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How Can We Attract and Retain Quality School Principals: What Do Principals Say?

M. Scott Norton

Introduction

Attracting quality personnel for leadership roles as school principals and then retaining their services have become national concerns. Studies reveal that turnover in the principalship at both elementary and secondary schools reached the 50% level during the 1990s, with predictions that such losses are likely to increase during the current decade. In addition, Pounder and Merrill reported that of 170 high school assistant principals and middle school principals, only 30% had career goals as high school principals.¹ In a related study by Norton, only 30% of the 225 school principals surveyed in metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona had plans to remain in the position while 30% were looking to leaving the principalship, and another 30% planned to retire early. Another 10% hoped to leave the principalship for another position outside the field of education.²

Losses of quality personnel in leadership roles have become increasingly costly from two perspectives: The cost monetarily and the loss of intellectual capital. The replacement of school principals is costing taxpayers millions of dollars each year, money that would be welcomed in other needy areas of the school budget. The cost of replacing middle management administrators has been minimally estimated to be \$25,000.³ A school district with 20 principals and a 50% turnover rate is facing a replacement cost of at least \$250,000 over a ten-year period based on today's dollars. Yet, the loss of intellectual capital, due to principal turnover, is even more costly to school quality in the long run. No organization can expect to lose its quality leadership and remain effective, and schools are no exception. Thus, it is imperative not only to attract qualified principals but also to retain them.

The Study

A study of elementary, middle, and secondary school principals was undertaken for the primary purposes of gaining their insights regarding certain conditions within the principalship in schools today and soliciting their recommendations relative to attracting quality persons to the position of principal and retaining their services. Thus, the first section of the study questionnaire posed specific questions relating to: (1) The stress levels being experienced by the practicing principals; (2) Prominent areas and levels of job satisfaction; (3) Conditions that might lead to their job resignation; (4) Those conditions or provisions of most importance in keeping them on the job; (5) The importance of salary in retaining their services; (6) The most difficult problems facing them in their roles of principal; and (7) The principals'

perspectives concerning their immediate plans and their views concerning the principalship as a career pursuit. The second section of the study instrument centered on the perceptions of the school principals relative to recommendations for keeping quality school principals on the job.

Study questions were based on a review of the literature and a previous research study that centered on the general topic of principal retention.⁴ The content validity of the study instrument was assessed by 15 persons representing practicing school principals who were serving as elected officers of the state's administration organizations and professors of educational administration in higher education. Questionnaires were sent to a sample population of 110 Arizona principals consisting of 40 high school, 30 middle school, and 50 elementary school administrators, with an 80.0% return rate. Purposeful sampling techniques were used in order to include administrators in all geographical areas of the state and ones representative of urban, suburban, and rural school settings. The study population administered schools ranging in size from 500 to 1,150 students in the elementary grades, 112 to 1,350 students in the middle school grades, and 600 to 2,700 students at the high school level. Assistant principals served in about 60.0% of the elementary schools and 83.0% of the middle schools. All of the high schools, with one exception, had at least one assistant principal in a supportive role.

Fifty-one percent of the study population was female while 49.0% was male. The median age of the group was 48.6 years. Two-thirds of the elementary school principals had no previous experience as a principal or assistant principal before assuming their current role. On the other hand, all of the participating middle school administrators had prior experience as an assistant principal, and 55.0% of the high school principals had served as a principal in another school setting before serving in their current position. Principals at the K-6 level averaged 6.56 years in a principalship role; median years of experience for this group was 7.2 years. Middle school principals averaged 5.86 years in principalship positions; the median was 4.5 years. High school principals in the study had a mean of 6.2 years in the position, with a median of 5.5 years of experience.

