

Principal Perceptions of Early Literacy Specialist Turnover, 2017-2018

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Key Findings:

- 49% of responding principals reported experiencing ELS coach turnover since the start of the initiative.
- Cohort 2 had more annual ELS turnover than other cohorts, with 46% of cohort 2 principals reporting that they had one or more coach per year of the initiative.
- 59% of principals who have had more than one ELS coach since the start of the initiative said that ELS turnover has influenced the success of the initiative.

Support for Early Literacy in Philadelphia

As part of the School District of Philadelphia's (SDP) early literacy initiative, all elementary schools serving kindergarten through third-grade students have a full-time Early Literacy Specialist coach (ELS). ELS coaches support K-3 students by promoting research-based literacy teaching practices; improving teacher content knowledge, classroom environments, and classroom structure; and providing content-focused coaching and resources.

Implementation of this initiative began in the 2015-2016 school year when 40 schools received a full-time ELS (cohort 1). In 2016-2017, 53 schools received an ELS (cohort 2), and in 2017-2018, the remaining 56 schools received an ELS (cohort 3). Because of this roll-out implementation approach, the number of years of support received by each school differs by cohort.

In summer 2018, the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) surveyed all 149 principals of schools with an ELS coach about their experiences with their ELS coaches.¹ Principals from 104 schools responded (70% response rate). This includes 31 cohort 1 schools, 37 cohort 2 schools, and 36 cohort 3 schools (78%, 70%, and 64% of each cohort respectively).

This brief focuses on two guiding questions:

1. What percentage of schools experienced ELS coach turnover since 2015-2016?
2. To what extent do principals view ELS coach turnover as a challenge to the success of the early literacy initiative?

¹ For more information about the early literacy initiative, including responses from the ELS coach survey and teacher retention in schools with an ELS coach, see <https://www.philasd.org/research/programsservices/projects/els-evaluation/>

Findings

About half of responding principals reported having more than one ELS coach since their school began participating in the ELS initiative.

Fifty of the 104 responding principals told us that they have had the same ELS coach for the duration of their participation in the early literacy initiative.

The percentage of principals who report experiencing ELS coach turnover differs by cohort: 68% of schools in cohort 1 reported having more than one coach since they joined the initiative, compared to 46% in cohort 2 and 33% in cohort 3. However, because schools in cohort 1 have participated in the ELS initiative longer than schools from other cohorts, schools in cohort 1 have had more opportunity for turnover. By comparing the percentage of principals in each cohort who report having one or more coaches *per year of the initiative*, we can better estimate which cohort has the highest incidence of annual coach turnover.

We considered ELS coach turnover in two ways:

1. Turnover at any time (more than one ELS since 2015-16)
2. Turnover during the school year (more than one ELS per year)

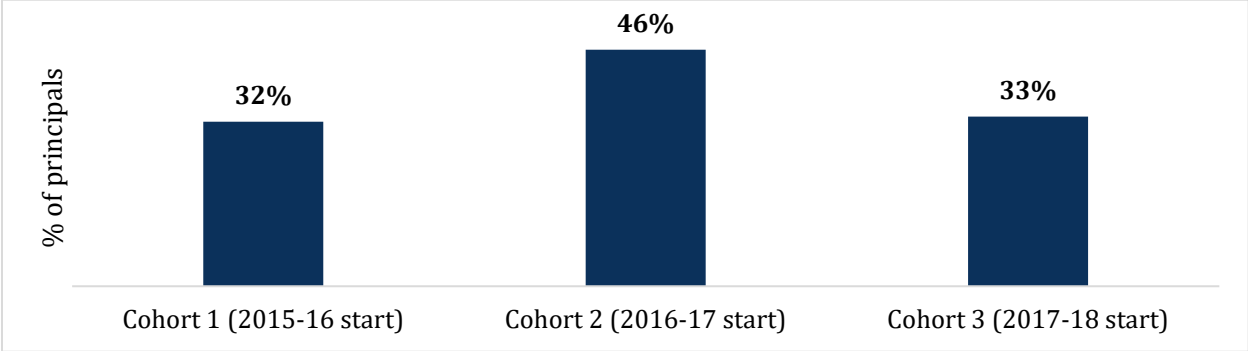
Schools participated in the early literacy initiative in cohorts. We considered there to be turnover during the school year if schools had

- 3+ coaches for **cohort 1** (began 2015-16)
- 2+ coaches for **cohort 2** (began 2016-17)
- 1+ coaches for **cohort 3** (began 2017-18)

Cohort 2 had the highest percentage of principals who reported having one or more ELS coaches per year, on average.

Almost half of cohort 2 principals (46%) reported having one or more ELS coaches per year of the initiative, on average, compared to one-third of principals in both cohort 1 and cohort 3 (32% and 33% respectively; Figure 1). This suggests that cohort 2 schools experienced more ELS coach turnover, on average, than other cohorts.

Figure 1. More cohort 2 principals reported having one or more ELS coaches per year of the initiative compared to principals from other cohorts.

