
You may have heard it said, “We’re here for the kids, not the teachers.” You may have even said it. It’s true. We are here for the kids. Students are the reason schools exist, and every decision should be driven by the needs and interests of the children. However, do not make the mistake of thinking student needs and teacher interests are mutually exclusive. I would actually argue they are inextricably linked. To put it simply, happy teachers are more effective teachers. In fact, the morale of your faculty is an important component of a strong school culture.

Here is the good news: It is not that hard to raise the morale of your teachers! But it usually does not happen by accident—you must be intentional about it.
Here are five ways you can raise the morale of your teachers:

1. Keep your teachers focused on the difference they are making for kids. Being a teacher is a profoundly gratifying career. It is easy to get bogged down in the administrivia though. The daily grind of planning lessons, grading papers, and dealing with the more challenging students can sap the energy and joy from teachers. We need to remind our teachers why we come to work each day. We keep the focus on our students and not the “hassles” of the job. We remind our teachers about the difference they make in the lives of their students. Our teachers are heroes in the classroom every day, and we never want to overlook that. When we help teachers keep their eye on the ball, they are more likely to keep their head in the game. When teachers remember their “why,” it can carry them through the stresses of their day.

2. Involve your teachers in the decisions of the school. In my experience, teachers are more motivated when their administration leads collaboratively. When teachers are involved in the decisions of the school, they are more invested in the process. When their opinions are valued, they feel valued. Listen to the feedback of your teachers...and take it seriously. When teachers feel included in the decision making process, they will take ownership of the entire school, not just their classroom.

3. Trust the judgment of your teachers. Teachers are professionals. Treat them like professionals. Respect their experiences, and respect their expertise. Of course principals are responsible for the entire school and are ultimately accountable for everything that happens. But micromanagement is the quickest way to destroy the morale of a faculty. Give your teachers an opportunity to prove themselves. Good leaders will quickly learn which staff members require closer supervision.

4. Give your teachers the benefit of the doubt. Trust is foundational to any healthy school culture. When you are frustrated with something a teacher said or did, assume that they had good intentions. Do not start off being judgmental. When your default setting is to give teachers the benefit of the doubt, it will not go unnoticed. Your teachers will feel supported, respected, and valued.

5. Notice the little things your teachers do... and recognize them for it. It is not enough to think your team members are valuable; it is important to tell them. People need to know their work is appreciated, so praise your teachers often. Give them shout-outs in front of their colleagues. Thank them for the little things they do that make a difference for their students, for their colleagues, and for the school. Never underestimate the value of encouragement. Be specific, and be genuine. Never take your teachers, or the important work they do, for granted.

As teacher morale increases, so will the positive energy in the building. Students will notice it; parents will notice it; and anyone who visits the building will notice it. In my world, there is never a time when teacher morale is irrelevant. I strongly believe teachers who feel good about coming to work, and who feel good about the work they do, will be more effective employees. They will bring a higher level of energy into the classroom, and they will demonstrate greater resiliency when confronted with adversity.

**Great Principals Do Not Act Important; They Make Their Teachers Feel Important.**

The role of the principal can never be overstated. Their impact is like a rock hitting a pond. The ripples continue endlessly. They have a tremendous influence on the culture and climate of the school. They can affect the morale of the students but they always directly affect the morale of the teachers.

Great principals treat their teachers the same way the best teachers treat their students. They make everyone feel important and valued. They do not treat everyone the same but they treat them all fairly. They listen, they laugh, and they build them up.

When a principal makes the teachers feel important, the teachers make the students feel important. Great principals know it and show it every day.
If a Principal Wants to Lose Their Teachers Quickly, They Should Brag About Themselves. If They Want to Build Relationships with Their Teachers, They Should Brag About Them.

The very best teachers have a consistent focus on their students. They make decisions based on what is best for the students and for the class. They never lose sight of that. Even if state standards, testing, and other mandates seem to take us down a different path, the best teachers quickly refocus on what is best for the students. They make everything they do about supporting, encouraging, and helping the young people in their class maximize their potential. They do not just do it for some of the students—they do it for all of the students.

