

How School and District Administrators Can Help Retain Effective Teachers

By Ellen R. Delisio

According to a study recently published by the Connecticut Center for School Change, "Overwhelmed and Out: Principals, District Policy, and Teacher Retention," schools and districts can take steps to increase teacher retention by providing principals with the support and training they need to develop and enhance their leadership skills.

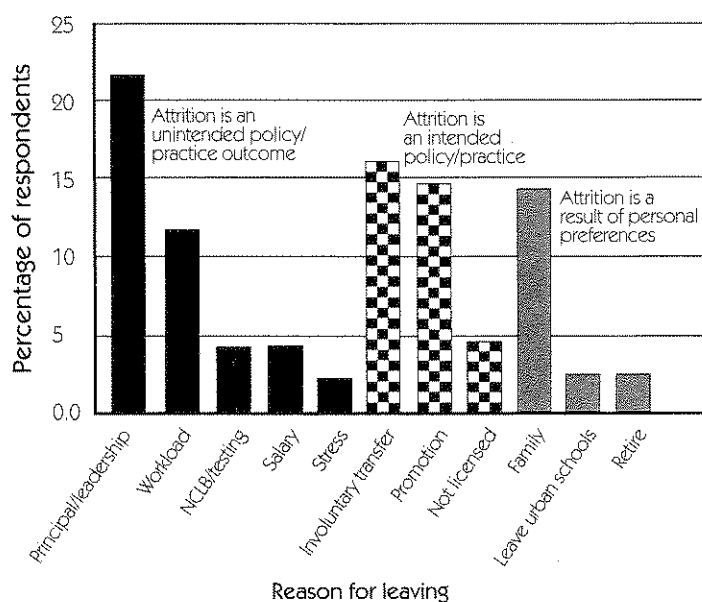
And maintaining an effective teaching staff has never been more important to Connecticut schools. The more high-quality teachers a school employs, the better chance it has of raising student achievement. And if that doesn't happen, schools face sanctions ranging from warnings to reconstitution of the school, under the regulations of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

The study's lead author, Robert Reichardt is principal of R-Squared Research and Associates. Dr. Reichardt holds a master's degree in public policy from the University of Maryland and a Ph.D. from the RAND Graduate School. He worked as a researcher at Mid-continent Research for Learning (McREL) and as executive director of the Alliance for Quality Teaching. In addition to being the author of numerous research reports, including "In Search of Quality: Recruiting, Hiring, and Supporting Teachers" published by the Center for School Change in 2006, he has experience in describing district procedures for new teacher support, costing out district activities, and measuring human resource processes. Ravay Snow, Jodi Schlang and Kelly Hupfeld were the co-authors involved in the study.

The authors make a point of noting that rarely is a single reason behind teachers' decisions to leave schools. Instead, educators choose to depart "because of the sum of multiple

burdens." This is similar to findings in previous studies that assessed factors affecting teachers' decisions to leave a school, district, or the profession altogether. Earlier studies cited the influence of "negative organizational conditions" on teachers' decisions to stay or move on. Better assignments, administrative support, and working conditions could lure teachers to new schools, earlier studies suggested.

Responses from teachers who left their schools, as charted



by the 2008 study authors (see chart), indicate that the unintended consequences of school and district policies are at least as important, and possibly more important, than the other two causes of attrition – an intended policy or practice and personal preferences. The primary reason teachers gave for leaving schools was poor leadership. Principals are largely responsible for ensuring positive working environments.

While the study authors found that having an effective principal was the key factor in keeping teachers in a school, principals

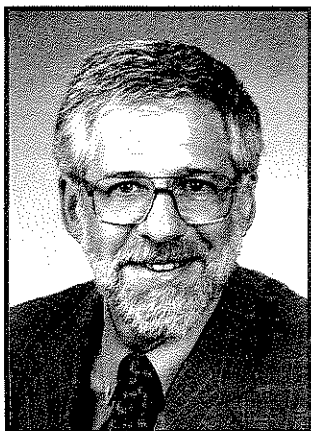
interviewed for the report could identify few formal support mechanisms provided by their districts to help them be successful leaders and little or no ongoing training in the strategies necessary to help retain teachers.

