessee are required only to have a bachelor's degree, though local boards may set other requirements and often do.[1] Boards can enter into employment contracts with superintendents of up to four years in length, renewable.

Administrative Data

Primary data for this study came from administrative personnel records provided by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) spanning the 2001–02 to 2021–22 school years. These records included the universe of educators at the school and district level. For each educator in each year, the records included demographic information (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age), years of experience in education, highest degree earned, job role, location, and salary.

Using job role information, we identified the superintendent for each district in each year beginning with 2006–07. Over the 15-year panel,[2] we could identify 418 unique superintendents

[1] The state does not have a separate license requirement for superintendents.
[2] Based on our operationalization of a superintendent turnover event, we examine 15 opportunities for a turnover event between 16 academic years.

populating 2,205 superintendent-by-year observations in 143 school districts.[3] For each of these superintendents, we calculated tenure (i.e., length of time in the superintendency in that district), filling in left-censored tenure lengths from public sources. We also used prior job assignment codes to construct an indicator for whether the superintendent was promoted from within the same district.

District-Level Data

We merged superintendent personnel records with publicly available information on district characteristics each year. This information included district enrollment size, locale type, and characteristics of students served (e.g., demographics, household low-income status), as well as district-level academic performance information, such as student proficiency rates in English language arts (ELA) and math and a composite student test score growth measure from the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). TVAAS compares a district's student growth to other districts statewide, assigning each district one of five levels based on where they fall in this relative growth distribution. Level 1 is far below average growth, while Level 5 is far above average.

We also created a school board–level measure of board member turnover. We began by gathering data on the size of each school board and board election timing from district web sites, Ballotpedia, and county election commission web sites. To measure member turnover, we counted the number of board members attending mandatory new board member training in the year following an election using rosters provided by the Tennessee School Boards Association, which provides the training. The board turnover measure each year is the number of new board members divided by the size of the board.

[3] We excluded specialized school districts such as the Tennessee School for the Deaf and the Achievement School District.

Operationalizing Superintendent Turnover

We defined a superintendent as turning over at the end of year *t* if he or she is not the superintendent in the same district at year *t+1* in the administrative data.[4] We set this binary indicator to 0 for superintendents who remained in the same district. We identified 313 turnover events in the administrative data during our analytic period.

To enable a more precise examination of turnover, we also used the administrative data to categorize turnover according to superintendents' destinations when they left their roles. Following Grissom and Mitani (2016), the administrative data permitted initial identification of three categories: (1) lateral moves, meaning moves to superintendent roles in other districts in Tennessee, (2) "downward" moves (i.e., to other central office or school-level positions) in the same district or a different district, and (3) exits, which identified superintendents no longer employed in a Tennessee school or district. We extend these categories with original data collection.

Original Data Collection on Separation Types and Post-Separation Destinations

For examining superintendent turnover, administrative data have two limitations. First, although we can see superintendents leaving their positions, we cannot directly observe why. Second, administrative data provide incomplete information about where superintendents go when they leave their positions because those who exit the data are not tracked.

To address the first gap, we supplemented the administrative records by hand-collecting information on the reasons for departure for superintendents who left any Tennessee superintendency during our study period. We gathered this information primarily from

[4] In a few cases, the administrative data recorded more than one superintendent in the same district in the same year. In that event, we considered the superintendent who was in office at the end of the school year as the superintendent for that year. When the administrative data was unclear on which superintendent met that criterion, we used information from the original data collection to identify them.

newspaper articles and other archives discussing the superintendents' departure. We characterized these departures as *retirements, resignations, terminations,* and *non-renewals*, the latter two of which were involuntary turnover events distinguished by whether the board ended employment during a contract period (*termination*) or was choosing not to extend a contract that was ending *(non-renewal*). A fifth category of separation types included unusual cases due to death, illness, or school district mergers, for example, plus the 1% of turnover cases for which a separation type could not be discerned.

An important caveat to our labeling of separation types is that it depended on interpretation of sources such as newspaper articles or school district press releases that may not accurately or fully report the reasons for a superintendent's departure. When possible, we attempted to triangulate our coding via multiple sources.

To address the second gap—incompleteness in post-separation destinations caused by the "disappearance" of exiters from state personnel records—we also hand-collected information about subsequent employment for superintendents who we no longer observed in the administrative data. This information was gleaned from multiple sources, including newspaper articles, social media profiles (e.g., LinkedIn), professional organization directories, inquiries to central offices, and conversations with professional acquaintances of the departed superintendent. We were able to document subsequent employment destinations (including a verified exit from the workforce due to retirement, death, or illness) for 96% of superintendents who exited the administrative data. We used this information to update and expand our categorization of turnover using the administrative data—for example, by recoding superintendents who moved to out-of-state superintendent roles as lateral movers and classifying subsequent job roles for administrative data exiters who did not leave the workforce. Categories

of subsequent roles included *superintendent, school or district position* (i.e., staying within public schools in a position other than superintendent)*, government* (including transitions to the Tennessee Department of Education or local government work other than in a school district)*, higher education, private sector, nonprofit/advocacy,* and *exit from workforce.*

Analytic Methods

A primary contribution of our analysis is better description of superintendent turnover using more robust information on superintendents' pathways out of the role. Our descriptive methods reflect this goal.

Beyond simple description, we estimated a series of linear probability models to investigate the factors associated with superintendent turnover. Following prior research (e.g., Grissom & Mitani, 2016), we estimated two types of models. First, we estimated models of a binary turnover indicator. These models took the form:

$$\Pr(turnover)_{ijt} = X_{it}\beta + D_{jt}\gamma + \mu_t + \epsilon_{ijt} \quad (1)$$

where the probability of turnover of superintendent *i* in district *j* at the end of school year *t* is the function of individual characteristics *X* and district characteristics *D*, plus a year fixed effect to capture year-specific shocks.[5] The vector *X* included factors examined in prior research, including an indicator for being female, an indicator for being Black,[6] an indicator for holding an educational specialist or doctoral degree, age range (categorical),[7] length of tenure in the current role (categorical), and an indicator for having been hired from within the district.[8] The vector *D*

[5] The low number of superintendent turnover events within each district made inclusion of district fixed effects infeasible.
[6] Nearly all superintendents in our data are classified as either Black or White.
[7] A nontrivial proportion of our sample were missing a valid entry for age in the administrative data. These superintendents systematically came from the earlier years of the data. To avoid losing these superintendents, we included *age missing* as an indicator in the regression models.
[8] Originally, we included experience in Tennessee schools, but it was correlated with age at $r = 0.81$, inducing multicollinearity in the regression models, so we dropped it.

included categorical measures of district enrollment size, locale type (e.g., urban, rural), proportion of Black students served, proportion of Hispanic students served, and proportion of economically disadvantaged students served, expressed as a decile of that variable to ensure comparability over changing state definitions of economic disadvantage.[9] We also considered salary a district-level factor.

Prior studies have also considered the role of district performance and of the school board in superintendent turnover (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). To examine district performance, we first used state standardized test score measures in math and ELA to place each district in a decile of student proficiency based on state cut scores. The two are highly correlated, so we focused on ELA performance. Because test scores are not released until after the conclusion of the school year, so may not be known when turnover decisions are being made, we lagged the test score performance measure by one year. We also interacted these performance metrics with an indicator for whether the superintendent was in their first year under the expectation that first-year superintendents would not be held accountable for past district performance. To investigate whether superintendent turnover follows school board turnover (Alsbury, 2008), we also included a measure of the proportion of new members on the school board as of *t-1*, i.e., with whom the superintendent entered the focal school year. We calculated robust standard errors for all models.

