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## Ineffective school leadership: Teachers weigh-in

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## Introduction

There is a common adage that *people don't quit jobs; they quit bosses*. This adage can be said of teachers and principals—teachers do not quit schools, they quit principals. Teachers who demonstrate success in the classroom will often become frustrated with poor campus leaders and seek other opportunities (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The financial cost of replacing and training teachers is expensive while the damage to the school culture and climate often takes years to repair (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teachers have reported leaving their campus due to lack of job satisfaction and/or a lack of administrative support (Shaukat et al., 2019). Factors related to teacher job satisfaction are directly related to school climate and principal support (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). School climate encompasses individual attitudes, behaviors, and group norms that contribute to a safe environment where high-quality relationships are a priority (Polatcan & Cansoy, 2019). Teachers often choose to stay in positive working environments with principals who provide opportunities for teachers to grow professionally, are mindful of teacher workloads, provide balanced autonomy, and have supportive leadership behaviors (Polatcan & Cansoy, 2019). While educational researchers (Ansley et al., 2019; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Olsen & Huang, 2019) have examined the characteristics and practices of effective and supportive campus leaders in regards to teacher retention, we explored the characteristics and practices of *ineffective* principal leadership in regards to teacher retention. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the perceptions of teachers who work in elementary, middle, and high schools in Texas on the qualities of ineffective principals and how these qualities affect teacher retention.

## The Principal Factor

Schools with high numbers of highly qualified teachers positively impact a student's academic success (Podolsky et al., 2016). In fact, a teacher's classroom instruction has been noted as the most influential factor in student achievement (Skourdumbis, 2014; Stronge et al., 2011), but a number of researchers have indicated that the campus principal is also a critical influence in improving student achievement (Branch et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2021). Branch et al. (2013) asserted that “highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount” (p. 63). Grissom et al. (2021) found that principals play a critical role in improving student achievement, and asserted that school districts should invest in improving the performance of the school principal as “the most efficient way to affect student achievement” (p. 40). Moreover, the principal is a critical factor in supporting and developing teachers (Burkhauser, 2017); hiring and retaining quality teachers (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019); and establishing a positive and inclusive learning environment for students (Sorenson et al., 2020). The researchers in these studies highlight that there is a definitive and impactful relationship between the principal being an effective leader and student achievement. This relationship is illustrated through (a) the principal's role in establishing the school's mission for high standards and best instructional practices for all students, (b) supporting teachers through active supervision and professional learning, and (c) monitoring students' academic growth and adherence to state expectations for student performance (Leithwood et al., 2004). Grissom et al. (2021) summarized the importance of the campus principal by stating:

Principals really matter. Indeed, given not just the magnitude but the scope of principal effects, which are felt across a potentially large student body and faculty in a school, it is

difficult to envision an investment with a higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership. (p. 43)

Overall, campus principals are crucial in setting the direction for their schools and ensuring their campuses are vibrant learning communities for their teachers and students. Principals are most influential when they foster a positive learning environment and collaborate with teachers to improve teaching and learning.

### **Principals' Influence on Teacher Retention**

The principal has been cited as a key aspect in teacher retention (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ford et al., 2018; Podolsky et al., 2016), and principals can either decrease or enhance a teacher's willingness to remain in the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Podolsky et al., 2016). Teachers who leave the profession often cite a lack of administrator support (Ford et al., 2018) as a key reason for leaving. Moreover, a principal's leadership behaviors and styles have a significant effect on teachers' intent to remain on a campus (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019).

Teachers' perceptions of their principal's leadership have a strong influence on their job satisfaction and attrition (Ansley et al., 2019). Researchers (Ansley et al., 2019; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Olsen & Huang, 2019) have identified key characteristics and leadership practices of school principals in relation to teacher retention. These leadership practices include genuinely caring and supporting the teacher; expressing appreciation and acknowledgement of a teacher's success, promoting work-life balance and self-care, offering opportunities for leadership and collaboration, and helping to foster a teacher's professional identity.

