On good days, Jamie Gillespie loves her job as a high school principal in Edenton, N.C. On bad days, she contemplates switching careers. Ms. Gillespie has been a principal for six years: one year at Edenton’s John A. Holmes High School and five years previously in Evansville, Wis. New research suggests that she may be one of the survivors in her profession.

Data available from a handful of states suggest that only about half of beginning principals remain in the same job five years later, and that many leave the principalship altogether when they go.

“I talk to a lot of principals, and it’s becoming more and more rare that you’ll have a principal stay at a school for 15 or 20 years,” Ms. Gillespie said. “Now, you stay three to five years, and you either move to another school or go to the central office. I think it is a problem.”

Whether this apparent churn in the principal’s office signals a problem, progress, or business as usual seems to be a matter for debate, though.

Among those who see the turnover as worrisome is University of Texas researcher Ed J. Fuller, who with his colleague Michelle D. Young published new data this month on the retention rates of newly hired principals in Texas.

“We think the job has outgrown the ability of one person to handle it,” said Mr. Fuller, who is a special research associate for the University Council for Educational Administration, an international consortium of research institutions at the university’s main campus in Austin. “Nobody is staying long enough to make connections or shepherd a reform through,” he added.

But another researcher who has studied principals’ career patterns, Susan M. Gates, a senior economist for the Santa Monica, Calif.-based RAND Corp., is less bothered by the turnover she sees. If more principals are leaving schools now, she said, it could be because the nationwide movement to hold educators responsible for their students’ scores on tests is prompting districts and school boards to oust school leaders who are not producing results.
“If you put someone in the principalship and it just doesn’t work out, do you want to keep them there just because it’s good to have low turnover,” she said, “or do you want to get somebody in there who’s good at the job?”

‘Need to Know Why’

What’s clear is that studies of principals’ career trajectories are long overdue. While research has for years highlighted the large numbers of beginning teachers who leave the classroom in three or four years, no national study has documented the career moves that principals make, according to experts.

Instead, information has been trickling out of state-specific research conducted in Illinois, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, and Texas. Many of those studies were funded by the Wallace Foundation, of New York City, which also underwrites coverage of leadership issues in Education Week. Whether the findings can be generalized more widely is an open question.

“If it is true, and principals are not just getting promoted to the district office but are leaving the profession, then we need to know why that is,” said Joseph F. Murphy, who holds the Frank W. Mayborn chair of education at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tenn.

Research shows that, next to teachers, principals may be the most important contributors to students’ learning in school. And there’s also evidence to suggest that principals with strong education backgrounds tend to attract and hire teachers with similar qualifications.

For the Texas study, Mr. Fuller and Ms. Young analyzed employment data from 1995 to 2008 for more than 16,500 public school principals. The average tenure over that time was 4.96 years for elementary school principals, 4.48 years for middle school principals, and 3.38 years for high school principals, according to the study.

That analysis and other research by the University Council for Educational Administration also found that many of those principals were not leaving their schools to head other schools, as might be expected.

A year after leaving, 45 percent of the Texas principals were no longer employed by their school districts, possibly because they had retired or switched careers. Another 32 percent had moved to central-office jobs, while nearly 15 percent were working as assistant principals, guidance counselors, or in some other professional capacity in schools. Another 8 percent were teaching.

Data from Ms. Gates for Illinois and North Carolina, which come from a pair of 2004 studies by RAND, put the number of first-time principals still working as principals in the same state after six years at 48 percent for North Carolina and 38 percent for Illinois.

The North Carolina finding, however, paints a somewhat less bleak picture of principals’ career paths. Only 14 percent of the exiting principals in that state had left the school system altogether.

In Missouri, the data show that half of principals are no longer principals in that state after about five years, while three-quarters of New York state’s beginning principals are no longer at the schools where they started their careers six years later.

Pushed Out or Quitting?
In some of those states, the principal pipeline seems to leak the most from schools with large concentrations of minority students and from low-performing schools. In Texas, the average tenure for principals at elementary, middle, and high schools that ranked in the top fifth in student achievement was a year or more longer at each level than it was for principals of schools in the bottom fifth.

Some experts say that pattern jibes with reports from the field that the testing-and-accountability movement is causing some of the turnover in the principal’s office.

“There are no hard and fast numbers but, from an anecdotal standpoint, you hear regularly of principals being reassigned, moved, or replaced because of displeasure around student performance in the schools they lead,” said Dick Flanary, the senior director for leadership programs and services for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, in Reston, Va. “There’s no question it has become a difficult job.”

Back at John A. Holmes High School in northeastern North Carolina, Ms. Gillespie agrees.

“People hire principals to come in and raise test scores,” she said, “and they expect change immediately. Anybody that works in organizational management knows that’s not reasonable. Change isn’t going to happen in one or two years, but principals are hired with contracts for one or two years.”

Ms. Gillespie said principals also burn out because of the constant public scrutiny, the 50- to 60-hour weeks, the harried nature of the workday, and a lack of preparation to deal with the day-to-day problems they face.

“Your preparation doesn’t prepare you for what to do about unhappy parents complaining about you at the school board meeting,” she added. “There’s never a course on how to handle difficult employees or teachers refusing to do something.”

**Derailing Reforms**

Pay may also be a factor in principals’ retention rates, experts say. Under some school district pay scales, new principals earn no more than the most experienced teachers, which can discourage potential candidates from taking the job.

Principals tend to stick around longer when their salaries are higher than those of principals in the surrounding area, said Bruce D. Baker, an associate professor of educational theory, policy, and administration at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., and one of the co-authors of the Missouri study.

Growing recognition of the importance of improving principals’ working conditions has been a major thrust of studies supported over the past decade by the Wallace Foundation. The aim of much of that work has been to find ways to restructure the job or better prepare principals so they can devote more time to improving instruction.

Some districts, for instance, are experimenting with strategies for delegating the job’s managerial duties to vice principals or assistant principals, or bringing in new leaders, called school administration managers, to take on those duties. The SAM program now includes nine states, 37 districts, and 180 principals.

According to Brenda J. Turnbull, a principal at Policy Studies Associates, a Washington-based firm that is tracking that effort, the strategy seems to be working: Principals who take part in the SAM program do end up devoting more time to instruction.
The instructional improvements that principals make, however, can be derailed if they leave their posts. Instituting new reforms also becomes more difficult, Ms. Gillespie said, as teachers get used to the constant turnover in the principal’s office.

“Teachers become very independent, and they’re making a lot of the decisions themselves,” she said. “It isn’t easy to wrestle some of that power back.”

Whether changes in the principal’s office are productive hinges on the quality of the departing administrators’ replacements, Mr. Baker said.

“There’s a built-in assumption that bad principals would be replaced with someone better,” he said. “But we also don’t know who’s on the labor market to assume that type of position.”