We also estimated a series of multinomial models using a categorical measure of turnover. We first categorized turnover each year according to the administrative data, labeling each superintendent a stayer, a mover within the superintendency in Tennessee, a position

[9] In 2018, Tennessee switched from operationalizing student poverty with free/reduced lunch to using an economic disadvantage indicator based primarily on receiving benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Because our data span this change and the two measures are not directly comparable, we instead calculated a district's decile of student poverty each year, regardless of which metric was used.

changer (either within or across districts), or an exiter from Tennessee schools and districts. Subsequently, we incorporated information from our original data collection to recategorize each superintendent as a stayer, a mover to any superintendency, a position changer within or across districts, a shifter to a position outside of school district employment, or an exiter from the workforce. In each case, we estimated a series of multinomial logit models with the same covariates as in equation 1.

Results

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1, column 1 describes our sample of Tennessee superintendents at the superintendent–year level. Twenty-four percent were female, and just 3% were Black. They were, on average, 55 years old, and 53% held an educational specialist or doctoral degree. They held 28 years of experience, on average, including 4.4 years as superintendent in their current district. Sixty-eight percent had been internal hires. Ten percent led urban districts, 13% suburban districts, 28% districts in small towns, and 49% rural districts. The mean salary (in inflation-adjusted 2022 dollars) was $136,000.

The mean annual turnover rate across years was 15%, which is 1 percentage point lower than prior estimates of the national average (White, 2023). However, as Figure 1 shows, this rate oscillated substantially across years, with annual turnover rates ranging from 8% to 21% across the panel, including a pronounced drop during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although not shown, the median tenure in the same position was three years across the analytic period.[10]

[10] The median tenure was three years in all but five years of the sample. In those years, the median was four years.

We also observed some initial differences in superintendents and their districts in years of stability versus turnover.[11] Comparing the *no turnover* and *turnover* columns in Table 1, female and Black superintendents were more likely to turn over, as were older, more experienced, and longer-tenured superintendents. Turnover was 6 percentage points higher among externally hired superintendents than internal hires. District-level factors descriptively associated with turnover included having higher enrollment, serving more Black students, and higher salaries, though none of these associations appeared large.

Separation Types

Figure 2 describes separation types among superintendents who turned over. The sources we consulted suggested that 47% of turnover events were retirements, and 25% were resignations. Terminations and non-renewals accounted for 12% and 7% of turnover events, respectively. In other words, we would categorize approximately 19% of turnover events as involuntary, based primarily on public reporting. For the remaining 10% of turnover events, we either could not identify a separation type, or the separation type was an unusual event (e.g., death of the superintendent, school district merger, transition of an interim superintendent). This last category was excluded from later analyses.

Appendix Table A1 describes characteristics of superintendents and their districts by separation type. The table shows some key differences in these characteristics across reason for turning over. Black superintendents, for example, seldom retired, and female leaders were more likely to exit via non-renewal of contract. Retirements were more common among older, more experienced, and longer-serving superintendents, as well as those who were hired internally. Involuntary exit types—termination and non-renewal—were more common in rural districts.

[11] Note that because our data contained the universe of superintendents in the state, we did not perform statistical tests for these comparisons.

Post-Separation Destinations

Categorizing superintendents' pathways out of the role requires knowledge of where they go next. The righthand side of Table 2 reports how we would classify superintendent turnover if we relied only on state administrative data as in Grissom and Mitani (2016). Under this assumption, we would classify 5% of superintendent turnovers as next-year moves within the superintendency, 14% as position changes, and 74% as permanent exits. An additional 7% of exiters—that is, superintendents who exited the administrative data for at least one year—reappeared in the administrative data in a later year.

Administrative data, however, narrow our lens to subsequent positions in schools and districts within the state's public education system. This limitation is potentially a significant one that we overcome with hand-collected data on superintendents' next job roles.

The lefthand side of Table 2 shows the distribution of the categorization of the next job roles among superintendents leaving their districts, combining across roles identified in the administrative data and our original data collection. Ten percent of job transitions were to other superintendent roles. Approximately the same proportion were to other district positions (11%) and school-level positions (9%). Transitions to government, higher education, the private sector, and nonprofit/advocacy organizations were each 4–6%. Forty-five percent of transitions were exits from the workforce altogether (i.e., true retirements).

Although not tabulated, we tracked in our coding whether the superintendent's job transition kept them in education work, even if they changed sectors—for example, we tracked whether they moved into government work in education (e.g., at the Tennessee Department of Education) or, similarly, work at an education-focused nonprofit or advocacy organization.

Overall, the 58 superintendents transitioning into employment outside a school district stayed in education-related work 72% of the time.

Returning to the righthand side of the table, we see how reliance on administrative data only would miss many of these subsequent roles when the superintendent leaves their role. The most telling column is the one labeled *Permanent Exit*, which shows the breakdown of post-separation destinations among superintendents we observed leaving the administrative data, meaning they exited all positions in a Tennessee school district. Among this group, we hand-coded 61% as exits from the labor force, meaning that we found confirmatory evidence of no further professional employment. Three percent left their positions due to death or illness, and for an additional 4%, next job either was unknown or due to an unusual event, such as a school district merger. The remaining 32%, however, held subsequent job roles. These roles included public school system roles in other states—3% in the superintendent's office, 2% in other district roles, and 3% in school-level positions—each of which would be miscategorized if we relied only on Tennessee administrative data.

The 3% of data exiters who, in fact, moved to non-Tennessee superintendent roles meant that using only the administrative data would lead us to underestimate the (next-year) superintendent mobility rate as 5% rather than the correct 8%. Reliance on administrative data could also lead to incorrect inferences about the proportion of exiting superintendents who leave the workforce altogether; assuming data-exiters were all workforce-exiters would substantially overestimate this proportion (74% vs. the more accurate 45%). To provide a more accurate representation of pathways out, the rest of the analyses we present employed these finer-grained data that supplement administrative records with the hand-collected information.

Table 3 shows superintendents' next work destination by superintendent and district characteristics. One especially useful comparison in this table is the one between stayers (column 1) and superintendents who left their district for superintendent roles elsewhere (column 2). These movers were more likely to be Black (13% of movers vs. 3% of stayers),[12] more likely to hold terminal degrees (72% vs. 53%), much less likely to have been hired from within the district (29% vs. 69%). Movers' districts were approximately twice as large and about 50% more likely to be urban; these superintendents' salaries were also about $24,000 higher.

This comparison of district characteristics at first seems inconsistent with the conclusion from prior research that superintendents often move to more "prestigious," better-paying superintendent roles (e.g., Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Yet when we replicated analysis of "sending" and "receiving" district characteristics (i.e., characteristics of districts superintendent movers left vs. the ones they moved to) included in these prior studies, we found familiar patterns.[13] As Table 4 shows, receiving districts were larger, were more likely to be city or suburban districts, served higher proportions of Black and Hispanic students, and paid substantially more (about $34,000 per year).[14]

Returning to Table 3, several other patterns stand out. First, women were disproportionately represented among movers into central offices and school-level positions both in the same and different districts, and into higher education and the nonprofit sector. Beyond new superintendent roles, Black superintendents were disproportionately represented in transitions to private sector and nonprofit/advocacy roles (11–13% of those groups) and to

[12] Although not shown given small sample sizes, Black superintendents were especially disproportionately represented among moves to superintendencies in other states (38% of that population).
[13] We were able to complete profiles for "receiving" districts in 94% of cases, even for out-of-state moves, by obtaining data from publicly available sources. The small remainder accounts for the slight difference in "sending" characteristics between Tables 3 and 4.
[14] These patterns were even starker for superintendents recruited out-of-state.

higher education (8%). People moving to higher education were very likely to hold higher degrees (90%) and were also the oldest superintendents (average age = 60) among superintendents continuing employment.

