

PRINCIPAL RETENTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF PRINCIPAL  
ATTRITION AND STRATEGIES TO BUILD CAPACITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE  
RETENTION OF SCHOOL LEADERS

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **PRINCIPAL RETENTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF PRINCIPAL ATTRITION AND STRATEGIES TO BUILD CAPACITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE RETENTION OF SCHOOL LEADERS**

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College of Education  
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This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of school principals and the factors influencing their decisions to either remain in or exit the principalship. Through in-depth interviews with current and former principals, this research uncovers key conditions contributing to principal attrition, such as job dissatisfaction, inadequate compensation, excessive workload, lack of support, and emotional exhaustion (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Husain et al., 2021). By identifying these antecedents, the study aims to provide actionable insights for school districts to improve retention rates and reduce attrition among principals.

Adopting a phenomenological approach, the study delves into the personal and systemic factors that shape principals' decisions, making it particularly well-suited to exploring the multi-dimensional nature of burnout and organizational support. This method allows for a deep examination of how principals perceive and react to challenges, providing a nuanced understanding of the pressures associated with the role (Van Manen, 2023; Moustakas, 1994; Duke, 1984). Findings reveal that excessive workloads and administrative tasks often impede principals' ability to fulfill their educational vision. Participants described being overwhelmed by

the demands of paperwork, regulatory compliance, and staff and student management.

Additionally, a pervasive sense of isolation due to insufficient support from district administration and peers further exacerbates stress, leading to diminished job satisfaction.

The study offers recommendations for improving principal retention by addressing these challenges, emphasizing the importance of reducing workloads, enhancing support systems, and promoting well-being within the role. Through these strategies, schools and districts can better support principals, ultimately contributing to more sustainable leadership practices in education.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Principal attrition has emerged as a critical issue in U.S. public schools, impacting not only school leadership but also the broader school community. High principal turnover is associated with negative consequences for student achievement (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018), teacher morale (Price & Moolenaar, 2015), and overall school culture (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). For instance, in Texas, between 1995 and 2001, nearly 30% of public school principals, on average, left their schools after just one year of service (Branch et al., 2009). This disruption in leadership can lead to inconsistency in implementing school visions and goals, which ultimately hinders school progress and student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021; Miller, 2013).

When a school experiences high principal attrition or turnover, it can disrupt the educational process (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). New leaders need time to adjust to their new environments and effectively implement the school's vision and goals (Miller, 2013). Principal attrition can result in a lack of consistency in school policies, leadership styles, and educational programs, negatively impacting student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Principal turnover is concerning because the principal's role is pivotal in leading school improvement, which research indicates can take 5–7 years (Fullan, 2020). Equally, principal attrition can sometimes bring fresh ideas and perspectives, leading to positive changes and improving student achievement. Addressing principal attrition requires understanding its causes and finding ways to reduce adverse effects while promoting the positive aspects of turnover.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in January 2020, introduced an additional layer of complexity to the principalship. By March 2020, the coronavirus outbreak had evolved into a

global pandemic, severely disrupting public education (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). Principals had to rapidly transition their schools to virtual or hybrid models while assuming new responsibilities, such as enforcing health protocols, in addition to their instructional leadership duties. These new demands further exacerbated the pressures principals face, adding to the existing barriers related to socioeconomic, emotional, and cultural challenges.

This phenomenological exploration seeks to uncover the ongoing challenges contributing to principal attrition, with particular attention to how the global pandemic has intensified these difficulties. The study also aims to explore methods that school district leaders can implement to reduce principal turnover, emphasizing the critical role of retention in maintaining a stable and effective school environment.

### **Problem Statement**

A growing body of research documents the importance of the school principal to school success. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2017, 35% of principals left their schools before serving 2 years (Taie & Goldring, 2019). Principals do not directly influence student learning, but they influence school-level factors, such as climate and human capital decisions, that indirectly affect student achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Grissom et al., 2021; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018).