Principals' Thoughts About Their Work Environment

The participants were asked to respond to several questions concerning job stress and job satisfaction. Elementary school principals reported the highest stress levels in the role; two-thirds of the K-6 school administrators indicated stress and pressure in the position as "high" or "very high." Middle school principals reported the second highest levels of job stress and pressure; the lowest stress and pressure levels were reported by participating high school principals. Only 38.1% of this group judged their stress as "high" or "very high" compared to 64.7% of elementary school administrators who responded similarly. In spite of the relatively high levels of stress and pressure being experienced by the participants, more than 80.0% of them viewed their job satisfaction as "above average" or better. When asked to name the most prominent sources of satisfaction for them in their work, the study participants listed such things as seeing specific improvements in student achievement, establishing professional growth activities for teaching personnel, working with teachers in such tasks as goal setting and program evaluation, implementing new programs for the school curriculum, and working with parents and other members of the school community.

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What were the most bothersome conditions being experienced by the principals in the study group? More specifically, what conditions most likely would cause them to step down from the role? As indicated by Table 1, the number one condition that might lead to job resignation was the lack of administrative and/or board support. This condition was ranked first by both the middle and high school principals; elementary school principals ranked such support as number two with the lack of respect their number one listing.

Table 1
Conditions That Might Lead to Job Resignation
With Group Rankings

Condition	K-6	7-8	9-12	Rank*
Lack of Adm/Bd Support	2	1	1	1
Lack of Worklife Balance	3	7-8	3	2
Changing Job Demands	5	3	5-7	3-5
Time Commitments of Job	7	5	2	3-5
Lack of Respect	1	2	11	3-5
External Interference	4	10	4	6
Lack of Staff Support	9	7-8	5-7	7
Salary Level Inadequate	6	4	10	8-9
Overall Stress & Burdens	8	6	5-7	8-9
Lack of Parent Support	10	9	8	10
Negative Media & Students	11	11	9	11

*Note: Final rankings were determined by averaging the individual rankings for each grade level.

Other top rated listings in the category of “might cause me to leave the position” were the lack of a work and life balance; changing demands of the job, including workload; and time commitments required by the position. Somewhat surprising was the participants’ listing of conditions, such as the negativity of the media and of students toward the school, the overall stress and burdens of the job, and lack of parental and community support, that were not highly rated as ones that might cause these administrators to leave the principalship. More than half of the elementary school principals and nearly half of the high school principals said that they had given serious thought to stepping down from the job. Middle school principals were less negative in this regard; two-thirds of this group indicated that little or no thought had ever been given to the idea of leaving the position of principal. As a group, high school principals were more positive about seeking a career in the principalship if they had it to do all over again; of this group, 61.9% so indicated. This response was considerably above that of the elementary and middle school participants who gave 41.2% and 46.4% responses respectively to the question: “If you had it to do over again, would you definitely seek a career in the principalship?”

The Importance of Salary in Retaining School Principals

Personnel studies in business and industry, and in the area of teaching personnel, consistently have found that salary is of less importance than working conditions in producing positive job

satisfaction (e.g., the relationship with one’s immediate supervisor).⁵ Yet, the level of compensation has been found to be a significant factor in the recruitment of persons for the principalship and for principal retention.⁶ The responses of the participants in this study also supported these contentions. As a total group, for example, study participants viewed salary as “very high” in importance in 25.0% of the cases; another 40.0% answered “high” in importance. Very few principals viewed salary as “not high” or as “low” in importance relative to the retention of their services. However, a much higher response was given to the importance of a “balanced work/family life.” The mean statistic for the three groups of principals was 50.2%; that is, slightly more than half of the participants viewed worklife balance “very high” among the scale of factors that served to retain their services. Thus worklife, overall, was viewed as more important than salary as a factor for keeping school principals on the job. Overall, 90.9% of the principals in the study viewed worklife balance as “high” or “very high” in importance for retaining their services. The responses of “moderately high,” “not high” or “low in importance” were limited.

