

## The Five Factors: How School Leaders Can Improve Teacher Retention

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### *Abstract*

*Prior research has identified five in-school factors that impact teacher retention: positive school culture, supportive administration, strong professional development, mentoring programs, and classroom autonomy. While much of the national attention is focused on state or district-level policies to address the teacher retention crisis, this study focuses on how school leaders can improve teacher retention by addressing the five factors. Semi-structured interviews with school leaders were used to provide examples of how principles can improve school culture and increase teacher retention.*

**Keywords:** *teacher retention, administration, school principal, education leadership*

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## **The Five Factors: How School Leaders Can Improve Teacher Retention**

Teacher shortages are one of the most common educational narratives in the post-COVID educational landscape (Loehrke, 2024; Turner & Cohen, 2023; Will, 2022). Nationwide, school leaders reportedly are struggling to attract and retain teachers. This is leading to creative ways to address the shortage. For example, USA Today (Cardoza, 2023) reports schools are beginning to recruit custodians, bus drivers, and aids into the teaching profession. These types of “Grow your own” programs whereby schools identify potential teachers among current employees or students are becoming increasingly popular (Gist, 2022). So too are other forms of policy change.

In his 2021 State of the Union Address, President Joe Biden noted that the American Rescue Plan “gave schools money to hire teachers and help students make up for lost learning.” Following this, the United States Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona, issues a call to action to address the teacher shortage (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The call to action was a call for policymakers and teacher preparation institutions. It was a call for policy change. Under Cardona’s leadership, the U.S. Department of Education encouraged teacher residency programs, increased compensation, loan forgiveness, and a slew of other policy changes.

While future policy changes may be necessary to increase the number of qualified candidates entering the teaching profession or to help improve teacher retention down the road, these suggestions are outside the control of school leaders in the field who are presently doing their best to attract and retain great teachers in their schools. For example, whether they are effective or not (Maranto & Shuls, 2013), building administrators may not have the ability to provide monetary incentives for teachers. In this paper, we are interested in examining what school leaders can do themselves to influence teacher retention. Our guiding research question is this: What strategies for increasing teacher retention are recommended by building administrators?

In a previous analysis, we conducted semi-structured interviews with human resource personnel in school districts that had high levels of teacher retention (Shuls & Flores, 2020). In that exploratory analysis, we focused on suggestions and recommended strategies that were under the purview of school leaders. That is, what can a building principal do to improve teacher retention? Our analysis revealed five factors that are key to maintaining high levels of retention in public schools: positive school culture, supportive administration, strong professional development, mentoring programs, and classroom autonomy.

In this paper, we dig deeper into these five factors. Through semi-structured interviews with 12 school leaders in schools with high levels of teacher retention, we examine whether school principal perceptions align with the HR professionals in our previous study and we examine how school leaders can improve these five factors within their school buildings. The 12 school leaders in our study reiterated the importance of the five factors, noting that school culture (10 of 12) and a supportive administration (2 of 12) were the most important factors regarding teacher retention.

In the pages that follow, we discuss our methods for recruiting and interviewing the participants in this study, their perceptions of the five factors, and we discuss ways in which school leaders can improve teacher retention in their schools by improving the five factors. First, we examine the research literature as it relates to the five factors of building level teacher retention.

## **Literature Review**

In our previous exploratory analysis of human resource professionals, we noted that the school districts in our study did not appear to have intentional teacher retention policies or plans. Rather, they developed “policies designed to make the school district more effective at meeting the needs of faculty and students” (Shuls & Flores, 2020, p. 14). Specifically, we identified five factors that were important for retaining teachers. Here, we examine the research literature as it relates to each of the five factors.

## **Positive School Culture**

There is considerable overlap among the five factors. Indeed, all could be said in some way to contribute to school culture. School culture has been defined by scholars in many ways. In essence it is the ethos of the place. The culture both shapes teachers attitudes and practices and is also set by teachers attitudes and practices. School leaders play a pivotal role in shaping a positive school culture. Hoerr (2019) for example writes, “the job of principals is to work with teachers to create a culture of trust and growth. A school’s culture is forged by principals and teachers working collaboratively.”

One way principals can foster a positive school culture is by providing support to teachers and clear communication (Hughes, Matt, and O’Reilly, 2015). Teachers need clear messages and guidance. They need to know what is expected, what the norms are, and they need to understand their administrators will do their best to support them as they act in good faith. Hoerr (2019) notes, “The power of a school’s culture is obvious in professional development sessions and at faculty meetings. Indeed, faculty meetings often are a Rosetta Stone for understanding a school’s culture” (p. 47).

When schools have a positive school culture, it improves teacher retention. Zavelevsky, Benoliel, and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2022) conducted a mixed-methods study which included 1,570 teachers in Israel in the quantitative portion of the study. As the authors stated, the purpose of the study “was to examine characteristics of schools that are effective in retaining novice teachers through a holistic examination of their ecological school culture” (p. 11). They found positive school cultures have a positive impact on teacher retention. Particularly, collegial relationships between teachers, mentoring policies, and positive principal-teacher relationships were most impactful.