Principal attrition is a known predictor of student achievement and school progress (Husain et al., 2021; Miller, 2013); however, there is a shortage of studies focusing on the differences in the turnover and predictive behaviors between principals who remain in education and those that leave the profession. Miller (2013) contended principal attrition can pose several problems for schools and communities, which include but are not limited to the following:

- Disruptions in school operations: High levels of principal attrition can cause disruptions in school operations (Miller, 2013). New leaders need time to adjust to their environment and effectively implement the school's vision and goals. In addition, attrition can lead to a lack of consistency in school climate, leadership actions, and educational success (Levin et al., 2019).
- Negative impact on student achievement: Principal attrition can negatively impact student achievement, disrupting the educational process and creating instability in school leadership (Grissom et al., 2021; Miller, 2013; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2013).
- Decreased teacher morale: High levels of principal attrition can decrease teacher morale, as teachers may feel uncertain about their future and the direction of the school (Miller, 2013; Price & Moolenaar, 2015; Scott, 2019).
- Loss of institutional knowledge: Principal attrition can result in the loss of institutional knowledge and the valuable experience principals bring to their schools (Miller, 2013; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018).
- Financial costs: Principal attrition can be costly, as it involves recruiting and training new leaders and the costs associated with the disruption in school operations (Fuller, 2012; Miller, 2013; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018).

Overall, principal attrition can have significant consequences for schools and communities. Principal attrition, or the high turnover rate of principals in public schools, poses a significant problem for school districts. When principals leave their positions, it affects the school's culture, stability, and academic performance (Grissom et al., 2021; Miller, 2013; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). Further, frequent leadership changes can disrupt the school's operations and hinder

progress toward achieving educational goals (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Fullan, 2020). Additionally, finding and hiring new principals can be time-consuming and expensive for school districts. The loss of experienced and skilled principals can lead to a decline in morale among teachers and students, ultimately affecting the school's quality of education (DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Price & Moolennar, 2015; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). Therefore, addressing the issue of principal attrition is crucial for school districts to ensure their schools provide the best possible education to students. Addressing principal attrition requires a concerted effort to understand its causes and to find ways to reduce its adverse effects while promoting principal retention. One tool to view the problem is through Maslach's (1976) burnout inventory (MBI).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is a widely used psychological assessment tool for measuring occupational burnout (Maslach, 1976). Initially developed to assess burnout in social care professionals, the framework comprises three scales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. These dimensions capture the physical, emotional, and psychological toll of prolonged workplace stress, offering valuable insights into why school principals may experience burnout and leave their roles.

According to the MBI, burnout occurs when the demands of a job—such as workload and accountability—outpace the available resources, including support from the district and opportunities for professional growth (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). For principals, burnout often manifests through poor working conditions, lack of administrative support, insufficient compensation, and inadequate professional development (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Levin et al., 2019). Each of these stressors aligns with the dimensions of burnout identified by the MBI:

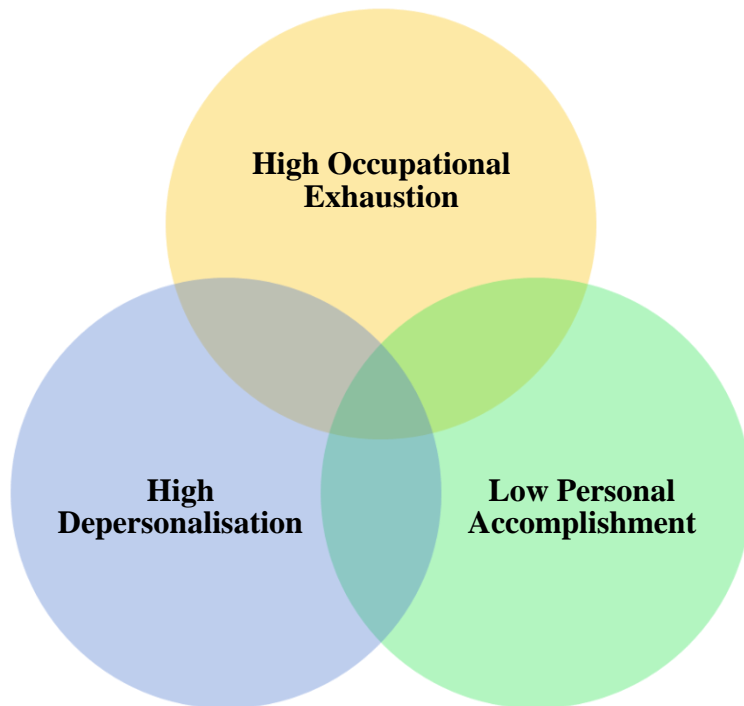
- Emotional Exhaustion—“The nine items in the emotional exhaustion subscale measure feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one’s work” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 101). Higher scores on the subscale correspond to more significant experienced burnout. Emotional exhaustion is burnout typically connected to a relationship with work perceived as difficult, tiring, and stressful.
- Depersonalization—“The five items in the depersonalization subscale measure an unfeeling and impersonal response towards recipients of one’s care or service” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 101). Higher scores on this subscale correspond to more significant experienced burnout. Depersonalization is viewed as a loss of empathy or regard for others (clients, colleagues, etc.) by keeping a greater emotional distance—expressed through cynical, derogatory remarks and even callousness.
- Personal Accomplishment—The subscale of personal accomplishment contains eight items that measure feelings of competence and achievement in one’s work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Lower scores correspond to more significant experienced burnout. Personal accomplishment refers to fulfillment in the workplace and a positive view of professional achievements.

