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Administrative Turnover in Kansas Rural School Districts: 1978-1984[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Kansas is typical of most people's concept of rural America. It has a population of less than two and one-half million people spread over 81,000 square miles, making Kansas the 32nd largest in population and the thirteenth largest in total land area of the fifty states. Few states have fewer people than Kansas and many large cities have larger populations than the state.

There are three cities in Kansas with over 100,000 residents, and these three cities and their metropolitan areas contain over one-third of the population of the state. The remaining two-thirds are spread over the small towns and countryside that comprise rural Kansas. The population density of rural Kansas (not including the three largest metropolitan areas) is just nineteen persons per square mile and over one-half of Kansas' 105 counties have population densities of fewer than ten persons per square mile.

The exiguous population of rural Kansas elicits characteristics that are common to rural areas. Most obvious of these is the limited access to business and commercial facilities. Many of Kansas' rural communities are small and isolated from convenient access to what urban dwellers take for granted. When the grain elevator is the only commercial enterprise in town, it is not uncommon to drive several miles to enjoy such luxuries as a movie theater, restaurant, clothier, or hardware store.

Another characteristic that is indigenous to rural areas is the relatively large geographic areA served by the rural school. Kansas public schools enrolled 386,387 students in 305 districts during the 1983-84 school year. These numbers take on new meaning when they are applied only to rural areas.

RURAL TURNOVER

This study was designed to determine the amount of turnover in rural Kansas school administrators.

Data have been compiled for this study from the school years 1978-79 through 1983-84, representing six school years. Only districts maintaining K-12 operations were studied. These districts were chosen based upon the number of district students attending elementary school. Districts with an elementary enrollment of less than 1,000 were included. Therefore one might say that total student enrollment by district ranged from about 2,000 to less than ninety students. Two hundred sixty-five districts of a possible 305 were included.

Changes were recorded using information provided by the Kansas Department of Education for the past six years. Administrators included were superintendents, central office administrators, secondary principals and assistants, middle school/junior high school principals, and elementary school principals. While central office personnel and assistant principals were included, they number far fewer than the other categories. Total number of central office administrators was 46 and the total assistant principals was 36, compared with 286 high school principals. No attempts were made to include directors of special programs or resource personnel.

The base for this study was 1977-78. Since no changes could be recorded for the base year, changes were noted in each category for the six years ending with 1983-84. Position turnover was recorded including those changes involving individuals assuming new positions within the district. For instance, if the position of high school principal were held by Jane Doe in 1982-83, and she held the position of superintendent in 1983-84, this was recorded as a change. A few of these changes took place during the years included in the study.

Results of the study will be displayed and examined in four ways: number of administrator changes by year; total district administrator changes over six years; number of districts with administrator changes by administrator category over six years; administrator changes in districts during the four year period 1981-84 and the three year period 1978-80. (See Table 1).

Total number of administrator changes peaked in the year 1979-80. There is a marked downward trend until the final year when changes increased. This increase was caused by the large number of principal changes during

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TABLE 1

Number of Administrator Changes by Year

Year	Superintendent	Central Office	High School Principal	High School Assistant Principal	Middle School Principal	Elementary Principal	Total
Total Possible	265	46	286	36	72	537	1242
1977-78	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1978-79	33	7	59	3	13	77	192
1979-80	37	7	80	5	17	87	233
1980-81	40	3	60	10	11	93	217
1981-82	33	8	56	4	11	76	188
1982-83	26	5	34	10	10	54	139
1983-84	25	3	55	3	14	86	186
Composite Total	194	33	344	35	76	473	
Turnover Average	32.33	5.5	57.33	5.82	12.66	78.83	
Composite % of Total	13%	12%	20%	15%	18%	15%	

1983-84. Only further study will determine whether this new increase represents a trend or a distorted year.

A number of conditions may influence position changes in rural school systems. Obviously, economic conditions affect all sectors of the job market, including school administrators. Also the administrative job market has grown tighter, decreasing opportunities for advancement or change. Other factors are decreasing enrollments and school closings.

During the period 1971-81 the number of public schools in Kansas decreased by more than the national average of 4.1% and enrollments dropped 18.6%. Attendance centers numbered 1,583 in the base year (1977-78) and decreased to 1,519 in 1982-83, representing a loss of 64 schools in a six year period. It should be noted that the years representing the most school closings also represent those with the largest number of administrator changes.

Another phenomena that might influence turnover is that of superintendents acting as principals. Numerous small schools employ their superintendents as high school or elementary principals with some smaller districts also requiring the superintendents to serve as high school and elementary school principal. A situation such as this might show three recorded position changes involving only one individual.

Recording total administrator changes over the six year period of the study reveals some interesting data. (See Table 2).