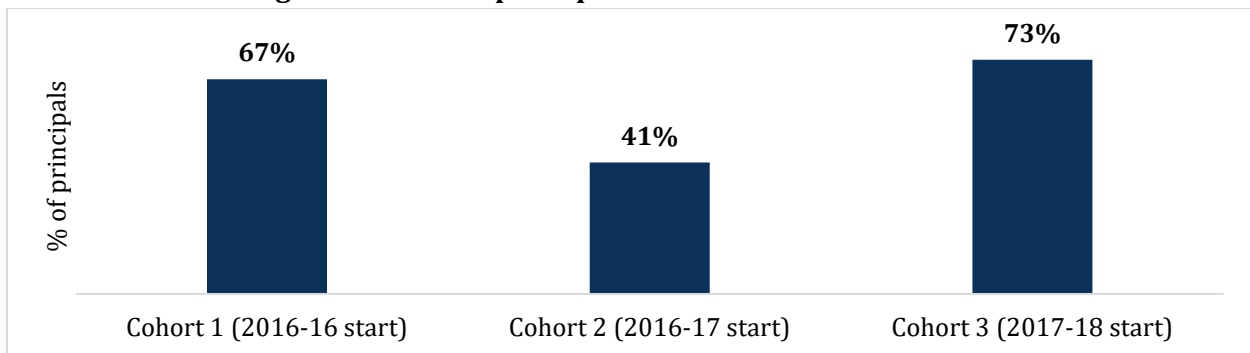


Nearly two-thirds (59%) of principals who experienced ELS coach turnover reported that it influenced the effectiveness or success of the coaching initiative.

If principals indicated that their school experienced ELS coach turnover – i.e., had more than one coach since their school began participating in the ELS initiative – they were asked whether they thought coach turnover influenced the effectiveness or success of the initiative. Of the 49% (n=50) of principals who reported having ELS turnover, 29 principals (59% of those with turnover) said that it affected the coaching initiative.

Of the principals who reported experiencing turnover, a greater percentage of cohort 3 principals reported that it influenced the effectiveness of the initiative; 73% of cohort 3 principals with turnover reported that it affected the initiative, compared to 67% of cohort 1 and 41% of cohort 2 principals with turnover (Figure 2). Some of this difference may be attributable to cohort: because cohort 3 had received only one year of coaching (as of Summer 2018), any turnover that occurred would have happened in the middle of the school year and may have been perceived as more disruptive.

Figure 2: Principals with ELS turnover from cohort 3 schools were more likely to say that it affected the coaching initiative than principals with turnover from other cohorts.



In open-ended comments, some principals reported that ELS coach turnover resulted in lost momentum for the initiative, while others said that new ELS coaches were able to continue previous ELS coaches’ work.

Twenty-one principals provided open-ended comments about the ways in which they thought ELS coach turnover influenced the effectiveness or success of the coaching initiative. They mentioned two primary reasons:

- **Lost Momentum/Lack of Consistency:** Eleven principals indicated that the ELS initiative lost momentum or lacked consistency when coaches left. One principal commented, “Each year it felt like the program started all over,” and another said, “It takes too much time in the school year for the new coach to acclimate to teachers and administration.”

- **Rebuilding Relationships/Trust:** Five principals mentioned that new ELS coaches have to re-establish trust and build positive relationships with school staff. One principal explained, “Having had an experience with an ELS that I found to be less effective set up a bit of a barrier to the receptiveness of teachers to the second more effective ELS. I think it was overcome, but there was definitely a delayed responsiveness.”

On the other hand, 13 principals provided reasons for why they thought ELS turnover did not affect the initiative. They mentioned two primary factors, described below.

- **All Coaches Effective:** Three principals explained that the initiative did not suffer because all of their ELS coaches were effective. One principal commented, “Both individuals were extremely effective and supportive of everyone in our building.”
- **Coaches Built off of One Another:** Three principals reported that new coaches built off of the work of prior coaches. One principal explained, “Our initial coach laid a firm foundation. The following coach...built upon teachers’ previously taught knowledge.” Another said, “My ELS jumped right in where the previous ELS left off so I don’t feel like we missed a beat.”

Finally, eight principals indicated that although ELS turnover was difficult, it was also necessary. One principal said, “ELS coaches face considerable challenges in trying to get buy in at the teacher level. A transition in coaches was necessary, but that trust building process had to restart.” Another explained, “Had we not experienced turnover, we would not have found the gems we currently have. Now that we have them, long-term retention is best.”

Conclusions

Although principals reported that ELS coach turnover affected nearly half of the schools that participated in the coaching initiative, not all principals believed this turnover affected the effectiveness or success of the initiative. This suggests that while ELS coach retention may still be an important goal of the initiative, it is also important to consider the ways in which coach turnover may have a neutral impact or a positive impact on schools. Program staff should consider strategies for retaining high-quality coaches who have built trust with school staff, while still considering how to best deploy ELS coaches as needed.

For more information on ELS coaching and the early literacy initiative, see <https://www.philasd.org/research/programsservices/projects/els-evaluation/>