Comparing principal attrition to Maslach’s (1976) burnout theory requires examining the key concepts of both phenomena and identifying similarities and differences. Principal attrition refers to the turnover of school principals, which can significantly impact the school community. Causes for principal turnover vary, such as job dissatisfaction, lack of support, or overwhelming workload—which can all lead to principal burnout or simply transferring to a different campus. Maslach’s burnout theory, on the other hand, is a widely accepted model for understanding burnout, which is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by chronic

workplace stress. The theory suggests burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, which all overlap as shown in Figure 1 (Maslach, 2017). To compare these concepts, one begins by reviewing the causes of principal attrition. Principals who experience high levels of burnout may become dissatisfied with their jobs and leave their positions. Emotional exhaustion may be related to the daily stress and workload principals face.

**Figure 1**

*Maslach Burnout Inventory—Three Contributing Factors of Burnout*



Another way to compare these concepts is to examine the organizational and systemic factors contributing to the phenomena. For example, school systems that lack adequate support or resources may increase the likelihood of principals experiencing burnout and leaving their positions (Levin et al., 2019). Similarly, schools that do not prioritize teacher well-being may contribute to burnout and high turnover rates among principals (Price & Moolenaar, 2015).

While principal attrition and burnout are distinct phenomena, they are also interconnected and share common causes and consequences. Maslach and Schaufeli (2017) stated, “Burnout can be considered as prolonged job stress, i.e., demands at the workplace that tax or exceed an individual’s resources” (p. 9). The many needs and stressors demanded of a school principal correlate with MBI (Maslach, 1976). Understanding the relationship between these concepts could help school systems’ leaders address the underlying issues and work towards creating healthier and more supportive work environments. Building on the theoretical framework of Maslach’s (1976) burnout theory, I aimed to explore and understand the manifestations of principal attrition and strategies to retain principals in this study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This phenomenological study aims to explore the lived experiences of school principals and the factors that influence their decisions to remain in or exit the principalship. Through in-depth interviews, this study seeks to uncover the conditions that contribute to principal attrition, including but not limited to job dissatisfaction, inadequate compensation, excessive workload, lack of support, and emotional exhaustion (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Husain et al., 2021). By identifying these antecedents, the study aims to offer insights into strategies that school districts can adopt to reduce principal attrition and improve retention rates.

Though principal turnover has been widely studied, recently reviewed data from first-year principals discovered half of the leaders left their schools in the first 2 years, and by the fifth year, only 19% of those who remained were at the same school (Davis & Anderson, 2021). The limited studies on the predictive factors of principal attrition require further examination to minimize disruptions for school leaders, staff, and students. My approach involved understanding the principal’s roles and responsibilities, including what conditions influenced

principal attrition or principal retention. Principal retention is vital for maintaining stability in school leadership, fostering long-term strategic planning, and promoting positive outcomes for both students and staff. As such, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on school leadership by providing actionable recommendations for mitigating the causes of principal burnout and turnover.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by two research questions:

Q1. What influences principals in public schools to depart from their positions?

Q2. What conditions influence principals to remain in their current role?

By exploring these questions, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and challenges that affect principals in public schools. Ultimately, this knowledge can be used to develop strategies to support and retain influential school leaders and improve educational outcomes.

### **Significance of Study**

Principal attrition refers to school principals leaving their positions on their assigned school campus. Principal attrition and burnout are growing concerns in education as school leaders face increasing demands and challenges in today's education system (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Husain et al., 2021; Price & Moolennar, 2015; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). Principals are critical in shaping students' educational experiences and creating a positive school culture. High attrition rates and burnout among principals can negatively affect schools and students (Miller, 2013). Studies demonstrate that high principal attrition rates can harm school performance and student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). However, in recent years, the issue of principal burnout has gained

more attention, as many school leaders are struggling with the demands and stress of their jobs (Yan, 2020).