TABLE 2

Total District Administrator Changes Over Six Years (1977-1984) by District

Number of Total Changes in a District	Number
0	15
1	17
2	40
3	42
4	43
5	26
6	21
7	12
8	15
9	9
10	5
11	5
12	3
13	2
14	4
15	1
16	1

Rural school districts in Kansas ranged from very stable to highly unstable from 1977-84. Fifteen districts experienced no administrator turnover in six years while the same number experienced eleven or more changes for the same time period. This represents an average of two changes per year for those on the high end of the spectrum. One district actually recorded sixteen changes for the six years, or, nearly three position changes per year.

Nearly fifty percent of the districts experienced between two and four changes. This is somewhat lower than the true mean which fell at 4.6 changes for the six years. One-third of the districts experienced an average of more than one change per year.

Table 3 reveals, again, that there is a great deal of variance between districts in the number of administrator position changed.

A categorical examination of the data disclosed that many districts have had no changes in at least one administrative position over a six year time period. One hundred-thirteen districts employed the same superintendent for six years, 91 districts have not changed the high school principal, 26 have the same middle school principal, and 233 employed the same elementary principals.

Looking at districts that experienced either one or no changes reveals that 86% of the superintendents, 89%

TABLE 3

Number of Kansas Districts with Administrator Changes
by Administrator Category over a Six Year Period of Time (1977-1984)

Number of Changes	Superintendents	Central Office	High School Principal	High School Assistant Principal	Middle School Principal	Elementary Principal
0	113	21	91	11	26	233
1	112	20	96	15	25	181
2	36	4	60	7	14	89
3	3	1	33	2	7	31
4	1	0	5	1	0	3
5	0	0	1	0	0	0

TABLE 4

*Administrator Changes in Districts During the Four Year Period 1981-84

Frequency of # of Administrative Changes	Superintendent	Central Office	High School Principal	High School Assistant Principal	Middle School	Elementary Principal	Total
4 of last 4 years	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
3 of last 4 years	3	2	19	1	2	16	43
3 of last 3 years	1	0	4	0	1	6	12
2 of last 3 years	21	2	26	7	4	39	99
2 of last 2 years	24	1	36	2	12	63	136

* Number of different administrators in the years 1981-84. Not the number of changes.

TABLE 5

*Administrator Changes in Districts During the Four Year Period 1978-80

Frequency of # of Administrative Changes	Superintendent	Central Office	High School Principal	High School Assistant Principal	Middle School Principal	Elementary Principal	Total
3 of last 3 years	0	0	4	0	0	3	7
2 of last 3 years	6	2	22	2	7	20	59
2 of last 2 years	2	0	15	1	3	11	32

of the central office personnel, 65% of the high school principals, 72% of the high school assistant principals fall into this category. Thus while there is a higher rate of change between high school principals and other administrators, a clear majority of the districts averaged less than one change per category for the six years studied.

Some districts experienced a great deal of change by positions. Thirty-nine districts changed high school principals an average of every other year. Thirty-four elementary principals changed at the same rate. Superintendents proved to be the most stable with only four districts changing three or more times during the period studied. One district had four changes in each category in the six-year period. (See Table 4).

The next table categorically represents the number of different administrators employed from the years 1981-84. It documents a surprisingly large number of districts with changes.

One district had a new superintendent for each of the last three years, four districts changed high school principals each of the last three years, one district employed a new middle school principal three of the last three years, and six elementary schools have had a new principal every year since the 1981-82 school year.

This rate increases drastically when examined for the last two years. Twenty-four superintendencies, one cen-

tral office, 36 high school principalships and 63 elementary school principalships have changed hands each of the past two years. These figures represent nearly 10% of the superintendencies, 14% of the high school principalships, and 10% of the elementary principalships.

Table 5 exhibits the same information as Table 4 but for the years 1978-80. Categories compare much the same way they do in Table 4, but the frequency is not nearly as high for the yearly changes.

Comparisons of the data reveal a consistent pattern in the incidence of administrator turnover. This pattern manifests itself in all of the data and points to the conclusion that high school principals hold the most volatile administrative position, followed by middle/junior high school principals, high school assistant principals, and elementary principals respectively. The greatest degree of stability was maintained by central office personnel, followed closely by superintendents.

While this study describes different degrees of turnover by administrative position, it leaves many questions unanswered. Some of the questions raised are: Why do administrators change so frequently? Do administrators stay in school administration when they change positions or do they leave the field either for higher education or jobs outside of education? What variables affect an administrator's movement and which of these have the greatest effect? Why do some school districts prove to be very stable while others change frequently? What does it take to become a stable school district and is stability desirable?