

Beyond Busses, Balls, and Beans: An Examination of the Leadership Skills of Kansas Principals

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Introduction

Each year in American public schools, nearly 450,000 teachers leave their jobs (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). This means that one-sixth of all teachers either transfer to different schools/districts or leave the teaching profession altogether. One of the main factors contributing to teachers' decisions to remain at or leave their positions is related to the level of support from school administrators. Not only is a principal responsible for managing the school (the busses, balls, and beans), but the principal is responsible for being the leader of the school as well. Research indicates that the decision to remain or leave a particular school is greatly influenced by the principal and the principal's leadership style (Brown & Wynn, 2007). This study sought to examine how the effectiveness of the leadership of principals in Kansas compares to the effectiveness of the leadership of principals throughout the rest of country.

Background on Teacher Retention and Principal Leadership

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future report that every school district in the country is affected by continuous teacher turnover (NCTAF, 2010). The large numbers of teachers leaving the field of education (the phenomenon known as "attrition") can be explained, in part, to the working conditions and school environment faced by many teachers. Research indicates that the working conditions of teachers affect their ability to teach well and the satisfaction they obtain from their teaching (Johnson, et al., 2005). One of the main sources affecting the working conditions of the school is the leadership of the school. The effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the leadership of the principal directly impacts the satisfaction of the teachers in the school (Johnson, et al., 2005). Luekens, Lyter, Fox, & Chandler (2004) found that over one-third of teachers who transferred to new schools reported that their dissatisfaction with the administrations' support was either a "very important" or "extremely important" reason for leaving their position. Similarly, Johnson and Birkeland (2003) found that, among 50 novice Massachusetts teachers studied over four years, those who decided to leave their schools or the profession often "described principals who were arbitrary, abusive, or neglectful. . ." (p. 594).

While ineffective principal leadership often leads to teacher attrition, effective principal leadership often leads to teacher retention. "How principals execute their leadership affects school organization, culture, and working conditions, which, in turn, affect job satisfaction and teacher retention" (Cornelia, 2010, p.3). Similarly, Useem (2003) found that "strong administrators and a collegial staff climate can lead to higher rates of teacher retention" (p. 18). "New teachers perceive building principals to be the vital link in their success" (Danin & Bacon, 1999, p. 206). Research suggests that teacher

retention increases “when school environments are organized for productive collegial work under a principal’s effective leadership” (Johnson, et al., 2005, p.67). For example, Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) reported that principals who delegate authority and support collective decision-making foster a “collective responsibility for student learning and instructional collaboration among teachers” (p. 774). Effective principals create a working environment that promotes teacher retention. The school principal has “the responsibility of creating an institutional atmosphere of collaboration and support, as opposed to one in which individual teachers shut their doors and operate privately” (Heller, 2004, p. 6-7). Effective principals attract, support, and retain qualified teachers who are successful in the classroom (Brown & Wynn, 2007).

Methodology

In this study, selected data from the National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES) 2007-2008 School and Staffing Survey were analyzed to examine teachers’ responses to various statements regarding their teaching positions.

The survey consists of several questionnaires, including one designed specifically for teachers to complete. This questionnaire asked participants about various issues, including education and training, teaching assignments/experience, perceptions and attitudes about teaching, and workplace conditions. Once the surveys are completed and returned, names, addresses, and other identifying information are removed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

For researchers who qualify, “restricted-use data” may be used for analysis. This data contains individually identifiable information that is confidential and protected by law. Only those who have official clearance from the NCES may access this data. This researcher holds a license to utilize restricted-use data.

Results and Discussion

Both public-use and restricted-use data from responses to selected questions from the 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey Teacher Questionnaire were used in this study. Participants were asked to indicate a level of agreement to the following five statements:

1. “In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done.”
2. “My principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it.”
3. “The principal knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the staff.”
4. “The school administration’s behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.”
5. “I am generally satisfied with being a teacher at this school.”

Weighted responses were used in the analysis of the data from each of the five statements, indicating application of the results to 3,404,500 public school teachers in the United States. These responses were compared to the responses to the same statements by 37,700 teachers in Kansas (See Table 1).

First, weighted responses to the statement, “In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done” were examined. The results indicate that nationwide, 34 percent of teachers “strongly agree” with the statement. Among the teachers in Kansas, 32.3 percent “strongly agree” with the statement. There is only a 1.7 percent difference in the responses of the Kansas teachers as compared to the national average.

