

How Effective Principals Encourage Their Teachers



Jan Richards

Principals can benefit from knowing which of their behaviors or attitudes are most valued by teachers.

IN BRIEF

The author reports on a survey of how 22 positive behaviors of principals toward teachers were ranked by each group. Teachers gave highest marks to principals who respected and valued them as professionals, while principals believed that encouraging teachers to improve was their most valuable contribution.

Teachers often come into my graduate classes exhausted, frustrated, and disheartened.

“My scores haven’t improved enough.”

“We haven’t met our goals.”

“I feel like I need to do more, even though I’m helping my students before and after school.”

“I spend evenings and weekends planning and grading papers.”

They are crying for reassurance and are beginning to doubt whether they are making a difference. One of the interns I supervise is teaching kindergarten in a Title I school where most of the students are on free lunch. The pressure of scripted teaching and unending testing has had a negative impact even on these little 5-year-olds. They no longer want to come to school. They don’t *like* school! At the end of her first year of teaching, my intern was disillusioned and said she may want to leave the classroom and prepare for a less demanding profession. I have begun to hear other education students tell me privately that they don’t plan to teach much longer.

In a time of high educational stress, teacher burnout continues to be a troubling problem. You are probably feeling its effects in your own school, where some of your best teachers may be having doubts about whether they want to keep going. There is a job made increasingly difficult by the unrelenting pressure of the No Child Left Behind Act, pressure being felt by principals

and teachers alike—especially those in low-income, disadvantaged areas.

The constant influx and necessary training of new teachers each year makes the principal’s job more difficult. It’s in your best interest (as well as the best interest of your students) to find a way to keep good teachers in your school. What can you do to strengthen, empower, and encourage them?

The Million-Dollar Question

According to Richard Ingersoll (2001), the level of administrative support in a school is a major factor in whether teachers decide to persevere in their profession. In studying the many factors connected with administrative support, I became particularly interested in the power principals have to make a difference in teacher *morale*. Teachers have told me that when they feel respected, valued, and empowered, there is a higher level of commitment, less turnover, and greater school stability. So the million-dollar question for principals is: “*What behaviors or attitudes can I demonstrate that will achieve these goals?*”

In a previous *Principal* article (Richards 2004), I discussed the outcome of a study that sought to answer that question. From the results of interviews with K–8 teachers in their first five years of teaching on principal behaviors that most encouraged them, I created a list of 22 positive behaviors and attitudes, which I then used in a survey given to 100 additional teachers as well as 100 K–8 principals. I believed that focusing on any difference of perceptions could give principals added tools for making their school climate more positive and successful (*see box*).

The resulting data indicated that there is a profound difference in perception of two important principal behaviors: *Supports teachers with parents* and *Supports teachers in matters of student discipline*. The implications of this disconnect are troubling. It means that a principal may work long hours as a motivator and team builder, provide many opportunities for professional development, have high standards, give teachers opportunities for shared decision-making, even

give praise and acknowledgment, and still contend with teachers who remain dissatisfied in their jobs and who may consider leaving. Teachers indicated on this survey that what they value even more than praise and acknowledgment is support in matters of discipline, as represented by two of their top five most important principal behaviors.

Perceptions of Experienced Teachers

After seeing such strong results from the original study, I was curious to know the perceptions of teachers at other career stages. Thus, during the summer of 2004 I gave the same survey to two additional groups: 75 teachers with six to 10 years of teaching and 75 teachers with 11 or more years in their profession. In comparing the perceptions of the three groups, I found that the *same five principal behaviors* are most valued by teachers, no matter how many years they have been in the classroom.

The results also revealed some variations in perceptions by groups. For example, the greatest reported need for teachers early in their careers is *emotional support and safety*. These fledgling teachers value a principal who motivates and encourages collaboration. They need you to be their cheerleader rather than their critic. Sometimes we forget that new teachers are operating from limited experience, so it’s important to focus on what they are doing *right* as often as possible.

The greatest need for teachers with six to 10 years of experience is to be respected as professionals. Of all the groups, these teachers are most interested in mentoring new teachers, since they feel they have much to offer.

The greatest reported need for teachers with more than 10 years experience is your respect for their knowledge and experience. Praise is relatively unimportant to this group, but a wise principal will ask their opinion, value their input, and give them opportunities for decision-making.

Pearls of Wisdom

At the 2005 NAESP convention, I had the privilege of sharing my findings with K–8 principals from across the country.

A Comparison of the Top Five Positive Principal Behaviors

Teacher Ranking Order	Principal Ranking Order
1. Respects and values teachers as professionals.	1. Encourages teachers to improve in areas of teaching practice and professional development.
2. Supports teachers in matters of student discipline.	2. Holds consistent, high standards for all members of the school family.
3. Has an open-door policy.	3. Respects and values teachers as professionals.
4. Is fair, honest, and trustworthy.	4. Is fair, honest, and trustworthy.
5. Supports teachers with parents.	5. Has an open-door policy.

I asked them to write down examples of how they demonstrated one of the five most valued five principal behaviors. Here are some of their responses.

- I give “Caught Doing Something Great!” certificates to teachers and staff to acknowledge their efforts.
- When doing walkthroughs, I inevitably come across an empty classroom. I use this as an opportunity to write an encouraging message on the whiteboard: “This class is so lucky to

have such a fun and caring teacher” and I sign it at the bottom.

- When a teacher walks into my office, I stop what I am doing and say, “Hi. What can I do for you today?” It shows that I am there to serve them instead of viewing them as interruptions.
- When his child was scheduled for retention because of academic weakness, a parent wanted his child promoted anyway. I stated that I could not simply change a teacher’s decision and that, after reviewing the

data, it was clear that the child was ill-prepared for the next grade.

- Anytime a complaining parent circumvents the teacher and comes directly to me, I refer them back to the teacher. I address the issue later only if needed.

In a time when you are all stressed with the demands of the principal’s job, you need to remind yourselves that you have great power to make a difference in your teachers’ lives. Teachers who feel encouraged and comfortable with your support will stay with you in a positive climate of learning. You deserve to have that kind of school. **P**

References

- Ingersoll, R. M. “Teacher Turnover and Teacher Shortages: An Organizational Analysis.” *American Educational Research Journal* 38, no. 3 (2001): 499–534.
- Richards, J. “What New Teachers Value Most in Principals.” *Principal*, January/February 2004, 42–4.

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