This finding seems to cut across cultures. Thien and Lee (2022) found similar results in a survey of 452 teachers in Malaysian Chinese primary schools. Their survey examined the relationship between school culture and teacher well-being, including “commitment to teaching.” They found school culture has a direct, positive effect on teacher well-being and commitment to teaching.

## **Supportive Administration**

Just as a positive school culture appears to increase teacher retention, so does administrative support. In a survey of 17 school principals and 41 teachers in hard-to-staff schools, Hughes, Matt, and O'Reilly (2015) noted that “support of teachers has a critical and important impact on teacher retention in hard-to-staff schools” (p. 132). Of the areas examined, they found emotional support to be the most important.

Brown and Wynn (2007) conducted semi-structured interviews of school principals, similar to the methods used in this study. They found similar results. Principals saw themselves as having an active role in improving school culture and teacher retention. They did this by promoting collaboration, providing supportive conditions, offering opportunities for shared leadership, as well as shared norms and values.

## **Strong Professional Development**

Teachers who are in schools where they can develop as teachers via mentoring and professional development seem to have higher rates of retention. This makes sense if we see professional development of meaningful ways to develop teacher efficacy. No one wants to be in a job where they do not feel they are effective. Moreover, teacher professional development and mentorship can provide emotional support and connections. As Feiman-Menser (2003) writes, “As new teachers try to make sense of what is going on in their classrooms, the explanations and advice they encounter, especially from more experienced colleagues, affect their attitudes” (p. 3).

## **Mentoring Programs**

Positive professional mentors are important for teacher development. This was made clear in a phenomenological study of six novice Canadian teachers, each with three years or less teaching experience (Whalen, Majocha, and Van Nuland 2019). The study found that each of the study participants sought out mentorship. They noted the importance of these mentoring relationships on the development of school culture, growth as educators, and ultimately teacher retention. Novice teachers look to veteran teachers for guidance and support. It is important for school leaders to find ways to foster these relationships.

## **Classroom Autonomy**

Just as teachers need opportunities to grow and develop their craft, they also need to feel that they have some level of agency within their classrooms. That is, they need some level of classroom autonomy. As Ingersoll, Merrill, and May (2016) write, “Sanctions exacerbate the teacher turnover problem in low-performing schools—but giving teachers more classroom autonomy can help stem the flood” (p. 45). We are not saying teachers need to be given complete authority to determine everything that they will do in their classroom. Of course, schools should develop scope and sequence guidelines that help make sure students progress through their education without missing important information. Yet, teachers do not need to be micro-managed. They need to be given some latitude, some ownership of their classroom if we want to maximize their likelihood of staying in the field.

## Summary

When we consider the academic literature as it relates to the five factors that impact teacher retention outlined by Shuls and Flores (2020)—positive school culture, supportive administration, strong professional development, mentoring programs, and classroom autonomy—there is clear consensus that these factors play a key role in teacher retention. The question is, how do school leaders influence these five factors? We explore this question in our analysis.

## Methods

In this paper we ask, what strategies for increasing teacher retention are recommended by building administrators? To answer this question, we conducted semi-structured interviews with school principals. In a previous analysis (Shuls & Flores, 2020), we conducted interviews with district level human resources professionals in three Missouri school districts. The districts were selected because they exceeded state rates of teacher experience, our proxy for teacher retention. To maintain consistency with our previous analysis, we first sought to interview school leaders from these same three school districts. Since our analysis here focused on head principals, this yielded a field of 36 potential interview candidates.

Initially, the field of principals was narrowed down to those who have served in their current role as building principal for at least three years as this would allow them to better understand the nature and impact of teacher attrition and retention at their school. This yielded a field of 15 potential participants in this study, however, after repeated attempts to recruit candidates only four principals agreed to participate in a 30 minute interview.

To increase the sample size of the study, the three-year requirement for building principals was removed which led to two additional interviews. We then expanded the study to include four additional school districts. These districts were also identified as meeting or exceeding the state average in teacher retention. As a result of the inclusion of these four school districts, six additional building leaders participated in the study for a total of 12 participants. School demographic information is presented in Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the participants presented in Table 2.

*Table 1: Building Level Descriptive Statistics*

Building	District	Grades	Students	FTE	Adv. Degrees	Avg. Years of Experience
1	1	K-5	521	31	73.2%	12.9
2	1	6-8	669	45.47	90.2%	18
3	2	6-8	718	47.3	84.6%	14.9
4	2	9-12	1,667	96.08	84%	16.5
5	3	K-5	418	28.98	85.4%	13.5
6	3	7-8	707	51.33	88.8%	15.4
7	4	9-12	1,692	117.11	81.5%	14.4
8	5	6-8	885	74.7	69.5%	14.5
9	6	7-8	241	17.55	65.2%	13.8

10	7	3-6	471	33.5	70%	9.8
11	7	7-8	210	15.58	76.1%	12.3
12	7	9-12	348	29.47	84.2%	16.2
MO	N/A	K-12	879,845	69,849	61.9%	13

*Note.* Teacher FTE is based on the 2018-2019 Academic Year and accessed from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data system (<https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/index.asp>). Master's Degree and Avg. Years of Experience column are based on the year 2020 data obtained from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Missouri Comprehensive Data System (<https://apps.dese.mo.gov/MCDS/home.aspx>).

