



Teacher Retention Focus Group Findings

Prepared by the Department of Research & Performance Management

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How Schools Were Chosen:

Schools were selected based on their rate of staff retention consistent across the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school years for each grade band.

The focus groups were conducted during the weeks of February 26th and March 5th. Each group represented one of the following classifications of personnel:

- Elementary School Principals (3 participants)
- Elementary School Teachers (25 participants)
- Middle School Principals (3 participants)
- Middle School Teachers (25 participants)
- High School Principals (3 participants)
- High School Teachers (19 participants)

Key Findings:

Participant responses across all schools tended to fall along similar themes. These themes included:

1. ***Positive Leadership Qualities*** –
 - High-retention schools have leadership that actively works to:
 - Protect and act as a buffer to staff
 - Recognize and reward achievement
 - Solicit feedback while being deliberate in decision-making
 - Set a consistent tone for all stakeholders
 - Display adaptability and compassion
2. ***Positive School Environment*** –
 - High-retention schools foster an environment that:
 - Facilitates cooperation and support among colleagues
 - Creates a cohesive school identity or brand
 - Encourages active, positive engagement from parents and community members
3. ***Facilities/Material Conditions***
 - High-retention schools have leadership that actively works to:
 - Ensure building facilities clean and well-maintained
 - Ensure that teachers are provided needed classroom resources
4. ***Defined Administrative Processes***
 - High-retention schools have leadership that actively works to:
 - Ensure that set procedures are in place to handle issues as they arise
5. ***Opportunities for Capacity Building***
 - High-retention schools have leadership that actively works to:
 - Provide staff members with opportunities for training and personal growth



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Positive Leadership Qualities:

High retention schools have leadership that works to balance accountability within the school and with staff, with supporting staff professionally and with compassion.

Focus Group Responses-

Attribute/Qualities	Feedback
High retention schools have leadership that protects staff and acts as a buffer in teacher interactions with the District and with parents.	<i>"In times of change, provide explanation rather than directives. Be approachable and let them all see who you really are. Protect the teachers. Let them accept change in small chunks, not by giving directives."</i> – ES Principal
	<i>"An irate parent came in to attack a teacher at my school. I knew this person personally but they cannot yell at a teacher. You need to show teachers that you have their back."</i> – MS Principal
High retention schools have leadership that emphasizes recognition and respect for teachers at school and for their personal lives at home.	<i>"We celebrate everything – teacher achievement and student achievement. Nothing goes unnoticed."</i> – MS Teacher
	<i>"When she starts meetings – she says that she is thankful to be there with us. She tries to balance work load – there's a whole bunch of stuff on our plate."</i> – ES Teacher
High retention schools have leadership that cares about buy-in from staff during decisions that impact the whole school community.	<i>"People will always push you to make a decision when they have an agenda. It's about being honest, having integrity, and taking the time to process and get teacher buy-in."</i> – MS Principal
	<i>"Teachers sometimes have conflicts between themselves. If they bring it to the administration, you have to have everyone at the table before making a decision."</i> – MS Principal
High retention schools have leadership that works to set a consistent tone with stakeholders at all levels.	<i>"The expectations are the same. I need to be talked to like I'm a human being. The same tone is set with the students and parents."</i> – MS Teacher
	<i>"Administrators, students, parents and teachers all need to be on the same side. Parents and students need to feel we have a common goal."</i> – HS Teacher
High retention schools have leadership that acknowledge that teachers have lives outside of the school building and display adaptability and compassion accordingly.	<i>"Teachers who have done tasks for 23 years may not want to do it anymore. That might go to a new teacher. It is a leader's job to recognize that."</i> – HS Principal
	<i>"You have to let teachers go outside the box. We have one teacher who teaches with an ukulele. We have clubs too, like gardening. They love it because it gets them invested in it and provides an opportunity to bond with the kids."</i> – MS Principal
	<i>"Supportive of special family circumstances. Our personal lives are valued."</i> – ES Teacher

Outcomes Based on the Finding –

- Determine appropriate training and support to foster these characteristics across school leaders.
- Utilize retention rates and Insight scores to establish a tiered training plan.
- Integrate these leadership qualities into principal hiring process and new leader development.