### **Effective vs. Ineffective School Leadership**

We frame this study using the literature on effective and ineffective school leadership in our findings and in our discussion. The literature concerning effective school principals describes skills, traits, behaviors, and responsibilities that effective principals should possess. Researchers (Hayet et al., 2016; McEwan, 2003; McKinney et al., 2015; Sanzo et al., 2011) have studied and identified these skills, traits, and behaviors of effective principals. McEwan (2003) identified ten traits of highly effective principals, which include:

1. *The Communicator*: an effective principal is a genuine person who has the capacity to listen empathize, interact, and connect with stakeholders;
2. *The Educator*: an effective principal is an instructional leader with a deep knowledge of the principles of teaching and learning.
3. *The Envisioned*: an effective principal is motivated by their purpose and is focused on a compelling vision for the school.
4. *The Facilitator*: an effective principal has outstanding human relations skills and is able to form meaningful relationships with stakeholders.
5. *The Change Master*: an effective principal is flexible and realistic who can initiate and manage change.
6. *The Culture Builder*: an effective principal is one who builds a strong culture and models the way for stakeholders.
7. *The Activator*: an effective principal displays drive, motivation, enthusiasm and humor.

8. *The Producer*: an effective principal is a results-oriented leader with a strong sense of accountability to stakeholders.
9. *The Character Builder*: an effective principal is a role model who demonstrates strong values and is an ethical leader.
10. *The Contributor*: an effective principal is a servant-leader who wants others to be successful. (pp. 174-175)

Similarly, Sanzo et al. (2011) found that effective school principals share leadership with their teachers; facilitate meaningful and relevant professional development; lead with an instructional orientation; and act openly and honestly. McKinney et al. (2015) also found that there is a correlation between “teacher morale and a principal modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart” (p. 152). Hayet et al. (2016) surmised that principals who exhibit leadership behaviors of *change agent*, *vision creator*, and *supporter of teaching and learning strategies* were able to develop and sustain a positive and effective learning environment. Although these researchers have identified varied traits, skills, and behaviors of effective principals, they all agree that principals are a critical component in leading effective schools, and a principal’s leadership traits, skills, and behaviors matter.

### **Ineffective Leadership**

In an op-ed for *Education Week*, DeWitt (2017) offered traits for highly ineffective leaders. DeWitt compared effective leadership to Covey’s seven habits of highly effective people and asserted that “just like there are habits of highly successful leaders, there are habits that can bring leaders to a place of ineffectiveness” (n.p.). The habits he listed for ineffective leadership include: a) being reactive instead of proactive; b) having no end in mind with no clear set vision or goals; c) putting your ego first instead of the needs of your employees; d) having a “my way or the highway” mentality instead of being collaborative; and e) promoting discord instead of consensus; and f) being a killer of efficacy instead of building collective efficacy.

Other opinions of bad leadership come from the business world. Kellerman (2004) argued that bad leadership falls into two categories: ineffective and unethical. She asserted that these two categories can be segmented into seven groups:

1. *Incompetent leadership*: the leader lacks the will and/or skill to sustain action.
2. *Rigid Leadership*: the leader is rigid or unyielding.
3. *Intemperate leadership*: leader lacks self-control or the ability to self-correct.
4. *Callous leadership*: the leader is uncaring or unkind.
5. *Corrupt leadership*: the leader is willing to lie, cheat, or steal.
6. *Insular leadership*: the leader minimizes the welfare of people in the organization.
7. *Evil leadership*: the leader inflicts physical or psychological pain on others. (pp. 40-46)

In lieu of ineffective or bad leadership, Gini and Green (2013) used the term *misleader* and argued that misleaders are leaders who intentionally or unintentionally cause harm to their followers or organization because they are unethical and lack moral virtues.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the perceptions of teachers who work in elementary, middle, and high schools in Texas on the qualities of ineffective principals and how these qualities affect teacher retention. In 2021, Texas had a teacher attrition rate of 9.4%, which is slightly lower than the national rate of 16% (TEA, 2022). This attrition rate accounts for all teachers who left the teaching profession, but it does not account for teachers who left a school campus for a different school campus.