Each of the interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes. They were conducted via Zoom video conference and recorded with the permission of the interviewee. Each recording was transcribed and, as in our previous analysis (Shuls & Flores, 2020) a horizontal and vertical analysis was applied to the transcriptions in order to isolate and determine themes. During the vertical analysis, we examined the responses from each administrator and developed themes within their own school context. We used the five factors as themes to code the responses, but also looked for additional themes that might appear. Once we conducted the vertical analysis, we then conducted a horizontal analysis, or cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this stage of the process, we looked across the interviews to discover similarities or differences among the responses from the various school leaders.

*Table 2: Building Leader Experience*

<b>Building Leader</b>	<b>Total in Education</b>	<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Administrator</b>	<b>Current Position</b>	<b>Current District</b>
BL 1	16.5	2.5	14	5	5
BL 2	28	8	20	12	20
BL 3	27	7	20	6	27
BL 4	20	5	15	3	3
BL 5	32	17	15	6	10
BL 6	13	8	5	1	1
BL 7	27	14	13	10	27
BL 8	18	7	11	2	2
BL 9	13	11	2	2	2
BL 10	12	7	10	1	1
BL 11	22	3	1	8	9
BL 12	26	10	16	12	12
Total	254.5	99.5	142	68	119
Average	21.2	8.3	11.8	5.7	9.9

*Note.* All measurements in Years. All data was obtained through personal communication with each building leader.

To avoid confirmation bias or the possibility of steering participants into our five factor themes, we avoided framing the questions in these themes until the end of the interview. We asked open ended questions about teacher retention in the district and practices used to address teacher

retention. Particularly, we asked about the “biggest factors in” the administrator’s “building that contributes to teacher staying.” We also asked whether the administrator had been able to “identify common reasons why teachers may leave [their] school.” Finally, we asked them to rank order the five factors and discuss them. This was the last question.

## Results & Implications

During our semi-structured interviews, we asked school leaders to rank order the five previously identified factors that influence teacher retention from most important to least important. These five factors were uncovered during the first phase of research with district leaders (Shuls & Flores, 2020) and include school culture, supportive administration, strong professional development, mentor program, and classroom autonomy. By having principals rank order these five, we sought to determine which factor school leaders believe has the largest impact on keeping teachers in the classroom. This is particularly important as school leaders may need to prioritize programs, policies, practices, and strategies. Priority should be given to those programs, policies, practices, and strategies that tend to be most impactful. The results of this ranking question as organized by factor and respondent ranking can be found in Table 3.

*Table 3: Ranking Question Response by Factor*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>1 (Most Important)</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 (Least Important)</b>
Classroom Autonomy	0	2	3	4	3
Mentor Program	0	1	2	2	7
Professional Development	0	0	5	6	1
Supportive Administration	2	7	2	0	1
School Culture	10	2	0	0	0

Of the five factors, school culture was ranked as the first or second most important factor for teacher retention at the building level by all 12 building leaders. The second most important factor for teacher retention according to this set of building leaders is a supportive administration. This factor was ranked in the top three by eleven of the interviewees and ranked in the top two by nine. Two building leaders ranked supportive administration as the most important factor that contributes to teacher retention and seven building leaders ranked it second. Tied for third were strong professional development and classroom autonomy.

According to those that participated in the study, the least influential variable that contributes to the successful retention of teachers is a mentor program. It is important to note, however, that though this factor was ranked fifth, it does not mean that it does not play a significant role in teacher retention. It simply means that of the options provided, it was consistently ranked lower

than the other items. Furthermore, all schools follow state law and have a mentor program that lasts for at least two years. Many of the schools in the study go well above the minimal state mandates and have a multifaceted mentor program that helps build connections and relationships across a variety of platforms.

Though we asked participants the rank order question last, we present it first here as a way to organize the following sections. We present the findings of the five factors in order of the rankings. It also happens to be the case that participants tended to discuss issues they ranked higher more frequently. As we discuss the results, we also offer suggestions and implications for school leaders that follow from our analysis of the interviews.

