Ineffective Campus Leadership: Why Teachers Leave Bad Principals

Jerry R. Burkett, Assistant Professor, University of North Texas at Dallas, US

ABSTRACT

Effective school leaders are essential to the success of the school environment. Preparation programs teach principals traits and skills that define what research has determined to be effective school leadership. However, either by attrition or through a lack of personal awareness, some principals may lose or under-develop these essential traits and then knowingly or unknowingly employ ineffective leadership skills and create dysfunction. Teachers have left schools due to poor and ineffective campus leadership but often do not report the reasons why they left or do not have a safety mechanism in place to support their claims and drive campus change. The purpose of this exploratory research was to survey teachers who have left school with poor campus leadership and determine the traits that define ineffective principal leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Principal leadership is second only to teacher competency when determining the effectiveness of a school (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anders, and Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005). Educational leadership programs are built on national and state standards related to principal leadership and competency. However, while principal preparation programs have focused intently on instructional leadership, it is not uncommon for teachers to report a lack of soft skills in current campus leaders. Whether it is leadership skills in collaboration, team building, or conflict management, there is anecdotal evidence that teachers have left schools because principals lack experience or competency in these areas. While these concepts are commonly covered in graduate programs, principals seemingly develop traits during their tenure as campus leaders that are often negative, do not support the growth of their faculty, and ultimately lead to good teachers leaving bad principals.

Certainly, the body of literature is robust with numerous authors and researchers who have confirmed for the educational leadership community aspects, traits, and frameworks for effective and successful principals. These seminal studies are the foundational principles of educational leadership programs across the country. While these "good" or effective traits or characteristics are rooted in research and part of the training protocol and competencies for certification, we also know that not every campus leader embodies these traits with fidelity and aptitude.

Campus principals are vital in setting the direction for a successful school (Tucker and Codding, 2002; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, 2005). The body of knowledge has been clear in its aim to provide a pathway for practitioners for continuous improvement in the leadership process (Stronge, Richard, and Catano, 2008). Once effective processes have been identified, they can be replicated, ensuring that more schools become vibrant learning communities under the direction of effective leaders (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, 2005).

However, whether school districts lack the resources for training their school principals on known continuous improvement models or perhaps because principals become complacent and comfortable in their leadership roles, teachers who demonstrate success in the classroom become frustrated with poor campus leaders and seek other opportunities. The financial cost of replacing and training teachers is expensive. The damage to the school culture and climate, too, often takes years to repair. While standardized test scores may demonstrate the "effectiveness" of the campus leader to produce an acceptable accountability rating, the damage to teachers, students, and the school community is often overlooked and immeasurable.

While educational leadership researchers have thoroughly examined the characteristics of effective campus leaders, this study will explore the characteristics of ineffective school leaders or the traits of "bad" or "poor" principal leadership. Researchers cannot assume that there is a reciprocal effect between effective and ineffective campus leadership. If anything, the traits of ineffective principals serve as cautionary examples for school districts to consider when planning training and developing their principal pipeline.

These traits have been developed from a framework of data analysis from campus-level teachers who work in Texas school districts and have experienced ineffective or "bad" principals during their careers, causing them to leave their school and seek other employment opportunities (a concept we refer to as "escapism"). The insight of these teachers has been developed through intentional coding and analysis to better understand the negative traits that cause teachers to leave schools and ineffective principals.

The chapter will be a training guide for educational leadership programs to help principal candidates and for school districts to support current principals by identifying the ineffective traits that principals develop, which can prompt teachers to seek other employment opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, we surveyed campus-level teachers who work in Texas school districts to understand if these teachers have left schools because of poor campus leadership. To discover the traits that cause teachers to leave schools, the principal is often a key indicator in why teachers leave schools. This study aims to determine the traits that embody a poor campus leader that has led to teachers leaving escape their school.

We partnered with a local teacher professional development organization to access their membership database. The organization sent a series of emails to teachers who are members of their organization. The email described the purpose of the study and provided a link to the survey. Participants accessed the online survey and were asked a variety of questions related to the teacher's past experiences with ineffective campus leaders. Teachers provided data based upon these experiences through analysis of competencies, anecdotal experiences, and survey questions focused on principal leadership traits.