Superintendents exiting the workforce had an average age of 62 and 35 years of experience in education. Experienced and long-tenured superintendents and those hired from within were more likely to transition into central office or school-level work in the same district. Notably, such transitions were much more common in rural districts.

Leading a large district was associated with moving into higher education or into the private sector. These moves also corresponded to serving in more urban districts with larger fractions of students of color.

The Relationship Between Separation Type and Post-Separation Destination

Table 5 shows a cross-tabulation between separation type and post-separation destination. The table shows that most superintendents we identified as retirements indeed left the workforce (78%). Twenty-two percent, however, continued into other employment, including 2% who "retired" but then took other superintendent jobs, and 10 others (7%) who went into other central office or school-based roles. In 82% of those cases, the superintendent remained within the same district. Our coding suggested that these same-district transitions sometimes represented roles advising the new superintendent before a complete transition out of the district, though in other cases the retiring superintendent stayed on in another administrative or instructional capacity.

Superintendents were much more likely to resign to take other superintendent roles. Thirty percent of resignations corresponded to moves to other superintendencies. Twenty-five percent of resignations preceded transitions to school- or district-level employment. Other

resignations were pathways to a variety of role types, with no concentration in any single category. Just 8% of resignations led to exits from the workforce.

Terminations and non-renewals were pathways to new superintendent roles less often than resignations. Six percent of terminated and 9% of non-renewed superintendents moved into other superintendent roles. Terminations and non-renewals were much more likely to be followed by exits from the workforce (roughly 30% of each group). More often, however, these involuntarily exited superintendents moved into other employment, including in schools and districts.

Regression Analysis

Next, we turn to the results of multivariate models of superintendent turnover. Following most prior research, we begin with binary models of turnover. We then turn to multinomial models of separation type and post-separation destination.

Binary Turnover Models

Table 6 shows the results of the linear probability model, where the outcome is a binary indicator of turnover. Column 1 includes only individual characteristics. Column 2 includes only district characteristics. Column 3 combines individual and district characteristics, while column 4 adds superintendent salary as an additional covariate. Results generally were similar across models, so we focus on column 4 as our preferred model.

We found differences in covariate-adjusted turnover probabilities by both gender and race. Conditional on other factors, female superintendents were 4 percentage points more likely to turn over than their male colleagues. Black superintendents were an astonishing 15 percentage points more likely to turn over than their White counterparts.[15]

[15] Black superintendents were 12 percentage points more likely in the bivariate case.

Unsurprisingly, age and tenure length were both important correlates of turnover. Turnover probabilities were 10–12 percentage points higher among superintendents older than 61 than those aged 50 or younger. Turnover likelihood also rose about 8 percentage points between one's third and fourth year leading a district, then rose again between years 6 and 7. Superintendents hired from within the district were 3 percentage points less likely to turn over each year ($p = 0.11$ in column 4).

Results regarding district size also paralleled prior research. Turnover probabilities rose significantly with enrollment. Translating the coefficient on the log-transformed enrollment variable, we found that doubling the size of the district would be associated with approximately 2.6 percentage point increase in turnover probability. Beyond size, we did not find consistent statistically significant associations between other district-level characteristics, such as locale type or student demographics, and likelihood of turnover. The exception was salary; for each $10,000 in annual salary the district paid, the superintendent, the probability of turnover fell by about 0.7 percentage points.

Multinomial Models of Separation Type

Table 7 shows estimates of a multinomial model of separation type. Separation type had three categories: retirement, resignation, or involuntary (i.e., combining termination and non-renewal). We estimated a series of these models with individual characteristics only, district characteristics only, or both together, but given substantive similarity across coefficients, the table displays results only from the fully specified model.

As with the binary models, we begin with gender and race. Column 2 shows that female superintendents' higher likelihood of turnover in Table 6 most clearly was driven by differences in resignations; female superintendents were 2.5 percentage points more likely to resign, while

coefficients for the other separation types were small and not statistically significant at conventional levels. Results for race were inconclusive. The *Black* coefficients for both resignation and involuntary turnover were similar and substantively meaningful in magnitude, but neither was statistically significant at conventional levels. The conclusion most consistent with the data was that the much higher probability of turnover among Black superintendents was driven by both separation types, but the relatively small number of Black superintendents who turned over made results insufficiently precise to draw strong inferences.

As expected, age was a key predictor of retirement, with a superintendent's probability of leaving via retirement increasing 4 percentage points in the age 56–60 category and about eight additional points at age 61. In parallel, superintendents appear less likely to resign as they grow older. No clear trends in involuntary turnover appeared for age, though superintendents in the 61–65 age group were the most likely to leave involuntarily. As superintendents served longer tenures, they generally were more likely to retire or resign, with the probability of retirement peaking for superintendents who have led their districts for 7–10 years; the likelihoods for those serving 11+ years were statistically similar to superintendents who were new to their districts. This group of longest-serving superintendents were the least likely to be involuntarily terminated. Internal hires were 5 percentage points less likely than external hires to resign from their positions.

Among district characteristics, district enrollment had a positive association with retirement and resignation. Conditional on other factors, superintendents of rural districts were 5 percentage points more likely than urban superintendents to leave involuntarily. We found no statistically significant relationships between separation type and the proportion of Black students, the proportion of Hispanic students, or the decile of economic disadvantage. With

regard to superintendent salary, coefficients are negative and of similar magnitude across separation types, though only statistically distinguishable from zero for involuntary turnover.

Multinomial Models of Post-Separation Destination

Table 8 turns from separation type to multinomial models of the post-separation destinations of superintendents who turn over. We categorized these destinations according to the same scheme as in Table 3. As with the prior two tables, we show results only from the fully specified model.

The clearest association in Table 8 was between age and likelihood of exiting the workforce. Consistent with findings from modeling separation type that older superintendents left their positions via retirement, superintendents' probability of exiting the workforce overall increased as they age. This increase became clear at age 56–60 and continued to climb, such that superintendents aged 65+ were 11 percentage points more likely to exit the workforce than the superintendents in the youngest age category. Tenure in the district generally showed a similar relationship.

Age and tenure predicted other post-separation destinations as well. The oldest superintendents were less likely to move into government and nonprofit/advocacy work. Likelihood of transitioning to another superintendency generally increased with tenure, though the longest-serving superintendents were less likely to make this transition, nor to move into other school or district employment. Medium tenure lengths (4–6 years) were associated with moves into government and higher education.

Internal hires were significantly less likely to move to new superintendencies and to leave for government or private sector employment. Neither gender nor race statistically

predicted any of the post-separation destinations at conventional levels once other factors were taken into account.[16]

There were few clear patterns by district characteristics. The exceptions were district size and salary. Superintendents leading larger districts are more likely to move to other superintendent roles and positions in government, and to exit the workforce. Higher salaries were associated with lower probabilities of moving to other school or district positions and into nonprofit/advocacy work. Turnover in suburban districts also was more likely to correspond to an exit from the workforce.

