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RESEP POLICY BRIEF

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Unequal Schools, Unequal Retention - Patterns of Educator Mobility in South Africa

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Policy brief: Unequal Schools, Unequal Retention - Patterns of Educator Mobility in South Africa

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Policy message: South Africa's challenge is not only to retain enough educators nationally, but to prevent mobility from weakening the schools and communities that can least afford to lose staff.

1 SUMMARY

Mobility is modest but possibly consequential: Approximately 4% of educators switch schools each year. Although this appears to be modest, it translates into at least 14 500 observed annually, which could be disruptive if switching is concentrated in less advantaged schools.

Most switching appears not to be related to promotion: More than 95% of school switches are not associated with a change in rank, a possible indication that educators generally move for reasons other than immediate career advancement.

The presence of school leadership is associated with retention: Teachers are significantly less likely to leave schools where a principal, deputy principal or both are present in the year preceding the move.

Disadvantaged schools face greater retention risks: Switching is more likely in less affluent schools and wards, potentially reinforcing existing educational inequalities.

2 CONTEXT

Approximately 80 per cent of South African learners attend under-resourced schools located predominantly in historically Black townships and rural areas. Relative to their affluent counterparts, these schools are characterised by larger classes, resource shortages, weak infrastructure and higher levels of household deprivation. In contrast, the relatively affluent minority of learners are served by comparatively well-functioning public and private schools. This bimodal education system produces and sustains inequalities in educational opportunity that profoundly shape labour market outcomes (Mlachila and Moeletsi, 2019; Spaull, 2013).

In an unequal education system such as this, educator mobility is important because educators carry subject knowledge, institutional memory, professional relationships and familiarity with local communities. Turnover can disrupt curriculum delivery and collaboration even when departing educators are eventually replaced. International evidence links high turnover—especially where it is concentrated in disadvantaged schools—to weaker organisational capacity and lower learner achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb and Wyckoff, 2013; Hanushek, Rivkin and Schiman, 2016).

This policy brief focuses on school switching amongst educators, which differs from attrition, where an educator exits public education entirely. The distinction is important since school switching reallocates human resources across schools and communities, which could reinforce existing inequalities, or present an opportunity to decrease educational inequality.

2.1 Why retention is becoming more urgent

Approximately half of South Africa's public-school teachers are aged 50 or older, creating a need to recruit, develop and retain younger educators as retirements accelerate (Van der Berg *et al.,* 2024). Educators being most mobile in their thirties, combined with higher rates of teacher mobility in poorer schools, could mean that relatively disadvantaged schools may struggle to build stable, experienced staff teams even when the national number of teachers is sufficient.

2.2 Evidence base

The analysis uses anonymised Personnel and Salary System (PERSAL) administrative records for 2012–2021, linked to school characteristics from the DBE Masterlist 2022 Quarter 2, and ward-level conditions from the 2011 South African Index of Multiple Deprivation (SAIMD) as estimated by (Noble *et al.*, 2013). Educators are identified as teachers, department heads, deputy principals and principals. A switch is recorded when an educator's school EMIS number differs from that of the preceding year.

The descriptive analysis covers all educator ranks, while the regression analysis is restricted to teachers because principals and deputy principals form part of the leadership-presence measure.

Evidence component	Coverage
Administrative records	Anonymised PERSAL records linked across 2012–2021
School and community conditions	DBE Masterlist 2022 Q2 and ward-level SAIMD 2011
Mobility outcome	A switch occurs when an educator's school EMIS number changes between years
Regression sample	Teachers aged 20–64; approximately 1.86 million teacher-year observations

2.3 What may shape switching?

Public-school salary structures are relatively standardised, which limits the extent to which schools can use remuneration on its own to attract teachers. Non-pecuniary conditions such as access to amenities, working conditions and school leadership may therefore be important contributors to the educator's decision to switch schools or not (Falch and Strøm, 2005; Johnson, Kraft and Papay, 2012).

South African evidence suggests that educator retention concerns are not unwarranted. Evidence from the TALIS 2024 country report indicates that roughly 60 per cent of educators experience substantial work-related stress, with administrative demands and responsibility for learner performance among the principal pressures (DBE, 2025b). Recent teacher surveys also reveal that there is a strong preference for metropolitan posts

and widespread reluctance to teach in rural schools, partly because of weak resources, unreliable basic services and limited local amenities (Hofmeyr *et al.*, 2024).

