



**Principals are more likely to stay in their roles when they work within a supportive and collaborative district ecosystem.**

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## **FOCUS ON PRINCIPALS**

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# **HOW CAN WE SUSTAIN AND RETAIN PRINCIPALS?**

**A**s my district's assistant superintendent for elementary education, I supervise, support, and evaluate 15 elementary school principals. From this work, as well as my own 14 years as a principal, I can attest to the challenges principals face and the need for ongoing support, networking, and professional learning to sustain and retain strong school leaders.

Despite the vital importance of principals in teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2021), many who choose the role do not remain in the profession for long. Twenty percent of principals leave their schools in a given year (NCES, 2023), and the average tenure of principals is only four years (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

While much research has focused on supporting aspiring and novice principals, far less has focused on how to support experienced principals' ongoing growth, effectiveness, and longevity. I believe this is key to understanding and reversing the troubling trend in principal attrition and ensuring strong leadership for all schools.

I looked to the principals with whom I work for insight because their role longevity exceeds national averages. I wanted to know what fuels their commitment and continued job satisfaction despite mounting complexity and challenges in recent years. Here are themes I heard from the principals.



### **Build and maintain a supportive ecosystem.**

Principals are more likely to stay in their roles when they work within a supportive and collaborative district ecosystem. Principals note that their job satisfaction and longevity is enhanced by environments characterized by trust, transparent communication, and commitment to building relationships — elements of psychological safety, “the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes” (Edmondson, 2012).

Principals further appreciate when their supervisors model and support their need for balance, acknowledge and respond to the daily stressors inherent in their roles as school leaders, and provide genuine opportunities for involvement in decision-making and problem-solving.

### **Identify core values and align them with actions.**

My principal colleagues shared that their commitment is bolstered by the alignment between their personal values and those of the district. For example, our district's school leaders are deeply devoted to principles of equity and social justice, and they derive immense fulfillment from our district work in this area.

When districts lead with clarity about their values and emphasize what they consider paramount, it helps them recruit and hire principals who will be a good fit and enables principals to seek positions in districts that share their values. Once principals are hired, this alignment of values can help them find a sense of purpose and direction in their work that helps them navigate challenges. Research shows the vital role of clearly held values in inspiring perseverance and

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Principal supervisors can cultivate the three conditions for principal longevity by asking themselves the questions in the second column, using the questions in the third column to guide discussions or surveys with principals and incorporating responses into next action steps.

Keys to principal longevity	Guiding questions for principal supervisors	Discussion/survey questions for principals
Supportive ecosystem and regular collaboration	<p>How can I cultivate a district ecosystem that fosters trust, transparent communication, and intentional relationship building for principals?</p> <p>How can I foster a collaborative community of practice among principals to enhance collective learning and support?</p>	<p>What is your perception of trust, transparency, and your opportunities for contributing to decision-making within the district?</p> <p>What processes and structures best support you in your role as a principal? How can I strengthen support for you in your role?</p>
Alignment with values and vision	<p>How can I communicate and reinforce the district's vision and values and create a shared understanding and commitment among principals?</p> <p>How can I support principals in translating their visions and values and that of the district into actionable strategies within their schools?</p>	<p>To what extent do you feel that districtwide decisions and policies reflect and promote shared values, and in what ways can this alignment be improved?</p> <p>Reflect on the driving force behind your work as a principal. What intrinsic "why" motivates your daily efforts, and how does it show up in your leadership?</p>
Opportunities for continuous professional learning	<p>How can I identify and respond to principals' collective and individual learning needs?</p> <p>To what extent is the professional learning provided to principals aligned with the overall goals and priorities of the school or district?</p>	<p>What structures or support mechanisms do you believe are crucial for your ongoing learning and success as a principal?</p> <p>What specific skills or areas of expertise would you most like to develop further? How do you imagine doing so would enhance your leadership?</p>

managing stress in challenging times (Brown, 2018; McGonigal, 2016).

