

Teachers who leave turnaround schools can have positive effects

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A new study found that teachers who left low-performing K-12 public schools in Tennessee as part of schoolwide turnaround reforms had

positive impacts on test scores in the schools that took them in, and they were more likely to collaborate.

The findings, which examined the impacts of turnaround reforms in Tennessee between 2012–2013 and 2018–2019, are part of a series of studies focusing on the broader impacts of turnaround [school](#) reforms. The results are published in the journal *Educational Researcher*.

"Supporting all of these schools in a more holistic way—not just one school, but the whole system—is an important part of planning school reform," said the study's lead author Lam Pham, assistant professor of leadership, policy and human development at North Carolina State University.

The Abstract spoke to Pham about the study findings.

The Abstract: What is the history of school turnaround reforms?

Lam Pham: School reform has a long history. The latest iteration was under the Obama administration through the federal school improvement grant (SIG) program. In exchange for federal money, low-performing schools were required to replace half of their teachers and principal and enact an assortment of other schoolwide changes like extending the school day, extra after-school tutoring and others. We've moved away from that under the Every Student Succeeds Act, which gives states flexibility in how they address low-performing schools, but turnaround policy is still very influential. A lot of states' plans were written when turnaround was the main model. Tennessee and North Carolina are continuing to use those ideas in their reform models.

TA: What was the impact on teachers in turnaround

schools?

Pham: In the first year, teachers are asked to reapply for their jobs, and no more than 50% can be rehired. You can imagine with all of these changes, after the first year of mandatory [teacher](#) replacements, there was still high levels of teacher turnover in these schools. A lot of other research has shown that is caused by turnaround disruptions.

TA: What did you find about teacher performance?

Pham: I was looking not at the effects in the turnaround schools, but the effects on non-turnaround schools using this idea of spillover effects. I looked at student test scores for teachers before and after they moved from turnaround schools, and compared those scores to a group of teachers who also moved into the same school, but not from turnaround schools.

I saw that teachers who left turnaround schools were a mix of teachers who voluntarily left or were forced out. These teachers would often move to nearby schools with similar student demographics that were also low performing. I saw that these teachers, even the ones who voluntarily left, were more likely to have low value-added student [test scores](#), and survey responses show they were dissatisfied and didn't want to collaborate with other teachers.

I also found that once teachers who were low performing moved into a new school, their effectiveness levels, and observation scores, improved significantly and noticeably in the new school environment. They became more effective when they moved to a new school.

TA: Why did teachers become more effective?

Pham: My primary explanation was that once these teachers moved, they were much more willing to collaborate with more effective peers. Working with more effective colleagues really helped these teachers improve their instructional practice.

When teachers moved, they also went from being very dissatisfied with their leadership to having a view of their principal that was similar to teachers in the rest of the state. Their views of school leadership were an improvement from highly negative to average.

TA: What about teachers who left the profession?

Pham: The teachers who left the profession entirely were also teachers who were less likely to collaborate, and find collaboration useful, whereas the people who moved were very similar to the stayers in terms of their willingness to collaborate. It suggests this reform pushed out people who likely didn't want to be teachers.

I also saw that Black teachers were much more willing to stay in the profession. I think that is another positive sign for this particular policy in Tennessee affecting schools in historically Black communities. As other studies have found, having more Black teachers is important for student outcomes, and especially Black student outcomes.

TA: What should we take away from these findings?

Pham: I think it has strong implications from a school leadership point of view. Principals shouldn't be so concerned about hiring teachers from a turnaround setting. My results are showing that once these teachers move, they do a lot better.

From a larger systemic viewpoint, at the district and state level, there

needs to be more thought around what these spillover effects are in general. We need to think about not just focusing on a few schools to the exclusion of all these other schools very near them that are also likely to serve disadvantaged students.

When [teachers](#) leave because of turnaround reform, they tend to move into very similar schools that are nearby. It's very possible that you are shifting a very limited amount of teacher talent around, and not actually increasing the pool of teacher talent. If we want to have systemwide improvement in educational policy, we need to improve the pool.

More information: Lam D. Pham, Teachers Are Not Lemons: An Examination of Spillover Effects When Teachers Transfer Away From Turnaround Schools, *Educational Researcher* (2023). [DOI: 10.3102/0013189X231175148](#)

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