Utilizing an open-ended qualitative questionnaire, we surveyed campus-level teachers who work in Texas school districts to understand if these teachers had left previous schools because of poor campus leadership. The open-ended survey was anonymous and no identifying information was collected on the teacher's current campus or grade level. This anonymity was necessary to protect the identity of the participants in the study and to encourage participation as some teachers may have felt reluctant to submit responses. We partnered with an area teacher professional development organization in Texas to access their membership database. The organization sent a series of emails to teachers, who are members of their organization, asking them to complete the questionnaire. The email described the purpose of the study and provided a link to the open-ended survey. Participants accessed the online survey and were asked questions that related to the individual teacher's past experiences with campus leaders that they felt were ineffective leaders based on their own personal perception. Teachers answered the survey questions by providing personal experiences and anecdotal narratives through open-ended questions.

In the survey, we asked teachers to self-report if they had ever left a school because of ineffective principal leadership. If the individual reported that they had never left a school due to a self-perceived ineffective principal, then the survey ended. If teacher reported that they had left a school due to an ineffective principal, the survey continued and asked the participants to respond to four open-ended questions:

- 1) What are the three most important areas you feel that principals should be spending most of their professional time?
- 2) Thinking about the principal that you left, what three areas do you feel they performed poorly?
- 3) Thinking about your current principal, what are three traits or areas you feel they do well?
- 4) Thinking about the principal that you left, please provide specific areas or incidents you feel were particularly unprofessional.

The survey was sent to 4,967 teachers across Texas in all areas of K-12 and charter schools, and we received 532 responses for a response rate of 10.71%. Even with lower response rates, data from open-ended questions can provide rich information (Krosnick, 1999), and we found that participants' answers on the open-ended questions provided rich data for content analysis.

The data were analyzed by reading and coding the participants' open-ended survey responses. We analyzed the open-ended responses to the four research questions using an open coding process whereby each sentence in the survey was reviewed and assigned a meaning relative to the research question (Maxwell, 2013). Each researcher coded the initial data independently before meeting to discuss and analyze codes collaboratively. Once we agreed upon similar codes we then assessed the relationships between the codes or clusters of codes looking for larger patterns that we developed into themes (Shank, 2002). We established

trustworthiness by collecting over 532 open-ended surveys from different teachers across Texas to gather multiple perspectives. We also individually coded the data and then jointly discussed and negotiated common codes to develop into themes. We also used the exact words of the respondents in the findings.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The open-ended survey was sent to members of a Texas teacher organization. The responses were anonymous, and we have no specific context for the respondents other than they worked in Texas. The study is limited by the complete anonymity of the respondents and not knowing their background, experience, or context. We also relied on the respondents to be truthful in their responses based on their experiences and encounters with past principals, and the study is limited to the responses of those who participated in the study.

### **Findings**

We present and discuss five key themes relevant to ineffective principal leadership: a) *Lack of Professionalism and Ethics*; b) *Limited Leadership Skills*; c) *Lack of Teacher and Student Advocacy*; d) *Limited Listening and Communication Skills*; and e) *Poor School Culture and Climate*.

#### ***Lack of Professionalism and Ethics***

Participants in the survey (n=199) were clear on the importance of having a school leader who possessed strong character, acted professionally in their duties, and made ethical decisions. Many respondents (n= 122) emphasized leadership traits such as “being a team leader,” “letting teachers teach,” “recognizing the professional qualities of the staff and faculty,” and “genuinely caring for them as a person” as qualities they valued in their current principal. Teachers in the study offered appreciation for not being “micro-managed” and being “treated as equals.” Some respondents (n=111) also appreciated how their current principals “took an interest in their current wellbeing and family life” and discussed the importance of servant leadership. Participants expressed that effective principals “lead by example.” One respondent noted, “She runs a tight ship and will follow through with anything she says. She also will not ask others to do anything that she herself is not willing to do.

However, a number of respondents cited reasons for leaving an ineffective principal. The respondents (n=122) indicated that they left a previous school due to a campus principal, who exhibited poor character traits. Examples these respondents gave included: “disrespect” and/or a “negative personality” “unprofessional dress,” “inappropriate staff and faculty relationships,” and “negative interactions with parents, faculty, or community members”.

One participant noted,

[My principal] was inconsistent with staff and students, her relationship with most of the teachers was adversarial. Teachers would stick their heads out the door to see if she was in the hall before they would dart to the restrooms to avoid her.