Principal supervisors can work with principals to identify their values and reflect on aligning values and actions. Allocating time for this work allows principals to feel invested in the collective purpose, which, in turn, further enhances their capacity to navigate the demands of their roles.

### Prioritize continuous professional learning.

Principals thrive when they feel challenged to improve and have access to continuous support. My colleagues said that tailored professional learning, peer collaboration, and consistent growth opportunities are integral to success, motivation, and commitment to school leadership. It's important to create clear structures for dedicated, specialized support that addresses real problems encountered in practice, is responsive to the multifaceted nature of principals'

responsibilities, and helps them to build their repertoire of leadership knowledge and strategies relevant to their role.

Principal supervisors should prioritize fostering effective practices outlined in research sponsored by The Wallace Foundation: instructional leadership, fostering positive school climates, supporting collaboration and professional learning, and effective management of personnel and resources (Grissom et al., 2021).

### THE KEY ROLE OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS

Principal supervisors play a key role in establishing these conditions and opportunities (Goldring et al., 2018). Assistant superintendents and other district leaders should develop and sustain open channels of communication and regular engagement with principals, not only to provide resources and facilitate reflection, but also to gather feedback and respond in ways that can

improve the district's work. Specific steps include:

- **Institute regular check-ins and promote hands-on support**, including school visits to gain firsthand insight into daily challenges.
- **Facilitate collaborative learning and decision-making opportunities**, bringing principals together regularly to create a community of practice and engage in shared decision-making and problem-solving.
- **Promote reflective goal-setting**, prompting principals to articulate and align personal vision and values with professional and school goals.
- **Frequently communicate alignment of decisions with district values.**
- **Promote peer learning communities** where principals

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- **Perceived by the team as furthering the achievement of the vision.** Achieving a win just to have a success means little if it doesn't move the vision forward. The vision should always undergird the work.
- **Tangible and observable within a few weeks.** The leadership team needs to define specifically what work will be undertaken and when.
- **Symbolic of a shared value.** When the school and district community perceive the win as furthering their values, it will ultimately become part of the culture. This will help create the kind of lasting improvements sought by the leadership team.

Celebrating early wins is important, not just for the leadership team but for the community as a whole. This step is too often overlooked. Planning ahead with milestones, deadlines, and opportunities for sharing results can help.

At the same time, when looking at early results, the team can learn

from what isn't working and engage in continuous improvement processes to get on track. The team can never know everything up front, and a "learn as you go along" approach is important.

Here are some examples of ways leadership teams can establish early wins:

- **Do a values clarification exercise** to find out what is most important to the team, faculty, and students to form the foundation of the vision. Build next steps, including professional learning, around those values.
- **Create subject-area teams** that engage in 45-day continuous improvement cycles to review student achievement and evidence of progress, and plan accordingly for the next 45 days. Design each cycle's goals to be achievable in the allotted time frame to encourage wins that build momentum and lead to further wins.
- **Engage teachers in peer observations** through classroom visits. Use a short, standard

protocol for observation and documentation. Create opportunities for participating teachers to present their learning to the leadership team and faculty and use the insights to spread best practices or revise practices and processes as needed. Some districts organize visits across schools and include central office staff to encourage learning and shared understanding throughout the district.

Communication between the leadership team and the school community should occur early and often. The team's vision and early wins — as well as future steps — should be transparent to the entire school community and reflect the community's larger values.

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can collaborate, share insights, and learn from each other's experiences.

- **Encourage action research projects** that directly address challenges in their schools, promoting hands-on and practical learning experiences.
- **Establish a feedback loop** to collect input from principals regarding the effectiveness of learning opportunities and make adjustments accordingly to meet evolving needs.

Supporting principals thoughtfully and strategically takes an investment of resources, including time and effort, which can be affected by district

size, organizational structure, the availability of networks, and other factors. Regardless of size and resources, though, principal supervisors should be deliberate in their efforts to understand and respond to principals' needs.

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