Considering District Academic Performance and School Board Turnover

Thus far, we have estimated the probability of turnover for superintendents using individual and district characteristics that are commonly found in administrative data systems and have been used in prior studies. Next, we incorporate two additional factors—academic performance and school board turnover—that we hypothesized could play a potentially outsized role in predicting superintendent turnover.

We began with a binary turnover model. We measured district academic performance both with a status measure (ELA proficiency rate) and with a growth measure (TVAAS) because we were unsure whether one or the other may be more relevant to turnover decisions. We measured school board turnover as the proportion of new members joining the board prior to the beginning of school year *t*.

Initially, we were concerned about the potential endogeneity of academic performance and school board turnover. Dissatisfaction theory predicts that low performance will lead citizens

[16] In an alternative version of Table 8 in which we grouped government, higher education, private sector, and nonprofit/advocacy together, we did find that female superintendents were 2 percentage points more likely to leave via this combined pathway ($p < 0.05$).

to vote school board members out of office, leading to subsequent superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2008). To test this hypothesis, we modeled the proportion of new board members at time *t* as a function of the two district performance metrics at time *t-1*, with and without district covariates. Results are shown in Appendix Table A2. In none of the models did we find evidence that either lagged proficiency level or lagged TVAAS predicted school board turnover. Although not conclusive, these results suggested that endogeneity would not be a major concern if we included both district performance and board turnover in our superintendent turnover models.

The first column of Table 9 shows the results. All models in Table 9 included superintendent and district covariates (as in prior models),[17] plus an interaction between the performance metrics and an indicator for whether the superintendent was in their first year, though these coefficients are all suppressed from the table for parsimony. The coefficients on the performance metrics could thus be interpreted as the association with turnover for superintendents in year 2 or more of their tenure in the district. We saw that superintendents whose districts were in the two lowest growth categories were significantly more likely to turn over (11–18 percentage points) than those in the middle (omitted) category. Above Level 3 TVAAS, we observed no statistically significant relationship between performance and turnover. Nor did we find evidence that superintendents in districts in the lowest or highest ELA proficiency categories were differentially likely to turn over.[18] The lagged proportion of new school board members similarly was not statistically significantly associated with turnover at

[17] These coefficients generally were not affected substantially by the inclusion of the performance and board turnover variables.

[18] We also experimented with models including proficiency deciles, TVAAS, and board turnover without conditioning on one another. Districts in the bottom 20% of ELA proficiency were 5.5 percentage points more likely to lose their superintendent if TVAAS was excluded ($p<0.10$).

conventional levels, though we note that the coefficient is imprecisely estimated, preventing us from ruling out a substantively important positive relationship.[19]

Columns 2–4 show results for estimating separation type. The coefficients suggested some nuance in the district performance—superintendent turnover relationship. The association between turnover and lower TVAAS ratings observed in column 1 appeared to be driven primarily by higher rates of retirement among superintendents in lower-growth districts. We also observed that involuntary turnover was 4.7 percentage points higher in districts in the bottom 20% of ELA proficiency. Neither performance metric was associated with resignation rates, nor did we find a statistical association between board turnover and any of the three separation types, though again, imprecision was an issue; we could not rule out potentially substantively important associations between board turnover and both retirement and involuntary turnover.

The remaining columns show estimates for post-separation destination. Consistent with the finding from column 2 that lower TVAAS ratings predict greater retirement, column 11 shows that superintendents in districts with lower TVAAS ratings were more likely to exit the workforce (7–13 percentage points compared to those in districts with Level 3 ratings). Superintendents in districts with Level 1 TVAAS were also 2 percentage points more likely to transition to nonprofit/advocacy roles. Also, superintendents in districts with the highest growth (i.e., Level 5 TVAAS) were more likely to leave both for roles in higher education and the private sector. In contrast, ELA proficiency rates generally were not associated with post-separation destinations, with two exceptions: superintendents in districts with bottom-20% proficiency were more likely to move into school or district positions (by 5 percentage points compared to districts in the middle 60%) and less likely to move into the private sector (by about

[19] Indeed, in models that include ELA proficiency but exclude TVAAS, the board turnover coefficient is 0.14 ($p<0.10$).

1 percentage point relative to the reference group). The similarity in the coefficients on low proficiency between columns 4 and 6 suggested that school boards in those districts are more likely to terminate or not renew their superintendents, who then move into other school or district employment.

We also found that school board turnover was associated with several separation types, though in unexpected ways. Higher board turnover was strongly positively correlated with superintendents exiting the workforce; to translate the coefficient, if a five-member board changed two of its members, we would predict superintendent turnover to increase by about 5 percentage points. In contrast, higher board turnover was associated with *lower* likelihood of moving to another superintendency or moving to higher education. We again noted some imprecision in the null estimates for other destinations. In particular, the board turnover coefficient suggested potentially large positive association with movement into a school or district position, though it was not statistically significant at conventional levels.

Discussion and Conclusions

By combining 15 years of administrative personnel data with an original hand-collected dataset documenting superintendents' reasons for leaving their posts and their subsequent employment, this study offers the most comprehensive portrait of superintendent turnover available in the literature to date, albeit in one state. Several results stand out.

First, at one level, our findings present a mixed picture relative to prior work. The retirement share of turnover we observed (47%) is comparable to the shares that Grissom and Andersen (2012) documented in California two decades earlier (40%), as well as what White and Muñiz (2025) documented nationally using more recent data (44%), suggesting this piece of the puzzle may be relatively stable across time and place. Resignations and involuntary separations,

however, diverged sharply from these benchmarks. Only 25% of the turnover we observed were resignations, compared to 45% and 48% in the California and national samples, respectively, while 19% was involuntary, compared to just 2% and 6%. This divergence suggests that the underlying mix of reasons superintendents leave varies across settings. Tennessee superintendents may face different pressures toward involuntary exit than superintendents in other states.

Second, and perhaps most consequentially, our results demonstrate that relying on state administrative data alone, the approach necessitated in most prior large-scale studies including Grissom and Mitani (2016), can produce a systematically distorted picture of where superintendents go when they leave their positions. Administrative data alone would lead us to classify roughly three-quarters of turnover events as permanent exits from the state's public education workforce. Yet once we tracked superintendents' subsequent employment, only 45% had, in fact, left the workforce; the remainder moved into new superintendencies (including out-of-state positions unobserved in state administrative records), other school or district roles, or employment in government, higher education, the private sector, or nonprofit and advocacy organizations—typically though not universally in education-adjacent work. These results complicate a likely common assumption that the superintendency represents a career capstone, or a final stop before retirement. For a meaningful share of the superintendents in our sample, leaving the role instead marks entry into a new career phase.

Third, considering separation type and destination jointly reveals a more differentiated picture of the labor market model of superintendent turnover than binary turnover models alone can offer. Consistent with the labor-supply-side logic of Grissom and Andersen's (2012) model, resignations were disproportionately followed by moves into new superintendencies or other

district and school roles, while retirements were mostly followed by true labor force exit. Involuntary separations, in contrast, were a mix, with meaningful shares of terminated and non-renewed superintendents both exiting the workforce and continuing in other employment. This pattern suggests that separation type and destination, while related, capture distinct dimensions of the turnover experience. Collapsing either into a single binary indicator likely obscures underlying processes driving departures.