Thoughts About Immediate Plans and Career Aspirations

Seven possible responses were provided to the participants relative to their immediate plans and career aspirations. Elementary principals in 43.6% of the cases, “planned to remain as a school principal until retirement age.” The number one response of middle school principals was similar: “I plan to remain as school principal in my current principalship or seek a principalship at another level in a different school.” High school principals gave a 28.5% response to each of three different entries: “I hope to seek a higher administrative position in education at the K-12 level”; “I plan to remain as school principal until retirement age”; and “I plan to seek early retirement.” Although one-fourth of the middle school principals had plans to seek a higher administrative position in education at the K-12 school level and nearly one-fourth of the elementary principals planned to remain at their present school or seek a principalship at another level or different school, other options, such as seeking a position at the university level, seeking a position outside the educational profession, or seeking early retirement, with the one exception noted previously, gained only a limited response by participants. Data provided no evidence that the principals were anxiously looking to leave the role.

The Most Frustrating and/or Problematic Condition for the School Principal

An open-ended question was posed for the principals’ consideration asking them to consider the one most frustrating problem that they encountered in their leadership role. Responses were numerous, and they varied widely among the participants. For example, elementary school principals recorded more than 50 entries ranging from matters of salaries to the lack of administrative support to the problems of politics in the profession. No identifiable dominant problems were recorded by K-12 school principals although the matters of accountability and related testing requirements and lack of administrative support received the highest number of notations.

Responses of middle school principals were similar in that no consensus on problem areas was identified, and the many entries varied widely. Among the listings for the number one frustration were such entries as workload, parent apathy, lack of funding, changing demands placed upon the role, the problems of the bureaucracy, and time requirements of the position. High school principals listed similar

frustrations. Workload, lack of time to do the job, lack of resources, and personnel problems encountered time and time again were those frustrations named most often by grade 9-12 principals.

In a related question, the principals were asked to identify the five most difficult problems that they faced as principal. Twenty-one selected problems were listed for the participants' consideration. Table 2 reports the ten most difficult problems as perceived by the respondents. The problem of "lack of respect for administrators" received a high response on the part of each of the three principal groups. Dealing with external mandates and regulations was a special problem for the middle school respondents. Of the 21 difficult problems listed for consideration, the problems of the negativity of the media, lack of parental/community support, and teacher absenteeism were among those problems that received relatively low responses by participants.

Table 2
Most Difficult Problems Facing Principals

<i>Difficult Problems</i>	<i>K-6</i>	<i>7-8</i>	<i>9-12</i>	<i>Mean %</i>
Lack of Respect for School Administrators Generally	58.8%	50.0%	50.0%	52.7%
Dealing With External Mandates & Regulations	23.5%	66.7%	20.0%	36.7%
Time to Do the Job	23.5%	41.7%	40.0%	35.1%
Balancing Work/Home Life	47.1%	25.0%	30.0%	34.0%
Dealing With Paperwork	35.3%	25.0%	30.0%	30.1%
Impact of Societal Problems	17.6%	50.0%	20.0%	29.2%
Teacher Personnel Problems	17.6%	25.0%	40.0%	27.5%
Parent Problems	35.3%	33.3%	10.0%	26.2%
Testing Mandates	23.5%	16.7%	20.0%	20.1%
Hiring Quality Teachers	11.8%	33.3%	30.0%	25.0%

Which Five Conditions or Provisions Rank Highest for Retaining the Services of School Principals?

Table 3 reveals the responses of each principal group regarding the most important provisions for keeping them on the job. Without question, the number one condition or provision for retaining the services of the principals was "being able to make a difference." This entry was ranked first among all others by each of the three principal groups in the study. The conditions of "challenges and opportunities in the role of leadership" and "relationships with students" tied for second and third respectively for the most important considerations for retaining their services. The fourth most important provision was "personal satisfaction that the role of principal provides," and "compensation for the position" ranked fifth among the group of participants. Study results were quite similar among the groups relative to both the most important conditions for retaining principals' services and those considered to be of lesser importance. As previously noted, "being able to make a difference" was ranked number one by each of the three groups. Among the entries at the lower end of the scale regarding provisions that would serve to retain principals' services were "recognition received for doing this work," and "prestige of the position of principal."

