



# Keepers of a Collaborative Culture

**APs' presence in classrooms might improve working conditions and reduce teacher turnover**

**By Ian P. Murphy**



Schools and districts nationwide struggle with teacher shortages, a 2017 brief from the Learning Policy Institute says, and attrition accounts for the vast majority—90 percent—of new openings. But schools can attempt to reduce that constant churn through leadership and support. And as linchpins of leadership in many schools, assistant principals play an important role in creating work cultures that encourage educators to stay put.

Evidence suggests that certain tasks APs take on correlate to improvements in school climate, says “The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership,” a research review published in April 2021 by Vanderbilt University/Mathematica and commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. And while the studies are limited, APs’ presence might contribute to greater job satisfaction and improved retention of teachers and principals.

“As leaders in their schools and members of school leadership teams, assistant principals could perhaps play key roles in making the job of the principalship more manageable, thus creating better working conditions for teachers and leaders, and even helping to stem the tide of educator shortages and attrition,” the report says.

## Seeking Support

Teachers identify the quality of administrative support as more important than salary or workload in deciding whether to leave their jobs. Resources associated with reduced teacher attrition include instructional and emotional support, teaching materials, and professional learning opportunities, but budgets sufficient to support educational goals and quality communication are also important.

Other factors in teachers' career decisions include school culture and collegial relationships, collaboration time, and decision-making input—all areas in which an effective AP plays an influential role. Talented principals who stay in their schools are also associated with retaining more effective teachers, and all building leaders who champion collaboration and inclusion are associated with lower attrition.

As with many aspects of the role, however, where the AP fits into the hierarchy remains ill-defined except perhaps at the school or district level. Few studies define the AP's role as a "lever" of leadership who can make working in a school easier, less stressful, and more fulfilling for everyone in its employ, but the research review suggests that the AP's broad-based influence and effect on school culture might also affect achievement.

Further research is needed to quantify APs' impact on student and teacher achievement, equity, and well-being, the report notes, as well as how specific aspects of the role affect school climate. Beyond improving principals' longevity and overall leadership stability, the theory is that APs might be able to help reduce teacher attrition by:

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—Edgardo Castro, principal, Lincoln Elementary School, Gallup, New Mexico

- Creating a positive school culture and favorable teacher working conditions;
- Building an instructional and social-emotional support structure for teachers; and
- Supplying teachers with needed resources and professional learning opportunities.

## Improving Outcomes

While responsibilities vary from team to team (see "What's My Role, Part 1" in the September/October 2021 issue of *Principal* magazine), school leaders believe that APs' instructional support contributes to improved outcomes. One large-scale study from a PLUS program district compared students whose teachers received coaching from APs with students of teachers who received "typical" district supports or no coaching, finding that student achievement improved with coaching.

"If an AP is well-versed in the classroom, that's where kids really succeed," says Edgardo Castro, principal of Lincoln Elementary School in Gallup, New Mexico, and a former AP. The two APs who served in Castro's school during the 2019–2020 year each spent eight to 12 hours per week in classrooms and four to six hours per week offering individual instructional feedback. "That's where the impact is—when you have APs more frequently in the classroom and visible."

Where discipline—a responsibility that often falls under the AP's aegis—is concerned, a 2005 study found that increasing the AP's visibility in junior high classrooms produced a 25 percent reduction in disciplinary incidents over a nine-week period. The study estimated that a corresponding 31 hours in paperwork processing was freed up for instructional leadership and administrative tasks.

Cindy Webster, principal of Weaver Elementary School in Springfield, Missouri, says her AP is the school's "first responder" on student discipline, parental concerns, and community partnerships. "My AP is my go-to for Tier 2 PBIS interventions," she says. "She creates behavior charts and sets students up for check-in/check-out in a timely manner. She also communicates with parents. This is a huge support for staff to address attendance and behavior concerns."

## Contributing to Climate

A 2020 study of Tennessee public schools suggested that APs deemed "effective" in supervisor evaluations had a positive impact on teachers' perceptions of school climate. While those higher evaluation ratings could be a product of already strong school climates, this suggests "that more effective

assistant principals could help improve schools' working conditions," the report says.

Castro says having a competent AP is a big factor in creating a positive school culture and thus improving teacher retention. "When it comes to school culture, it's almost a 50-50 split between the AP and the principal in terms of influence," he says.

The Vanderbilt/Mathematica research review found some indication that having an AP is also better for students in the long run, especially in situations in which the administrator becomes principal after serving as an AP in the same school. Having an AP "indicates a positive culture, but the number of studies is still very small," says Ellen Goldring, lead author of the report.

The report recommends additional research on the best ways to leverage the assistant principal role to improve working conditions, culture, and outcomes. All could be key to alleviating stress on teachers and principals and addressing other workforce issues that lead many educators to seek a way out of their current jobs or the entire profession.

### Collaboration Is Key

Collaborative leadership is also associated with lower rates of teacher turnover, the LPI report adds: "To foster collaboration and create a broader sense of ownership, principals often employ leadership teams, interview teams, or site-based management teams to make school-based decisions, with the new teacher's opinion just as important as the person that's been here 25 years."

Castro doesn't have an AP this year due to staffing shortages, but he has what the district calls a school leadership intern—a position that's just shy of AP in terms of accreditation requirements and responsibilities. While he has been happy to spend more time in the classrooms and hallways himself, "It is best for the principal to have an assistant principal," he says. "The AP is in constant communication with principals and teachers; they are a proxy or bridge or liaison."

"Assistant principals are indispensable in school leadership," Webster says. "As an AP, I knew my job was to assist the principal, but I didn't know the benefits and magnitude of [the AP's] impact until I became a building leader. APs provide the extra support needed for all staff to be successful, which helps students be supported and successful in an effective school." ●

*Ian P. Murphy is senior editor of Principal magazine.*

## More Resources for APs



### Equitable Expectations

Making school discipline more equitable requires assistant principals to work from the ground up, says Heather A. Williams, principal of Perritt Primary School in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. As an AP, she worked with teachers to identify implicit biases and their effect on student discipline to establish expectations for children and staff alike. "We all know that fair is not always equal," she says. "However, it is essential for students to understand what we (our school community—teachers, students, families, etc.) expect to ensure that our school is a safe, orderly environment."

Watch for more insights in the February edition of the *APs Rising* e-newsletter!



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