The parallel between teachers and their students is incredibly similar to that of principals and their teachers. The very best principals have a consistent focus on their teachers. This does not mean they lose sight of being student centered. Instead, it is because they know the best way to take care of their students is to take care of their teachers.

There are highly effective teachers who have larger than life personalities. There are highly effective teachers who work hard to stay out of the spotlight. Yet, regardless of their personal traits, all of the most effective teachers consistently center on the students.

This same thing is true for the best principals. Some are more outgoing than others, but all still work to make sure their teachers are “the main thing.” They give credit and take blame. They protect the teachers from outside influences as much as possible, while simultaneously supporting them in their individual efforts.

The characteristics between the best teachers and the best principals have tremendous overlap. They both know what the ultimate goal is and are highly aware they are only one piece of the puzzle. The best teachers know it is all about the students, and the best principals are highly aware of the essential role the teachers play in the success of any school. And in the best schools, the teachers and the administration are invested in the success of one another. They respect each other, and they appreciate each other, because they realize they are all in it for the same reason: The KIDS!
• The teacher who works hard to be a positive role model for their students.
• The teacher who refuses to let anything get in the way of their students’ learning.
• The teacher who is always committed to rising above adversity.
• The teacher who understands the importance of celebrating the successes of their students.
• The teacher who utilizes every resource possible in pursuit of excellence in their classroom.
• The teacher who is always willing to help out with things that aren’t even in their job description.
• The teacher who takes time to write personal notes on the papers they return to their students.

And it is not just the teachers who are doing great things in our schools! The support staff deserve our recognition as well.
• The registrar who takes the time to show new students around the school.
• The custodian who takes pride in how clean the floors are.
• The cafeteria worker who takes time to talk to the students while they are serving food.
• The secretary who is kind, patient, and helpful to all those who visit the building.
• The paraprofessional who demonstrates extraordinary flexibility as they work to help everyone in the building.
• The School Resource Officer who takes time to get to know the students.
• The bookkeeper who brings extraordinary efficiency to their job to ensure that teachers have the resources they need as quickly as possible.
• The nurse who understands stomach aches are often more about stress than germs.
• The maintenance technician who maintains a positive attitude even when they’re being pulled in a million directions.
• The media center specialist who will drop what they’re doing to go and help a teacher who is having some “technical difficulties.”
• The counselor who goes above and beyond to connect students with resources to meet their needs.

How do you recognize and celebrate your staff? Share ideas on social media. Tag @TEPSAtalk & #WeLeadTX.

AUTHORS

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PERSISTANCE IN THE PRINCIPALSHIP

How Do We Get Our School Leaders Beyond Five Years in the Principalship?

By Rachel Taylor, EdD

When two principals come together to discuss their experiences as principals and one likens the job to hanging off a cliff and the other says it is like living in a swirling tornado, you better believe the work must have its challenges. How do we ensure these principals persist in their important work of leading our schools and grow in their capacities to handle the challenges of the role?

Principal resilience and persistence matter. As a principal I found myself overwhelmed by the internal and external forces preventing me from being the instructional leader I desired to be. My struggle to balance my professional responsibilities made it difficult to leave my school office and caused me to feel inadequate for the key task of impacting student learning. The tipping point occurred when, after being a principal for several years, I had my first child. I struggled to see how I could juggle being a mother and an effective principal at the same time. So I decided to stop serving as a principal and instead to stay at home with my children. This experience caused me to wonder how other principals persist in their roles, and thus created a desire to explore principal development that supports and impacts the persistence of school leaders. As a result, I returned to school. At every turn I studied the principalship.

How do principals persist amidst the myriad of responsibilities that surround them?

What are the major barriers in the principalship?

What are the behaviors of principals who have persisted in the principalship?

Today’s modern principals have increased expectations and standards for student achievement yet they press on, and I wanted to know how they persist.