Another respondent commented,

The principal I left only listened to parents’ opinions of the teachers without fact checking, without supporting the teachers, without talking to the teacher. She also acted as if problems did not exist and did not help alleviate stress on teachers. She was very much into gossiping and making the school look as if it were perfect but didn’t actually

do the work that could help improve the school or build trusting relationships with teachers and staff members.

Other respondents also reported a concern for their former principal's lack of ethics as a school leader. Participants noted that principals would engage in lying, playing politics, and hiding in their office to avoid conflicts. Some of respondents (n=101) reported that they believed their former principal was simply "putting on a show" as a school leader and lacked the skills needed to be an effective principal.

One respondent commented,

My former principal was grossly unprofessional. Most of us ate in our rooms just to avoid her. After that, she made eating in the teacher's lounge mandatory. She is the only principal I ever unloaded on in 25 years after she flat out lied about me and accused me of something I didn't do.

Based on the data, the teachers surveyed valued a professional and ethical principal and look for those traits in their current principals. Teachers want a principal with a strong moral character, who is empathetic, professional, and ethical.

### ***Limited Leadership Skills***

Leadership skills are a significant contributor to campus effectiveness. Teachers reported the importance of having a principal with strong leadership skills (n=64). The data from research question three revealed the leadership qualities that respondents valued. These traits included building relationships with students and staff, holding teachers accountable, and thinking outside of the box.

One respondent noted,

"[The principal] acknowledges teacher's growth areas while acknowledging our growth areas too. She gives very detailed feedback on what we can improve on."

Another respondent stated,

I love my current principal. She never treats us like we are under her. She lets us teach our classes and recognized that we are experts in our content areas. She has never been afraid to go to the mat for our kids. She tells Central Office how it is, and [they] aren't sure how to handle her.

The majority of respondents (n=521) asserted that leadership and management skills were essential for school leaders, and some respondents (n=85) stated they wanted their principal to spend more time on building relationships with staff members. However, several teachers reported in the survey that former principals they had worked for lacked essential skills for school leadership including "poor campus visibility" (on campus as well as off campus), "poor hiring practices and judgement," "lack of relationship building skills," and "the inability to build trust with parents, teachers, students, or the school community."

Visibility was important to the respondents. Some of respondents (n=75) wanted to see their campus leaders "more present in hallways and classrooms," and other respondents (n=176) suggested that "principals spend more time away from campus or in meetings." One respondent noted, "One principal I left never did anything but let their assistant principals (APs) do everything and then couldn't see when an AP was being manipulative and bullying the teachers."

Respondents provided several examples of wanting principals to be “more visible,” “spend more time with faculty and staff,” or “address problems with an open-door policy.”

The principal’s hiring practices were also mentioned by respondents as problematic. Teachers reported that some ineffective principals were unable to hire qualified personnel for the school or struggled to manage poor or ineffective teachers on campus. Some teachers (n=80) responded that their former principals “struggled to hire effective teachers or staff members” or “hired friends or family for open positions and failed to manage these individuals appropriately.” One respondent noted, “In her [the principal] first year at my high school, she was hell bent on destroying successful programs by hiring her friends and family members who were terribly unqualified.” Another participant respondent, “A former principal of mine would hire unqualified teachers, fail to mentor them, and then blame them for their lack of success.”

Respondents also felt that having a relationship with their campus principal was a priority. However, many teachers cited examples of “poor relationship building,” “lack of teamwork,” “lack of trust,” or an “antiquated approach to leading” as reasons why they left schools with ineffective principals.

One respondent noted,

“My former principal was incapable of interacting with his teachers. He stayed in his office and spent his time trying to further his career.”

Another respondent commented,

“He could not build authentic, trusting relationships with individuals at the school across all levels (teachers, students, parents, staff members, on-campus leaders).”

Based on the data, respondents place a high value on the importance of highly trained and skilled principal with solid management and leadership skills.

### ***Lack of Teacher and Student Advocacy***

Teachers reported in the survey the importance of having a principal who understands the importance of supporting and advocating for teachers and students (n=39). Teachers reported the need for a principal who values and supports teachers, connects with students, advocates for student programs, and who cares about students and parents.

One respondent noted,

“My current principal is really good at supporting all faculty. He is polite to everyone, provides us with an opportunity to reflect and grow and has a positive attitude. I know he will support our work and our students.”

