

Retaining Principals to Reduce Teacher Attrition:

How Leaders Can Support Principals to Mitigate the Turnover Cycle



Research is clear that highly effective principals are critical contributors to both [student outcomes and teacher retention](#). But despite some stabilization during the pandemic, both [teacher and principal turnover](#) rates are rising at the district and school levels, especially at high-poverty schools. Our recent original research underscores an [overlooked impact](#) on teachers and students alike: When principals leave their schools, teachers are more likely to leave, as well.

Addressing this turnover cycle and the pervasive teacher shortage means focusing on supporting the principals around the issues that matter most to them: Are the expectations of their role clear? Are their workloads manageable? Are they empowered to execute their work and develop as professionals? When principals get effective support from their district office—including on how to attract and retain highly effective teachers—they're [less likely to leave their schools](#), which can stabilize teacher turnover rates and improve student outcomes and experiences. Stopping the turnover cycle and [building toward transformative change](#) in schools means providing principals with these four key supports.

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1. Role Clarity and Manageable Workloads

Principals are often expected to be everything: instructional leaders, people developers, operations experts, budget specialists, family liaisons, and social-emotional supporters. To fill these many roles, most principals work long, arduous hours—an [average of 60 hours per week](#), according to one study—which can lead to burnout and turnover. To create a more sustainable job and maximize principals’ impact, district leaders can:

- **Clarify the principal role.** District leaders should consider the most important ways principals can spend their time, and then structure responsibilities, supports, and evaluations accordingly. In a district where principals need to focus more on working directly with teachers in classrooms as instructional leaders, for example, district leaders can help manage school operations. In a district where principals need to serve as budget experts, central office leaders can provide financial training and create teacher leadership opportunities for instructional support.
- **Create cohesive leadership teams that share the load.** Principals require resources to organize effective shared leadership teams comprising assistant principals, deans, and instructional coaches of their own choosing. District leaders can support by assigning content, specialty, and grade-level leads to these teams; investing financial resources in establishing these teams; creating compensation structures that align to these roles; and offering professional development opportunities to enable team members to do their best work.

- **Simplify principals' workloads.** District leaders can make workloads more manageable by eliminating or reducing lower-priority tasks (such as purely compliance-related tasks); providing tools and data that they can integrate into their [school planning processes](#); and adjusting timelines to spread tasks throughout the year.

2. Flexibility

Clarifying the principal role involves defining which decisions fall into principals' and central offices' purviews, respectively. When principals aren't able to make the decisions that impact their school's outcomes, they're more likely to feel unsatisfied or leave. As such, it's essential that district leaders:

- **Align on a clear theory of action around principal flexibility.** Principals need some level of flexibility to design schools that meet their students' unique needs. But there is no one-size-fits-all approach to flexibility. The level and type of flexibility depends on a district's particular theory of action, which is influenced by a complex interplay of district culture, leaders' skills, and leaders' capacity.
- **Identify how current systems do and don't align with the broader vision for principal flexibilities.** In some cases, districtwide policies undermine theories of action. A district might provide principals with decision-making authority around talent management decisions, for example, but then require them to follow "last in, first out" and strict teacher placement directives. Principals in these situations are unable to make the best staffing decisions for their schools.
- **Define the budgeting, staffing, and scheduling areas in which principals have flexibility.** These flexibilities may vary based on the school's needs and the principal's skill level and experience.
- **Provide appropriate levels of support and accountability.** Principals need support and training to make strategic decisions in the areas in which they have flexibility, which might require shifting roles, responsibilities, and central office mindsets. District leaders should also create and adjust structures that ensure schools see improvement in instruction and student achievement.

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3. Support Structures

Without [coordinated, consistent, and collaborative support from central office](#), principals can't do their best work. Professional learning opportunities, mentoring, peer networking, [high-quality preparation programs](#), and coaching can all help principals navigate their roles and develop professionally. Principal supervisors—who can provide these types of supports—play a key role in developing principals into strong instructional leaders and resource managers. They serve as the link between principals and central offices, ensuring that principals receive integrated, streamlined support. To assist principal supervisors in developing principals, district leaders need to:

- **Clarify principal supervisors' role and responsibilities.** To be successful, principal supervisors need to spend less time on compliance and administrative tasks and more time [working directly with principals](#) and facilitating school leadership networks.
- **Ensure that principal supervisors can provide deep support to their principals.** For maximum effectiveness, supervisors should oversee no more than 12 principals.¹ In high-need schools, that load would ideally be even lower.
- **Provide principal supervisors with ongoing support,** which helps principal supervisors grow in their role and ensures they're addressing their district's particular needs. Every district leader has a responsibility to help school leaders find, grow, and retain effective teachers, for example—especially in high-need schools that struggle to support rookie teachers. District leaders should focus on providing principal supervisors with the resources they need to improve their principals' [support structures for new instructors](#).

4. Competitive, Differentiated Compensation

Higher salaries are associated with lower principal turnover rates.² While compensation is just one of several factors that influence job satisfaction, competitive compensation can help keep principals in their districts—and differentiated compensation can help keep them in their schools. To address this area, district leaders should:

- **Set principal compensation levels that are competitive with surrounding districts.** Leaders should compare their principal salaries with nearby districts' and conduct exit interviews and hold frequent conversations to understand the extent to which compensation drives turnover.
- **Differentiate principal compensation based on responsibilities and experience.** Leaders can provide financial incentives for working in higher-need schools or create career ladders that offer more experienced principals the opportunity to support newer principals, giving them more options for advancement beyond leaving their district.

With the current rise of teacher turnover across the country, it's easy to overlook the interlocking pieces of the attrition puzzle. But when districts take the time to better understand the relationship between principal and teacher turnover in their schools, they're more equipped to take decisive action to break the turnover cycle. Supporting teachers means supporting principals—and district leaders are well-positioned to do both.

1 This figure was derived from internal ERS research and direct work with principal supervisors in our district network.

2 Multiple studies over the past two decades have proven the relationship between salary increases and principal turnover. These studies include:

- Akiba M., Reichardt R. (2004). What predicts the mobility of elementary school leaders? An analysis of longitudinal data in Colorado. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 12(18). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26387253_What_Predicts_the_Mobility_of_Elementary_School_Leaders_An_Analysis_of_Longitudinal_Data_in_Colorado
- Papa F.Jr. (2007). Why do principals change schools? A multivariate analysis of principal retention. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 6, 267-290.
- Pijanowski J. C., Brady K. P. (2009). The influence of salary in attracting and retaining school leaders. *Education and Urban Society*, 42, 25-41.
- Baker B. D., Punswick E., Belt C. (2010). School leadership stability, principal moves, and departures: Evidence from Missouri. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46, 523-557.