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Positive School Environment:

High retention schools strive to develop a work environment that is supportive and mindful of the needs of all staff, while also encouraging active and positive engagement from the surrounding community.

Focus Group Responses –

Attribute/Qualities	Feedback
High retention schools have leadership that works to foster an environment conducive to mutual support among colleagues through a shared sense of identity.	<i>“Our administration pushes professionalism. We all help each other.” – HS Teacher</i>
	<i>“ Collaboration between my peers and staff – if I’m unclear about a lesson, I can go to my peers.” – MS Teacher</i>
	<i>“A lot of first-year teachers don’t want to go for help. I ask the veteran teachers to go to them and offer to help. They may not want to come to me, but they can go to another teacher for help.” – HS Principal</i>
	<i>“You have to build a brand for the school. When you come into the building, they feel the love. We’re not being forced to be here. We love to be here.” – MS Principal</i>
	<i>“We just hired 3 former students to teach. It’s a different mindset. Get them to think ‘you are at the best building, with the best kids.’” – MS Principal</i>
High retention schools allow for active participation from parents and other community members.	<i>“Strong community relationships. Very welcoming. Very personable. We have a wonderful PTO...she asks for options of parents...includes the parents.” – ES Teacher</i>
	<i>“You need a diverse group of parents to get things done in the building. Parents have the power to get things done.” – MS Principal</i>
	<i>“Create allies with difficult parents.” – ES Principal</i>

Outcome Based on the Finding –

- Identify best-practices strategies that other schools can adopt.
- Determine appropriate training and support to foster these environmental characteristics within schools.
- Leverage District marketing practices to generate school-level branding.
- Examine best-practice strategies for building community involvement within the school.
- Develop ways to strengthen communication practices with parents and the community.
- Work to ensure that parent-teacher organizations are meeting regularly.



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Facility Conditions/Material Resources:

High retention schools have District-level support to ensure that facilities and materials are adequate to the needs of the school, teacher, and student.

Focus Group Responses –

Attribute/Qualities	Feedback
High retention schools have facilities that are clean and well-maintained , inspiring pride in the school as an institution.	<i>When I arrived, updating school facilities was a priority. It needed a facelift – new paint – to make everything in the school feel fresh and new.” – MS Principal</i>
	<i>“Building attractiveness and cleanliness are most important. Teachers need to be proud of where they work.” – ES Principal</i>
	<i>“The physical environment is important. Anyone who works in an older location can feel down. It is dark and the lights are dim. It was not air-conditioned. That can be very depressing.” – MS Teacher</i>
	<i>“We have only one person to clean the whole school. We have ten bathrooms. She has to clean all of the bathrooms by herself.” – HS Teacher</i>
	<i>“Cleanliness at the campus and having basic needs met are important. For example, enough toilet paper, hand sanitizer and soap.” – HS Teacher</i>
High-retention schools ensure that teaching staff has needed access to all material resources .	<i>“We have Title I funds and they are strict, but we try to give them resources. We try to see that they will have what they need when they come in. They should have everything they want in the classroom. We listen to them.” – HS Principal</i>
	<i>“Administration can't buy software we need, even though we have the money. We have to jump through all these hoops to get something that doesn't cause much. Principal doesn't have the autonomy to do it.” – HS Teacher</i>
	<i>“One lady I worked with said that the Board had allocated a certain amount of money for the teachers' lounges. In our building, we often don't have toilet paper or paper towels.” – MS Teacher</i>
	<i>“I've never had a problem getting resources I need. And that's one of the reason I've stayed so long. As long as I can justify it – you can't be effective without what you need for your students.” – MS Teacher</i>

Outcome Based on the Finding –

- Identify gaps in maintenance and facility upkeep service at schools.
- Determine avenues to improve services under the current provider contract.
- Maintain open communication with staff to identify areas of greatest need.



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Defined Administrative Processes:

High retention schools have leadership that supports staff through clearly defined protocols, open communication, and District-level support.