Fourth, our regression results identify both anticipated and unanticipated predictors of turnover. Age and tenure-related patterns align closely with a retirement-driven story: the probability of leaving via retirement rose sharply after age 60 and peaked among superintendents in their seventh through tenth year in a district, while these same factors were largely unrelated to resignation or involuntary turnover. Salary and district enrollment operate much as prior research has found (Grissom & Mitani, 2016), with higher pay associated with lower turnover and larger districts associated with higher turnover, more moves into new superintendencies, and more moves outside the K–12 sector entirely. We also find that lower district academic growth predicted turnover primarily through elevated retirement rather than involuntary separation, complicating a straightforward reading of dissatisfaction theory (Alsbury, 2008), in which underperformance is expected to trigger termination. Instead, our results suggest that superintendents themselves may be more likely to leave voluntarily, by retiring, when their districts are struggling, or that stated "retirement" in these cases may mask departures that are involuntary in substance if not in public reporting. Similarly, school board turnover was associated with a higher likelihood of workforce exit though a lower likelihood of moving to another superintendency, suggesting a more nuanced relationship between board instability and superintendent's departure that deserves further attention. In addition, we find that

superintendents hired internally had an overall rate of turnover lower than externally hired individuals and were less likely to resign.

Finally, we document a substantial and, by covariate-adjusted standards, striking gender and racial gap in turnover. Female superintendents were 4 percentage points more likely to turn over than their male counterparts, a difference driven specifically by elevated resignation rates. Black superintendents were 15 percentage points more likely to turn over than their White counterparts, yet this gap did not resolve cleanly into either resignation or involuntary separation when we examined separation type, nor into any single post-separation destination. These findings depart from prior work; White's (2025) synthesis of the literature concluded that superintendent gender and race have consistently *not* been found to predict turnover once age, tenure, salary, and district characteristics are taken into account. Our results suggest otherwise, at least in Tennessee. This divergence signals that the relationship between superintendent demographic characteristics and turnover deserves further empirical attention.

For school boards and other policymakers, our findings suggest that not all turnover calls for the same policy response. Retirement-driven departures are comparatively predictable from superintendents' age and tenure and may be best addressed through proactive succession planning rather than retention-focused interventions. Resignation- and involuntary turnover–driven departures, by contrast, appear more responsive to compensation and working-conditions levers, consistent with prior research (DeMatthews et al., 2025; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). The association between low district academic growth and elevated retirement is also worth flagging for state and district leaders designing accountability systems; our results are consistent with the possibility that accountability pressure contributes to earlier departures of experienced superintendents through retirement, an unintended consequence that would not be visible in

analyses that only examine involuntary separations. School board turnover emerged as another potentially underappreciated lever, given its association with both superintendent workforce exit and reduced re-employment as a superintendent. Board development and stability may therefore be a more directly actionable policy target than is often discussed in conversations about superintendent retention. Finally, the lower rates of turnover among internally hired candidates, as well as their lower likelihood of seeking another superintendency, suggest that districts interested in stability and long tenures might benefit from developing and promoting internal candidates to lead their system.

Our study faces several limitations. First, our findings come from a single state, and our results may not generalize elsewhere. Second, our hand-collected measures of separation type and post-separation destination depend on the availability and completeness of public reporting such as newspaper coverage and district communications, which we suspect are unevenly distributed across district size and locale; departures in smaller or more rural districts may be systematically harder to document, potentially biasing our separation-type classifications in ways we cannot fully assess. Third, our measures of district academic performance, standardized test proficiency and growth, are relatively narrow lenses on district quality. Local communities may also weigh other dimensions of district performance, such as fiscal health, the strength of extracurricular offerings, and the avoidance of scandal, that our data do not capture and that could independently shape superintendents' decisions to stay or leave. Fourth, our regression models are associational rather than causal. This concern is especially relevant to the relationships we identify among district academic performance, school board turnover, and superintendent turnover, where reverse causality and omitted community-level factors remain plausible despite analysis we conducted to probe potential endogeneity. Finally, small cell sizes

for some subgroups, particularly Black superintendents and several of the less common post-separation destinations, limit the precision of several estimates, as we note throughout the results; this is a likely explanation for why the racial gap in turnover did not resolve into a specific separation type or destination despite its substantial magnitude.

These findings point toward several directions for future research. Replicating this study's approach of leveraging administrative augmented with additional data collection would help establish whether the magnitude of the gender and racial gaps in turnover we identify, as well as the specific patterns linking separation type to post-separation destination, generalize beyond Tennessee. Longer-run tracking of superintendents' post-exit trajectories would also be valuable, both to understand whether superintendents who leave for other sectors ever return to K–12 leadership and to assess how such moves relate to their career satisfaction and to the outcomes of the districts they leave behind. Because school board turnover proved to be a meaningful predictor of superintendent departures, future work should investigate the drivers of board turnover itself and whether interventions that promote school board productivity have downstream effects on superintendent retention. Researchers might also extend the destination taxonomy we introduce here, distinguishing government, higher education, private sector, and nonprofit or advocacy employment, to other states and contexts, now that we have shown these pathways collectively account for a nontrivial share of superintendent transitions. Finally, future work could incorporate broader measures of district performance, beyond test score proficiency and growth, such as fiscal health or community satisfaction, to better capture the full range of factors that may influence superintendents' turnover decisions.

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Figure 1: Turnover Rate Over Time