After interviewing and examining the experiences of 10 people who have worked five or more years in the principalship, four major themes emerged as barriers to principal persistence:

- Unsustainable workload
- Lack of autonomy
- Isolation
- Difficulty prioritizing

As an illustration, imagine the principalship as a tornado. A principal enters the tornado and quickly feels the workload is unsustainable, there is a lack of autonomy, the role is isolated, and prioritizing is
difficult. What should one tackle first when everything is swirling? Add to this the disparity between how a principal feels and how the principal perceives other principals are handling their own tornado and you have a recipe for loneliness and isolation.

While the illustration of the tornado is fictional, there is a real feeling in the principalship of, “Will these winds ever subside?” Does the tornado ever end or, at least, slow down over time (experience), or do principals actually grow stronger and grow in their ability to withstand the swirling winds (grow their leadership capacity)? Perhaps there is a combination of settling winds over time (experience) and gained strength (leadership capacity) the longer a principal endures the tornado’s churn.

The Spiraling Nature of the Principalship

My study of the 10 principals led me to conclude that the barriers principals repeatedly encounter in the principalship actually generate behaviors that continue to get better over time and ultimately lead to sustainability and persistence in the role. What are those behaviors?

Barrier of Unstainable Workload

A principal’s attempt to satisfy the many demands from various stakeholders amidst the principal’s myriad of responsibilities can be quite daunting and, frankly, draining. One principal summed it up, “It’s about students and sometimes we get caught up with an angry parent, we get caught up with a lack of funding, or we get caught up with state testing. There are so many things that can interrupt the work we do, and take us off the path and demand our time.” Over time though, a principal’s workload becomes more manageable as that principal persists for multiple years and learns behaviors like prioritizing and delegating tasks.

Barrier of Principal Isolation

There is isolation in the principalship because no one else in the school experiences a principal’s level of responsibility. Most schools employ only one principal. There is also isolation in not feeling directly or overtly involved in the success of the campus. Additionally, there is an uncertainty of what it is exactly one should be doing each day to maximize one’s impact on the campus. Furthermore, the looming ambiguity that other principals, in the same position, may not be struggling makes the job feel lonely. One principal explained, “Being a principal is a lonely job because nobody understands it. You cannot complain to your teachers. Nobody gets it—you’re the lone ranger and it can be lonely.” Also supporting the theme of isolation is one principal’s statement, “We’ve got health issues; we’ve got family issues and it’s heavy stuff and there’s so much that you carry that nobody else knows.” Thankfully, as a principal becomes more experienced, he/she learns behaviors such as building trust and communicating openly to help overcome the barrier of isolation.

With time and with experience, persisting becomes easier because behaviors are formed that help principals overcome the barriers in the role. Put simply, the longer a principal persists the more likely the principal is to demonstrate positive behaviors and attributes that are associated with the more experienced principals in the district, such as:

- Building relationships
- Prioritization and delegation
- Communication

My study was unique. Many other studies point to why principals leave the principalship. I wanted to know why principals stay in the principalship. I found the principals who persist are the ones who are good at and value relationships, understand how to prioritize effectively, and are strong communicators. My findings suggest there is staying power by persisting in the principalship.

School District Support

Importantly, based on my study I recommend school districts acknowledge the importance of principals
In terms of rollout, the professional development initiative I suggest is one that can be piloted on first year principals, redesigned, and then applied at the next level: first year principals and principals with one to three years of experience. Next, the initiative can be further redesigned and then applied to multiple principals across various years of experience. After multiple tweaks and iterations, the professional development initiative may be applied to an entire district of school leaders. Thus, the vision for this professional development initiative is to intentionally create thoughtful and methodical ways of training aspiring leaders, inexperienced principals, and experienced principals to ensure that principal training and development produces principals who persist, with confidence, year after year by highlighting the behaviors principals develop over time to deal with the demands of the principalship.

In sum, school districts should address the barriers principals face in their early years of development (unsustainable workload, lack of autonomy, isolation, and difficulty prioritizing) and highlight impactful learned behaviors such as building trust with stakeholders, better prioritizing responsibilities, and allowing communication to become more open, clear, and positive. To do so, school districts should design, with intentionality, professional development for principals based on their experience level. My study suggests these districts may increase the likelihood their principals will persist over time in their roles.