Focus Group Responses –

Attribute/Qualities	Feedback
High-retention schools have transparent expectations and clear protocols to provide a sense of stability and give staff an understanding of what they should expect on a day-to-day basis.	<i>“One of the biggest things is consistency, in carrying out rules and regulations. The principal is not fickle. You know what you are going to get from day to day. He allows us to give suggestions. He makes an environment where co-workers can depend on each other. He tries to foster a healthy environment.” – MS Teacher</i>
	<i>“We have online referrals. That allows us to immediately handle issues and give feedback to the teachers. They can appreciate the feedback we give them. When we stopped using paper, it made things easier. I can easily see all the referrals and work on them.” – HS Principal</i>
	<i>“In our school, it is the structure. It is really organized. There is a system in place. Even if certain people are out, we know where to go.” – MS Teacher</i>
High-retention schools emphasize active communication with school staff and the wider community.	<i>“Communicate face-to-face with as many people as possible...not by email.” – ES Principal</i>
	<i>“Communication is a huge piece. It is impossible to always communicate in a school as large as mine. But when any communication goes out, I am very careful of how I say things so they don’t come across as demands. We have some disconnects in our leadership of how we communicate. But if you build a rapport with teachers, that helps.” – HS Principal</i>
	<i>“Our principal has an open door policy. You can walk in and have a conversation with him.” – HS Teacher</i>
	<i>“I worked in another place where the only means of communication were meetings. There were never any face-to-face communications. Face-to-face creates a greater comfort level. It makes you feel you are doing a good job, and they are not just checking on you.” – MS Teacher</i>
High-retention schools have teachers that feel supported at the District level.	<i>“If the people higher up – do what they are asking us to do for one week. Need the experience of planning and dealing with the constant changes.” – ES Teacher</i>
	<i>“District visits are very stressful. And when there’s teams of like 8 people coming in – not effective. Scaring people. People are leaving because they are overwhelmed.” – ES Teacher</i>

Outcome Based on the Finding –

- Assess best-practice strategies for building up communication and administrative practices within schools.
- ILDs and Principals building school communication plans and setting expectations for both school staff and community.



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Opportunities for Capacity Building:

High retention schools have leaders that look to build up the capacity of staff within their school, leading to a sense of personal growth.

Focus Group Responses –

Attribute/Qualities	Feedback
High retention schools provide staff with opportunities for training and professional development to ensure continual learning and improvement.	<i>“Provide in-service training for office staff on how to deliver great customer service: identifying primary complaints; role play. Cross train classified employees.” – ES Principal</i>
	<i>“Mindset of building teachers up – as opposed to getting rid of ineffective teachers. Need of training for administration. Need training that is more hands on.” – MS Teacher</i>

Outcome Based on the Finding –

- Provide school leaders with flexibility to create customized training opportunities that are meaningful to teachers.
- Incentivize participation in learning opportunities.
- Determine training and supports needed for school leaders to better utilize staff strengths and identify areas of potential growth.



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Appendix A: Response Trends by Grade Band

Numbers indicate the number of times a response was mentioned in conversation during the focus group sessions.

Elementary Schools -

Positive Leadership Qualities

Sub-Theme	ES Principals	ES Teachers
Protect Staff/ Act as Buffer	3	14
Recognition/Respect	6	32
Deliberate Decision Making	0	4
Setting Tone w/ All Stakeholders	3	11
Adaptability	7	16

Positive School Environment

Sub-Theme	ES Principals	ES Teachers
Mutual Support/Identity	1	22
Supportive Parents/Community	1	1

Facility Conditions/Material Resources

Theme	ES Principals	ES Teachers
Facility Conditions (Clean and Maintained)	5	3
Material Resources	1	5

Defined Administrative Processes

Theme	ES Principals	ES Teachers
Transparent Expectations/Clear Protocols	7	5
Communication	9	13
District Support	0	5