Principals need a particular skill set to maximize teacher retention—such as the ability to prioritize and filter reform initiatives, thus minimizing the burdens on teachers from these measures, the study revealed. Other skills that helped with retention included the ability to create a fulfilling work environment and to build good relationships with staff. The situation is particularly hard on new principals, the study notes. Veteran principals often have established informal support networks with other administrators, while principals just starting out found themselves pretty much on their own.

A Message from the Executive Director

Andrew Lachman

Principal Leadership Key to Student Achievement



Educational research has shown that the single most important factor in student achievement is the quality of teaching, a finding confirmed by our experience at the Center for School Change. According to the researchers, the second most important school factor affecting student performance is the quality of educational leadership. The ability to close Connecticut's

achievement gap depends upon policies and practices that ensure equity in how these two fundamental factors – teacher quality and school leadership – play out in our public schools and our communities. That belief is central to our motto at the Connecticut Center for School Change: “System Success = Student Success.”

In 2006, the Center examined Connecticut school- and district-level practices in teacher recruitment, hiring, and support in a study, “In Search of Quality: Teacher Recruitment, Hiring, and Support,” by Robert Reichardt and Michael Arnold. The follow-up study showcased in this newsletter, “Overwhelmed and Out: Principals, District Policy, and Teacher Retention,” builds on the earlier study and reviews school and district actions that affect teacher retention. Like the 2006 report, this newer study finds that district personnel actions significantly affect whether school districts can attract and retain the highest quality teachers.

This is a critical finding, because teachers rarely leave schools for a single reason. While compensation issues are important in a teacher's decision to leave or stay in a classroom, researchers note that working conditions – levels of administrative and instructional support, issues arising from student motivation or behavior, the extent to which teachers have influence in work related matters, and general issues of school climate – can be equally or more influential. In fact, “Overwhelmed and Out” found that the single most important factor in teacher retention was the role played by principals in bringing coherence to school improvement efforts and in creating a climate of respect and professional growth.

When working conditions result in teacher turnover in low-achieving schools, the students who most need qualified teachers are least likely to have access to them. If competing for and retaining the best teachers is a priority for district leadership, the district can develop proactive strategies and processes for improving teacher recruitment and retention. As “Overwhelmed and Out” makes clear, working conditions, principal leadership, school culture, and program coherence all have a direct impact on teacher retention. Connecticut's school districts are not powerless bystanders in the process of recruiting, supporting, and retaining quality teachers; rather, they are key players in the professional development of the men and women who play such a critical role in determining whether students learn and succeed.

That is why the Center is working collaboratively with the Fairfield County Community Foundation, the University of Connecticut and the Bridgeport, Danbury, Norwalk, and Stamford school districts on the Urban School Leaders Fellowship (USLF) program. USLF is an intensive, year-long program to prepare the next generation of principals, who are committed to making positive changes in classroom instruction and school culture. Through case studies, project-based learning, and action research, fellows will develop strategies and skills to lead urban schools that improve student learning. The fellows are becoming administrators skilled in instructional leadership who can lead their faculties in analyzing data, adopting more powerful and effective teaching strategies, and creating school communities in which both adults and students are continuously learning.

The Connecticut Center for School Change is committed to supporting local and state administrators and policymakers who are pursuing the goal of a quality educator in every classroom. We hope that “Overwhelmed and Out,” with its practical recommendations for action, helps state and local policy makers, school administrators, district superintendents and boards of education ensure that all of Connecticut's students have access to high-quality teachers and effective instructional leaders. Reaching those goals is the key to closing the achievement gap and ensuring that all students are prepared to enter college or the workforce after high school graduation.

Central office personnel sometimes make it even harder for principals to support their teachers by not having a more organized approach to disseminating school reform initiatives, according to the study. District administrators often inundate principals with new directives without prioritizing them or considering the consequences of the changes as they trickle down into the schools. At the same time, teachers already feel under siege from the need to improve test scores, implement curriculum changes, review student work, and analyze data.

How the Study Was Conducted

The Center's study reviewed State Department of Education data collected from 2000-01 to 2005-06. The investigators looked at 12 elementary schools in the state that had consistently high or low rates of teacher retention when compared with similar schools. One high- and one low-retention school was selected from each of four districts to compare schools within the same policy environment. To ensure more truthful responses, the districts are anonymous. Half of the 12 schools had new leadership and four of those new administrators were in their first principal assignment. Interviews were conducted at the school level with principals, both current and former teachers, and staff developers; and at the district level with superintendents, assistant superintendents, and human resource directors.