### **Promoting a Positive School Culture**

Many of the building leaders expressed that their school has a community or family feel that unifies and connects staff, administration, and students with one another. In other words, they suggested their schools have a positive school culture. But how do you go about building a positive culture? In almost all cases, building leaders expressed that they are currently or have in the past worked hard to build a positive school culture that incorporates trust, transparency, belonging, and value. While the tactics of doing this may have been different, all noted that this is one of the primary jobs of a building leader and is something that should be consistently monitored, evaluated, and improved if needed. In the words of one study participant, “Building administrators need to constantly ask themselves ‘Am I creating a school where teachers want to work and students want to learn?’”

For schools to be impactful and thrive, their foundation must be built upon a healthy school culture. School leaders can shape, craft, and nurture school culture. As such, building leaders need to keep culture at the forefront of their minds when making decisions that impact and shape a school from the hiring of individual teachers to the programs and policies they create and implement.

As noted by many school leaders that participated in this study, a positive school culture is one built on care, trust, transparency and belonging. Many leaders when describing their school culture explained that it was like a family where they all care for and support one another. School leaders must be intentional to shape this type of culture. As one study participant noted, teachers stay in a school when “they know we [administration] care about them.” She went on to add that it is important that teachers know they are more than data and test results, that they are cared for and supported.

School leaders must purposefully seek to build trust with teachers. Building Leader 1 noted that he builds trust by treating teachers as professionals. He noted that he trusts that his teachers are exceptional at what they do which is why he hired them in the first place. Because he trusts his teachers, he gives them voice and autonomy in their classes. Similarly, Building Leaders 12 and 13 mentioned that at the center of their school cultures is a mutual trust that all parties are working to do what is best for kids.



School leaders also build trust by being transparent with teachers. That is, the school leaders in this study noted that it is important to be open with teachers regarding building decisions and even allowing them to participate as often as possible. Building Leader 10 further noted that transparency can sometimes even extend into difficult conversations but is still important to ensure a healthy culture.

Ultimately, a positive school culture is one in which teachers have a sense of belonging. This is *their* school. Multiple administrators in this study noted the importance of belonging.

In fact, all building leaders, except for two, mentioned that their staff members feel like they belong to a school family and a tight knit community. According to Smith and Waller, this sense of belonging is important to a school's culture because it is "the platform for higher levels of collaboration and creativity, as well as for individual and collective growth" (2020, p. 26).

In order to create a positive school culture that encompasses all of these attributes on their campuses, the building leaders that participated in the study seek out and listen to teacher voice, purposefully build in time for connection, and clearly articulate and encourage connection with the school mission and vision. One way that many of the building leaders gather and encourage teacher voice is by having an abundance of committees for teachers to participate in to help guide the direction of the school and help make building level decisions. For instance, both Building Leaders 5 and 6 have committees that are dedicated to central themes or components of the school for the purpose of bettering the school around their chosen topic. Building Leader 5 mentioned that her school has committees dedicated to sustainability, social justice, character education, and a social committee just to name a few. Similarly, Building Leader 6 upon arriving at her school thought about all the major components that make up a school and how it functions on a day-to-day basis and then created teacher led committees centered on these topics of professional development, discipline, academics, and curriculum. In both of their schools, the committees are designed to first come together and meet as a group to generate ideas, create programs or policies, and problem solve, and then bring these ideas to the principal as suggestions or ways to better the school.

When committees are given real responsibility and their work truly matters, they can create buy-in among teachers and provide a sense of ownership in the decision making process. This teamwork and cooperation around major facets of the school creates a collaborative leadership structure that makes the decision-making process bottom up rather than top down. According to Building Leader 5, this creates a sense of ownership over what is happening in the building that has driven an increase in people coming to her with new ideas. Furthermore, this sense of ownership then leads to greater teacher investment which in turn helps to build and reinforce culture. In the words of Building Leader 4, "When teachers have a strong sense of ownership, that creates a much stronger sense of community that when things are top down."

Furthermore in regard to committees, every school that participated in the study has some form of a leadership committee. In many of these schools, this leadership committee has department chairs or grade level team leaders that meet with administration monthly to not only help make decisions,

but to also discuss the climate and culture of the building. This group often addresses staff issues or concerns and works with administration to problem solve. One important characteristic of these committees in a few schools is that the committee is open for any teacher to join, even those that do not serve as team leaders or department chairs. This helps to further the community feel and really shows that all teachers can influence the school and its path. Furthermore, this design is intentional and is meant to bring as many voices to the table as possible to combat the fact that fewer and fewer educators feel like they matter or are valued by those they work for and work with on a daily basis (Smith & Waller, 2020).

