



The Role of Principals in Addressing Teacher Shortages

Abstract

Districts around the country are grappling with teacher shortages. Given that attrition accounts for nearly 90% of the demand for new teachers, strategies that increase teacher retention are particularly important. Principal leadership plays a significant role in teacher turnover. Teachers identify the quality of administrative support as a key factor in decisions to leave a school. In addition, teachers point to the importance of school culture and collegial relationships, time for collaboration, and decision-making input—also areas in which the principal plays a central role. Principals tend to be weaker in high-poverty, low-achieving schools, where principal quality can have an even greater bearing on teacher attrition. Local, state, and federal policymakers have a role to play in recruiting and training principals. The passage of ESSA provides one such opportunity, as local and state policymakers can leverage federal ESSA funding to strengthen principal preparation and development.

This brief can be found online at <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/role-leadership-solving-teacher-shortages>.

LPI's work in this area is supported by funding from the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, the Stuart Foundation, and the Sandler Foundation.

Schools and districts around the country are grappling with teacher shortages that threaten educational opportunities and outcomes, particularly for our highest-need students. Responding to this pressing challenge, policymakers at all levels are shifting resources, rethinking practices, and enacting policies to attract and keep qualified educators in our nation's classrooms. Given the significant role that attrition plays in exacerbating shortages—accounting for nearly 90% of the demand for new teachers—strategies that plug the “leaky bucket” of teacher turnover are particularly high leverage.

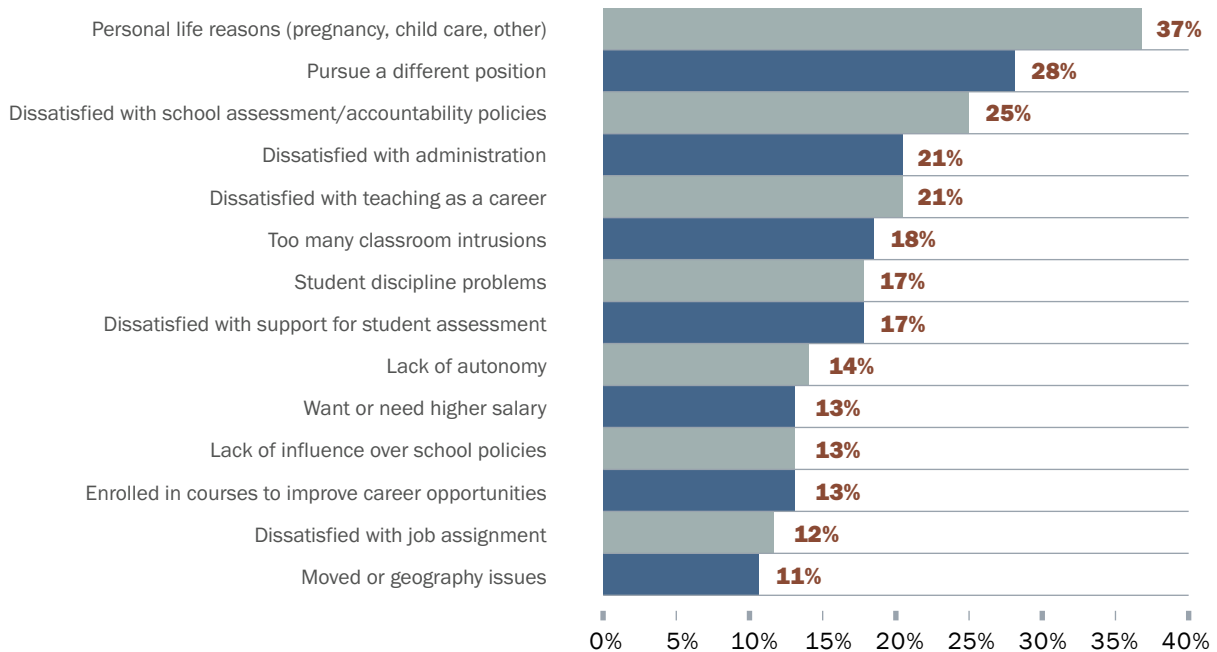
This brief summarizes research on the important role that school leaders can play in reducing the steady churn of teachers that can worsen shortages and undermine students' educational opportunities. It concludes with a discussion of how local, state, and federal policymakers can strengthen the preparation and ongoing development of principals to create learning environments that better enable students and teachers alike to thrive.

