

# What New Teachers Value Most in Principals

Jan Richards

They don't ask for much—just some respect and support.

**I**n a time of high-stress testing and school accountability, doing what you can to ensure that teachers experience

job satisfaction and fulfillment has become imperative. The fact that most teachers are in the 45–55 age group and thinking of retiring, coupled with projected student growth over the next few years suggests that the proportion of new teachers on your faculty may be increasing each year. Teacher loss through retirement or attrition is a very real factor, especially in hard-to-staff schools and in subjects like math, science, and special education.



## IN BRIEF

A survey of new teachers finds that what they value most in principals are: being treated with respect; an open-door policy; integrity; support with parents; and support with students.

can include providing adequate supplies, ensuring strong school discipline, or providing needed professional development. Because the majority of those who leave are teachers in their first five

Much research has been done on the reasons teachers leave their school or their profession. One of the most frequently mentioned reasons is the quality of support they receive from the principal, which

years, I was interested in discovering what type of support teachers in this group valued most in making the decision to stay or leave.

To find out, I first conducted a study of 15 K–8 teachers, all within their first five years of teaching. I asked them the following questions:

- What are some things that make you (or would make you) feel supported as a teacher?
- What is the most important way your principal could support you?
- What kind of support is important to you?

# The Top Ten Principal Behaviors

From their responses, I listed 22 positive principal behaviors which I then used to survey 100 other teachers, also within their first five years of teaching. These teachers were asked to rate each of the behaviors and rank the top three. Both groups of teachers represented a mix of ethnicity, gender, and school socioeconomic levels.

## The Valued Behaviors

Findings from the survey's rating and ranking data suggested that these teachers most admired principals who:

- Respected and honored them as professionals;
- Had an open-door policy;
- Were fair, honest, and trustworthy;
- Supported them in dealing with parents; and
- Supported them in student discipline.

## "I Would Like to Be Treated as a Professional"

All of the teachers interviewed mentioned the importance of feeling respected as professionals. Some offered examples of being listened to, of principals who demonstrated confidence in their judgment, or of principals who held teachers' opinions in high regard. Others spoke of the anxiety and unhappiness that resulted when a principal treated teachers with disrespect or disregard.

One teacher told of feeling respected by her principal when he found some money for teachers to supplement the curriculum. "He gave it to us and said, 'You guys decide,'" she reported, adding, "He gives us a lot of freedom to make our own decisions, and I appreciate that."

A dedicated first-grade teacher in her second year of teaching typified the feeling of all those interviewed when she said, "I would like to be treated as a professional...I'd never do anything to disrespect [the principal] and I would appreciate the same in return."

1. Respects and values teachers as professionals;
2. Has an open-door policy— is accessible, available, willing to listen;
3. Is fair, honest, trustworthy;
4. Supports teachers with parents;
5. Supports teachers in matters of student discipline;
6. Gives praise and acknowledgment for a job well done;
7. Demonstrates warmth and friendliness to teachers and students;
8. Respects differences in teaching styles;
9. Gives teachers opportunities for responsibility and decision-making; and
10. Cares about what makes teachers happy in their jobs.

## "You Don't Have to Make an Appointment"

By far the most prevalent theme among the interviewed teachers was the need for emotional support. Having an open-door policy is one way of demonstrating that support. One of the interviewed teachers spoke glowingly of principals whose doors were always open: "You don't have to make an appointment for the next day. You can walk in if you have a situation. They will support you or help you fix the situation, or send you on the right path."

New teachers need reassurance that they are doing a good job and that they are showing professional growth. A principal's willingness to offer suggestions and encouragement (and sometimes comfort) may be an undervalued commodity.

## "The Staff Trust Her"

According to Thompson (1996), one of the traits principals need to

influence teachers' behavior is *integrity*, which he defines as being fair, honest, and worthy of trust.

Describing how her principal demonstrates integrity, a surveyed teacher noted that the principal was "the glue that keeps the school together" by showing no favoritism, being considerate of all, and making sure that every teacher has what is needed to do a good job. "The staff trust her, knowing that they can come to her and she will treat them as responsible people."

## "He Would Make It a Win-Win Situation"

Surprisingly, the interviewed teachers commented far more on the need for a principal's support with parents than on the need for support in imposing discipline. One described her principal's supportive negotiation skill in dealing with parent-teacher disputes:

*Even if you were wrong, he would make it a win-win situation for you and the parent. He might say, "You might want to rethink this or do this differently," but not with the parents there. You are supported no matter what your decision was.*

## "...She Reads the Riot Act"

All of the interviewed teachers indicated that the principal's level of support for discipline strongly affected their degree of job satisfaction. They need to know with certainty that their efforts to maintain positive classroom behavior are backed up by the administration. Especially in difficult schools, teachers felt supported by principals willing to suspend students for disruptive or dangerous behavior. Conversely, teachers who said the principal did little to punish unmanageable behavior voiced feelings of insecurity and apprehension.

A teacher described how her principal dealt with a student brought into her office for failure to do his homework assignment: "They have a heart-to-heart sitting there and she reads the riot act. And she follows up on it,

too. When she tells him he better have his homework in for her to look at tomorrow morning, she is looking for that homework.”

### Implications for Principals

It is possible that a principal may work long hours as a motivator and team builder, provide opportunities for professional development, have high standards, give teachers opportunities for shared decision-making, give praise and acknowledgment—and still contend with dissatisfied teachers. Since the behaviors described here are crucial to a new teacher’s job satisfaction, perceptive principals would be wise to reflect on the following questions:

- Do I respect and value teachers as professionals? How do I demonstrate that?
- Do I encourage an open-door policy? Am I accessible, available, and willing to listen?

- Do I support teachers in matters of student discipline?
- If a new teacher needs assistance in learning classroom management strategies, what form does my help take?
- Am I fair, honest, and worthy of respect? How do I show those qualities?
- Other than cases of legal or moral violation, do I support teachers with parents—even if the teacher’s judgment could have been better?
- Do I make it a practice to point out what *should* have been done in a teacher-parent conflict in private conversation? □

### References

Thompson, D. P. *Motivating Others: Creating the Conditions*. Princeton, N.J.: Eye on Education, 1996.

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### WEB RESOURCES

The Consortium for Educational Policy Analysis has produced a Policy Brief, “Teacher Turnover: A National Perspective.”  
[www.system.missouri.edu/consortium/PolicyBriefTurnover.pdf](http://www.system.missouri.edu/consortium/PolicyBriefTurnover.pdf)

The Tennessee P-16 Council has made available its 2002 report, “Why Are New Teachers Leaving the Classroom: An Analysis of Teacher Attrition in Tennessee.”  
[www.tntomorrow.org/downloads/Teacher\\_Attrition\\_06-02.pdf](http://www.tntomorrow.org/downloads/Teacher_Attrition_06-02.pdf)

The Connecticut State Department of Education has compiled a bibliography of literature on beginning teachers.  
[www.ctserc.org/library/actualbibs/beginningteachers.pdf](http://www.ctserc.org/library/actualbibs/beginningteachers.pdf)

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