Another way that building leaders promote a positive school culture is by intentionally creating time for adults to connect and collaborate with one another both inside and outside of the school environment. In the words of Building Leader 6, “If we are trying to build a positive school culture built on relationships, we have to have and set aside time for the groups to build those relationships.” Or as Building Leader 4 stated, “[Culture] is all about relationships and always making the effort to bring people together when you can. It is about always showing the value that you see in people.” As mentioned previously, in some buildings this is achieved through committee work, while in other buildings this is achieved by providing staff opportunities to connect and feel valued or appreciated beyond the school environment and primary school functions. For instance, in Building Leader 2’s school, a portion of the start of every staff meeting is dedicated to teachers and administrators thanking or giving shout outs to one another. Teachers or administrators do this by standing up and saying a few words about the person they want to recognize and give them a candy bar provided by administration. While small, this builds connections and a sense of appreciation. Building Leader 8 expands on this by purposefully building in time each month to honor and thank his teachers. In what he calls “[Name of School Mascot] Hour”, he and his administrative team do things like leave inspirational notes on all teacher’s cars in the parking lot, or brings them their favorite soda, or even walks through the halls with a nacho cart because his staff are “Nacho average teachers!” Again, while small, these acts of kindness show teachers that they are valued and appreciated which helps to connect people, strengthen relationships, and build comradery. In order to build comradery, one school leader noted that her administrative team hosts events like tailgates before Friday football games, a staff chili cook off, potluck lunch days, and provides a barbecue lunch for staff in the outdoor commons at least once a school year. In addition, her school, as well as several others, have Kindness Committees that meet to plan events for staff like baby showers, birthday celebrations, and holiday celebrations.

Lastly, building leaders can promote a positive school culture by clearly and frequently articulating the school mission or vision and connecting all work that goes on in the building back to these guiding principles. In this sense, Building Leader 10 stated that school administrators need to ask themselves:

What is the mission and vision and how do we talk about that each time we are together? If we are saying our focus is equity, what does that look like in every action that we take and communication that we make? How are we standing up and expressing that to our community as well?

For Building Leader 11, the mission and vision for his school and the connection that his staff has to it are what keeps them in the classroom. He noted that the building mission and vision statements are not just words on the wall, they are the guiding principles of the school through which all decisions are made. Furthermore, he believes that his teachers know this, and this connection that they feel to the mission and vision gives them a clear sense of purpose and works to unite them around a common goal.

### **Supportive Administration**

Just as teachers are pulled in multiple directions and are asked to take on a variety of roles, so are administrators. One of their primary job functions is to provide needed and constant support to their teachers. Adding complexity to this concept of support is that not all teachers need support in the same ways or will feel supported by the same actions, policies, or programs. In the end, an administrator must not only find the right amount and type of support for each teacher but must also provide this support in a manner that is well received by the teacher.

Many of the building leaders that participated in this study provide support to their teachers by listening to teacher voice and using their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences to help make decisions that impact the whole school. As described by Building Leader 6, her teachers are involved in facilitating change and she often dedicates time to “include teacher voice into how we create a safe, respecting, and nurturing school environment for our students.” Like other building leaders, she does this through the use of a Principal Advisory Council that meets at least once a month to discuss the culture, direction, challenges and successes that are happening in their building. As stated by Hoerr (2005), “It is easy for principals, even the best ones in the most collaborative and creative schools, to be isolated or removed from teachers’ thoughts and concerns” (p. 112) and councils such as this help to keep this isolation or removal from happening.

It is important to note that many of the school leaders view this council as more than just a platform for teachers to air their grievances and voice their frustrations, and instead view the council as an opportunity to pitch ideas, problem solve, and actively seek the advice of building teachers. For example, Building Leader 5 actively “fought off” having an advisory council in her building at the beginning of her tenure because she did not want to create a hierarchy of voice or influence in her school. Instead, she wanted to have a culture of trust and openness where all teachers knew that they could come to her at any time to share their voice and experiences. Unfortunately, she found that rather than open voices, many of her staff felt like the opposite was happening because the previous leadership had an advisory council. To fix this, she reversed course and started such a group composed of a teacher representative from each grade level and/or department. In the beginning, the time set aside for the council meetings with the principal was primarily used by the group of teachers to bring problems and complaints to her from other teachers in the building. While she did appreciate hearing about these issues and the opportunity to work and solve them, in her mind the Advisory Council was created for a different purpose. For her, the vision of an advisory council, if it truly is an advisory council, is for the principal to bring ideas to the teachers about any number of topics to actively seek out the teachers’ advice, to listen to their advice, and

to use their advice for the betterment of the program, policy, or idea to in turn better the school as a whole.

Through the development of trust over time, the perspective of the group shifted and now the cohesive and collaborative group, rather than school administration, is the main driver of the direction and path of the school because they help to craft and implement the programs, policies, and structures that run the building. The group still brings forth issues and problems, but that is no longer their sole purpose, as the culture of trust and support that began with this group has diffused throughout the rest of the building and many teachers address their concerns directly with the school principal as opposed to through the Advisory Council.

Another way that building leaders provide support to their teachers is by having an “open door policy” or, in other words, by being available to their teachers at all times. For Building Leader 10, this means “being around in a way that teachers know that they can come to you at any time and you will listen to them, before school, after school, or even during passing periods.” For Building Leader 2, this means that he has to be available and make sure that people feel like they are being listened to and heard.