There are a number of possible reasons for teacher mobility that are not observed in the available data. These unobserved data include whether a transfer was voluntary or due to administrative processes such as schools closing or opening; the educator's residence, family-related reasons, subject specialisation, experience or classroom effectiveness. Teacher experience is also not observed in the administrative data. Educational qualifications of teachers (their REQV[1]) are available only for 2021, ward deprivation is measured in 2011, and 2022 school-location data are applied across the study period. While some of these variables are expected to be slow-moving (do not change much over time), the data constraints mean that cautious, policy-oriented interpretation is required.

3 MAIN FINDINGS

3.1 A modest annual switching rate produces substantial system-wide movement

Between 3.56 and 4.39 per cent of educators switched schools each year from 2013 to 2021. In absolute terms, this represents up to 14 500 school switches annually. While the percentage is relatively modest, the absolute magnitude and concentrations of relative mobility and immobility could be disruptive to less advantaged parts of the school system, who are in most need of stable teacher populations.

3.2 Switching is rarely associated with immediate promotion

More than 95 per cent of educators who generally retained the same occupational rank after moving. Only 3.18 per cent of switchers were promoted and 0.69 per cent moved to a lower-ranked position. Stayers were more likely to be promoted than switchers. The available data therefore does not support the view that promotion is a prevalent reason for educator mobility in South Africa.

3.3 Mobility across school quintiles is not a one-way movement to affluent schools

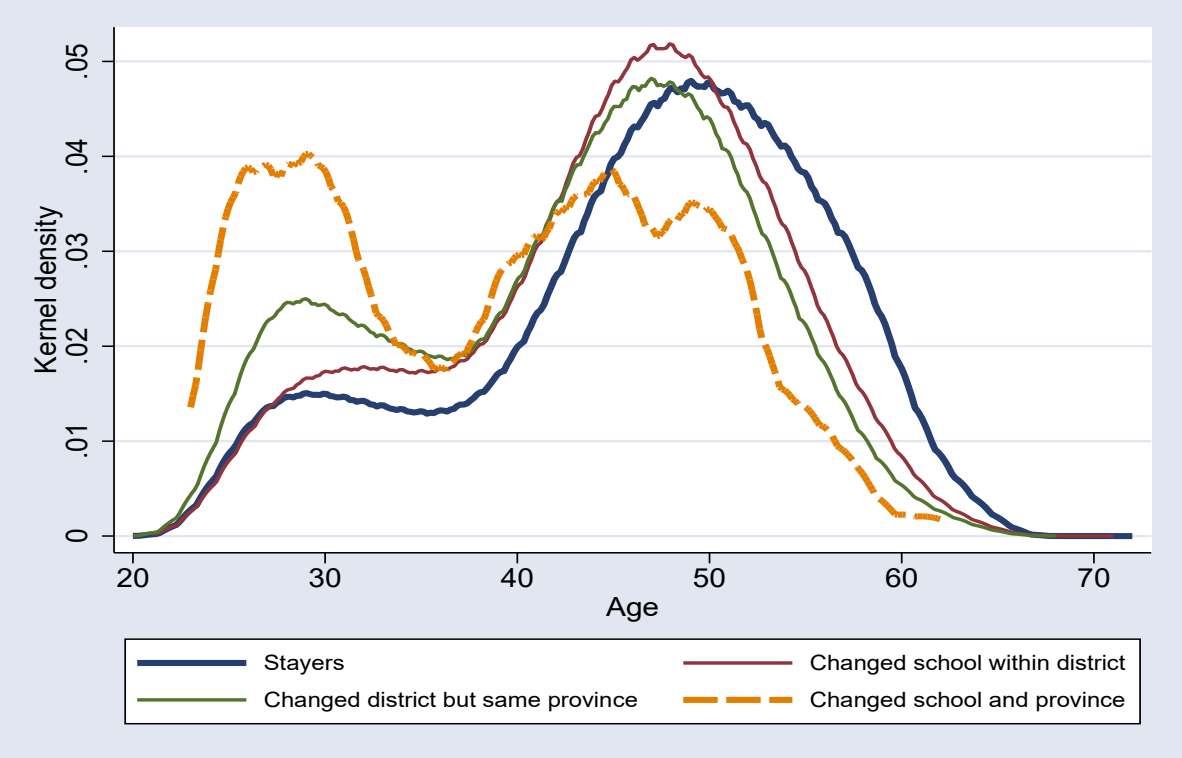
Just under half of all switches occurred between schools in the same quintile. The remaining movements were divided approximately evenly between switches to a higher-quintile school and switches to a lower-quintile school. This pattern cautions against describing mobility as a uniform exodus towards quintile 5 schools. The more important distributional issue is that educators in less affluent schools and wards display higher switching probabilities, creating a greater risk of recurrent staffing instability in disadvantaged settings.