Second, 56 percent of participants nationwide “strongly agree” with the statement, “my principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it.” In Kansas, 55.1 percent of teachers indicated that same level of agreement with the statement, resulting in a less than one percent difference between the responses of Kansas teachers and teachers nationwide.

Third, responses to the statement, “the principal knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the staff” indicate that 57.7 percent public school teachers “strongly agree” with the statement. 55.2 percent of teachers in Kansas also strongly agree that their school principals have effectively communicated his or her vision for the school to the teachers – a difference of 2.5 percent.

Fourth, weighted responses to the statement, “The school administration’s behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging” were examined, indicating that 55 percent of public school teachers in the nation “strongly agree” with the statement. Kansas teachers indicated a slightly higher level of support and encouragement from their principals. 57.7 percent of teachers in Kansas strongly agree with this statement, resulting in 2.7 percent higher than the overall finding for the nation.

Fifth, only 59.4 percent of public school teachers “strongly agree” with the statement, “I am generally satisfied with being a teacher at this school.” In Kansas, 57.1 percent of teachers “strongly agree” that they are generally satisfied with their teaching positions, which is 2.3 percent less than that nationwide response.

These results indicate that Kansas principals are performing at a level similar to principals across the nation. The largest difference in percentage of responses from teachers nationwide and those in Kansas was 2.7 percent. However, this difference was a result of a higher number of Kansas teachers strongly agreeing that their principals were supportive and encouraging.

These results are encouraging for the state of Kansas, particularly when noting that a higher number of teachers in Kansas believe their school administration offers more support and encouragement as compared to the remaining states in the nation.

However, while Kansas principals should be pleased with the indication that they are providing similar levels of effective leadership to their teachers, there is still much room for improvement. Only 32.3 percent of teachers in Kansas feel that staff members are recognized for a job well done. This means that 67.7 percent of Kansas teachers did not agree that teachers' accomplishments are adequately acknowledged. Further, only slightly more than half of all Kansas teachers agreed that their principals adequately enforced rules, agreed that their principals have effectively communicated the goals of the school, agreed that their principals are supportive, and agreed that they are satisfied with their teaching positions. Therefore, almost half of all Kansas teachers do not agree that their principals enforce rules, effectively communicate the mission of the school, or are supportive of the teachers. Almost 43 percent of Kansas teachers are not satisfied with their teaching positions. This lack of a supportive environment can result in teachers leaving the school or the teaching profession altogether.

This should be addressed in two areas. First, academic institutions training aspiring principals should provide them with the knowledge and skills to be effective leaders in their future schools. Future principals should have a firm grasp on how to be not only efficient managers of their schools' busses, balls, and beans, but also how to effectively be the leaders of their schools. Second, current Kansas principals should address this issue in their own school environments by identifying areas of weakness in their own leadership style. This self-reflection may improve their leadership skills and prevent the loss of high-quality staff.

Table 1

<i>Weighted Responses of Public School Teachers</i>			
Statement	Percentage of Teachers Nationwide	Percentage of Teachers in Kansas	Difference
In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done.	34	32.3	1.7
My principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it.	56	55.1	.9
The principal knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the staff.	57.7	55.2	2.5
The school administration's behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.	55	57.7	-2.7
I am generally satisfied with being a teacher at this school.	59.4	57.1	2.3

Summary

Data analysis indicates similar findings in teachers' beliefs in the effectiveness of the leadership of the administration when comparing the results in Kansas to those nationwide. While principals in Kansas should feel a sense of satisfaction that their leadership abilities are similar to those of administrators across the nation, they must also be aware of the improvements that can be made, potentially resulting in even higher numbers of job satisfaction and, therefore, teacher retention.

Effective principals create an environment where teachers feel and sense of collaboration and support, and as a result, are dedicated to their jobs. On the contrary, ineffective principals fail to create such a climate, leaving the teachers to feel a sense of isolation, leading to dissatisfaction with their jobs and a higher probability that they will leave their teaching positions for either a different position in the teaching field or a different position in a field outside of teaching. Current and aspiring principals in Kansas (and across the nation) must recognize the impact they have on teacher retention and must take steps to ensure that teachers in their schools feel a sense of satisfaction with their jobs to improve the retention rate of teachers.

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