Another respondent noted,

“My principal supports teachers and trusts what they report [back to the principal] is happening. He has a respect for our profession. He is always available to hear problems and shows us appreciation.”

The data also supports that teachers left principals who did not advocate or support them or their students. Some respondents (n= 85) cited “a lack of teacher or student advocacy” as a reason for leaving an ineffective principal. Among the ineffective traits that teacher cited in the



study included micromanagement, teacher support/professional development, and inattention to student needs.

Micromanagement by their principal was a key concern of respondents, Teachers indicated in the survey wanting to be “left alone to their jobs” or feeling a “constant pressure of being micromanaged.”

One respondent noted,

“My principal would nit-pick and look for ways to catch me doing something wrong. She was always trying to make my work-life more difficult out of passive aggression rather than sitting down and finding a constructive way for us to communicate and work together.”

Another respondent commented,

“She micromanaged everyone. No one could breathe around her. I am just here to do a great job for students, and she wanted to meddle in everything we were trying to accomplish. It was just too much.”

Another different respondent also commented,

“Micromanaged things to the point where it was difficult to even get basic supplies. He rewarded and favored staff who complied with this mismanagement. He was disrespectful of teacher time including holding 2-hour faculty meetings once a week whether they were needed or not.”

Another respondent noted,

“I honestly can’t think of a single thing she does well. She is an angry, bitter micro-manager that talks down to teachers all the time. But she is connected, so she keeps her job.” And lastly, another respondent stated, “He is way too busy climbing the political ladder to trust teachers as the professionals they are.”

Teacher and student advocacy and support were also essential data points in the survey. Survey respondents valued the advocacy of school principals, but many teachers (n=90) in the survey responded they had left a campus principal because of a lack of teacher or student advocacy.

One respondent noted,

“She [the principal] did not seem to care about the overwhelming number of students per teacher and how that can affect a teacher’s own life.”

Another participant commented,

“She rarely supported teachers with anything. When she arrived on campus, she told us that if there was a parent/teacher issue, she would always support the parent. Also, she would target certain teachers and allow her friends to do anything!”

Other participants commented that their principal “didn’t seem to care or support any of us unless we were passing the standardized tests” or “would not provide any support or

professional development for struggling teachers.” The data indicates the importance of having a campus leader who supports teachers and students.

### ***Limited Listening and Communication Skills***

Respondents in the survey cited listening and communication skills as essential functions of a campus principal. Teachers (n=36) in the survey valued active listening and communication skills as important leadership traits in their current principal. Respondents to the questionnaire value a “two-way street of communications,” “want to feel that their voice is being heard,” and “want to be part of the decision-making process.” Survey respondents deemed these traits as important and effective for their current principals.

One respondent noted,

“My principal is very transparent with the leadership team. He will also talk with me about my classroom needs and my personal and professional life.” Another respondent noted, “I have a principal who considers the feedback from all stakeholders and attempt to find solutions to problems. She promotes the involvement of students and staff in decisions. Everyone feels valued.”

However, respondents also explained that some of them (n= 74) left a campus principal due to a lack of listening or communication skills. The traits cited by respondents in the survey include “ineffective or non-existent coaching and feedback,” “a lack of follow through in daily duties,” and “negative teacher and parent interaction.”

One respondent noted in the survey:

“Communication. My former principal had no idea how to converse with our school faculty or staff members. It was an ordeal to try to make ‘small talk’ with our principal. I have worked in education for over 30 years and never experienced that before with an administrator. I have had better conversations with third graders.”

Another participant stated,

“She has little to no ability to communicate effectively with assistant principals, staff, faculty, and parents. She has unrealistic expectations and unreasonable amounts of pressure on teachers.”

Other respondents noted communication was inconsistent, only via email, or non-existent. Some respondents also noted that administrators “hid behind their emails,” “could not carry a conversation or a training without losing a train of thought,” and “were forgetful”. The data support the importance of having a principal who understands good communication and ineffective principals lack effective listening and communication skills. Teachers want a principal with strong listening, presentation, and communication skills for their school.