Scholars have conducted surveys to identify why principal turnover occurs (Combs et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2013). In this phenomenological exploration, I will enhance the literature by capturing authentic, in-depth lived experiences from public-school principals regarding the reason for their departures or thoughts of departure from their school districts. By engaging in in-depth interviews and analyzing participants' lived experiences, I seek to uncover the underlying practices and conditions contributing to principal attrition and to provide insights into potential strategies for addressing the issue. As school principals navigate the varying stages of their careers, they may benefit from hearing personal accounts (e.g., challenges, successes, needs, etc.) from current and past principals. Furthermore, the lived experiences told through interviews may become a supporting mechanism for new or seasoned principals to help them navigate the principal role. Finally, the lived experiences shared by school principals may assist in reducing the turnover rate as current principals may find support and affirmation from hearing personal accounts from their colleagues.

Addressing principal attrition is essential for improving the quality of education and ensuring schools have influential leaders who can meet the needs of their students and communities (Miller, 2013). Principal retention requires addressing the root causes of principal attrition and providing support and resources for school leaders to help them succeed in their roles.

### **Assumptions and Bias**

Creswell (2013) noted that phenomenology assumes that participants will answer all questions completely, honestly, and in-depth. However, this is a baseline assumption for any

researcher. For this study, my specific theoretical assumptions are grounded in the framework of Maslach's Burnout Theory, which posits that burnout arises from chronic workplace stress and can drive decisions to remain in, move within, or leave a system. The three dimensions of burnout—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment—serve as the theoretical foundation for my assumptions around principal attrition. Based on the literature surrounding burnout, turnover, and leadership in education, I make the following assumptions:

1. Principals experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion are more likely to consider leaving the education field entirely or moving into less stressful roles, either within or outside their current system.
2. Principals who feel a strong sense of personal accomplishment and efficacy in their roles are more likely to remain in their positions despite systemic challenges.
3. Principals who experience depersonalization, where they begin to distance themselves from their roles and communities, may opt to shift within the educational system to find a position with less emotional demand.
4. Collecting information from principals through one-on-one interviews will yield insights into how burnout influences their decision-making processes regarding staying, transitioning, or leaving.

In this phenomenological exploration, I seek to understand how the pressures and demands of the principal role, compounded by burnout, contribute to high attrition rates. These assumptions align with Maslach's theory, suggesting that addressing burnout at the institutional and individual levels is essential to reducing attrition. Given my position as a high school principal, it is crucial to acknowledge my potential biases. However, I aim to bracket these biases, allowing

the participants' authentic accounts and lived experiences to inform my understanding of the broader issue of principal attrition.

### **Definitions of Terms**

Specific terms used in the study were defined as indicated. In this study, the terms principal turnover and principal attrition were used interchangeably.

*Employee retention* refers to the connections, abilities, and sacrifices an individual possesses to be present to lead and grow professionally to improve the organization and community (Mitchell et al., 2001).

*Job embeddedness* refers to the commitment and intention of a public-school principal to continue as a leader at a specific school (Mitchell et al., 2001).

*Retention* means staying in the position for some time due to receiving remuneration, benefits, equal treatment, and positive relations between employers and employees (Allen & Shanock, 2013).

*Principal attrition or turnover* occurs when a public-school principal voluntarily or involuntarily does not return to the same school and district the following year or exits altogether from the school system (Anthony, 2016; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018).

*Principal characteristics* refer to attributes, features, or qualities a principal possesses (Fuller et al., 2007).

### **Summary**

With this study, I aimed to provide insights into the lived experiences of principals and to examine the conditions that affect their decisions to remain in or exit the principalship. In Chapter 1, I discussed the background of principal attrition and its implications on teachers, students, and schools. The significant increase in principal turnover within 5 years of their start

date was found to be a nationwide concern among public schools (Goldring & Taie, 2018). The problem of principal attrition requires new strategies from school district leadership and extended efforts to educate school communities about the significance of principal retention. In this study, I aimed to explore the lived experiences of principals and examine the lived experiences that affected their decisions to remain in or exit the principalship.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Across the United States, approximately one in five principals leave their positions each year, negatively impacting student achievement, campus culture, and climate (Wood et al., 2013). This principal turnover, which exceeds 20% annually, is driven by factors such as insufficient salaries, poor working conditions, a lack of administrative support, and excessive work hours (Fuller et al., 2020; Grissom et al., 2021). High principal turnover undermines the development of effective school leadership and impedes the stability required for school improvement (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018).

