



IN BRIEF

Several studies of teacher morale show that by listening to teachers and supporting their work with recognition and resources, principals can build and maintain a learning environment in which teachers feel appreciated.

"There is overwhelming research evidence that teachers enter teaching to help young people learn, that their most gratifying reward is accomplishing this goal, and that the work-related factors most important to teachers are those that allow them to practice their craft successfully" (Frase 1992).

Maintaining High Teacher Morale

Nancy Protheroe

By nurturing an environment focused on learning, principals can support both high levels of student success and high teacher morale.

“[Teachers] want to work in schools where they have the time and opportunity to work with other professionals—and where they are supported and appreciated by their principal.”

In public education’s current environment of high-stakes testing and accountability, principals are constantly engaged in an effort to balance messages to their teachers to achieve ever-higher levels of student learning with appreciation for what they do. As a result, it is not surprising that staff morale is an issue in some schools.

It would be nice if principals had the resources available to pay teachers significantly more or to fund initiatives—such as reducing class sizes—that would make teachers’ jobs more manageable. Since few principals have this luxury, what can they do to create an environment in which teachers feel productive, supported, and appreciated?

Listening to Teachers

A principal who listens to teachers is better able to identify both the positives and negatives in the school environment. What teachers say in one-on-one talks with the principal, what issues they bring up in staff meetings, and even snatches of teacher conversation heard in hallways provide valuable data for principals interested in keeping staff morale high.

Large-scale teacher surveys also tell us much about characteristics of schools that support high teacher morale—as well as those that do not. For example, Perie and Baker (1997) analyzed data from a study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics and found that the “most satisfied” teachers viewed their schools as supportive, safe, autonomous environments. They were also more likely to feel that staff members were recognized for a job well done, that their

administration was supportive and caring, that teachers in their schools participate in making important school decisions, that principals frequently discuss instructional practices with teachers, and that there is a great deal of cooperative effort among the staff.

Whitener *et al.* (1997) analyzed data from surveys of teachers who had either left teaching due to “dissatisfaction with teaching as a career” or who, while still teaching, had transferred due to “dissatisfaction with the previous school.” Both groups said two factors significantly influenced their decision: inadequate support and lack of recognition from school leaders.

A more recent study of North Carolina teachers analyzed teacher-provided data on working conditions in schools. The study found school leadership to be “at the heart of teacher working conditions” (Hirsch 2005). The teachers indicated they:

“value school settings where they are not isolated, working together with leadership that supports their efforts. As one accomplished teacher described during an online conversation about working conditions, ‘My darkest hours of teaching were when I had no one else to talk to about student achievement and effective instruction’” (Hirsch 2005).

What Do New Teachers Say?

As every principal knows, new teachers can be particularly vulnerable to bouts of low morale. Principals would do well to remember that these

teachers begin employment with expectations about their schools and principals that can have a significant negative effect on their morale if reality does not match these expectations.

The importance of the school principal to making—or breaking—a teacher’s first years in the profession is highlighted in a report by the Public Education Network (2003):

“New teachers working in schools run by principals they describe as effective and competent had a much easier transition into teaching. Teachers listed several attributes and behaviors of principals and other school administrators that made a difference to their introduction to teaching. The first was accessibility. Teachers gave high marks to principals who made it easy for them to ask questions and discuss problems, and those that provided them with assistance, guidance, and solutions.”

In addition, these new teachers “greatly appreciated being observed in the classroom . . . [and] getting direct feedback and guidance.” Finally, “support from principals for [teachers’] disciplinary decisions” was another important factor in their job satisfaction.

What Principals Can Do

So what are some specific things principals can do to build and maintain high staff morale? When a group of successful principals was asked to identify the characteristics they considered important in building relationships with their teachers, the ability to “understand the value of people” was high on the list. In their view, such principals:

“provide continual feedback to their teachers and find ways to provide teachers with professional development opportunities, both in-house and off-campus. They ensure teachers have the opportunity to work collaboratively with their peers and to increase leadership abilities. They also demonstrate their valuing teachers by actively involving them in meaningful decision-making” (Charlotte Advocates for Education 2004).

Other ways in which principals could demonstrate support for teachers:

- Demonstrate to teachers that they “work for them,” not vice versa;
- Provide resources—often creatively—needed for teachers to be successful;
- Keep “stressors,” such as extra duties and paperwork, to a minimum; and
- Publicly support teachers and recognize them for a “job well done” (Charlotte Advocates for Education 2004).

“...Watching lightbulbs go on in students’ eyes plays a major role in keeping teachers motivated.”

Because good teachers repeatedly talk about the personal satisfaction that evidence of student learning brings them, strengthening school efforts to ensure student success—although often stressful—can be structured in ways that strengthen teachers’ bond with teaching and their schools. Staff members in districts that rapidly and significantly improved student achievement repeatedly talked about being given opportunities to discuss standards and the way teachers could work toward them. In their view, these opportunities acknowledged their skills and professionalism while allowing them to share ideas and strategies (Cawelti and Protheroe 2001).

Balancing Support

The satisfaction intrinsic in watching lightbulbs go on in students’ eyes plays a major role in keeping teachers motivated. They want to work in schools where they have the time and opportunity to work with other professionals—and where they feel supported and appreciated by their principals. By nurturing an environment in which teachers and students can focus on learning—and by providing the types of organizational support teachers say they need—principals can balance their support for both high levels of student learning and high staff morale. ■

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WEB RESOURCES

Two samples of teachers—some still in the profession and others who left—provide their opinions on factors that motivated them to teach, the nature of the teaching profession, and the rewards and challenges they experienced. <http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/exodus.pdf>

Twenty principals of high-need schools that have achieved high teacher retention address the question: "How can principal leadership positively impact the working environment to increase teacher retention." www.advocatesfored.org/publications/Principal%20Final%20Report.pdf

This Web site includes a variety of resources for districts and schools working to provide high-quality work environments for teachers. Five domains—time, leadership, empowerment, professional development, and facilities/resources—are discussed. www.teacherworkingconditions.org

Opinions expressed by new teachers in five districts on a variety of topics—school leadership, induction programs, mentor teachers, and difficulties with teaching diverse learners—are summarized. A copy of the survey instrument is included. www.publiceducation.org/pdf/Publications/Teacher_pQuality/Voice_of_the_New_Teacher.pdf

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