Building Leaders 7, 8, 9, and 11 all mentioned that they purposely block off times in their calendars to make sure they get into classrooms at least some portion of every day. The blocking of time not only intentionally reminds them to get into classrooms, but it also serves as a notice to teachers that their administrators make time to see them in action every day and are partners in the work that they are doing of educating students. Building Leader 11 is even more intentional with his calendar in that he organizes the time periods blocked off by subject area and grade level so that he spends time visiting every teacher’s classroom each week in an equitable manner so that no teachers feel left out or supported less than others. Furthermore, being visible is not only for academic and evaluation purposes, but to also build connections and relationships. As noted by Building Leader 7, she visits classrooms as often as possible for non-academic purposes as well. Lastly, to provide support to teachers, building leaders 8 and 10 noted the importance of being responsive and following up with teachers in all situations and answering all questions regardless of how small they may seem to the administrator.

Another way building leaders can provide support to their teachers is by being intentional about the structure and design of the school day to allow ample time for planning and collaboration. All the school leaders that participated in this study designed or modified their schedules to allow teachers to have multiple times throughout the week designated for individual planning and team collaboration by grade level or department. For instance, teachers in Building 10 teach six of eight class periods on a block schedule and thus have a daily planning period in which they do not have a scheduled class. Furthermore, the school is organized into grade level teams, and all core teachers on each team have at least one common off hour to allow for team meetings. This means that teachers meet as a group and collaborate on lessons and students at least twice each week.

At the high school level where grade level teams may not be possible due to the variety of grades that teachers serve, common planning time by department or specific course are utilized as much as possible. These meetings allow teachers to review student data, to plan with one another, and to discuss strategies and best practices. Furthermore, this time allows teachers to learn from one another about topics such as technology, differentiated methods of instruction, or student engagement. In these collaborative environments, teachers feel supported not only by administration, but also by one another.

Lastly, school leaders can provide support to their teachers by creating opportunities for shared experiences throughout the school year. For almost all building leaders, this meant attending weekly or monthly team or grade level meetings, attending IEP meetings, being present at sporting events and staff gatherings, and meeting the needs of teachers in the same manner that they meet the needs of their students. In short, there is no one clear method of providing support to teachers, but all the building leaders agreed that being supportive is critical to the success of teachers and students. If school leaders want their teachers to empower and inspire, then they must help them feel empowered and inspired by providing support in ways that build relationships, create trust, and show that teachers are valued.

### **Strong Professional Development**

Half of the building leaders in this study noted the importance of having strong building level professional development that is tailored to the needs of the campus or even to individual teachers. To do this, several of the building leaders survey their teachers at the end of the year to determine needs or desired areas of learning and design the following year's professional development based on the results. Furthermore, several school leaders and their corresponding districts take this individualization a step further by purposefully setting aside funds for teachers to pursue individual professional development based on their evaluation goals, areas for improvement, or areas of interest. As explained by Building Leaders 4, 6, 11, and 12, investing in teachers in this way adds to their sense of ownership of their craft and shows teachers that they are listened to, valued, and cared for. Building Leader 1 then leverages this individual investment by using the teacher as a pillar in the school community to teach other professionals about the area they just learned more about themselves. Lastly, several of the principals when discussing professional development championed the importance of offering teacher-led professional development so that more teachers feel a connection to the material. Building Leader 2 summed this sentiment up best when he explained that he makes use of teacher-led professional development as often as possible because he has found that teachers are much more willing to learn from and engage with other teachers and that they much prefer learning from one another rather than from administration.

Just as with supportive administration, professional development (PD) can take many shapes and forms. Regardless, two main themes for recommendations regarding PD were uncovered in this study. First, PD needs to be meaningful to teachers and in turn meaningful to the school as a whole. Second, PD can and should be used not only to improve teacher practice and the academic success of students, but also as a way to build or strengthen a positive school culture.

One way that building level leaders make PD meaningful to their staff is by allowing teacher voice in the development of a building wide professional development plan. For instance, several building leaders noted that they survey staff at the end of the year to find areas of focus for next year's professional development. In Building 7, this survey takes the form of a free response survey where teachers can write areas of PD that they would like to explore such as social-emotional learning, problem-based learning, technology, self-care, or engagement strategies. In turn, the administrative team reviews this data with the teacher led building Professional Development Committee to create a plan tailored around teacher voice and need for the following school year.

In Building 11, teachers also complete a survey at the end of the year though this survey takes a different form. Rather than free response questions, teachers are asked to rate themselves in areas such as "I understand and implement cooperative learning strategies," "I feel prepared to meet the needs of students of color," and "I have a clear understanding of differentiated instruction." Based on these ratings the principal, with the help of instructional coaches that act as the professional development committee, creates a building PD plan focused on areas of need as identified by teachers and highlighted by low rankings on the survey. This not only improves the practice of teachers' areas critical to the success of the building and its students, but also improves teacher buy in and sense of ownership.

