

The profession that eats its young: The effect of principal leadership on the survival rate of teachers

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ABSTRACT

Each year, 450,000 teachers leave their teaching positions. One of the main factors contributing to this turnover is the lack of support by the administration. Teachers in school environments that fail to foster a sense of support and collaboration are more likely to leave their positions than those teachers in more positive environments. This study sought to examine the impact of the leadership of the principal on teacher retention by analyzing data from the National Center for Education Statistics' School and Staffing Survey and the Teacher Follow-Up Survey. Results indicate the impact of principal leadership in a teacher's decision to remain in a teaching position as well as a significant number of teachers who do not feel an overall sense of job satisfaction.

Key Words: principal leadership, teacher retention, education, teacher satisfaction, teacher turnover

1. Introduction

Each year in American public schools, nearly 450,000 teachers leave their jobs (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). This means that one-sixth of all teachers either transfer to different schools/districts or leave the teaching profession altogether. One of the main factors contributing to teachers' decisions to remain at or leave their positions is related to the support (or lack thereof) from the administrators at the school. Research indicates that the decision to remain or leave a particular school is greatly influenced by the principal and the principal's leadership style (Brown & Wynn, 2007). This study sought to further examine the role of the principal in teacher retention to provide current and aspiring principals with insight into their responsibilities as school leaders.

2. Background on Teacher Retention

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future reported that every school district in the country is affected by continuous teacher turnover (NCTAF, 2010). The general term "turnover" is most commonly used as an umbrella term to describe "the departure of teachers from their teaching jobs" (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 500). However, the implications are different when teachers leave their jobs for other teaching jobs as opposed to when they leave the teaching profession altogether to pursue careers in other fields. To reflect this significant difference, the term "attrition" is often used to describe the trend of teachers leaving the profession, and the term "migration" to describe the transfer of teachers from one school to another (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 503).

Teacher attrition is the most prevalent in beginning teachers. According to Viadero (2002), 29 percent of new teachers leave education within their first three years, and by the end of five years, 39 percent have left the profession. The field of education is notorious for the low "survival" rates among beginning teachers, which led Halford to refer to the field of education as "the profession that eats its young" (Renard, 1999, p. 227). This phenomenon of high attrition can be explained, in part, to the working conditions and school environment faced by many teachers. Johnson and Birkeland (2003) found that new teachers who do not experience a "sense of success" with their students are less likely to feel satisfied with their positions and remain in the classroom. This sense of success and satisfaction can be linked to teachers' working conditions. Research indicates that the working conditions of teachers affect their ability to teach well and the satisfaction they obtain from their teaching (Johnson, et al., 2005). One of the main sources affecting the working conditions of the school is the leadership of the school. The effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the leadership of the principal directly impacts the satisfaction of the teachers in the school (Johnson, et al., 2005). Luekens, Lyter, Fox, & Chandler (2004) found

that over one-third of teachers who transferred to new schools reported that their dissatisfaction with the administrations' support was either a "very important" or "extremely important" reason for leaving their position. Similarly, Johnson and Birkeland (2003) found that, among 50 novice Massachusetts teachers studied over four years, those who decided to leave their schools or the profession often "described principals who were arbitrary, abusive, or neglectful. . . ." (p. 594).

While ineffective principal leadership often leads to teacher attrition, effective principal leadership often leads to teacher retention. "How principals execute their leadership affects school organization, culture, and working conditions, which, in turn, affect job satisfaction and teacher retention" (Cornelia, 2010, p.3). Similarly, Useem (2003) found that "strong administrators and a collegial staff climate can lead to higher rates of teacher retention" (p. 18). "New teachers perceive building principals to be the vital link in their success" (Danin & Bacon, 1999, p. 206). Research suggests that teacher retention increases "when school environments are organized for productive collegial work under a principal's effective leadership" (Johnson, et al., 2005, p.67). For example, Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) reported that principals who delegate authority and support collective decision-making foster a "collective responsibility for student learning and instructional collaboration among teachers" (p. 774). Effective principals create a working environment that promotes teacher retention. The school principal has "the responsibility of creating an institutional atmosphere of collaboration and support, as opposed to one in which individual teachers shut their doors and operate privately" (Heller, 2004, p. 6-7). Effective principals attract, support, and retain qualified teachers who are successful in the classroom (Brown & Wynn, 2007).

3. Methodology

In this study, selected data from the National Center for Education Statistics' 2007-2008 School and Staffing Surveys and the 2008-2009 Teacher Follow-Up Survey were analyzed to examine teachers' responses to various statements regarding their teaching positions.

3.1 The Schools and Staffing Survey

The National Center for Education Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences, is the primary federal entity for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data related to education. In the 1980s, the National Center for Education Statistics designed the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), a set of questionnaires designed to gather data on schools and school personnel. This survey is the nation's largest sample survey of the characteristics of public, private, and Bureau of Indian Affairs/tribal schools. The survey has been administered six times during the following school years: 1987-1988, 1990-1991, 1993-1994, 1999-2000, 2003-2004, and 2007-2008.