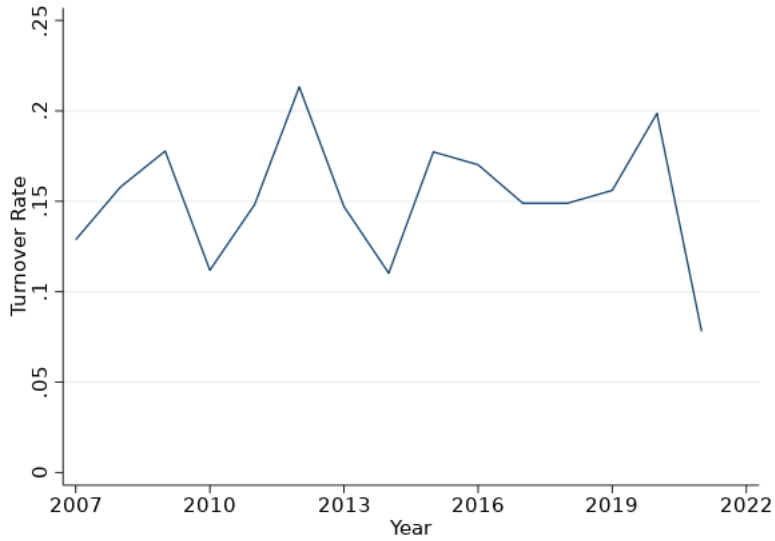

Figure 2: Superintendent Separation Types

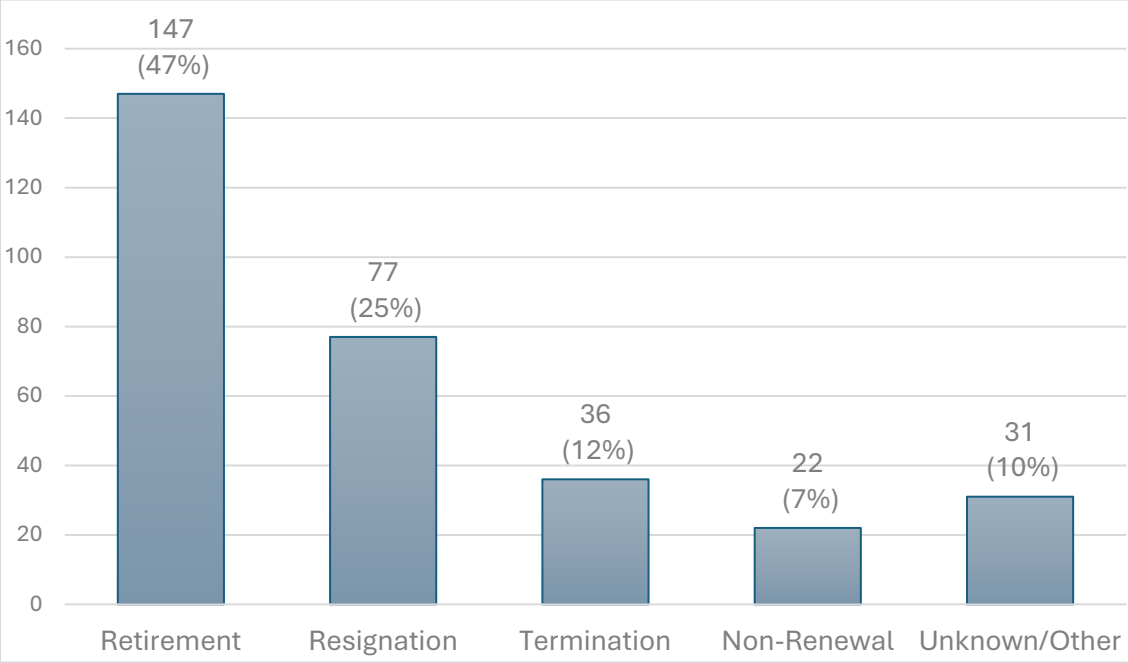

Table 1: Characteristics of Superintendents in Pooled, No Turnover, and Turnover Samples

	All Years	No Turnover	Turnover
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Turnover (any type)	0.15	--	--
Superintendent Characteristics			
Female	0.24	0.23	0.26
Black	0.03	0.03	0.06
Ed Specialist or Doctorate	0.53	0.53	0.47
Age	54.61	54.18	57.40
Years Experience	27.99	27.49	30.92
Tenure	4.43	4.19	5.56
Hired Within	0.68	0.69	0.63
District Characteristics			
Enrollment	7,390	7,126	8,890
City	0.10	0.09	0.11
Suburban	0.13	0.13	0.11
Town	0.28	0.29	0.27
Rural	0.49	0.49	0.51
Proportion Black	0.12	0.11	0.13
Proportion Hispanic	0.06	0.05	0.05
ED/FRPL Decile	5.47	5.46	5.53
Other			
Salary ($2022)	$136,076	$136,161	$138,145
ELA Proficiency Decile (lagged)	5.55	5.60	5.20
TVAAS Composite (lagged)	3.19	3.20	2.75
Proportion New School Board Members (lagged)	0.08	0.07	0.09
N	2,205	1,751	313

Note: Column 1 includes all years (2007–2022). Columns 2 and 3 do not include 2022 because leading year used to identify turnover. Table reads: 24% of the pooled superintendents were women, 23% of superintendents who did not turn over were women, 26% of superintendents who turned over were women.

Table 2: Post-Separation Destination by Administrative Data Turnover Type

	All			By Turnover Type in Administrative Data			
Post-Separation Destination	N	Proportion of All Turnover	Examples	District Change within Superintendency	Role Change	Exit then Return	Permanent Exit
Superintendent	31	0.10	--	1	--	0.29	0.03
District position	35	0.11	Assistant Superintendent; Chief Academic Officer	--	0.61	0.19	0.02
School position	29	0.09	Principal; Teacher	--	0.39	0.29	0.03
Government	14	0.04	Numerous Positions at the Tennessee Department of Education; Town Manager; Tennessee House of Representatives	--	--	0.19	0.04
Higher education	12	0.04	Assistant Professor	--	--	--	0.05
Private Sector	18	0.06	Consultant; Insurance Executive; Shipping Executive	--	--	0.05	0.07
Nonprofit/Advocacy	15	0.05	Private School Head; Leadership Positions in Education Reform, Residential Treatment, and Educator Training Organizations	--	--	--	0.06
Exit Workforce	142	0.45		--	--	--	0.61
Unknown/Other	9	0.03		--	--	--	0.04
Death/Illness	8	0.03		--	--	--	0.03
N	313			17	44	21	231
Proportion				*0.05*	*0.14*	*0.07*	*0.74*

Table 3: Superintendent and District Characteristics by Post-Separation Destination

	Stay	Superintendent	School or District Position		Government	Higher Education	Private Sector	Nonprofit/ Advocacy	Exit Workforce
			Same District	Different District					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Superintendent Characteristics									
Female	0.23	0.23	0.31	0.42	0.21	0.36	0.19	0.40	0.22
Black	0.03	0.13	0.05	0.04	0	0.08	0.11	0.13	0.04
EdS or Doctorate	0.53	0.72	0.26	0.58	0.64	0.90	0.63	0.67	0.36
Age	54.2	53.4	56.4	51.4	50.7	59.6	56.4	51.8	61.5
Years Experience	27.5	25.2	32.1	21.8	24.6	25.7	28.3	28.6	35.3
Tenure	4.2	4.5	4.1	3.6	6.3	6.1	5.0	5.6	6.7
Hired Within	0.69	0.29	0.92	0.63	0.33	0.50	0.36	0.63	0.73
District characteristics									
Enrollment	7,126	13,064	8,063	3,084	9,484	29,216	18,468	4,724	7,210
Urban	0.09	0.13	0.11	0.04	0.14	0.25	0.33	0.20	0.08
Suburban	0.13	0.06	0.05	0.04	0.14	0.08	0.11	0.07	0.16
Town	0.29	0.32	0.16	0.27	0.29	0.25	0.28	0.27	0.30
Rural	0.49	0.48	0.68	0.65	0.43	0.42	0.28	0.47	0.46
Proportion Black	0.11	0.16	0.11	0.13	0.15	0.16	0.23	0.12	0.12
Proportion Hispanic	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.05
ED/FRPL Decile	5.5	5.4	5.9	4.9	6.0	5.9	5.0	6.4	5.3
Salary ($2022)	$136,161	$160,452	$117,912	$118,997	$141,920	$185,947	$159,471	$134,586	$136,652
Other									
ELA Proficiency Decile (lagged)	5.6	6.8	3.5	5.0	4.8	4.7	4.7	5.0	5.5
TVAAS Composite (lagged)	3.2	3.2	2.9	2.5	3.3	2.0	3.0	3.0	2.6
Proportion New School Board Members (lagged)	0.07	0.04	0.10	0.08	0.13	0.05	0.03	0.09	0.10
N	1,751	31	38	26	14	12	18	15	142

Table 4: Changes in Job Characteristics Among Superintendents Who Move

	Sending District	Receiving District
	(1)	(2)
Enrollment size	14,034	59,600
Proportion Black	0.18	0.22
Proportion Hispanic	0.05	0.07
Urban	0.14	0.21
Suburban	0.07	0.21
Town	0.29	0.29
Rural	0.50	0.29
Salary ($2022)	$160,950	$194,854

Note: We excluded the 6% of districts for which we could not profile the characteristics of the "receiving" district.