Opportunities for Capacity Building

Theme	ES Principals	ES Teachers
Professional Development/Training	1	8



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Middle Schools -

Positive Leadership Qualities

Theme	MS Principals	MS Teachers
Protect Staff/ Act as Buffer	8	16
Recognition/ Respect	17	35
Deliberate Decision Making	4	2
Setting Tone w/ All Stakeholders	6	16
Adaptability	7	13

Positive School Environment

Theme	MS Principals	MS Teachers
Mutual Support/Identity	5	16
Supportive Parents/Community	1	1

Facility Conditions/Material Resources

Theme	MS Principals	MS Teachers
Facility Conditions (Clean and Maintained)	1	4
Material Resources	1	3

Defined Administrative Processes

Theme	MS Principals	MS Teachers
Transparent Expectations/Clear Protocols	15	19
Communication	12	25
District Support	5	0

Opportunities for Capacity Building

Theme	MS Principals	MS Teachers
Professional Development/Training	2	4



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High Schools -

Positive Leadership Qualities

Theme	HS Principals	HS Teachers
Protect Staff/ Act as Buffer	2	1
Recognition/ Respect	17	24
Deliberate Decision Making	5	0
Setting Tone w/ All Stakeholders	3	3
Adaptability	11	12

Positive School Environment

Theme	HS Principals	HS Teachers
Mutual Support/Identity	2	5
Supportive Parents/Community	0	1

Facility Conditions/Material Resources

Theme	HS Principals	HS Teachers
Facility Conditions (Clean and Maintained)	0	4
Material Resources	2	5

Defined Administrative Processes

Theme	HS Principals	HS Teachers
Transparent Expectations/Clear Protocols	14	11
Communication	13	10
District Support	0	1

Opportunities for Capacity Building

Theme	HS Principals	HS Teachers
Professional Development/Training	2	4



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Appendix B: Focus Group Questions Asked

Principals:

1. How have you and your leadership team worked to build and maintain a strong school culture at your school? How have teachers responded to these efforts? What has worked best?
2. What did not work? Why? What lessons did you and your team learn from what did not work?
3. How do you think working conditions impact teacher retention? How have working conditions affected teacher retention at your school?
4. What are the specific actions you and your team have taken to create good working conditions at your schools? For example:
 - a) Time management/scheduling?
 - b) Fostering peer collaboration?
 - c) Dividing up non-instructional responsibilities?
 - d) Deploying resources/supports to teachers and students?
 - e) Other actions?
5. How do you motivate and provide encouragement through your communications and interactions with teachers? How you show that you value and support teachers?
6. How do you deal with conflict and stress at your school? How do address teachers' conflicts and stress?
7. In general, how do you think these communication and interaction practices impact teacher retention at your school? What lessons have you learned from your successes and challenges?
8. What do you think makes you a successful school leader who is able to retain effective teachers?
 - a) Personality style?
 - b) Leadership style?
 - c) Communication/ interaction style and practices?
 - d) Lessons learned from past efforts?
 - e) Other characteristics or experiences?



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Teachers:

1. How has your principal and school leadership team worked to build and maintain a strong school culture at your school? How have teachers responded to these efforts? What has worked best? What is most important to you and why?
2. What did not work? Why? How was it resolved or changed for the better?
3. How do you think working conditions impact teacher retention? How have working conditions affected teacher retention at your school?
4. What are the specific actions that your principal/leadership team have taken to create good working conditions at your schools? For example:
 - a) Time management/scheduling?
 - b) Fostering peer collaboration?
 - c) Dividing up non-instructional responsibilities?
 - d) Deploying resources/supports to teachers and students?
 - e) Other actions?
5. How does your principal/leadership team motivate and provide encouragement to teachers through their communications and interactions? How do they show that they value and support teachers?
6. How does your principal/leadership team deal with conflict and stress at your school? How do they address teachers' conflicts and stress? What has worked well and why?
7. In general, how do you think these communication and interaction practices impact teacher retention at your school?
8. What characteristics and practices do you think make someone a successful school leader who is able to retain effective teachers?
 - a) Personality style?
 - b) Leadership style?
 - c) Communication/ interaction style and practices?
 - d) Lessons learned from past efforts?
 - e) Other characteristics or experiences?