Reducing principal attrition is crucial to improving student outcomes, fostering a positive school climate, and maintaining fiscal stability, as the costs of replacing school leaders are significant (Grissom et al., 2021; Levin & Bradley, 2019). Continued research into principal retention is essential for educational stakeholders, including school districts and policymakers, as it highlights strategies that foster supportive environments, reduce burnout, and provide pathways for long-term leadership sustainability. Consequently, addressing principal turnover involves exploring leadership roles, understanding the causes and effects of attrition, and developing targeted retention strategies. This chapter examines the following areas: (a) principal leadership roles and responsibilities, (b) causes and effects of principal attrition, and (c) principal retention strategies.

#### **Principal Leadership Roles and Responsibilities**

The role of a principal is central to the functioning of any school, serving as the bridge between district policy and classroom practice (Grissom et al., 2021). Principals are expected to manage resources, provide instructional leadership, and cultivate an environment conducive to

learning for both students and staff. The complexities of this role have grown as accountability measures, such as state and national testing requirements, have heightened the expectations placed on school leaders (Leithwood et al., 2020). This section examines the historical and contemporary responsibilities of school principals and the significant evolution of their roles over time.

### **Historical Context of the Principal Role**

The role of the school principal has evolved. In the early years of public education, the principal was primarily responsible for maintaining the school's daily operations (Bogotch, 2005; K. Brown, 2005; Pierce, 1935). Bogotch (2005) stated that principals were responsible for maintaining order, managing resources, and instructing students. The principal was also responsible for developing and implementing school policies and procedures (K. Brown, 2005). The principal's role historically served as the school's disciplinarian and the teachers' boss.

#### ***Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century***

In the early 1800s, the public-school system was in its infancy, and there were few established systems of school governance (Pierce, 1935). Principals, when they existed, were typically appointed by local school boards and were responsible for overseeing the school's day-to-day operations. As Pierce (1935) noted, however, at least from a contemporary view, by the end of the 19th century, the principal in most large cities was recognized as a powerful and vital head of the school:

He gave orders and enforced them. He directed, advised, and instructed teachers. He classified pupils, disciplined them, and enforced safeguards to protect their health and morals. He supervised and rated janitors. He requisitioned all educational and frequently all maintenance supplies. Their parents sought his advice and respected his regulations.

Such supervisors, general and unique, who visited his school usually made requests of teachers only with the consent, or through the medium, of the principal. (p. 39)

### *Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

By the late 1800s, public education had become more established, and the role of the principal had evolved to include greater responsibilities for academic oversight and curriculum development. However, later in the century, teacher responsibilities were eventually removed and replaced with increasing building management, authority over teachers, student discipline, and the principal role was noted to have increased political involvement in the community (K. Brown, 2005; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013). This was also a time of increased standardization in education, with principals playing a pivotal role in ensuring that schools were adhering to state and national standards. Principals asserted that the exams resulted in unfair comparisons of teachers across different schools and settings and complained that the tests gave the superintendent “despotic” power and interfered with the school’s internal management (Pierce, 1935, p. 18). Elsewhere, principals demanded the right to examine and promote students independently, hire and fire teachers, purchase textbooks, and supervise the maintenance of their buildings.

### *Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

In the early 1900s, the role of the principal continued to develop, emphasizing school management and administration (Pierce, 1935). Principals were increasingly responsible for managing budgets, hiring and firing teachers, and overseeing the school’s physical plant. Principals began creating local associations to discuss their mutual problems concerning superintendent and board issues. In 1916, principals established the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and in 1921 the National Association of Elementary School

Principals. As documented by Pierce (1935), establishing professional associations led to sponsored research on the principalship. In contrast, local associations instituted professional yearbooks, monthly journals, and group and individual investigations into problems of practice. Professional associations also encouraged states to pass laws requiring more significant certification requirements for principals, thereby elevating the status of the principal by establishing academic qualifications and specialized expertise as prerequisites for the position (Brown, 2005).