So how should districts implement this type of professional development? Start with a new vision. The new vision is a methodical way of training aspiring leaders, inexperienced principals, and experienced principals to ensure principals persist in the principalship, with confidence, year after year. Next, consider the resources available to attain this vision. A district’s central office leadership team can define, imagine, make, and test possible solutions to principal persistence by tapping into the wonderful wealth of knowledge they have at their fingertips: the district’s principals. Adjusting a principal’s experience by applying the insight of his or her peers is highly impactful.

AUTHOR

Dr. Rachel Taylor is a former teacher in Galena Park ISD and former principal in Frisco ISD. She completed her doctoral studies at SMU. Rachel has a heart for school leaders and their impact on Texas students. She is currently a consultant at Fringe Learning.

How do you persist in the principalship? Share on social media! Tag @TEPSAtalk & #WeLeadTX.
THE VALUE OF LISTENING TO OUR STUDENTS
As Classrooms Evolve, Listening Stays Constant

By Trevor Muir

In the past decade, many schools and classrooms have received massive overhauls. From equipping students with their own laptops and iPads, installing electric whiteboards on classroom walls, putting wheels on tables and chairs to make classroom seating flexible, to the prominence of innovative learning methods like Genius Hour, Project Based Learning, and STEM—school has changed in many ways. However, despite the evolution that has taken place, there are ideas and practices that are every bit as valuable today as they were 100 years ago.

While the tools and methods of a teacher are transforming, there are parts of this profession that seem to be molded to its bedrock. No matter how much evolution takes place or how many technologies are introduced, there are some things that should never change in education.

And perhaps the most important one is the teacher’s ability to listen.

Let’s start with a story.

My parents got divorced when I was in 6th grade. I was too busy playing in the woods, jumping on the trampoline, and listening to my Spice Girls cassette tapes to notice that they did not love each other and that my dad was sleeping on the couch a lot.

So when they said they were splitting up, I was devastated. The high number of divorces among my generation did nothing to soften the blow of a family being ripped apart. Pain usually came from getting stung by wasps or fighting with my brothers, but this pain hurt in a much more severe way, and it was suffocating, and more than a little boy should have to handle.

Top that off with the fact that it was my first year of middle school.

I remember one of those overwhelming, lonely days in sixth grade when I stared into space in class trying not to think about what was going on at home, and I realized class was over and I was by myself in my desk.

I suddenly heard a voice in front of me say, “Trevor, are you alright?” It was my teacher, Mr. Peters. He was about 30 years old, loved basketball, and once said the word ‘damn’ in front of the class, so to me he was the epitome of ‘cool.’
I told him I was fine and started packing up my books. He sat down in the desk next to me and said again, “Trevor, are you alright?”

I looked at his eyes for a second and then looked back to the floor. After a moment, I looked back up and Mr. Peters was still looking at me. I tried again to tell him I was fine, but my voice choked up and my 11-year-old eyes filled with tears, and I couldn’t say anything. Whether it was by some magical intuition or that my mom called him, I don’t know, but Mr. Peters said, “Trevor, I heard your parents are getting divorced.” I barely nodded my head to confirm, and then Mr. Peters said, “My parents split up in middle school too, and it was so hard. What’s it been like for you?”

For the next 15 minutes, he let my 11-year-old self unload everything that was building up over that time. Despite the fact that his next group of students was piled up at his door in the hallway, wondering why they weren’t being allowed in, Mr. Peters sat there and listened to a boy who desperately needed someone to listen to him. And from then on I talked to him every day after class, usually just for a couple of minutes. Each time he hardly said a word. He just listened.

There was nothing constant about my home-life in middle school. It was sometimes good and sometimes very painful. But regardless, Mr. Peters would listen to me every day. And since becoming a teacher myself, I know that he did not have time to listen to me every day.

But he did it anyway. And it saved me.

I’ve had many, many students who struggle. Whether it’s divorce, depression, anxiety, or abuse, most of their stories are much harsher and more painful than mine. I cannot relate to all of them or always have sage wisdom and advice to give.

But I can listen.

