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New Schools, New Leaders: A Study of Principal Turnover and Academic Achievement at New High Schools in New York City

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New York State has had a surge of new school development in recent years due to the opening of a large number of small high schools and charter schools. As new organizations, these schools may be especially vulnerable to fluctuations in leadership, which may disrupt personal relationships in ways that draw attention away from the creation of infrastructures that allow these schools to focus on student performance. In this report, the authors use quantitative and qualitative data to examine how principal turnover at new high schools affects school culture and student performance, and how principals manage transitions to minimize the impact on both. They find that there is considerable principal turnover during the first ten years of a school's existence. Their results suggest that the initial change from the founding principal to a successor may have little effect on student performance, but that further changes in principal leadership are more problematic. Additionally, the authors found that transitions between principals were often complicated, tumultuous, and sometimes hostile. Moreover, there were few institutionalized systems to help facilitate those transitions. The findings, however, suggest that there are ways to ease this transition period, including on-going, sustained connection to another principal or "shadowing programs" that allow new principals to watch experienced principals at work. In addition to such mentoring programs, findings indicate that schools may wish to adopt a model of distributive leadership to minimize the impact of a principal's succession on the school through the sharing of responsibilities among the faculty and staff prior to the succession.