Another way that building leaders make PD more meaningful to teachers through personalization is by offering PD in an education camp or conference style. In this model of PD, teachers attend a large group session designed for all teachers in the morning, and then have the opportunity to join different breakout sessions later in the day that better align with their areas of need or interest. Ideally, these breakout sessions last for 30 minutes to one hour and there are several options for teachers to choose from. Then, at the end of the day, teachers join back together in a large group setting or smaller group settings broken out by grade level teams or departments to share their learning, discuss implications, and start the process of planning how to incorporate their takeaways into their professional practice. While this form of PD may be more difficult to plan and implement, it provides an experience that is more engaging and meaningful to staff because they are able to own their choices and selections.

Building leaders can also make PD more meaningful to teachers by having it be a part of the goal setting process. When discussing her time as a leader in a previous district, District 3, Building Leader 10 explained that teachers at her previous school would write goals for the year as a part of their evaluation process and would then meet with school administration to create a personalized professional development plan to help them achieve this goal. In this sense, professional development was differentiated to meet the needs of each individual teacher, just as we ask teachers to differentiate learning for their students.

Lastly, building leaders can make professional development more meaningful to teachers by offering teacher led sessions as often as possible. In the words of Building Leader 2, "Teachers are much more willing to learn from and engage with other teachers and they much prefer learning from one another rather than from administration." At his school, he offers these opportunities at

every staff meeting where 10-15 minutes are set aside for a teacher or group of teachers to present and share methods, strategies, or lessons that others can use and implement in their classes.

When professional development is not personalized or tailored to the needs and interests of individual teachers, it should be used to shape, build, or improve school culture. In this sense, while not personalized, it is still meaningful to teachers because it directly impacts the environment and community that they are a part of. One way to do this is to connect PD opportunities to the overall mission or vision of the school. This provides a clear sense of purpose to the session, increases engagement and buy in, and also unifies staff through the reinforcement of shared values and commitments.

Another idea is to allow students to participate in the teacher PD process and share their experiences with staff. This practice was used by Building Leader 4 to break down barriers between students and staff. To do this, he identified and worked with student leaders to help them build the confidence and skills to share their voices and experiences at their school and beyond with teachers. Then, on a few professional development days, he had these students lead sessions with teachers where they sat in circles and all shared their stories together. The end result was the creation of a culture of caring, trust, and values that extended beyond staff to include students as well.

## **Classroom Autonomy**

Public school teachers are never truly free to do what they want within their classroom. They have a responsibility to adhere to local, state, and federal guidelines and to teach the content required of them. Yet, it is important to give teachers some level of agency in their classrooms. As one building leader in our study noted, it is the job of the principal to create and provide the structures to let teachers do what needs to be done within the structure. To her, it was critical that she provides autonomy, space, and opportunities for her teachers to be creative and innovative because “the exact same thing does not need to happen in each classroom because the exact same kid is not sitting in each classroom.” Building Leader 2 expressed a similar sentiment when he cited that teachers in his building should be working towards the same grade level standards but have the autonomy to determine what that looks like because “every teacher has their own personality, their own strengths.” Building Leader 4 added that it is his intention as building leader to “give as much autonomy as possible without sacrificing the guaranteed and viable curriculum” while Building Leader 5 stated that as long as her teachers are meeting core expectations and building universals, they can add to and bring in extracurricular or skill-based components as they see fit.

The word “autonomy” can often become fraught in education conversations. As Building Leader 10 noted, “The word autonomy is misunderstood and misinterpreted by people often and does not mean that I get to do whatever I want.” She went on to explain that because educators have such a wide range of needs, it is critical that school leaders are “very clear with what is consistent and tight across teachers and also clear with what is loose” so that teachers know where they have the freedom to go be innovative and creative and where they need to be in lock step with other teachers. To not paralyze and overwhelm those that need structure while simultaneously not alienating or

being deemed dictatorial by those that like ultimate freedom, Building Leader 10 likened autonomy to a school playground in that administrators must “be clear with what is our fence so that teachers can play freely and safely within it.” Administrators must set clear boundaries from the outset, communicate these boundaries to staff, and create structures that allow teachers to express their creativity and individual freedoms.

Another way to improve classroom autonomy is by allowing teachers to “own” their curriculum or content by letting them be the drivers of the curriculum writing process. In Buildings 10, 11, and 12, this is accomplished by having all teachers participate in district level groups known as Curriculum Action Teams (CAT) that are each overseen by an elected teacher leader and a building level administrator. These teams meet once each month of the school year to review, discuss, and make changes to their curriculum as needed based on current best practices, the needs of students, or current events. Furthermore, these teams make sure that curriculum and skills are aligned across grade levels and that all courses are aligned to state and district standards. Essentially, through work in these teams, teachers feel a greater connection to their curriculum, content, and standards as they have control and ownership over almost all facets of them. In turn, this bolsters classroom autonomy because each teacher is an active participant in the development of the framework of their courses.