Table 3

Provisions That Would Serve to Retain the Services of Principals

<i>Provisions</i>	<i>K-6</i>	<i>7-8</i>	<i>9-12</i>	<i>Rank*</i>
Able to Make a Difference	1	1	1	1
Challenges/Opportunities	4	2	3	2-3
Relation With Students	3	4	2	2-3
Satisfaction Role Provides	2	3	5	4
Compensation for Position	7-8	5	6	5
Professional Relationships	5	6	7	6-7
Responsibilities & Growth	6	7-9	4	6-7
Importance for Career Goal	9	7-9	8	8-9
Work I Am Prepared To Do	7-8	7-9	9-10	8-9
Prestige of the Position	10	7-9	11	10
Recognition Received	11	10	9-10	11

*Note: Final rankings were determined by averaging the individual rankings of each grade level.

Do Principals Really Enjoy Their Work?

If consideration was given only to the participants' responses relative to job enjoyment, it would have to be concluded that principal retention is of little or no problem. As a group, 87.8% of the school principals reported that they enjoyed the work "just about all of the time" or "to a moderate degree." The majority of each of the three principal groups, elementary, middle, and secondary, gave the response of "most all of the time" as the level of job enjoyment at 69.3%, 64.2%, and 57.1%, respectively. Only a very few principals answered the question of job enjoyment as "seldom" or "almost never."

Principals' Recommendations for Changing the Position

An effort was made to gain the ideas of study participants regarding needed changes in the role of principal and their suggestions for decreasing those things that tend to inhibit the entry of talented individuals into the principalship. Eleven conditions were set forth that potentially could serve to inhibit principal recruitment. Participants were asked to identify each of the entries which, in their opinion, was significant in posing problems for principal recruitment. As a group, the factors of "overall demands of the job," and "not having sufficient time to meet the demands of the position" led the list of leading recruitment inhibitors. High school principals overwhelmingly viewed the matter of insufficient time as the number one recruitment inhibitor and ranked the matter of "overall demands of the job and resulting workload" as a close second inhibiting factor. The factor, overall demands/workload, was considered as either the first or second leading inhibitor by each of the three principal groups.

Other conditions that rated high on the list of factors that inhibit the attractiveness of the principalship for potential leaders were inadequate salaries, conditions facing principals in schools today (e.g., student violence and related discipline problems), worklife and family life balance problems, and personnel problems with teachers and other staff personnel. Factors that do not serve as inhibitors in attracting quality persons to the work of school principal, in the minds of the

study population, were such considerations as “poor programs of preparation for the demands of the principalship” and “assistant principal experiences do not provide necessary preparation to assume the role of principal.”

What Are Principals’ Recommendations for Keeping Quality Principals on the Job?

What changes and/or provisions most likely would keep quality principals on the job? Ten specific recommendations were set forth for the participants to consider in regard to principal retention and an open-ended opportunity to add to the list was provided. Table 4 reveals the principals’ ideas in this regard. As the data show, “increasing principal salaries substantially” and “providing the resources necessary for needed administrative support at the school level such as assistants, legal services, and other support personnel” were the two leading recommendations for retaining quality school leaders. Middle school principals viewed the increasing of salaries as the number one recommendation for principal retention. Elementary school principals were of the opinion that providing necessary support resources was the number one need, and high school principals believed that a re-examination of the role of principal in order to find creative ways to decrease the demands of the position was the top priority for decreasing turnover.

Table 4
Recommendations for Keeping Quality School Principals in the Role

Recommendation	K-6	7-8	9-12	Rank*
Increase Salaries	2	1	2-3	1-2
Provide Needed Resources	1	2	2-3	1-2
Re-examine Principal's Role	3	5	1	3
Provide Public Support	4	3	5-9	4
Add Benefits/Incentives	8-10	4	4	5
Gather Principal Feedback	6	6-7	5-9	6
More Attractive Retirement	5	9	5-9	7
Educate Public of Demands	7	8	5-9	9
Provide Mentoring Services	8-10	6-7	5-9	9
Outsource Certain Work	8-10	10	10	10

*Note: Final rankings were determined by averaging the individual rankings of each grade level.