Table 5: Connecting Post-Separation Destination and Separation Type

	Retirement	Resignation	Termination	Non-Renewal
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Superintendent	0.02	0.30	0.06	0.09
School or District Position	0.07	0.23	0.28	0.45
Same District	*0.82*	*0.44*	*0.30*	*0.50*
Different District	*0.18*	*0.56*	*0.70*	*0.50*
Government	0.01	0.12	0.03	0.09
Higher Education	0.03	0.06	0.08	0
Private Sector	0.05	0.05	0.11	0.05
Nonprofit/Advocacy	0.03	0.10	0.08	0
Exits Workforce	0.78	0.08	0.31	0.27
Unknown	0	0.05	0.06	0.05
N	147	77	36	22

Note: Cells show column proportions. The *Other* separation type shown in Figure 2 is excluded from the table.

Table 6: Modeling Binary Turnover

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Female	0.028		0.037*	0.036*
	(0.021)		(0.021)	(0.021)
Black	0.137**		0.132**	0.148**
	(0.064)		(0.067)	(0.067)
EdS or Doctorate	-0.008		-0.015	-0.016
	(0.018)		(0.020)	(0.020)
Age 51–55	0.011		0.010	0.013
	(0.020)		(0.020)	(0.020)
Age 56–60	0.025		0.029	0.031
	(0.025)		(0.026)	(0.025)
Age 61–65	0.121***		0.118***	0.117***
	(0.033)		(0.033)	(0.032)
Age 65+	0.103**		0.102**	0.098**
	(0.045)		(0.046)	(0.046)
Tenure in District 2–3 Years	-0.018		-0.015	-0.009
	(0.021)		(0.021)	(0.020)
Tenure in District 4–6 Years	0.063***		0.066***	0.073***
	(0.024)		(0.024)	(0.024)
Tenure in District 7–10 Years	0.106***		0.110***	0.121***
	(0.032)		(0.033)	(0.033)
Tenure in District 11+ Years	-0.045		-0.053	-0.037
	(0.045)		(0.046)	(0.046)
Hired From Within District	-0.020		-0.025	-0.033
	(0.019)		(0.020)	(0.021)
District Enrollment (logged)		0.019***	0.026***	0.038***
		(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)
Suburb		-0.013	-0.002	-0.003
		(0.035)	(0.039)	(0.039)
Town		0.010	0.042	0.024
		(0.032)	(0.038)	(0.039)
Rural		0.027	0.051	0.032
		(0.034)	(0.038)	(0.039)
Proportion Black Students		0.108*	-0.013	0.030
		(0.064)	(0.074)	(0.078)
Proportion Hispanic Students		-0.123	-0.230	-0.224
		(0.168)	(0.176)	(0.175)
District ED Decile		-0.001	-0.000	-0.002
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Salary (in 10,000s, $2022)				-0.007**
				(0.003)
Constant	0.057**	-0.025	-0.170**	-0.162**
	(0.028)	(0.067)	(0.077)	(0.078)
Observations	1,474	2,055	1,474	1,473
R^2	0.072	0.015	0.080	0.084

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Models also include an *age missing* indicator.

Table 7: Multinomial Model of Separation Type

Separation Type:	Retirement	Resignation	Involuntary
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Female	0.006	0.025*	-0.003
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.011)
Black	0.004	0.068	0.070
	(0.034)	(0.052)	(0.051)
Ed Specialist or Doctorate	-0.023	-0.021*	0.033***
	(0.015)	(0.012)	(0.010)
Age 51–55	0.009	-0.012	0.017
	(0.009)	(0.015)	(0.012)
Age 56–60	0.037**	-0.031*	0.019
	(0.017)	(0.016)	(0.013)
Age 61–65	0.116***	-0.051***	0.038**
	(0.025)	(0.016)	(0.018)
Age 65+	0.115***	-0.026	0.009
	(0.039)	(0.028)	(0.018)
Tenure in District 2–3 Years	0.017*	0.014	-0.007
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Tenure in District 4–6 Years	0.074***	0.041***	0.007
	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.014)
Tenure in District 7–10 Years	0.123***	0.040**	0.016
	(0.025)	(0.020)	(0.018)
Tenure in District 11+ Years	0.023	0.022	-0.047***
	(0.035)	(0.027)	(0.017)
Hired Within District	0.011	-0.046***	-0.016
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.011)
District Enrollment (logged)	0.015**	0.015**	0.005
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.004)
Suburb	0.014	-0.029	0.016
	(0.031)	(0.025)	(0.020)
Town	0.007	-0.002	0.021
	(0.029)	(0.026)	(0.020)
Rural	-0.008	-0.001	0.045**
	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.021)
Proportion Black Students	0.007	-0.005	0.028
	(0.053)	(0.058)	(0.047)
Proportion Hispanic Students	-0.190	-0.073	0.091
	(0.123)	(0.101)	(0.105)
Proportion ED Students	-0.001	0.000	0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Salary (in 10,000s, $2022)	-0.002	-0.002	-0.003*
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Constant	-0.114**	-0.018	-0.048
	(0.055)	(0.052)	(0.037)
Observations	1,372	1,345	1,331
R^2	0.114	0.043	0.056

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Models also include an *age missing* indicator.

Table 8: Multinomial Model of Post-Separation Destination

Next Destination:	Superintendency	School/ District Position	Government	Higher Education	Private Sector	Nonprofit/ Advocacy	Exit Workforce
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Female	0.002	0.006	0.007	0.007	-0.000	0.009	0.003
	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.015)
Black	0.044	0.017	-0.015	-0.013	0.003	0.055	0.056
	(0.039)	(0.032)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.028)	(0.038)	(0.043)
Ed Specialist or Doctorate	0.008	-0.005	-0.006	0.003	0.001	-0.004	-0.015
	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.014)
Age 51–55	0.003	0.005	-0.000	-0.005	-0.002	-0.002	0.014
	(0.010)	(0.013)	(0.008)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.009)
Age 56–60	-0.004	-0.008	-0.009	-0.005	0.007	0.001	0.041**
	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.008)	(0.004)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.017)
Age 61–65	0.001	-0.007	-0.017**	0.008	0.017	-0.002	0.106***
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.012)	(0.006)	(0.025)
Age 65+	-0.005	0.012	-0.016**	0.010	-0.007	-0.009*	0.113***
	(0.017)	(0.027)	(0.007)	(0.015)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.039)
Tenure in District 2–3 Years	0.013*	0.001	-0.003	0.001	-0.006	-0.005	0.017*
	(0.007)	(0.011)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.010)
Tenure in District 4–6 Years	0.016*	0.016	0.016*	0.008*	0.011	0.003	0.058***
	(0.008)	(0.013)	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.010)	(0.007)	(0.013)
Tenure in District 7–10 Years	0.025*	0.029	0.011	0.012	0.001	0.008	0.102***
	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.024)
Tenure in District 11+ Years	0.013	-0.031**	0.010	-0.002	-0.006	-0.009	0.022
	(0.022)	(0.015)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.012)	(0.008)	(0.035)
Hired Within District	-0.027**	-0.003	-0.014**	-0.001	-0.010*	-0.006	0.009
	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.007)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.014)
District Enrollment (logged)	0.007*	0.007	0.005*	0.002	0.003	0.004	0.011*
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.006)
Suburb	-0.011	-0.007	-0.002	-0.003	-0.035	-0.008	0.053**
	(0.020)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.008)	(0.022)	(0.007)	(0.026)