Lastly, administrators can enhance classroom autonomy by understanding that each of their teachers has their own personality and set of strengths. As such, teachers should have the freedom to use strategies and design lessons in ways that complement their personality and strengths to enhance the learning experience of their students. This means that no two lessons delivered by teachers should look identical and administrators must be ok with this variance. Furthermore, when visiting classroom and conducting evaluations, administrators must use this knowledge of their teachers’ personalities and strengths to step outside of themselves and not let their own thoughts of how they would teach the lesson influence their evaluation. As explained by Building Leader 6, “When I am in classrooms, I try to not let my own ideas, or what I would do in their shoes, trickle into what they are doing.” Instead, she “looks and listens to learn the why behind the actions of the teacher” in order to understand what they are doing from their perspective. Through this lens, classroom autonomy is furthered because teachers can teach in the ways that they deem best for their students rather than solely in the way that the administrator deems best.

## **Mentor Program**

Though mentor programs were ranked last of the five factors, strong mentor programs show much promise for improving teacher retention. One component of a mentor program that is critical to its success is partnering each teacher that is new to the building with the correct mentor. As stated by Building Leader 2, it is important for administrators to “make sure that [new teachers] get paired with a teacher that is vested in the community and that understands all of the things that are going on in the building.” He lets this mentorship begin organically during the interview process as multiple teachers serve on the interview committee. One thing that he pays attention to during this time, along with the quality of the candidate’s answers, is who the teaching prospect connects with on a personal level. If this person is hired, he then makes sure to pair them with the person that



they already have a bond with to help them acclimate to the new school environment quicker. In the words of Building Leader 10, she handpicks building level mentors to make sure that the person assigned to the new teacher is “proactive, positive, and well connected with other teachers in the building” to enhance the new teachers access to the building culture.

To provide additional support to beginning teachers, many of the schools utilize a two-tiered mentor system. For example, in Building 2, new teachers are assigned a personal mentor as described above as well as a master mentor. The purpose of the first mentor is to acclimate the teacher to the building climate, help them understand building practices and policies, and to provide them with someone to go to with questions. The second mentor, the master mentor, is typically an instructional specialist that visits the teacher’s classroom and helps them better their teaching practice through feedback cycles and coaching that are conducted in a non-evaluative way. As a result of this two-tiered system, teachers not only have someone to help them feel more connected to the school community, but they also have someone that helps support them specifically in the areas of instruction and classroom management.

Similarly, Buildings 4 and 5 also make use of a two-tiered mentor program. In Building 5, new to the building teachers are given both a Buddy and Mentor. The Buddy is typically someone on their team or in their department that new teachers go to for quick or daily things. Often, this Buddy is someone that they are already working with on a daily basis which leads to a further relationship and deeper connection. On the other hand, the Mentor that is assigned to the new teacher is someone that is not in the building. Either they work in another school or are teachers that have retired from the building or district and are hired back for the sole purpose of providing support to the new teacher. According to Building Leader 5, this second partnership is highly important because it is a “free flowing relationship that is uninfluenced by building politics or gossip” and allows new teachers to express their thoughts and opinions without fear of reprisal or judgement from their colleagues in the building.

Another strategy to promote collaboration and development used by building leaders is cohorting. By creating building and district cohorts of teachers with intentional and structured times for collaboration, building leaders can foster relationships and growth. For example, in Building 9, all teachers that are new to a building regardless of their years of experience are placed in a cohort that meets monthly with administration. These meetings are non-evaluative and their main purpose is to allow teachers the chance to talk, ask questions, and discuss what they are seeing and doing in the building. Essentially, their main purpose is to provide all teachers with the opportunity to network and build relationships in order to strengthen the school culture.

## **Conclusion**

In a prior study with district level human resources professionals, we identified five building level factors that were important for increasing teacher retention: positive school culture, supportive administration, professional development, teacher autonomy, and mentoring. In this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 school principals. We wanted to know whether their

responses aligned with the five factors and, if so, how they work to develop these five factors in their school communities.

The participants in our study were school leaders in districts that had relatively high rates of teacher retention. We cannot say for sure that the rates of retention were high because of the actions of teachers and not due to some other factors, such as salaries. Nevertheless, the principals we interviewed were intentional about fostering the five traits we highlighted. School leaders were intentionally trying to promote a positive school culture where teachers felt connected. They sought to provide a supportive administration that listened to the voice of teachers. They also attempted to provide meaningful professional development that nurtured individual development or the overall school culture. The school leaders in this study sought to provide teachers with clear expectations and the autonomy to work within those expectations. Finally, they were intentional about providing mentoring opportunities for new teachers.

While much of the public attention regarding shortages focuses on policy, school leaders rarely have the opportunity to set federal, state, or district policies. Yet, the school leaders in our study saw themselves as playing an integral role in teacher retention. Through deliberate action, they attempted to improve the five factors under their control that can affect teacher retention.

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