The survey consists of several questionnaires, including one designed specifically for teachers to complete. This questionnaire asked participants about issues such as their education and training, teaching assignment, teaching experience, certification, teaching workload, perceptions and attitudes about teaching, job mobility, and workplace conditions. Further, it also asked participants to respond to issues of teacher preparation, induction, and organization of classes, professional development, and the use of computers.

Approximately 40,000 teachers participated in the each of the survey administrations. To ensure that the samples contain sufficient numbers for estimates, the Schools and Staffing Survey uses a stratified probability design. Public and private schools are oversampled based on certain characteristics. Further, after schools are stratified and sampled, teachers within the schools are also stratified and sampled based on their characteristics (NCES, 2012).

Once the surveys are completed and returned, the responses are entered into electronic data files, which are checked against the survey forms to ensure accuracy. Names, addresses, and other identifying information are removed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

3.2 The Teacher Follow-Up Survey

The Teacher Follow-up Survey was designed to measure attrition rates and to compare teachers who left the teaching profession, teachers who moved to another school, and those who stayed in the same school as the previous year. The Teacher Follow-Up Survey also measures the current economic activities of leavers, obtains

data on educational activities and future plans for all groups, and collects data on attitudes about the teaching profession and job satisfaction. The Teacher Follow-Up Survey sampling frame consists of all eligible teachers who responded to the Schools and Staffing Survey in the previous year.

3.3 Public-Use and Restricted Use Data

The National Center for Education Statistics must comply with the Privacy Act of 1974 (5 U.S.C. § 552a), the Computer Security Act of 1987 (PL 100-235) and the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 (PL 107-279). The Privacy Act of 1974 protects the privacy of personal data maintained by the federal government. It requires that agencies safeguard the confidentiality of personal data and limit the uses of that data. The Computer Security Act of 1987 requires all federal agencies to identify computer systems that contain “sensitive information” and to implement measures to maintain the security of this information. The Act defines “sensitive information” as “any information, the loss, misuse, or unauthorized access to or modification of which could adversely affect the national interest or the conduct of Federal programs, or the privacy to which individuals are entitled” under the Privacy Act of 1974. Finally, the National Center for Education Statistics must comply with the requirements of the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002. This Act, as amended, prohibits producing any publication in which data furnished by any particular individual can be identified, and permitting any person not authorized by the National Center for Education Statistics Commissioner to examine any individual data or reports.

To comply with these laws, the National Center for Education Statistics prevents the general public from accessing individually identifiable information. This refers to data “from any list, record, response form, completed survey, or aggregation about an individual(s) from which information about particular individuals or their schools/education institutions may be revealed by either direct or indirect means” (NCES, 2012). To do so, the National Center for Education Statistics makes data available to the general public in an abridged version, known as “public-use data.” All information that would disclose the identity of individual administrators and teachers is removed. This data has been coded, aggregated, or otherwise altered to protect the confidentiality of the respondents.

For researchers who qualify, “restricted-use data” may be used for analysis. This data contains individually identifiable information that is confidential and protected by law. Only those who have official clearance from the National Center for Education Statistics may access this data. To obtain a license to access data containing individually identifiable information, a letter of request to use the data and a notarized affidavit of nondisclosure is submitted to the National Center for Education Statistics for review. If approved, a license allowing access to the restricted-use data is awarded. This researcher holds a license to utilize restricted-use data.

4. Results

Both public-use and restricted-use data from responses to selected questions from the 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey Teacher Questionnaire and the 2008-2009 Teacher Follow-Up Survey were used in this study. Results from questions related to job satisfaction and principal leadership were analyzed.

4.1 Schools and Staffing Survey (2007-2008)

Participants of the 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey were asked to indicate a level of agreement to the following five statements:

1. “In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done.”
2. “My principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it.”
3. “The principal knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the staff.”
4. “The school administration’s behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.”
5. “I am generally satisfied with being a teacher at this school.”

Weighted responses were used in the analysis of the data from each of the five statements, indicating application of the results to 3,404,500 public school teachers in the United States. (See Table 1.)

First, weighted responses to the statement, “In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done” were examined. The results indicate that only 34% of teachers “strongly agree” with the statement.

Second, only 56% of participants “strongly agree” with the statement, “my principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it.”

Third, responses to the statement, “the principal knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the staff” indicate that 57.7% public school teachers “strongly agree” with the statement.

Fourth, weighted responses to the statement, “The school administration’s behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging” were examined, indicating that only 55% of public school teachers “strongly agree” with the statement.

Fifth, only 59.4% of public school teachers “strongly agree” with the statement, “I am generally satisfied with being a teacher at this school.”

Table 1
Weighted Responses of Public School Teachers

Statement	Percentage
In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done.	34
My principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it.	56
The principal knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the staff.	57.7
The school administration’s behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.	55
I am generally satisfied with being a teacher at this school.	59.4

4.2 Teacher Follow-Up Survey (2008-2009)

The 2008-2009 Teacher Follow-Up Survey was completed by participants of the previous year’s Schools and Staffing Survey to examine teacher attrition, migration, and retention. This study focused on the responses of those teachers who remained in their teaching positions (“stayers”) following the 2007-2008 school year.