The purpose of this exploratory research study was to survey current teachers who work in elementary, middle, and high schools on their perceptions of the qualities of effective and ineffective principals. Teachers were given a list of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and asked to rank these traits from most effective to least effective.

This was offered to provide data on the areas of professional leadership that are most important to campus teachers. After the teachers ranked the PSEL competencies, the survey asked for teachers to self-report if the individual has 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, the survey ended. If teachers reported that they had left a school due to an ineffective principal, the survey continued and asked the participants four key questions:

- What are the three most important areas you feel that principals should be spending most of their professional time?
- Thinking about the principal that you left, what three areas do you feel they performed poorly in?
- Thinking about your current principal, what are three traits or areas you feel they do well?

- Thinking about the principal that you left, please provide specific areas, or incidents you feel were particularly unprofessional.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed by reading and coding the participant survey responses. The analysis consisted of open coding, a process whereby each sentence in the transcript was reviewed and assigned a meaning relative to the research question (Maxwell, 2013). Relationships between codes or clusters of codes suggested more significant themes (Shank, 2002) that are presented below.

The coding of the survey responses revealed five key themes relevant to ineffective principal leadership. The emergent themes include a Lack of Professionalism and Ethics, Limited Leadership Skills, Lack of Teacher and Student Advocacy, Limited Listening and Communication Skills, and a Poor School Culture and Climate.

Lack of Professionalism or Ethics

Participants in the survey were clear on the importance of having a school leader who acted professionally in their duties and made ethical decisions. More than 23% of respondents left a school due to an unprofessional school administrator citing disrespect, unprofessional dress, and a

negative personality as reasons for their departure. Other key professionalism traits included professional dress, inappropriate staff, and faculty relationships, and negative interactions with parents, faculty, or community members. One participant noted,

> "She 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. Most of us just ate in our rooms to avoid her."

Another respondent,

> "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 survey respondents also reported 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. More than 19% of respondents 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. More important for school districts that are developing school leaders is addressing the concern presented by teachers about principals who regularly engage in lying, politics, cheating, or stealing. While few examples of these ethical concerns were evident in the coding, the presentation of this data should be a concern for any school district and presents a need to investigate the perceived wrongdoings.

The data from the survey indicates the need for continued training for campus principals on professionalism and ethics. When survey respondents were asked to think about the principal they left and cite one thing they did poorly, 50 out of 218 respondents cited a lack of professionalism or disrespect as primary reasons for their departure.

Limited Leadership Skills
Leadership skills are a significant contributor to campus effectiveness. Principal preparation programs dedicate a significant curricular focus on leadership skills development for aspiring administrators. Among the most critical traits for school principals to learn and employ are strong leadership skills. Survey respondents agreed at a rate of 96.67% that leadership/management skills

were essential for school leaders while 16.23% of survey respondents stated they wanted their principal to spend more time 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 (when on campus as well as off-campus), employed poor hiring practices and judgement, lacked relationship-building skills and did not work to build trust with parents, teachers, students, or the school community.

Visibility was a significant outlier in this data set. More than 13.64% of respondents wanted to see their campus leaders more present in hallways and classrooms. 32.47% of teachers surveyed suggested that principals spend more time out of their office (8.44%) and in meetings (24.03%). On the topic of visibility, 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."

> Question 18 of the survey gives the statement, *"I wish my principal would spend more time*

doing _____ and less time doing ____." 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."

Hiring practices were a surprising data point in the survey. Teachers reported in the survey that some ineffective principals could not hire good personnel for the school or struggled to manage poor or ineffective teachers on campus. Roughly 15% of teachers 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.

Building relationships and trust are critical in school leadership. Respondents in this research felt that having a relationship with their campus principal was a priority (55.56%). However, many teachers cited examples of poor relationship building (6.88%), lack of teamwork (0.92%), trust (2.75%), or an antiquated approach to leading (0.46%) 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,

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

Lack of Teacher and/or Student Advocacy

Teachers are professionals, meaning they are degreed, certified, and highly trained to do their assigned job. Teachers who responded to the survey cited a lack of teacher or student advocacy as a reason for leaving an ineffective principal. Among the traits that were cited in the study included micromanagement (5.50%), teacher support/professional development (14.68%), and inattention to student needs (2.29%).