[1] The Relative Education Qualification Value (REQV) is a value assigned to educators based on their qualification type and number of years of study. REQV 13 is equivalent to three years of tertiary education (such as a three-year undergraduate degree or diploma), which includes training as an educator. REQV 14 is equivalent to a 4-year Bachelor of Education degree or a three-year degree plus a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). A higher REQV is generally rewarded with a higher salary. REQV 14 is generally the minimum standard of education expected of newly trained educators, although there are still educators in the system with REQV 13 or below.

3.4 The most mobile educators are concentrated in particular career stages

After accounting for observed school and area characteristics, teachers aged 30–39 were more likely to switch than those aged 20–29, while mobility fell markedly from age 40 onwards. Figure 1 shows the age distributions of educators who switched schools between 2013 and 2021, disaggregated by administrative boundary crossed. Generally, educators who crossed district and provincial boundaries were younger on average than stayers and switchers who moved within district. Given that teachers aged 30 to 39 were most likely to switch, this may indicate that some teachers get early-career experience, (which makes them more attractive to potential employers) and then decide to switch.

Figure 1: Kernel densities of age for school stayers and school movers 2013 to 2021 (by administrative boundary crossed)



Source: Constructed using a combination of PERSAL data (DBE, 2024) and Masterlist 2022 data (DBE, 2025).

3.5 Who is more likely to switch?

The main regression model[2] in our working paper indicates that Black African and Coloured teachers had higher switching probabilities than White teachers, while women were less likely to move than men. Teachers in secondary and combined schools were less likely to switch than primary-school teachers. These coefficients describe differences that remain after controlling for the measured variables; they should not be interpreted as intrinsic preferences or causal effects. Unobserved labour-market factors and personal characteristics (such as family arrangements) may contribute to the patterns.

[2] Regression models in the related working paper analyse the probability of moving, conditional on teacher, school and geographical area characteristics.

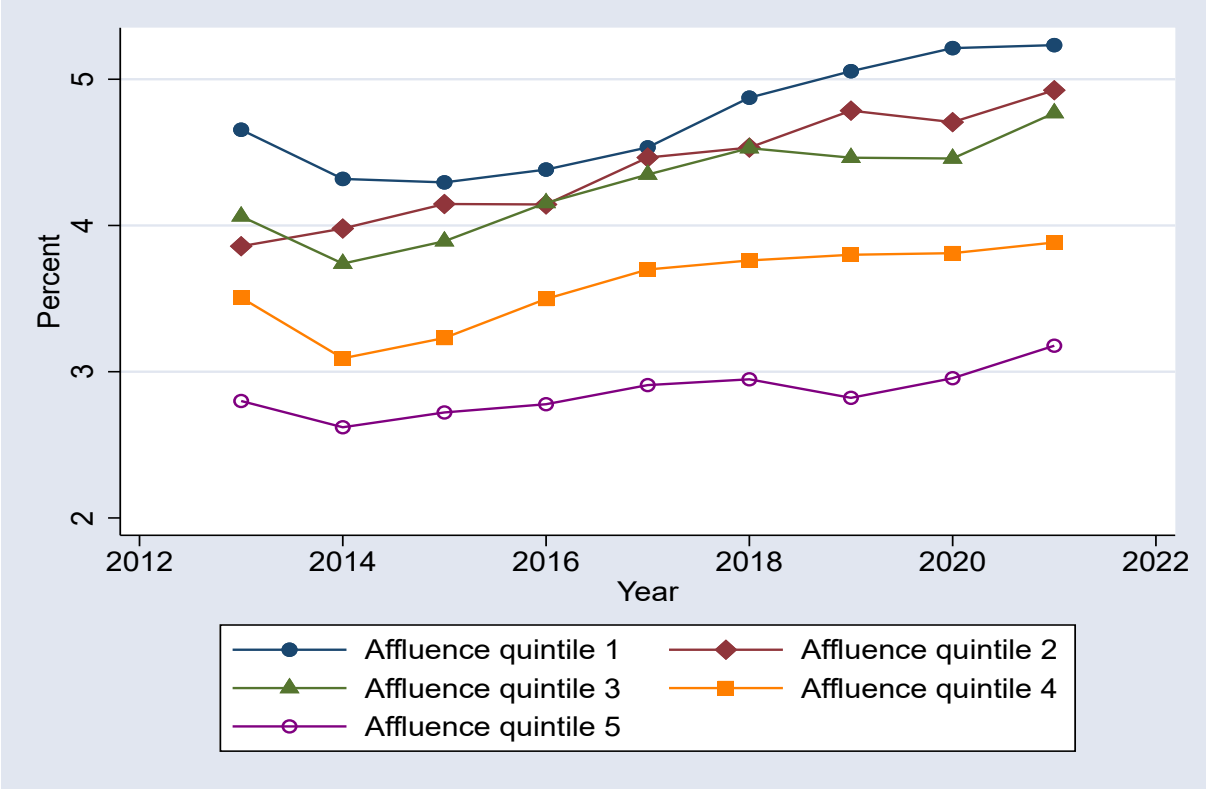
3.6 Leadership presence is one of the clearest institutional correlates of retention