Recommendations, such as outsourcing certain work, for example, some of the business administration responsibilities of principals, gained little favor. This fact was somewhat puzzling in view of the participants’ high rankings of other work related entries (e.g., re-examine the role of principal to find creative ways to decrease the demands on the position, provide the resources necessary for needed administrative support, etc.).

An open-ended comment section was included for the purpose of gaining related input into the matter of principal retention. Several selected comments in this regard are included below:

There is a perception that 90% of the principal’s time is devoted to negative problems and troublesome issues. This serves as a major deterrent to those considering work as a principal.

The next 20 years will be challenging for principals. I’m not sure the training will be able to match the actual demands of the job.

Teachers tell me that they don’t want to give that much time for that little money.

Discipline is part of the job, but violence and lack of non-motivated, potential dropout students, and other such problems take away from the more enjoyable work of a school principal today.

If you want a job that’s challenging and incredibly complex, be a high school principal. It is clear that not everyone views these challenges as part of the good life.

Summary

Two primary purposes guided the collection of data for the study reported herein: (1) To gain principals’ insights into the status of certain conditions within the school principalship today; and (2) To solicit principals’ recommendations for attracting quality persons to the principalship and retaining their services. It can be safely concluded that the large majority of principals in this study experienced high levels of job satisfaction and enjoyment in their work, although the levels of job stress and pressure were high as well. For the most part, there was no evidence in the study findings that would support a belief that principals were seeking ways to exit the position or that they were anxiously looking forward to early retirement. Identifiable frustrations within the role of principal certainly did exist, however, and school principals, like individuals in other professional roles, had given thought to leaving the position.

Study results provided several recommendations by principals concerning changes and/or provisions that could lead to increased interest on the part of talented personnel to pursue the career of principal. The principals also stated their thoughts about conditions that might be changed and provisions that needed to be implemented or improved to assure their retention in a principal’s role. The study participants were given an opportunity to state their best ideas regarding what might be done to attract and retain others in the leadership role of a school principal. Although the following recommendations are not offered as “the solutions” to the complex problems surrounding principal turnover, they do provide guidelines, places to start, in implementing positive steps for keeping our quality school principals on the job.

1. *It is recommended that the position of school principal be re-examined and redefined for the purposes of providing information and insights concerning needed changes and support in the role.* Study participants cited the importance of administrative and school board support consistently in their answers to various questions posed. This condition was listed number one among the many factors that would cause them to step down from the principalship position. It seems of paramount importance that steps be taken to gain an understanding of what school principals include in their definitions of administrative and board support. For example, studies related to teachers’ job satisfaction have viewed administrative support in terms of the principal’s interest and involvement in matters of instruction and the curriculum, rather than the traditional thinking that the principal must be there to support and protect the teacher in problems with disgruntled parents.

Certainly, administrative and board support would include listening to the recommendations of the principal and giving fair and full consideration to their needs and suggestions. It also includes the spirit of team management in the best sense of the concept.

2. *It is recommended that needed attention be given to informing the several stakeholders of local schools of the demands being made upon local school leaders and the importance of demonstrating this fact through recognition and respect for the work of this office.* School principals are especially sensitive to disrespect of the schools and school personnel since they are at the cutting edge of everyday school activities; they are the ones that, more than any other persons, face the media and the school's stakeholders on a daily basis. Principals must deal with the problems and dissatisfactions of students, teachers, support staff, central administrators, the superintendent, the board, parents, community members, and the media as part of their daily routine. Much more needs to be done to inform both the media and other stakeholders about the comprehensive responsibilities and demands made upon the principal's office. Teachers, and others who are given opportunities to learn about the realities of the principal's work, most often gain a new respect for both the person in the principal's office and the accomplishments that all too often are taken for granted. There is evidence that the community desires to hear much more often from the local school principal rather than from the school superintendent and/or members of the school board. Such communication opportunities should be programmed; principals are in the best position to inform others about the problems, needs and accomplishments of the local school.