Town	0.011	-0.004	0.005	0.003	-0.031	-0.007	0.039
	(0.020)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.005)	(0.023)	(0.010)	(0.025)
Rural	0.003	0.021	0.002	0.005	-0.030	-0.006	0.024
	(0.021)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.005)	(0.022)	(0.009)	(0.023)
Proportion Black Students	0.015	0.025	0.023	-0.007	-0.002	-0.007	-0.005
	(0.039)	(0.041)	(0.027)	(0.007)	(0.027)	(0.016)	(0.058)
Proportion Hispanic Students	-0.173***	0.055	0.015	-0.006	0.090	-0.045	-0.109
	(0.063)	(0.095)	(0.049)	(0.036)	(0.073)	(0.028)	(0.125)
Proportion ED Students	0.000	-0.001	-0.000	0.000	-0.001	-0.001	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Salary (in 10,000s, $2022)	0.000	-0.004**	-0.001	0.001	-0.001	-0.002**	-0.002
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Constant	-0.043	0.010	-0.020	-0.042**	0.032	0.016	-0.119**
	(0.037)	(0.033)	(0.024)	(0.020)	(0.031)	(0.019)	(0.050)
Observations	1,316	1,330	1,304	1,301	1,306	1,303	1,366
R^2	0.049	0.027	0.045	0.029	0.051	0.028	0.099

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Models also include an indicator for age being missing.

Table 9: Multinomial Models Including District Performance and School Board Turnover

	Binary	Separation Type			Post-Separation Destination						
	Any Turnover	Retirement	Resignation	Involuntary	Superint-endency	School/ District Position	Govern-ment	Higher Ed	Private Sector	Nonprofit/ Advocacy	Exit Work-force
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Lagged ELA Proficiency											
Bottom 20%	0.024	0.005	-0.012	0.047**	-0.002	0.044*	0.008	-0.001	-0.009*	-0.003	0.008
	(0.035)	(0.026)	(0.020)	(0.023)	(0.011)	(0.026)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.026)
Top 20%	-0.025	-0.019	0.004	-0.017	0.005	0.000	-0.001	-0.016	-0.010	0.004	-0.021
	(0.036)	(0.027)	(0.024)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.019)	(0.005)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.010)	0.008
Lagged TVAAS											
Level 1	0.106***	0.088***	0.019	0.003	0.013	-0.006	0.008	0.009	0.006	0.021**	0.074***
	(0.034)	(0.026)	(0.021)	(0.019)	(0.015)	(0.021)	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.010)	(0.027)
Level 2	0.182***	0.178***	0.012	0.021	-0.016	0.081	-0.002	0.031	0.003	0.005	0.127**
	(0.062)	(0.055)	(0.038)	(0.036)	(0.013)	(0.050)	(0.003)	(0.029)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.052)
Level 4	0.062	0.078	-0.014	0.000	-0.012	0.039	-0.004	0.002	0.001	0.000	0.042
	(0.059)	(0.049)	(0.032)	(0.030)	(0.011)	(0.046)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.046)
Level 5	0.045	0.022	0.016	0.006	0.018	-0.009	0.002	0.010*	0.016*	0.005	0.008
	(0.033)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.021)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.004)	(0.024)
Lagged Proportion New School Board Members	0.111	0.071	0.013	0.071	-0.061**	0.078	0.029	-0.032*	0.001	-0.002	0.129**
	(0.081)	(0.059)	(0.046)	(0.056)	(0.026)	(0.053)	(0.021)	(0.017)	(0.019)	(0.017)	(0.062)
Constant	-0.143	-0.161*	-0.044	-0.040	-0.096	0.023	-0.032	-0.070**	0.036	0.021	-0.137
	(0.144)	(0.092)	(0.090)	(0.064)	(0.070)	(0.055)	(0.046)	(0.035)	(0.040)	(0.043)	(0.088)
Observations	986	915	896	881	875	884	863	863	864	865	911
R^2	0.11	0.17	0.05	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.15

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Models include individual and district characteristics and year fixed effects. Models also include an interaction with an indicator for being new to the district for each lagged proficiency and lagged TVAAS variable.

Appendix

Table A1: Superintendent and District Characteristics by Separation Type

	Retirement	Resignation	Termination	Non-Renewal
Proportion of Turnovers	0.47	0.25	0.12	0.07
Superintendent Characteristics				
Female	0.22	0.25	0.26	0.38
Black	0.01	0.10	0.11	0.09
EdS/Doctorate	0.36	0.59	0.65	0.59
Age	61.9	51.7	54.2	56.6
Years Experience	35.4	24.0	26.7	28.9
Tenure	7.12	5.23	4.00	4.45
Hired Within	0.73	0.48	0.45	0.60
District Characteristics				
Enrollment	6777	11727	12763	4269
City	0.09	0.14	0.11	0.05
Suburban	0.15	0.08	0.11	0.00
Town	0.30	0.29	0.11	0.27
Rural	0.46	0.49	0.67	0.68
Prop. Black	0.12	0.15	0.15	0.11
Prop. Hispanic	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.06
ED/FRPL Decile	5.3	5.8	5.7	5.7
Other				
Salary ($2022)	$137,549	$143,080	$145,264	$129,669
ELA Proficiency Decile (1 year lagged)	5.6	5.3	4.5	4.1
TVAAS (1 year lagged)	2.6	2.9	2.8	2.9
Proportion New School Board Members (1 year lagged)	0.08	0.06	0.12	0.09
N	147	77	36	22

Table A2: Predicting Proportion New School Board Members

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Lagged TVAAS Level 1		0.006	0.006			0.001	0.001
		(0.013)	(0.013)			(0.013)	(0.013)
Lagged TVAAS Level 2		-0.023	-0.023			-0.026	-0.026
		(0.020)	(0.020)			(0.020)	(0.020)
Lagged TVAAS Level 4		-0.017	-0.017			-0.019	-0.019
		(0.018)	(0.019)			(0.019)	(0.019)
Lagged TVAAS Level 5		-0.007	-0.008			-0.013	-0.011
		(0.012)	(0.013)			(0.012)	(0.013)
Lagged ELA Proficiency Bottom 20%	0.001		-0.002		0.001		0.001
	(0.009)		(0.011)		(0.010)		(0.012)
Lagged ELA Proficiency Top 20%	0.006		0.003		-0.000		-0.009
	(0.009)		(0.011)		(0.010)		(0.013)
District Enrollment (logged)				0.009***	0.011***	0.010**	0.010**
				(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Suburb				0.014	0.010	0.015	0.016
				(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Town				0.007	0.002	0.009	0.007
				(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Rural				0.013	0.012	0.020	0.017
				(0.011)	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.018)
Proportion Black students				0.026	0.028	0.037	0.037
				(0.022)	(0.030)	(0.035)	(0.037)
Proportion Hispanic students				-0.046	-0.073	-0.082	-0.089
				(0.059)	(0.067)	(0.074)	(0.075)
ED/FRPL Decile				-0.001	-0.002	-0.003*	-0.003*
				(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Constant	0.093***	0.099***	0.100***	0.004	0.009	0.025	0.034
	(0.004)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.024)	(0.038)	(0.045)	(0.047)
Observations	1,649	1,247	1,247	2,204	1,649	1,247	1,247
R^2	0.298	0.318	0.318	0.302	0.305	0.327	0.327

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1