The Importance of Dependable Leadership

When teachers were asked to cite reasons for their dissatisfaction at their schools and their decision to leave, they tapped as number one the unintended consequences of poor leadership in their schools -- such as the inability of administrators to lead effective teachers through the reform process and filter and integrate reform initiatives. Principals also were considered ineffective when they failed to establish positive working environments; did not create and maintain student discipline practices; and did not treat teachers with respect. Supporting teachers as they worked with challenging students and parents also was cited by teachers as an important factor in retention.

Besides effective school leadership and management, other areas teachers listed that make their working conditions better include supportive relationships with colleagues, students, and administrators at school; feeling competent and/or successful and having opportunities to grow professionally and personally. Responsibility for those issues also falls to principals who have the primary charge and resources

that support teachers' perceptions of success and the ability to provide assignments that allow teachers to feel creative and grow professionally.

Teachers who were interviewed discussed how positive school leadership could help teachers, particularly new teachers, feel successful and want to continue teaching. These efforts focused on identifying teachers' challenges and providing supports to help them meet those challenges.

Certain working conditions also were cited by teachers as having an effect on their decision to remain at a school. Among them were a lack of substitute teachers in their schools, minimal classroom materials, poor quality copy machines, a disconnect between school reform initiatives and the materials supplied to teachers, poor building maintenance and low salaries.

Those conditions can be addressed by re-allocating resources to these operational expenses, according to the report. Policy makers also should analyze the cost of neglecting these operational issues on teacher retention.

How to Help Principals Keep Teachers

To help principals become the type of leaders who develop and retain effective teachers, the study authors recommend providing principals with more ongoing support and professional development in the areas cited as critical by teachers.

One proposal is for the state of Connecticut to establish principal academies that would help principals develop new skills as well as provide them with support for their daily and long-range challenges. The report recommends ongoing and sustained professional development that is job-related rather than abstract, collegial and peer supported, aligned with relevant school improvement goals and practices and centered on active rather than passive learning.

New principals in particular would benefit from more support. Providing peer support for principals also is critical; seasoned principals with a high level of staff retention all had a professional network with which to consult when a new issue arose.

District administrators should re-think how they implement reforms, so varied and disconnected initiatives are not constantly bombarding teachers, leaving them frustrated. In some cases administrators were so driven to implement quick fixes that they failed to reflect on the consequences of all their actions. *Spending more time analyzing the processes that lead to positive changes and how they were implemented, the report notes, can help policy makers determine if a particular*

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strategy made a discernable difference. This approach, called feedback loops, allows decision-makers to review the implementation of initiatives, collect data, and make changes as necessary.

A good feedback system lists the expected school-level changes, monitors the process and degree of implementation, collects information on whether the expected changes have occurred, and allows for continuous improvement based on the data collected. Information on how well an initiative is being implemented also should be part of the feedback loop. Initiatives that are neglected and shallowly implemented, the report notes, "do not have much chance of success. Likewise, only using outcomes to assess an initiative does not allow time for adjustments if the strategy is not working.

"Districts must establish mechanisms for analyzing the information they collect, disseminating the results of the analysis in a process that prompts discussion, and incorporating the results into district-level decision-making," the study authors write. State officials can contribute to the retention effort by collecting data from different districts and schools on teacher attrition and the issues that influence teacher retention. Then administrators can compare those results with their own efforts.

Reichardt and his co-authors did note that the influence of two other factors on teacher retention remains unknown. One of those is the role of elected boards of education in school reform efforts. School boards often are in a position to monitor school reform initiatives from start to finish if district leadership changes. Also left unclear are the methods districts employ to develop human capital; that is, how they "integrate their improvement efforts into an overall system for developing the knowledge and skills of the men and women who teach children," the report continues. This involves recruitment, hiring, professional development, supervision and evaluation, procedures for removing ineffective educators, and compensation policies.

Based on this study, though, the investigators see that policy makers can start to make changes without waiting for more information about these factors. "Instructional reform is the hard and important work on which teachers must be focused if they are to meet Connecticut's educational goals. Those who shape policy, from principals through state policymakers, need to minimize distractions from this focus and support teachers as they work to educate all of Connecticut's children."

Copies of the complete report are available at the Center's web site:
<http://www.ctschoolchange.org/pdf/res-Overwhelmed.pdf>

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