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aged 10 to 14

Matters

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Retaining Your Best and Brightest Teachers

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It is fast approaching the time of year when I dread having a teacher visit my office and ask to “speak with me for a moment.” Those words are often the precursor to a discussion about the teacher leaving our school. It can be one of your best teachers or one with whom you have been working to gracefully “exit” from the profession. But it is the loss of elite teachers, the master teachers, that cause me tremendous heartburn. It could be that they are leaving for a higher-paying position, they could be retiring, or they could be leaving the field. But, I work diligently to make sure they are not leaving because of a feeling of being underappreciated. This is especially important in a middle-level school, with its special challenges.

Why would your master teachers want to stay at your school with you as their principal? How can you retain your best and brightest teachers? You have no control over salaries and benefits. You cannot dictate what type of student enrolls in your school. You have limited ability to alter the physical structure of your school. So, what do you do? It is my belief that retention of teachers is the second most important role of a principal, with hiring good teachers being the most important.

I believe that the retention of exemplary teachers involves time, trust, and appreciation. The faculty members at my school know that I maintain an open-door policy for most of the day. I rarely close my office door and will stop what I am doing whenever a teacher comes in. Every survey administered to my staff regarding my performance lists this accessibility as one of the top items teachers appreciate. When I was a young administrator, I worried that this practice would prevent me from completing my work. What I soon realized was that turning in a report on time paled in comparison to the loyalty built by stopping to listen to a teacher who was standing at my door. One of my long-time mentors once told me that “if they really want the report, they’ll call again.” It has always amazed me as to the number of reports no one ever asks for twice. My point is that time for a teacher is much more important than paperwork!

Giving your time helps develop trust in you and trust in the organization. Most folks think building trust takes too long. They say that they don’t have time to develop trust, that they just need respect. Hey, Attila the Hun had respect, but is that the way you think you’ll retain teachers? I believe that it is paramount to your organization to create a climate of trust. Listen to your teachers, have a smile on your face, believe in your employees’ abilities, and don’t micromanage. Why would you hire someone and then not allow them to do their work? Check out Stephen M.R. Covey’s book, *The Speed of Trust*.

Finally, teachers need you to appreciate their efforts on behalf of the students in your school. How much time each day do you dedicate to showing appreciation to the folks who work in your school? It is one of the most beneficial parts of my day. I write at least five notes a day to teachers and employees, thanking them for a specific action. I do not e-mail thanks. Which would you value more, a handwritten note or an e-mail? The notes are sent on tiny cards, which prevent me from getting too long-winded. I also give “paper plate” awards. If a teacher has done something particularly laudable, or not so laudable—like burning popcorn in the microwave—I decorate a paper plate and present it at the faculty meeting. This is so popular that teachers now present their colleagues with paper plate awards.

It’s not hard to retain teachers, but it takes time and a sincere heart. If you have ideas for retaining your best and brightest teachers, please share them with me.



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