And there is a chance that listening might save someone. It might be exactly what they need to be able to move forward. When Mr. Peters started listening to me, I started loving my time in his class each day. I began to care so deeply for this man and my time with him. So much so that I began to listen to him when he talked about the content of his class. I wrote my papers with excellence for him, always turned in my homework, and spoke up during class discussions. I became a better student when I walked in his room, and this is not an exaggeration. Twenty years later, I am a teacher because of Mr. Peters.

The Best Classroom Management Tool
In teacher college I remember developing classroom management plans and learning about all of the theories about how to best manage students and have an effective classroom. From discipline techniques to incentive systems, I’ve used many of those ideas, but none of these strategies compare to the value of building student relationships. My ‘A-students’ aim higher and work harder when I have a relationship with them. My struggling students from difficult backgrounds and rocky academic pasts strive for success more when I build relationships with them.

Our students want to know they are cared for and valued, and when educators do this first, those students will work in ways we never thought possible.

No matter what innovation schools undergo, what new technologies are introduced, or how much of a departure the modern classroom takes from the traditional one, students will still need people to listen to them. And teachers will always be one of the best kind of people to do so.

AUTHOR

Trevor Muir is a teacher, author, international speaker, and project based learning expert. He is the author of “The Epic Classroom: How to Boost Engagement, Make Learning Memorable, and Transform Lives.” Trevor writes articles and creates videos for fellow teachers that have been viewed on Facebook over 25 million times. Formerly a high school teacher, Trevor is currently a professor at Grand Valley State University, and his work has been featured in the Huffington Post, EdWeek, WeAreTeachers, and TEDx San Antonio. @TrevorMuir
Dear School Principals,

Thank you for letting your school librarian be the school librarian. What do I mean by this? Let me tell you what happened when my principal allowed me to be a school librarian. In Fall 2017, I returned to school to discover that some of my students were suffering from non-school related trauma. I knew my traditional Harry Potter theme would have to take a backseat, and I decided to create the Read Woke challenge. This challenge consisted of me curating a list of books that:

- Challenge a social norm.
- Give voice to the voiceless.
- Provide information about a group that has been disenfranchised.
- Seek to challenge the status quo.
- Have a protagonist from an underrepresented or oppressed group.

I added these books to our collection and dusted off some that had been hidden on shelves. I challenged my students, teachers, and community to Read Woke. Students were able to earn t-shirts, prizes, and more. Students were reading and more importantly becoming empowered. I shared my vision with my principal and he supported me by providing funds to bring in local diverse authors.

Many times the work of the school librarian goes unnoticed. You may walk in and the library is empty but 30 minutes prior more than 100 students were there modeling in a Prom Book and Fashion Show or participating in Read Woke book tasting! This is why I encourage school librarians to share their programs using social media. Many people are unclear about the role of the school librarian. There is so much more to the profession than simply circulating books.
My principal let me be the school librarian and this allowed me to focus on promoting literacy. In addition, he listened and included me in the decision making process. He trusted me as a leader because school librarians are leaders too. If you have a school librarian who wants to make an impact, encourage them to do so. School librarians can be a great asset to the school when included in the decision making process.

The Read Woke challenge became a movement. Librarians across the world have implemented the challenge in their schools. They realize the importance of having diverse texts in the school library. Students need to see themselves in books, and they need to be able to look into the lives of others. As a result, students are reading! Students are discussing issues and now their thoughts and opinions are based on knowledge instead of traditional family beliefs and prejudices.

We need your support now more than ever because librarians are in a battle with budget cuts, equal access for our patrons, illiteracy, and misconceptions about our profession. We cannot do it alone. Consider this your call to action. Advocate for your school librarian because a vote for the school librarian is a vote for a successful school.

When she isn’t challenging kids to Read Woke, Cicely Lewis hosts Book Fashion Shows with her students. The Georgia Library Media Specialist and 2019 Library and Journal Mover and Shaker uses her platform to advocate for libraries and promote diverse books. Learn more on her blog “CicelytheGreat” at https://cicelythegreat.wordpress.com. She welcomes your book suggestions for her bimonthly Read Woke column in School Library Journal. @cicelythegreat

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@TEPSATalk & #WeLeadTX

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