

Principals Under Pressure

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What Principals Can Do to Keep Good Teachers in Their Schools

By **Madeline Will**

October 16, 2018

Principal Mary Beck knew that in order to transform her Chicago high school's staff culture, she had to go the distance —13.1 miles, to be exact.

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Beck, who is the principal of Nicholas Senn High School on the North Side of Chicago, ran a half-marathon last year both to raise money for her teachers and to encourage them to prioritize their own wellness. It had been a **tough few years** in the cash-strapped Chicago district, and teachers were feeling burnt out and, increasingly, leaving the classroom.

"The culture of my building wasn't very strong," Beck said, adding that she had to hire 21 new staff members when she first came on board in 2015. "We can say we appreciate teachers, but it's hard to really show it."

To change the culture, Beck started inviting teachers to work out with her.

She tapped the community to sponsor her half-marathon and used the money to buy gift cards and prizes to give to teachers every month. Staff members began spending time together outside of work, which fostered more trust at work.

Beck's efforts paid off: In 2015, the school's teacher-retention rate was about 70 percent. At the end of last school year, it was about 85 percent.

Takeaways for Principals

Here are some key elements that keep good teachers around:

- Having an **effective principal** is one of the strongest predictors of teacher retention, research shows
- Providing **instructional support and positive recognition** for teachers is crucial to keeping them, principals say
- For principals in rural areas, it's important to build a **sense of community** for teachers outside of school

Research has shown that effective school leadership is among the strongest predictors of teacher retention. How principals engage their teachers matters in terms of whether they will stick around.

"Principals are major sources of support, encouragement, and recognition for a job well done," said Jason Grissom, an associate professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt University. "There are expectations that principals are coaching teachers, providing them with targeted professional development, in

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addition to creating their classroom assignments. ... Principals play a large role in setting the culture and climate of the school."

The most recent federal data show that 84 percent of teachers who were teaching during the 2011-12 school year stayed at the same school the following year, with 8 percent moving to a different school, and 8 percent leaving the profession altogether. Among teachers with three or fewer years of experience, 80 percent stayed at the same school the next year.

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Creative Ways to Hold Onto Staff

In schools in high-needs areas, it's especially tough to retain teachers. Just 78 percent of teachers stay in the highest poverty schools, compared to the 87 percent of teachers who stay in schools with little or no poverty, the federal data show.

Those principals have an especially tough job retaining teachers. They often have to get creative and stay nimble in their work to create a school community where teachers stay.

"It's all about support," said Kevin Armstrong, the principal of DuPont Hadley Middle School near Nashville, Tenn. "We have to give support to the point where teachers [actually] feel supported."

Although he leads an urban, Title I school, the teacher-retention rate there hovers near 90 percent. That's through making sure all teachers, novice and veteran, have both the professional-development and social-emotional support they need, Armstrong said.

For example, he said, the school has new-teacher meetings every month, and new teachers are asked to lead sections of professional development for the veterans.

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"We have a wealth of knowledge from teachers who are just coming out of college that have learned new strategies that some of our veteran teachers have not been exposed to," he said.

"It really makes a young teacher feel good when they're able to lead a professional development session of something they just learned, in some instances, a couple months ago."

And administrators are tasked with making sure new teachers are not only comfortable with the content, but are fitting into the culture of the school.

"Oftentimes, I feel like some principals hire someone and stick them in the classroom and then turn around and walk off—and then [the teacher is]

putting in a letter of resignation because they're overwhelmed," Armstrong said.

Changing the Instructional Culture

When Jeremy Baugh started as the principal of Lew Wallace Elementary School in Indianapolis in 2015, about half the teaching staff was leaving every year. The high-poverty, low-performing school had been flagged by the district for transformation, and Baugh was hired to turn it around.

District officials offered Baugh flexibility with staffing if he piloted the **Opportunity Culture model**, an initiative led by Public Impact, an education policy and management-consulting firm in Chapel Hill, N.C. The model seeks to **put high-quality teachers in charge of more students**.

Teachers who have demonstrated effectiveness with student learning are named "multiclassroom leaders" and are tapped to lead a teaching team and provide on-the-job coaching to their teachers. There are now four multiclassroom leaders at Lew Wallace who are paid up to \$18,300 more.

Baugh said that after some initial implementation bumps, teachers began to embrace the model. They felt supported, and that meant they were more likely to stay. At the end of last academic year, only one teacher left—and that was because of retirement.

"We talk about expanding the reach of teachers, but in a way, I feel like it allows me to expand my reach," Baugh said. "I couldn't get to 23 classroom teachers and have them feel overly supported on a daily basis. I'm one person. This allows us to distribute some of that leadership, and it allows me to be more involved on that academic side than if I didn't have that support."

After all, principals say that it's important for them to be as involved as possible in the daily work of instruction.

That's the philosophy of Jayda Pugliese, a first-year principal at St. Mary Interparochial School in Philadelphia. There's relatively little teacher attrition at the K-8 private school, but Pugliese knew from her own experience as a teacher how important it is to have supportive school leadership.



Jayda Pugliese, the principal at St. Mary Interparochial School in Philadelphia, greets students each morning as they arrive. Pugliese teaches one period each week in every grade level as one way to demonstrate support for her teachers.

—Sarah Bones for Education Week

"I'm a new principal, a young principal," she said. "I didn't want them to feel like my ideas were going to chase them away. [I wanted them to know] I'm going to put in the work to support them in any capacity."

Her solution is to teach in each grade level for one period a week. Teachers can spend the time planning or catching up on work, or they can observe Pugliese's lesson.

"Teachers really enjoy their free time, so I'm giving up my principal time to try to support my teachers, show them that I notice their free time is valuable," Pugliese said.

"This dynamic allows me to not only support them by giving them more time for planning. ... Opportunities for collaboration are now being better developed, and more than everything, it allows me to get to know my students."

Creating a Community

Principals in rural school districts often face **an extra challenge retaining teachers**.

Some areas are so isolated that principals have to work beyond the hours of the school day to make their teachers feel supported and welcome, said Hannah Nieskens, the principal of Whitehall Middle and High Schools in rural Montana, and the state's high school principal of the year.

While Whitehall is close to more bustling areas, Nieskens previously served for four years as the principal of Northside Elementary School on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, which was three hours from the closest big city.

"And by big city, I mean a city that has a Walmart," Nieskens quipped.

She would typically have to replace between one-third and one-half of her staff every year.

"It's kind of a culture shock for someone to move somewhere that's so isolated," said Nieskens, who was on the reservation for six years altogether.

"It requires a lot of changes to your life. We don't have good cell service, we don't have good internet access. It's challenging to travel. ... If they're not in love with where they are, it's tough to get them to stay."

To make teachers feel at home on the reservation, she and her staff planned community events at the school, like bingo nights and powwows.

That way, teachers were able to interact with members of the community and experience the local culture.

"It's easier for people to walk away from a community if they don't feel like they're a part of it," Nieskens said. "It's more difficult" when they feel at home.

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