### ***Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century***

During the mid-1900s, the principal's role became more focused on academic leadership, emphasizing instructional supervision and teacher development. The early 1930s brought an extended role to the office of the principal in two parts: to advocate for developing the school as a system through district funding and to embed training new teachers to educate the children or students (Rousmaniere, 2013). This was a time of significant change in education, with the rise of new teaching methodologies, increased federal funding, and the Civil Rights Movement. In this capacity, the principal's job security rested on public perception and the accomplishments of the school's highest-achieving students (P. F. Brown, 2006).

### **Modern Context of the Principal Role**

#### ***Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century to Present Day***

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the present day, the role of the principal has continued to evolve, with an increased focus on collaborative leadership, data-driven decision-making, and community engagement (Bogotch, 2005; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Levin, 2020; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Principals must work closely with teachers and other stakeholders to improve student achievement and foster a positive and inclusive school culture. The change in

the principal role began with more accountability placed on schools, teachers, and administration. In the early 1980s, a report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, was based on 18 months of collecting testimony from education experts and reviewing commissioned papers written by some of the most respected persons with expertise in their fields of education at the time, addressing the quality of education in the United States (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The main concern of the authors was adding rigor and raising standards in teaching and learning. In addition to the influential report discussed, numerous other landmark works on U.S. education emerged around this time. These included Adler's *The Paideia Proposal*, *Making the Grade*, the College Board's *Academic Preparation for College*, *Action for Excellence*, Sizer's *Horace's Compromise*, Goodlad's *A Place Called School*, *Educating Americans for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, and Boyer's *High School* (Spady & Marx, 1984). Each contributed uniquely to the evolving conversation about educational reform and student preparation highlighting a broad spectrum of ideas and recommendations.

Adler's *Paideia Proposal* (1982) argues for a singular, 12-year track for all students in the U.S., with a general/liberal education designed to strengthen democratic institutions. He emphasizes three outcomes: mental, moral, and spiritual growth; a citizenry capable of sustaining democracy; and a workforce prepared for an industrial economy. His vision suggests a unified approach to education, contrasting with today's focus on specialized tracks and individual choice. Adler's ideas raise critical questions about equity and uniformity in education—challenging the fragmented educational tracks we often see today.

The *Making the Grade* report from the Twentieth Century Fund highlights the federal government's role in supporting elementary and secondary education, with a particular focus on English proficiency as vital for civic and societal participation. This work underscores the importance of federal support in standardizing and enhancing education quality across diverse communities, hinting at ongoing debates over the role of the federal government in educational funding and policy.

The National Science Board's 1983 report, *Educating Americans for the 21st Century*, proposes that all students, not just future scientists, need solid grounding in mathematics, science, and technology. This approach foreshadows the STEM emphasis that has since become foundational in education, underscoring early efforts to democratize access to fields often reserved for the elite and underlining the belief that STEM competence is essential for all citizens in a modern economy.

The College Board's *Academic Preparation for College* points to a gap between high school diplomas and college readiness, pushing for tangible skills and knowledge as indicators of readiness. This critique remains relevant as debates continue around college admissions criteria, competency-based education, and the pressures on high schools to bridge the gap between secondary and post-secondary demands.

In *Action for Excellence* (1983), the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth emphasizes the principal's role as the instructional and moral leader of the school. This notion of principalship, as critical to school success, anticipates current models where principals are expected to be both leaders of learning and custodians of school culture, revealing early recognition of leadership's impact on school improvement and educational quality.

Sizer's *Horace's Compromise* (1984) critiques the time-bound structures of high school education, advocating for student-paced progression rather than age-based grading. His call for mastery-based learning over traditional grading presages modern educational reforms such as competency-based education, resonating with today's efforts to personalize learning and dismantle the 'factory model' of schooling.

In *A Place Called School*, Goodlad (1984) argues for nurturing 'risk-takers' who prioritize improvement over compliance. His call for leaders who can inspire collective effort for sustained change reflects the qualities sought in transformative educational leaders today. His ideas parallel discussions on cultivating innovation and resilience among educational leaders as schools face rapid change.

Finally, Boyer's report *High School* underscores goals for curriculum development, student outcomes, and professional growth for teachers and principals. His proposal for Academies for Principals indicates a recognition of the importance of continuous professional development for school leaders. His forward-thinking approach to principal support aligns with contemporary efforts to create leadership networks and professional learning communities for educators.

