

Why Principals Quit



Lori A. Johnson

There are many reasons why principals voluntarily leave the positions they worked so hard to earn.

Margo seemingly had it all: a loving husband; two beautiful children; and her dream job as principal of a small suburban elementary school just minutes from her home. Margo had worked hard for this job and now, five years later, supervisors and colleagues recognized her as a superior principal. Test scores were high; staff, students, and parents loved her; the school was a happy, productive place.

IN BRIEF

The article describes research done with a small group of former principals on what led them to voluntarily leave the principalship. It offers suggestions for what can be done to stem the high turnover in the principalship.

But if Margo was a picture of success outside, inside she was in turmoil. Evening meetings and activities were cutting into time with her family, mediating conflicts was exhausting, and mounds of paperwork were keeping her from her vision of helping children. She had spent years preparing to be a principal, and she was good at it. But now she was thinking of quitting.

Margo's turning point came unexpectedly at a routine school board meeting, when a member of the audience openly criticized her for being slow to deal with an ineffective teacher. The truth was that Margo had been dealing with the situation, but confidentiality requirements prevented her from sharing that information. Feeling hurt and betrayed, Margo went home that night knowing she had to quit. She submitted her resignation in the spring and took a position with a local educational curriculum company.

Margo didn't know it, but she was far from alone in making her decision. Of the principals who leave their jobs each year, a turnover rate estimated as more than 40 percent (Doud & Keller 1998), about 10 percent quit voluntarily for a variety of reasons (Davis 1997). Typically, the decision is made when the principal recognizes that problems exist that make the role untenable and that a change might be personally beneficial. The principal may be experiencing burnout, or realize that his or her idealized image of the role does not match the reality.

Whatever the cause, a process called *role exit* has begun. As described by Ebaugh (1998), the process has four stages.

First doubts begin when the individual begins to question remaining in his or her current role, which may lead to a general feeling of dissatisfaction.

Seeking alternatives occurs when the individual starts to compare his or her current role with other possible roles.

The turning point occurs when the individual decides that remaining in the current role is no longer an option.

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Finally, *creating the ex-role* occurs when the individual integrates the norms and expectations of old and new roles in order to create a consistent sense of self.

Examining the Exiters

In 2003, I set out to study the experiences of 12 principals who had voluntarily quit the principalship. All had worked as school principals for at least two years and some had served for more than 10 years. Interviews revealed the following findings:

- The former principals fell into two categories: Three “satisfied” exiters had no intention of leaving the principalship until a new and more promising opportunity presented itself; nine “unsatisfied” exiters were hoping to leave and had sought alternatives to the principalship.

- The nine unsatisfied exiters experienced first doubts for several reasons. Four had entered the principalship hoping to influence and help children, but found that a variety of barriers prevented them from doing so. Three wanted to work with teachers and professional development, but found that the workload and burden of managerial tasks prevented them from providing instructional leadership. The remaining two unsatisfied exiters experienced first doubts for personal reasons: one found that the principalship took a high physical and emotional toll; the other had an ill daughter who needed ongoing care.

- Only four of the nine could recall a specific turning point in making their decision to quit. For one, the turning point came when a health

checkup discovered problems. For another, it was when a staff voted down a curriculum change after two years of work. Others cited unsupportive behaviors by supervisors.

Adjusting to New Careers

Whether their exits were smooth or tumultuous, virtually all of the surveyed principals needed to make some adjustments after they left the principalship. They had to reconcile the reasons why they had entered the principalship with the reasons why they had left, and with the goals of their new jobs.

It was not an easy process. The former principals described leaving their schools with emotions ranging from sadness to guilt to happiness. Most agreed that telling their staff was the most difficult part, and that they missed relationships with staff members and students, as well as the adrenaline rush generated by the fast pace and authority of the position. But these feelings were offset by what they did not miss:

Cultural issues. The former principals talked about the difficulty of working in schools where strong faculty groups were accustomed to doing things a certain way, impacting the principal's ability to make changes.

Workload. They recalled the many hours needed to attend school and community functions and meetings while supervising large numbers of employees.

Bureaucracy. They cited everything from central office directives to restrictive union contracts to frivolous lawsuits as bureaucratic impediments.

Student discipline and irate parents. None of the former principals said they missed dealing with complicated and emotional discipline issues, or unsupportive and hostile parents.

While most of the study participants expressed no regrets about leaving the principalship, five remarked that they had not ruled out returning to the principalship at some point. Three of them noted that they had learned some important lessons about being more effective principals since their exits.

Getting Principals to Stay

What can be done about the issues that cause principals to quit? Suggestions from the study include the following:

- Reduce the discrepancy between the level of accountability expected of principals and the lack of influence they really have over many factors impacting school success.
- Reduce the isolation principals feel in dealing with many of the challenges they face.
- Find ways to reduce the workload, such as appointing “partner principals” or providing stipends to teachers to take on certain managerial tasks.
- Provide effective internship programs that include real on-the-job experience.

A significant theme that emerged from the study was the importance that all the former principals placed on their “legacy.” All of them stated that they believed they had been good principals and had made a significant dif-

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ference for children in that role. They expressed concern about a nationwide shortage of qualified principals and about the future of those still working as principals. They may have voluntarily left the principalship, but they had not forgotten what the principalship meant to them and the children they served. ■

References

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Ebaugh, Helen Rose Fuchs. *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.

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WEB RESOURCES

Avoid stress and burnout by reading articles from *Principal’s* March/April 2004 theme issue, “The Healthy Principal.”

www.naesp.org

If you simply need a change of schools, find useful tips in “Strategies for a Job-Hunting Principal.”

www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=971

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