Survey respondents cited micromanagement in the coded text and the valued leadership traits selection (5.50%). Teachers indicate in the survey wanting to be "left alone to their jobs" or feeling a "constant pressure of being micromanaged." One survey responded noted,

> "My principal would nitpick 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,

> "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 respondent,

> "Micromanaged things to the point where it was difficult even to 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,

> "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 at 16.22%, while 16.97% of teachers in the survey responded that they had left a campus principal because of a lack of teacher or student advocacy. Teacher and student advocacy included professional development opportunities (14.68%). Several respondents noted,

> "She did not seem to care about the overwhelming number of students per teacher and how that can affect a teacher's own life."

> "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!"

> "Didn't seem to care or support any of us unless we were passing the standardized tests."

> "They will not provide any support or professional development for struggling teachers."

For student advocacy, teachers reported that ineffective principals would often fail to "advocate for the inclusion of special needs children" or "eliminated an essential program for advanced academics just to prove a point." The survey also noted the importance of having a campus leader who supported students (2.29%). In addition, 4.55% of survey respondents wanted their principals to spend more time on student engagement.

Limited Listening or Communication Skills

Respondents in the survey cited Listening, and Communication as essential functions of a campus leader (21.62%), and 13.76% of teachers reported leaving 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 (1.38%). Respondents 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."

> "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 that communication was inconsistent, only via email or non-existent. Some teachers noted that administrators hid behind their emails, could not carry a conversation or training without losing a train of thought, and were forgetful.

Poor School Culture and Climate

The climate and culture of the school environment was an important data point for respondents in the survey. 17.63% of respondents cited issues with culture and climate as a reason for leaving a school and ineffective principal. The traits cited by respondents in the survey include poor campus morale (15.07%), school safety issues (20.55%), lacking a mission and vision for the school (13.70%), and a lack of encouragement (17.81%). One responded noted,

> "Made me feel undervalued or underappreciated. I do this because I love it, but I also need to hear "good job" every once in 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,

> "Our principal seemed to work hard at creating a hostile working environment which leads to a culture of distrust and unprofessionalism."

> Respondents in the survey also noted a lack of support on issues related to discipline.

Several teachers 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. 8.44% of respondents wanted their principals to spend more time on discipline issues at the school.

DISCUSSION

The job and expectations of a school principal are varied and are clearly subjective. There was not a firm majority in the survey on effective traits for the principal role. Building relationships was the most common trait that teachers reported wanting to see more from their principals or citing as a leadership trait that their current principal is very good at doing in their work. 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 researcher that teachers know how they want their campus principal to lead. They also have a clear understanding of the functions that are lacking in the skills of the campus leader and are willing to leave the school and possibly the district due to the school leader's discrepancies.

Principals should learn to improve these skills or at least conduct self-evaluations of their leadership skills to determine if there are areas of concern to address. If teachers are empowered to share their thoughts openly without fear of retaliation, they may share their concerns to improve

