



Research paper

Leaving the teaching profession: The role of teacher stress and educational accountability policies on turnover intent



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HIGHLIGHTS

- There are two distinct kinds of teacher movement: Migration and attrition.
- Accountability policies may affect teacher stress, which predicts teacher turnover.
- Greater teacher experience may be related to lower migration between schools.
- Young and experienced teachers display similar intent to leave the profession.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between test-based accountability policy at the state level, teacher test stress, teacher burnout, and teacher turnover intentions, while controlling for years of teacher experience. Structural equation modeling of data from 1866 teachers across three states identified that state-specific accountability significantly predicted higher rates of test-stress, burnout, and turnover intent. Greater teacher experience was significantly related to a lower likelihood of teacher migration between schools. This study provides evidence across multiple states that test-based accountability policies may predict greater teacher turnover intent, as well as higher levels of teacher stress. Implications for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the United States has made dramatic changes in the way it measures and evaluates teacher effectiveness. In response to growing concern about the quality of education in the United States (cf. *A Nation at Risk*; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), landmark educational legislation, including the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and most recently the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), has firmly established an ‘accountability era’ wherein

student test scores on statewide and national educational assessments have become a national yardstick for evaluating schools, teaching quality, and school effectiveness. The practice of measuring teaching quality through student performance on standardized assessments has become standard practice in school districts across the United States (Baker et al., 2010). As a result of this practice and increasing use of student test scores as a factor in teachers’ annual evaluations, the stakes for teachers have greatly increased in the current educational climate (Valli & Buese, 2007). Around the world, individual countries are implementing policies to evaluate teachers based on student test score performance. While these policies are too numerous to review individually, England may be a useful example. England passed the Education Reform Act in 1988 (ERA, 1998), and with it, implemented a national curriculum, including Ofsted inspections and national

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standardized assessments to evaluate student progress (Gipps, 2003). As in the United States, these assessments have been linked with a rise in reported teacher stress, student test anxiety, and school climate (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain & Symes, 2011; Putwain, 2008). Moreover, in a survey from the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey which sampled 23 countries, 65% of teachers reported that student test scores formed a major component of their teacher evaluations (OECD, 2013). Among the countries surveyed, a majority of teachers within the several countries, including Mexico, Chile, Poland, Turkey and Bulgaria, reported that student test scores were not only incorporated, but of moderate or high importance in their teacher evaluations. Given that numerous countries around the world have begun implementing test-based accountability policies similar to the United States, it is important to look at one country's test-based accountability policies closely and examine how these policies influence teacher outcomes overall.

1.1. Test-based accountability in the United States

In recent years, some states in the United States have passed and adopted individual test-based accountability policies that punish or reward teachers based on the extent to which they raise student test scores. While practices vary based on state, they may include the use of student test scores in teacher bonus pay decisions, in the decisions to award tenure, and in professional evaluation scores. Further, within states, local educational agencies differ in how they enact teacher evaluation guidelines. Finally, teachers that instruct in subjects on the state test are often evaluated differently from teachers who teach untested subject areas. Thus, due to differences in accountability policies in each state, in how policies are implemented at a district level, and in what subject teachers instruct, each teacher may experience somewhat different consequences for low student test scores (von der Embse, Pendergast, Segool, Saeki, & Ryan, 2016).

State-specific systems vary according to state, but many share common features related to teacher evaluations and teacher tenure. In Connecticut, Public Act 12–116 (2012) required the use of an approved teacher evaluation system to measure teacher effectiveness. The state-specific system Smarter Balance was implemented in 2013–2014. Based on this legislation, teachers with tenure may be dismissed for ineffectiveness. Additionally, a provision was passed which required 22.5% of the teacher evaluation to be based on student test scores (Pryor, 2012). Although intended to be implemented in 2013–2014, this was delayed for two years until 2015–2016. In Maryland, the Partnership of Assessment for Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) was implemented in 2014–2015. In that system, 20% of teacher evaluations are based on student test scores, and another 10% is based on school-wide test scores or other measurement criteria, including attendance and graduation rates. The recent passage of HB 1167 (2014) in Maryland prohibits the use of student standardized test scores in teacher personnel decisions until 2016–2017.

In Pennsylvania, the School Performance Profile was created in 2013 to measure student progress across time (PA Department of Education). The SPP includes student test scores and school criteria, such as attendance and graduation, to measure school quality. Student test scores are weighted heavily in this system. For example, within an annual evaluation, 15% of the teacher evaluation is based on student test score growth, and another 15% is based on school-wide test scores, graduation rates, and attendance. Despite variation in how student test scores are used to evaluate teachers, all three states have linked student test scores to an evaluation of teacher performance. If a school has low test scores, they may face restrictions in access of state funds.

Given the similarities in policies across states, there is a need to examine how the implementation of high-stakes accountability policies influences teachers across schools, districts, and states. Currently, most research on teacher attrition is limited to within-state research and may occur post-onset of NCLB, but prior to the onset of Common Core (e.g., Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Diaz, 2004; Jones & Egley, 2007). Little is known about how teachers across the United States are affected personally and professionally by these policies as a whole, many of which have been introduced in recent years and gone unexamined (Ysseldyke et al., 2004). Moreover, given that teacher attrition and teacher stress are global phenomenon, studying how test-based accountability may impact teacher stress and turnover in the United States may act as a case study for the influence of policy on teacher well-being around the world. Understanding the relationship between policy and teacher outcomes is particularly important given the high rates of teacher attrition currently plaguing the field of education.

1.2. Teacher stress and teacher attrition

Teaching is known to be a highly stressful profession (Kyriacou, 2001). Teacher stress has been linked with adverse professional outcomes, including burnout, absenteeism, stress, and attrition (von der Embse, Kilgus, Solomon, Bowler, & Curtiss, 2015; Menken, 2006; Yoon, 2002). It may be that changes in educational accountability policies at both the federal and state level trickle down to contribute to increased stress and adverse outcomes for teachers. Recent research suggests that the use of test-based accountability in performance evaluations, merit pay, and tenure decisions results in increased test-related stress in the environment, increased stress related to the teaching curriculum, and increased teacher stress in general and specific to testing (von der Embse et al., 2016).

Historically, teacher attrition has been linked to stress, burnout, salary, and job dissatisfaction (Betoret, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Sass, Seal, & Martin, 2011). Teacher attrition is a widely acknowledged challenge facing the teaching profession in the United States, and some studies estimate that as many as 40–50% of new teachers depart in their first five years of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ingersoll, 2001). Teacher longevity, or the amount of time a teacher remains in the teaching profession, is an important issue for school climate and school resource allocation. Teachers grow more effective the longer they teach and they typically require significantly more investment in training and development at the start of their careers (Berry, 2010). Indeed, newer teachers typically are less effective in their first year of teaching (Rice, 2003). Therefore, when schools train teachers who do not remain in the field, this represents a discrepancy between economic resources invested and the professional output that the teacher contributes back to the school and education profession. Understanding if accountability policy pressures related to test-based accountability are associated with teachers being less likely to remain in the field of teaching would be important as teacher attrition has significant financial impacts on districts in training, professional development, hiring expenses, and instructional quality impacts, as more experienced teachers are more effective.

Of the 250,000 teachers newly hired in the United States each year, half are entering into the profession for the first time (Darling-Hammond, 2010); the remaining hires are the result of teacher migration between schools or are teachers returning to the profession. Ingersoll (2001) estimated that 13.2% of teachers change schools yearly. During the time of No Child Left Behind, it was found that higher rates of attrition and migration occurred in under-resourced and under-funded districts (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The negative impact of this turnover is even greater when seen in

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