How Does School Leadership Affect Teacher Retention?

Principal leadership and support are among the most important factors in teachers' decisions about whether to stay in a school or in the profession (see Figure 1). Studies across the nation have found that the quality of leadership can have a large effect on teacher turnover. In fact, teachers often identify the quality of administrative support as more important to their decision than salaries. One recent study found that improvements in school leadership were strongly related to reductions in teacher turnover.¹ Recent data show teacher turnover rates reaching nearly 25% among teachers who strongly disagree that their administrator encourages and acknowledges staff, communicates a clear vision, and generally runs a school well. That is more than double the attrition rate of teachers who feel their administrators are supportive.²

In addition to salaries and resources for teaching, other key factors in teachers' professional decisions include school culture and collegial relationships, time for collaboration, and decision-making input—also areas in which the principal plays a central role. Moreover, talented principals who remain in their schools can be associated with retaining more effective teachers, even when controlling for student and school characteristics.

Figure 1
Why Do Teachers Leave?



The percentage of voluntary leavers who rated the factor as extremely or very important in their decision to leave. Percentages do not add to 100 because teachers can select multiple factors.

Source: LPI analysis of the Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS), 2013, from the Schools and Staffing Surveys, National Center for Education Statistics.

A 20-year public school teacher in Minneapolis noted how her school leader has influenced her professional decisions:

For the past decade, I've worked at a school where 97% of the children qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. I stay because the school climate is good for children and teachers alike. I stay because my principal is wonderful, supports us, does what's best for children, and because I trust her. I stay because my colleagues are gifted teachers and good company, and because I continually learn from them.³

Research identifies at least two major components of school leadership that contribute to teachers' decisions about whether and where to stay in the profession. These include administrator support and leadership style. We discuss each of these in turn.

Administrative Support: Teachers are more likely to remain in the classroom when they feel supported by administrators. In fact, research suggests that principal support can matter more than even teacher workload when it comes to decisions to stay at or leave a school. This support can take many forms, including providing emotional and instructional support. School leaders who support teachers with instructional resources, teaching materials, and professional learning opportunities have also been associated with lower teacher attrition rates. Principals at schools with reduced teacher turnover also ensure that teachers have the necessary communication channels and sensible budgets to address the learning needs of all their students.

Leadership Style: Studies have also found that a principal's leadership style is associated with teachers' decisions to leave the school or profession. For example, principals who do not "view themselves as traditional, omnipotent, 'top-down' administrators" have been associated with low teacher attrition rates. Instead, these principals generally describe their leadership responsibilities as facilitators, collaborators, team leaders, or leaders of leaders. To foster collaboration and create a broader sense of ownership, these principals often employ leadership teams, interview teams, or site-based management teams to make school-based decisions, "with the new teacher's opinion just as important as the person that's been here 25 years."⁴

What Are the Effects of Principals on Teacher Retention in High-Need Schools?

Principals tend to be weaker in high-poverty, low-achieving schools, where teachers often rate their principals as less effective.⁵ Similarly, in the quartile of schools with the most students of color, teachers are almost twice as likely to report severe dissatisfaction with their site leaders compared to teachers in schools with the fewest students of color.⁶ Not surprisingly, then, principal quality influences teacher attrition even more in schools with large proportions of low-income and minority students. Multiple studies of teacher attrition in high-poverty schools have found that teachers' perceptions of their school's leader are a dominant factor in their decision to remain in the school. This relationship—which includes such factors as setting clear expectations, providing support and encouragement, and recognizing staff for a job well done—is much larger in high-need schools, and, for the most effective principals, can even close the teacher turnover gap with schools serving more advantaged students.⁷

A synthesis of six studies analyzing teacher turnover in high-poverty schools found that effective school leaders were:

- effective school managers (ensuring that teachers have the necessary resources, communication channels, and sensible budgets);
- effective instructional leaders (strategically hiring teachers and staff, providing regular and fair teacher evaluations, and helping their teachers to continually improve); and
- inclusive decision makers (listening to teachers' ideas and engaging them in change, and providing teacher autonomy within their classroom as appropriate).⁸

How Can States and Districts Strengthen Principal Quality to Improve Teacher Retention?