the school environment. Otherwise, school districts are running a risk of losing high-quality teachers because of leadership issues within their principal pipeline that could be easily addressed.
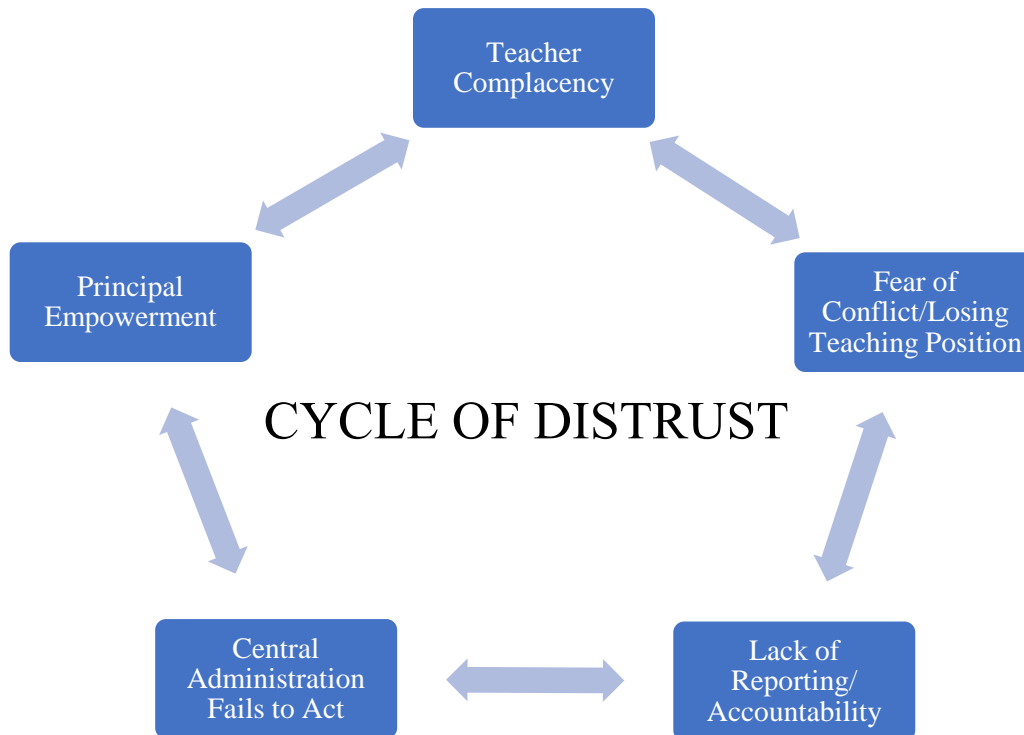
School districts should evaluate their principals on a regular basis to determine if their principals are leading effectively. Human resources departments should conduct exit surveys of their teachers to determine patterns of teacher exodus from schools. Districts should also encourage open and honest communication of campus issues without teaching being afraid of retaliation or losing their jobs. What is most concerning from the data set is the numbers of teachers who report principals having a severe lack of ethics, playing politics, stealing, lying, or cheating. If there was an anonymous reporting system for such incidents, school districts could investigate and resolve these problems before teachers leave, or the school district develops a reputation for not addressing ethical concerns.

If school districts do not put methods in place to address the lacking skills and traits of ineffective principals on their campuses, they are encouraging a cycle of distrust among their teachers and staff members (Table 1). Due to their lacking skills in various areas of leadership, ineffective principals will eventually push teachers to leave the school or school district. This creates a culture of Principal Empowerment. If their lack of skills goes unchecked, nothing will encourage them to change their behavior or address their unchecked skillset. This can lead to Teacher Complacency. Without mechanisms to report ineffective campus leadership, teachers have essentially two choices for their careers – to leave the school or to sit quietly and endure the consequences of ineffective leadership. In either case, the ineffective principal goes unreported to the district level, continuing to drive their empowerment.

Teacher complacency also leads to a Fear of Conflict or Fear of Losing the Teaching Position. Teachers in Texas have a right to a contract, which is mainly given on a year-to-year basis. Without collective bargaining rights in the state, many teachers are afraid to speak out against ineffective campus or district leadership and tend to stay at their jobs despite feeling trapped at an ineffective district or school. This fear also drives their complacency to continue at their current job, believing nothing will ever change even if they were bold enough to report campus issues.

Fear of conflict or losing the teaching position leads to a Lack of Reporting and Principal Accountability. Because teachers may feel afraid of losing their jobs or are afraid to confront the issues firsthand with campus or district leadership, the traits of the ineffective principal continue to go unchecked. This leads to district leaders failing to act and address the issues that may be happening at a school. A lack of reporting creates a lack of awareness of campus issues and leads back to the campus principal feeling empowered to continue the ineffective behaviors they may or may not be aware of.

Figure 1

CONCLUSION

Teachers have reported several defining traits that have emerged into themes showing the ineffective skills of a poor campus leader. Teachers have cited concerns with leadership skills, listening and communication skills, professionalism issues, lack of teacher and student support, and negative culture and climate as primary reasons teachers have left schools. Other secondary traits include micromanagement, visibility, hiring skills, teamwork, trust, and professional development as other reasons for leaving their teaching positions. School districts should put in place various reporting and evaluation systems to empower teachers to speak freely and work to

uncover campus issues, and use employment data to track trends in teacher departures. School districts should also create a culture of support for teachers to report issues without fear and distrust. Lastly, principals should work to be self-aware and professionally developed by district leaders to address areas for improved leadership skills.