### ***Poor School Culture and Climate***

The climate and culture of the school environment was important for respondents in the survey. Some of the teachers in the survey (n=14) reported that their current principal excels at building a quality culture and climate on question three. One respondent noted about their current principal, “She’s very intent on establishing a campus culture where students look

forward to coming to school. She allows time for fun at school.” Another respondent noted, “My principal has great relationships with staff and tries to promote a lot of positivity around campus. He also works to foster a supportive environment for parents and students.

However, many of the respondents (n=96) cited issues with culture and climate as a reason for leaving a school and an ineffective principal. The concerns cited by respondents in the survey include “poor campus morale,” “school safety issues,” “a lack of a clear and compelling mission and vision for the school,” and an overall “lack of encouragement from the principal.”

One respondent noted,

“Made me feel undervalued or underappreciated. I do this because I love it, but I also need to hear “good job” every once and a while at the end of the day. When those are neglected, over and over, and over; teachers begin looking for positions in other schools.”

Another respondent stated,

“Our principal seemed to work hard at creating a hostile working environment which leads to a culture of distrust and unprofessionalism.” The respondents were disenfranchised with principals who did not focus on building a positive learning and working climate for teachers and students.”

Respondents in the survey also noted a lack of support on issues related to discipline. Many teachers (n=96) noted that students were “disrespectful to teachers and the campus leader did little to change the behavior of the students or support the teacher in the discipline.” Respondents wanted their principals to spend more time on discipline issues at the school.

One respondent noted,

[My former principal was] “afraid of students. She didn’t have the guts to stand up to students and discipline them when they needed it.”

Another noted,

“My principal was weak when it comes to student discipline. I rarely sent a kid to the office, but when I did, nothing happened to correct the student’s behavior. The behavior in the halls and cafeteria was also bad. There was no discipline in the school.”

From the data, we surmised that effective principals focus on developing a positive learning culture for teachers and students, but ineffective principals pay little to no attention to positive culture-building.

### **Discussion**

The job and expectations of a school principal are time-consuming and demanding (Leithwood et al., 2004), and the principal role is significant in improving student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021) as well as in teacher retention (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ford et al., 2018; Podolsky et al., 2016). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) found that a campus principal can either decrease or enhance a teacher's willingness to remain in the profession, and teachers often cite a lack of administrator support (Ford et al., 2018) as a key reason for leaving. We undertook this study to understand teachers’ perceptions of effective and ineffective principals to explore why teachers leave ineffective principals. Although the

experiences of the teachers in this study are varied and are clearly subjective, there were over 500 teachers who reported leaving a school because of an ineffective principal.

As in every profession, there are highly effective school leaders and there are ineffective school leaders. Teachers discussed ineffective traits and the effective traits they wanted to see in school principals. Building relationships was the most common trait that teachers reported wanting to see more from their principals. While building relationships emerged as a clear front runner in the coding of the themes, and all other reported traits were varied and grouped into emergent themes, it is clear to the researchers that teachers know how they want their campus principal to lead. Essentially, teachers wanted principals who cared about them, valued character, and could build positive relationships with stakeholders. The teachers in this study have a clear understanding of traits and skills lacking in their former principals and were willing to leave the school and possibly the district due to the school leader's discrepancies.

Many of the respondents in the survey found that their principal lacked character, professionalism, and ethics; exhibited poor leadership and management skills; did not practice active listening nor could they effectively communicate with others; and lacked the capacity to develop and sustain a positive learning climate. We presented five themes related to teachers' perceptions of ineffective principal leadership: a) Lack of Professionalism and Ethics; b) Limited Leadership Skills; c) Lack of Teacher and Student Advocacy; d) Limited Listening and Communication Skills; and e) Poor School Culture and Climate. From these five themes, we discussed our analysis of the data through the characteristics of effective principals that appear to matter most to the teachers in this study.

### ***Character Matters***

The teachers in the study placed a strong emphasis on the principal's character and emphasized that principals should be both ethical and professional. Teachers expressed wanting a principal with a strong moral character, who is empathetic and supportive of school stakeholders in a way that does not appear self-serving. One of the ten traits that McEwan (2003) listed for highly effective principals is *the character builder*: a principal who is a role model and demonstrates strong values and is an ethical leader. Character is a facet of the nature of an individual, and character development is the "psychological processes that bring about the growth of character" (Berkowitz, 2021, p. 17). Often, perceptions of an individual's character are influenced by the inconsistency between a person's *espoused* character traits and the person's actions (Berkowitz, 2021). For example, principals may state that they value shared leadership, but their actions suggest a more authoritative leadership style. The respondents in this study discussed ineffective principals as being those who are disrespectful and unethical, which are characteristics that are not congruent with being a role model and possessing strong ethical principles. In contrast, in order to be perceived as an effective school leader, principals should be cognizant of their words and actions and ensure congruency between them.