Because of the importance of school leadership in teacher recruitment and retention, local and state policies designed to better prepare and continually develop school leaders can play a significant role in reducing teacher attrition. Programs and strategies designed to improve principals' ability to include teachers in decision making, foster positive school cultures, and create learning communities are particularly effective. Importantly, these programs have also been associated with increased student achievement.

Research points to several key features of effective principal preparation and development programs:

- close collaboration between programs and districts that ground learning in real school contexts;
- principals learning in cohorts that support collegial problem solving;
- problem-based learning, field-based internships, and coaching/mentoring; and
- curriculum focused on improving schoolwide instruction, supporting collegial environments, and using data effectively to identify and solve problems.

Effective programs provide principals an opportunity to learn by practicing aspects of the daily tasks of the principalship, such as learning to listen to and include teachers in school-site decision-making.

Both state and federal policymakers also have a role to play in recruiting and training promising candidates for school leadership positions, especially given that the challenges of the job often discourage strong candidates from entering the field.

States could encourage the widespread development of such high-quality principal preparation programs by incorporating the elements detailed above into policy through program accreditation or state licensing standards, a practice that several states have already undertaken.

State and federal entities could also offer grant funding and technical assistance for competitive service scholarship programs for principal preparation to attract exemplary candidates to the field and allow them to participate in internships with expert

Up Close: Quality Professional Development

The McREL Balanced Leadership Professional Development (BLPD) program is an example of research-based training that has been found to reduce both teacher and principal turnover. Over the course of 10, 2-day sessions, BLPD requires participants to read, reflect on, and discuss how to:

- establish a vision of academic success for all students;
- create a climate hospitable to education;
- cultivate leadership in others;
- improve instruction; and
- manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

A study of the program found a 23-percentage-point reduction in turnover for BLPD principals and a 7-percentage-point reduction in turnover for teachers who worked with them, compared to principals in the control group who received whatever professional development their district normally offered.⁹

principals—a key feature of effective programs. For example, the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program offers \$20,000 annually in scholarship loans to attract outstanding aspiring principals. The program includes two years of preparation that encompass both coursework and a yearlong, full-time internship under the mentorship of an expert principal. In exchange, principal candidates agree to four years of service as a principal or assistant principal in one of the state’s public schools. Since its inception in 1993, the program has trained more than 1,200 principal fellows. As of 2007, more than 12% of the state’s principals and assistant principals were graduates of the program.

Finally, states should consider providing funding for principals to receive preparation and professional development. States can leverage funds under Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provides funding to support high-quality programs for principal preparation, including school leader residency programs, offering a full year of clinical training. Another source of funds to support these types of programs is ESSA’s School Leader Recruitment and Support Program, which authorizes competitive grants to recruit and train principals for high-need schools.

In a notable change, the law permits states to set aside 3% of their Title II formula funds to strengthen principal quality, including by investing in principal recruitment, preparation, induction, and development. As states develop their state plans under ESSA, they should consider taking advantage of these targeted funds to make strategic investments in their school-leader workforce. In addition, states can leverage the U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to establish internships that strengthen principal preparation. For example, Mississippi used these funds to establish a paid sabbatical program for teachers, which supports their participation in a principal internship and training program.

Conclusion

Recruiting and retaining excellent teachers and principals is critically important for the success of future generations, especially for those living in underserved communities. The two goals are closely related. Decades of research point to the critical role that high-quality school leaders play in building a strong and stable teacher workforce. With the passage of ESSA, local and state policymakers can leverage federal funding to strengthen principal preparation and development, an investment that can reap significant dividends—both in the form of increased teacher retention and the improved academic opportunities that come with a strong instructional leader.

Endnotes

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The content of this brief draws on the findings of the following research reports from the Learning Policy Institute:

Sutchter, L., Podolsky, A., & Espinoza, D. (2017). *Supporting Principals’ Learning: Key Features of Effective Programs*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/supporting-principals-learning>.

Sutchter, L., Darling-Hammond, L., and Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). *A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S.* Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/coming-crisis-teaching>.

Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). *Solving the Teacher Shortage: How to Attract and Retain Excellent Educators*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/solving-teacher-shortage>.