Currently, the role of the public-school principal is very complex. Levin and Bradley (2019) reviewed evidence from various studies as to why principals leave their jobs and underscored the increasing demands of the job as one of the leading reasons. As research shows, over 20 years ago, a principal's job responsibilities were immense:

Today's principal is faced with the complex task of creating a schoolwide vision, being an instructional leader, planning for effective professional development, guiding teachers, handling discipline, attending events, coordinating buses, tending to external priorities

such as legislative mandates, and all the other minute details that come with supervising a school. (Richard, 2000; as cited in Hertling, 2001, p. 2)

According to the Texas Education Agency (2023), principals in Texas are now responsible for five standards. These standards include instructional leadership, human capital, executive leadership, school culture, and strategic operations. The knowledge and skill indicators for these standards include the following:

Standard 1—Instructional leadership focuses on the principal targeting rigorous curriculum and assessments aligned to state standards, monitoring multiple forms of data to inform instruction, and intervention to maximize student growth (Texas Education Agency, 2023).

Instructional leadership refers to the actions and behaviors of campus principals that support and promote effective teaching and learning. It is the process of guiding and directing the district's academic programs and instructional practices. Skaalvik (2020) asserts

five dimensions of instructional leadership; (a) developing educational goals and visions, (b) creating a collective culture among the staff, (c) motivating teachers, (d) classroom observation and guidance of teachers, and (e) creating a positive and safe learning environment for the students [that the principal can do or delegate to ensure tasks are accomplished]. (p. 483)

Influential instructional leaders are knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction, can analyze and use data to improve teaching and learning, and can communicate effectively with teachers, students, and parents. They also prioritize the needs of students and work to ensure that all students have access to high-quality instruction and resources. Instructional leadership is a

critical component of school improvement efforts. It helps ensure teachers have the support and resources to educate students and effectively promote academic achievement.

Standard 2–Human capital focuses on the principal selecting, placing, and retaining effective teachers and staff by coaching, providing feedback, and aligning professional development opportunities (Texas Education Agency, 2023).

Human capital refers to the collective knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes that individuals possess, which can be used to create a positive school culture and climate focused on academic success. It includes tangible and intangible assets that individuals bring to an organization, such as educational training, experience, and talent. Hughes et al.’s (2014) findings stated personal growth and the ability to receive support from administrators regarding emotional, environmental, and instruction had an impact on a teacher’s decision to stay or leave hard-to-staff schools.

In the context of education, human capital is often viewed as a critical resource that can be leveraged to achieve strategic goals and objectives that the principal has set for the campus. Therefore, principals invest in developing human capital through various means, such as training, mentoring, coaching, and career development opportunities, to build skilled and knowledgeable teachers. “By focusing on key issues related to human capital, you treat faculty/staff members as the most valuable resource and invest in their development, support and supervision” (Texas Education Agency, 2023, Standard 2, para. 1). Overall, human capital represents individuals’ potential to contribute to organizations’ success, and it is a critical resource for achieving sustainable growth and development.

Standard 3–Executive leadership ensures the principal is responsible for being solutions-oriented, treats challenges as opportunities, proactively seeks and acts on feedback, accepts

responsibility for mistakes, and develops meaningful and positive relationships while adhering to the Code of Ethics and Standards Practices for Texas Educators (Texas Education Agency, 2023).

As Mendels (2012) stated, “when most people hear the word principal, they think of the chief, the operations executive, the head of all others, and the person who controls the levers” (p. 54). However, effective leadership is the ability to inspire, motivate, and guide individuals and organizations to achieve their goals and objectives. Effective leadership involves many skills and attributes, but the key is to motivate individuals in the organization. Success requires strategic thinking, communication, decision-making, adaptability, empathy, and accountability which are attributes a principal needs to promote a healthy school culture.

Standard 4–School culture is when the principal develops and implements a shared vision of high expectations for students and staff through clear expectations for conduct and creates an atmosphere of safety that encourages the social, emotional, and physical well-being of staff and students (Texas Education Agency, 2023).

