

Study Highlights Importance of Principals in Teacher-Retention Efforts

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A new study suggests that school districts take a closer look at the principal job if they want to get to the root cause of teacher turnover and find ways to prevent it.

Susan Burkhauser, institutional research associate at Loyola Marymount University, outlines her study in a paper titled "[How Much Do School Principals Matter When It Comes to Teacher Working Conditions?](#)," published in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. Burkhauser bases her work in part on the intuitive assumptions that working conditions are a prime factor in a teacher's decision to stay or go and that principals may be in the best position to shape working conditions. Principals, she says, can influence a teacher's perception of the job by changing actual conditions—by offering more academic and moral support, more opportunities to develop teaching skills and advance their careers, more say in school policy, and the like.

What's new about Burkhauser's study is that it suggests that a teacher's perception of working conditions is closely related to his or her perception of the principal. That is, the way a teacher sees her principal can shape the way she perceives conditions in the school, even before any changes are made, and regardless of what else is going on in the school or district.

Using data from the biannual [North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey](#), Burkhauser measured the relation between the teacher's perception of principal and workplace climate in four areas: 1) teachers' time use, 2.) school environment, 3.) school leadership, and 4.) **teacher training**. She found that the teacher's ratings of their experiences in these areas matched their ratings of their principals.

Burkhauser writes that "the estimated effect of increasing principal quality by one adjusted standard deviation in perceptions of time use has the equivalent estimated effect of a decrease in seven students per teacher or a movement to a pupil/teacher ratio of 8-to-1 in the average classroom." In other words, teaching seems more manageable to a teacher who trusts her principal.

What's more, the measure of principal effectiveness correlated across all four areas. This suggests that well-liked principals who are seen as doing a good job in one area may enjoy favorable perceptions across all areas of school environment. At the same time, Burkhauser acknowledges that it could be that teachers are judging their principals according to whether or not they like the school environment, in which case more research has to be done to determine the cause of this correlation.

Based on the study's results, Burkhauser advises districts suffering high turnover to conduct a survey of teachers' perceptions of their working environments. Low scores would suggest that districts need to find ways of training its principals in improving conditions at the school. Districts might also create principal-training programs on how to effectively communicate with teachers, or in providing useful feedback to teachers. They could look to recruit principals who have a record of improving school working conditions.

Burkhauser does acknowledge some limitations of the study. For example, the data come one state, North Carolina, whose particular school accountability policies may shape the principalship and interest in principal jobs in ways that don't apply to other states. Further, North Carolina does not have collective bargaining agreements for teachers, and so the study's results may not be entirely applicable to states with strong unions and labor agreements that determine a principal's job and authority.

Finally, the study doesn't account for the effects of certain school factors, such as location, or how much autonomy the district gives a principal, all of which affect the principal's impact. So theoretically, a principal who gets favorable ratings on school environment at one school, may not experience the same outcomes at a different school.

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Comment: I absolutely agree. Principals can make the difference, particularly if they provide what help where the rubber meets the road: to the classroom teacher. Providing “just-in-time” subject-specific instructional support and subject-specific mentoring teacher access to teachers with new assignments is the most practical, economical way of addressing the 4 points raised in the article. Such a program of support will not only will save hundreds of hours of prep time (point 1, use of teacher’s time); but will better prepare teachers for their classroom assignments leading to improved student achievement (point 2, school environment); demonstrate school leadership (point 3); and fulfill the need for teacher training (point 4). Specifically, the instructional support materials in the *Expert Systems for Teachers*® Series include everything a teacher typically needs to prepare for each day and for the entire school year, everything that doesn't come with a textbook: a pacing guide, detailed daily lesson plans, editable class lecture notes in Power Point form, complete labs and activities and editable assessments. The material can be used as is in the classroom or taken through a participating university for credit toward license renewal with study guide and fees paid for state subject-area certification exams when necessary. Now with over 120 subject-specific titles in 17 subject areas, the *Expert Systems for Teachers* series (at teaching-point.net) serves schools in all 50 U.S. states and 87 countries. For principals, this program addresses the issues of teacher shortages that lead to quality issues and the unequal distribution of highly-effective teachers not to mention the recruitment, development and retention of teachers.