Teachers working at schools with administrative leadership in the forms of principals and deputy principals, were least likely to switch schools, even after controlling for other observable characteristics. While there is no measure of leadership quality in the PERSAL data, the consistency of the association is important for policy discussion.

3.7 Area and school affluence are associated with retention

Figure 2 shows the annual school switching rates for all educators between 2013 and 2021, by ward affluence quintile. School switching rates are lowest for educators who had been in schools located in the most affluent 20 per cent of wards in the previous year, and highest for educators who had been teaching in the least affluent wards.

Figure 2: School switching rates by relative affluence quintile and year



Source: Constructed using a combination of PERSAL data (DBE, 2024), Masterlist 2022 data (DBE, 2025) and SAIMD data (Noble et al., 2013).

Even after controlling for other factors in our regression analysis, teachers in quintile 5 schools and schools in the most affluent wards exhibited the lowest switching probabilities. The ward result matters because school quintile and surrounding socioeconomic conditions overlap only partly: a school's internal resources may differ from access to transport, services and amenities in the wider community. Retention is therefore linked to both school and place-based conditions.

3.8 Formal qualifications do not explain switching in these data

Although quintiles 4 and 5 had larger shares of educators with REQV 14 or higher, REQV level was not statistically significantly associated with switching once other factors were included. This result does not imply that educator quality is irrelevant. REQV is an

incomplete proxy, is observed only for 2021 and captures formal qualifications rather than subject knowledge or classroom effectiveness. Better quality measures are required before assessing whether mobility redistributes effective educators.

Overall implication: The analysis suggests that retention is shaped by leadership presence and the socioeconomic context surrounding a school. Uniform measures alone are unlikely to address the concentration of mobility risk in disadvantaged schools and places.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Prioritise and track school leadership stability.** Prioritise the timely appointment and sustained presence of principals and deputy principals, particularly in schools with repeated vacancies or acting arrangements. Track teacher switching and leadership retention or appointment to determine whether leadership stability in fact does make a difference to teacher retention.
2. **Target retention support to high-risk schools and places.** Use linked PERSAL, vacancy, school-quintile and area-deprivation data to identify schools with persistent switching rather than relying only on provincial averages.
3. **Focus on early- and mid-career retention.** Develop district-level retention strategies for educators in their first decade of service and for the highly mobile younger age groups. Monitor whether teachers acquire experience in disadvantaged schools and then repeatedly move, and test locally appropriate retention responses.
4. **Build a strong national educator-mobility evidence system.** Distinguish voluntary transfers from administrative redeployments and exits from public education. Where possible, further research should link mobility records to subject specialisation, experience, vacancies, school performance and credible measures of teaching quality.

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