### ***Enhance Relationships to Support Teachers and Students***

The teacher respondents in the survey asserted that leadership and management skills were essential for school leaders, and they equated effective leadership to the principal building positive relationships with faculty and being visible on campus. Teachers also reported their desire for a principal who values and supports teachers, connects with students, advocates for student programs, and cares about students and parents. McEwan (2003) stated that effective principals serve as *a facilitator*: a principal who is outstanding in human relations skills and is

able to form meaningful relationships with stakeholders. The data clearly indicate that teachers want a principal who builds a positive relationship with them and students. Relationships are nurtured through compassion and care (Gini & Green, 2013). Effective leaders are able to connect with the needs of their stakeholders and demonstrate empathy, compassion, and care. Through these connections, strong relationships are nurtured and sustained (Gini & Green, 2013). Principals can develop positive relationships with their stakeholders by getting to know them, being visible in the hallways, having an open-door policy, and demonstrating genuine care.

### ***Practice Active Listening and Effective Communication***

Respondents in the study cited listening and communication skills as essential functions of a campus principal. The data support that teachers value active listening and effective communication skills as important leadership traits in school principals. McEwan (2003) described *the communicator* trait in terms of school leadership as a principal who is a genuine person and has the capacity to listen empathize, interact, and connect with others. Communication skills are the foundation of human relations and are vital to the success of an organization (Lussier, 2019). Effective principals understand that communication is a two-way process that involves both listening and messaging. Principals who practice active listening pay attention to the person who is talking, limit distractions, take notes, ask clarifying questions, and paraphrase what the speaker is saying to check for understanding (Lussier, 2019). Likewise, effective principals are open and honest with their messaging by being timely and transparent with their messages and asking for feedback (Lussier, 2019). Principals can also improve communication with stakeholders by paying attention to their nonverbal communication such as smiling, remaining calm, and being open with their body language. Effective principals model positive interactions with stakeholders and communicate appreciation and praise to stakeholders (Casas, 2017).

### **Focus on Culture and Climate**

The teachers in the study asserted that effective principals focus on developing a positive learning culture for teachers and students. McEwan (2003) listed *the culture builder* as an effective trait and explained the culture builder as a principal who builds a strong culture and models the way for stakeholders. Effective principals understand that “a school’s culture has more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president of the country, the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal, teachers, and parents can ever have” (Barth, 2002, n.p.). Culture and climate must be nurtured and monitored for improvement and sustainability. Effective principals systematically examine the school’s culture and work to transform it into one that is hospitable to sustain human learning (Barth, 2002). Casas (2017) offers recommendations for school leaders to follow to improve school culture: a) model the behaviors desired in the school; b) cherish relationships; c) share the positive work that is being done; d) focus on serving and fulfilling the needs of others; d) foster pride in the building and campus; e) do not allow weak behavior to go unchecked; f) take time to think before you act but follow-through; g) create a learning organization by investing in your faculty; h) inspire people and champion innovation. By paying attention to the culture and climate of the campus, principals will ensure that teachers feel respected, heard, and appreciated.

### **Conclusion**

The traits of ineffective principals serve as cautionary examples for school districts to consider when planning, training, and developing their principal pipeline. Through this study, teachers self-reported several defining perceived traits that have emerged into themes showing

the ineffective skills of a school principal. Teachers cited concerns with leadership skills, listening and communication skills, issues with character and professionalism, a lack of teacher and student support, and a negative culture and climate as primary reasons why teachers left schools. Principals are critical factors when it comes to school improvement, and teachers' perceptions of their principal's leadership have a strong influence on their job satisfaction and retention. Through this study we offer insight into why teachers quit principals by exploring teachers' perceptions of ineffective leadership. Teachers know what they want from a campus leader: a principal who is of good character and who nurtures relationships with teachers through positive and effective communication, climate, and support.

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