Among those “stayers”, 89.1 percent agreed that “the school administration’s behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.” Further, 90.7 percent of those teachers agreed that the principal of their school “backs me up when I need it.” 88 percent of those teachers also indicated that their principal “knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the staff.” Further, 76.3 percent indicated that teachers in their school are “recognized for a job well done. Finally, 93.6 percent of teachers who remained in their teaching positions indicated that they were “satisfied with being a teacher” at their school. (See Table 2.)

Table 2
Weighted Responses of Public School Teachers

	Percentage of Stayers
Agree that staff members are recognized for a job well done.	76.3
Agree that principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it.	90.7
Agree that principal knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the staff.	88.0
Agree that school administration’s behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.	89.1
Agree that I am generally satisfied with being a teacher at this school.	93.6

5. Discussion

Results from the 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey indicate that the administrator plays a crucial role in the job satisfaction of teachers. Only 34% of teachers indicated that they felt that staff members in the school were recognized for good work. This means that the majority of teachers (66%) do not feel that staff members are acknowledged for their accomplishments. Further, only 56% of survey respondents “strongly agreed” that their principal enforces school rules and backs them up when needed, resulting in almost half of the teachers in American public schools believing that their principals fail to support them when needed. Further, only 57% of teachers agree that their school principals has communicated his or her vision for the school to the staff, leaving 43% of teachers believing that their school principal has failed to adequately communicate that to the staff. When examining the “supportive” and “encouraging” nature of the school administration, only 55% of teachers strongly agreed that their administrators’ behavior exhibited these characteristics, leaving 45% of teachers not strongly believing that their administrators were supportive and encouraging. When examining teachers’ overall

satisfaction with their positions at their schools, only 59.4% of teachers strongly agreed that they were generally satisfied with their teaching job at the school. The remaining 40% did not feel a strong sense of satisfaction with their positions at their schools.

These results indicate that a significant portion of teachers feel that the administrators in their schools are not promoting an environment where the teachers are valued, supported, and recognized. This lack of a supportive environment can result in teachers leaving the school or the teaching profession altogether.

To examine the impact of the principal more closely, participants of the Schools and Staffing Survey also participated in the Teacher Follow-Up Study during the following academic year (2008-2009). These responses reveal additional information regarding teacher job satisfaction and the role of the principal.

Among those teachers who remained in their teaching positions during the 2008-2009 academic year, 89% of those teachers indicated that the school administration was supportive and encouraging. Further, 90% of those "stayers" also indicated that their principal backs them up when needed. Among those teachers who stayed in their positions, 88% of them indicated that the principal effectively communicated his or her vision for the school to the staff. Further, 76% of the "stayers" indicated that teachers in their school are recognized by the principal for a job well done. Finally, almost 94% of teachers who remained in their teaching positions indicated that they were "satisfied with being a teacher" at their school.

These results indicate that strong leadership from the principal of the school has a direct connection to the job satisfaction of the teachers in the school. Among those teachers who remained in their teaching positions, an overwhelming majority indicated that the principals in their buildings were supportive, encouraging, had effective communication, and recognized accomplishments of teachers.

An examination of both sets of results indicates that teachers who remain in their teaching positions work in school environments with effective school principals. However, as indicated by the findings, a significant amount of teachers indicate that their working environments are not supportive and encouraging. As a result, many of these teachers may choose to leave their teaching jobs for positions in a different school under the direction of a different principal or they may choose to leave the teaching field altogether.

Principals must be aware of the impact their leadership effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) has on the job satisfaction of teachers. This should be addressed in two areas. First, academic institutions training aspiring principals should provide them with the knowledge and skills to be effective leaders in their future schools. Future principals should have a firm grasp on how to be not only efficient managers of their schools, but also how to effectively be the leaders of their schools. Second, current principals should address this issue in their own school environments by identifying areas of weakness in their own leadership style. Principals should examine their communication styles, their methods of interaction, and their relationships with teachers. This self-reflection may improve their leadership skills and, consequently, prevent the loss of high-quality staff.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

To continue to examine the role of principal leadership on teacher retention, it is recommended that, when available, the next set of Schools and Staffing Survey (2011-2012) data and Teacher Follow-Up Study (2012-2013) data be analyzed to determine the level of satisfaction teachers indicate they have with the leadership of their school principals. This analysis will reveal if principals are becoming more or less effective in their leadership skills related to teacher retention.

7. Summary

It is essential that current principals and aspiring principals recognize that their leadership style has a direct impact on the teachers' level of job satisfaction in the school. Effective principals create an environment where teachers feel and sense of collaboration and support, and as a result, are dedicated to their jobs. On the contrary, ineffective principals fail to create such a climate, leaving the teachers to feel a sense of isolation, leading to dissatisfaction with their jobs and a higher probability that they will leave their teaching positions for either a

different position in the teaching field or a different position in a field outside of teaching. Current and future principals must recognize the impact they have on teacher retention and must take steps to ensure that teachers in their schools feel a sense of satisfaction with their jobs to improve the “survival rates” of teachers.

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