In recent years, observers of Michigan’s educational system have expressed concern about turnover among school district superintendents. They argue that the top leadership post resembles a revolving door, especially in urban school districts. Urban superintendents simply do not have the time to bring about significant improvements in their districts, because they leave before they have had an opportunity to make lasting change. A new superintendent is then hired, who pursues a different reform agenda. S/he departs in turn, leaving behind yet more unfinished reforms.

In this policy brief we consider the longevity of school district superintendents in Michigan, based on data from the state’s 50 largest school districts from 1991 to 2001. These districts enroll nearly 720,000 students, or 42 percent of the state’s K-12 public school enrollment.

**Question 1: Do Michigan’s largest school districts face a high rate of superintendent turnover?**

Figure 1 shows the turnover of superintendents in each of the fifty largest Michigan school districts from 1991-2001.

Sixty percent of Michigan’s fifty largest school districts employed only one or two superintendents in this decade. Another 18 percent employed three superintendents. In 22 percent of Michigan’s largest school districts, however, there were four or more different superintendents during the past decade. In these districts, the superintendent’s average tenure in office was less than three years. Detroit had six superintendents in this period, and Ann Arbor, Pontiac, and Traverse City each had five. Together these districts enroll approximately 218,600 students.
Question 2: Do Michigan’s poorest school districts face higher superintendent turnover than more affluent districts?

We also sought to determine whether large districts serving poor communities experienced greater superintendent turnover than districts serving more affluent communities. Figure 2 compares districts in more affluent communities to districts with high percentages of students receiving free and reduced price lunches. More affluent school districts generally had fewer superintendents, but the relationship between a school district’s socio-economic standing and superintendent turnover is far from perfect. For example, Muskegon City School District is Michigan’s third poorest district, but this district employed only two superintendents in this period. In two other poor districts a single superintendent served for the entire decade. One-third of the districts serving affluent communities employed three superintendents between 1991 and 2001. Even so, six poor districts employed four or more superintendents in this decade, while no wealthy district had more than three.

![Figure 2: Large District-Superintendent Tenure: Wealthiest vs. Poorest Districts](image)

Michigan’s largest school districts hire new superintendents slightly more often than major corporations hire new CEOs. One study of CEO tenure in 476 corporations around the world during the decade 1991-2000 found that 55 percent of these companies employed two CEOs, and 15 percent employed three. Only one of these companies employed six or more CEOs. Some turnover is normal in leadership positions, but changing leaders every two years is clearly a sign of deeper problems.

Systematic school reform efforts require consistent policy. When superintendents change, however, policies may change too, with potentially damaging consequences for teaching and learning. To minimize disruptions to students and teachers, school boards should consider the ramifications of a revolving door to the superintendent’s office and its effect on the learning environment in local schools.

1 School data are from the Michigan Department of Education Data Book, 1998. Corporation data are from Drake Beam Morin, CEO Turnover and Job Security, Boston MA. 2001.

More information is available at [www.epc.msu.edu](http://www.epc.msu.edu), or contact David N. Plank at 517.355.4494.