3. *It is recommended that the importance of a balanced worklife for school principals be recognized in the determination of job responsibilities and work assignments.* Workers in America are insisting on opportunities to place personal and family responsibilities toward the top of their priorities. No longer is the "live to work" attitude dominant in American culture, rather "work to live" has become the motivational edict. Unless the system is able to make the school a place where people want to work, one that allows them to tend to other life responsibilities as well, they will look for such positions elsewhere. School principals, in the study reported here, viewed worklife balance above salary considerations in importance for retaining their services. Education has not done well in this regard; it is clear that the role of principal needs to be re-examined with the purpose of altering the time and load demands presently placed on the position. Such considerations as sabbatical leaves for school principals and a more effective allocation of people resources are needed. Principals speak frequently about the increasing demands of the job. The need seems clear: Either find better solutions for the growing workload of school principals or expect to lose the battle for principal retention.

4. *It is recommended that the salary levels of school principals be re-examined for the purposes of compensating persons in these positions commensurately with the demands of the role.* Kennedy listed the changing demands of the position, discussed briefly in number three above, as one of the leading causes of principal turnover.⁷ A second cause of principal turnover noted by Kennedy was salary. This contention was supported unconditionally by the results of this study. For example, the principals in this study ranked the importance of the compensation level as being of "high" or "very high" importance in retaining their services. History does not provide a high confidence level for increasing school administrators' salaries substantially, now or at anytime in the near future. Many groups and individuals, including

teaching personnel, have expressed the opinion that administrative salaries already are out of proportion to the low pay of teaching personnel. Yet, when principals' salaries are compared to mid-management compensation levels in other fields, the myth of overly paid school administrators becomes quite clear. The dilemma is quite clear as well: The compensation offered to potential principal candidates is too small to encourage their entering the principalship as a career and to retain the services of quality leaders. It appears that other "compensation" provisions, such as sabbatical leaves, peer-assisted leadership programs, mentoring and coaching relationships, personal and professional growth activities, and other psychic income provisions will have to suffice as provisions for self-renewal and motivational strategies or local school leaders.

5. *It is recommended that the job description of the school principal be designed so as to be certain that priorities are established that assure the opportunities for this leader to make a difference.* School principals place the opportunity to initiate programs that provide better learning experiences for students and improved personalized growth activities for support and professional staff personnel realize their potentials, to make a difference, among the most satisfying outcomes of the principal's work. The opportunity to contribute to such important differences was considered by participating principals in this study as the absolute number one factor for retaining their services as principal. Yet, other concerns of school principals identified in this study are beginning to erode the realization of this opportunity. The lack of administrative and board support, lack of respect for the work of the principal, inadequate compensation levels that tend to discourage talented persons to choose the principalship as a professional career, and external interventions that are disruptive to goal achievement were among those conditions that were cited by principals as ones that distract from the positive efforts of school leaders and, if not corrected, will ultimately reduce the efforts of the principal to a level of mediocrity.

Although the foregoing recommendations do not represent panaceas for resolving the complex problems of administrative turnover, they do focus on positive actions of paramount importance. Solutions to the problems facing the nation in the area of quality administrative leadership necessarily become the primary responsibilities of state educational agencies, the general citizenry, and district administrative leaders, including the local school board. Without collaborative efforts on the part of these groups and individuals, the problems of high administrative turnover are likely to continue.⁸

Endnotes

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⁷ Cathleen Kennedy, *Summary of Responses to NAESP/NASSP/NMSA Survey Questions* (Washington, D.C.: Principals' Leadership Summit, 2000).

⁸ Norton, "Let's Keep Our Quality High School Principals on the Job."