According to Shafer (2018), “most principals have an instinctive awareness that organizational culture is a key element of school success” (para. 1). School culture refers to the values, beliefs, behaviors, and practices that shape a school’s social and academic environment. “In a strong culture, there are many, overlapping, and cohesive interactions among all members of the organization” (Shafer, 2018, para. 6). The sum of attitudes, customs, and traditions defines how students, teachers, administrators, and staff interact with one another and the broader community. Muhammad (2017) stated school culture is a complex web of history, psychology, sociology, economics, and political science. A positive school culture promotes learning, academic achievement, and student well-being. It is characterized by respect, inclusivity,

collaboration, and shared ownership. In addition, a healthy school culture fosters a sense of belonging, trust, and safety, leading to better academic outcomes, higher attendance rates, and lower rates of discipline problems. On the other hand, a negative school culture can harm student achievement and well-being. For example, a toxic culture may be marked by bullying, harassment, and a lack of respect and general support for students and staff. Muhammad stated that to diagnose and eliminate toxic school culture effectively, one must take an honest look at the internal and external factors that create the conditions that make cultural transformation difficult.

Standard 5–Strategic operations focus on the principal building student and staff outcomes through data-driven instruction, diverse and rigorous course offerings, professional development, and advocacy for district policies that meet the needs of students and staff (Texas Education Agency, 2023).

Through these standards, principals must analyze and self-reflect on their leadership. In addition to the complexity of the state standards already mentioned, numerous federal and state mandates have to be followed, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), and constant revisions of the state standards, all of which place immense pressure on school principals. In addition to these mandates, school principals are now responsible for the safety and security of students and staff due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic and an increase in school shootings. Per Banks (2024) regarding school safety,

New legislation that was recently passed added five requirements for school districts to enact in addition to the existing policies. School districts must:

- Employ an armed guard at each public school campus
- Install a silent panic button in all classrooms that immediately connects with law enforcement, fire departments, and emergency services
- Train select district employees to recognize potential harm posed by a student's mental health or substance abuse
- Give an up-to-date map of school campuses to the Texas Department of Public Safety, local law enforcement agencies, and local first responders
- Contact parents and select people when violence is occurring or being investigated at district campuses, facilities, or district-sponsored activities. (para. 9)

The guidelines that public schools in Texas must follow regarding the coronavirus are common sense and should be followed if a child has the flu or any other contagious illness:

As provided in this Department of State Health Services (DSHS) Rule, school systems must exclude students from attending school in person who have or are suspected of having COVID-19, and must immediately notify parents if this is determined while on campus. As noted in the rule, exclusion shall continue until the conditions for re-entry are met:

- For children with symptoms, at least 5 days have passed since symptom onset, and fever free, and other symptoms have improved.
- Children who test positive for COVID-19 but do not have any symptoms must stay home until at least 5 days after the day they were tested.
- Parents must ensure they do not send a child to school on campus if the child has COVID-19 symptoms or is test-confirmed with COVID-19, until the conditions for re-entry are met. (Texas Education Agency, 2022, para. 3)

## **Principal Attrition**

Principal attrition or school leaders' departure is a growing concern in the United States (Miller, 2013; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). Research has shown principal attrition is associated with several adverse outcomes, including lower student achievement, increased teacher turnover, and decreased school climate (Fuller et al., 2007). A study in Texas examined the relationship between principal characteristics and student achievement and found patterns associated with high-teacher turnover and low-student outcomes when compared to principal turnover.

Principal attrition refers to the process by which school principals leave their positions. This can occur for many reasons such as burnout, inadequate administrative support, inadequate compensation, inadequate job satisfaction, reassignment to another position in the same district, being promoted, accepting a position in another district, resignation, termination, retirement, or leaving the profession. Principal attrition can have significant consequences for schools, as principals play a critical role in creating a positive learning environment and leading effective teaching and learning practices (Miller, 2013; Peterson & Deal, 1998). When principals leave, it can disrupt the school's stability, negatively affect staff morale, and impact student achievement (Johnson, 2005). High, principal-attrition rates can also make it difficult for schools to establish and maintain a consistent vision and mission (Norton, 2002). Therefore, school district leaders must have strategies to minimize principal attrition and support the success of their principals (Miller, 2013).

A school district's inability to hire and retain effective school principals leads to low academic achievement that can be seen district wide (Superville, 2019). This inability also contributes to low teacher retention, student achievement, and recruitment causing a financial burden on the school district in training and recruitment.

The actions of principals and teachers—those individuals who lead schools and meet daily with children—most directly affect school success (Adams, 1999; Donaldson, 2006; Fullan, 2001; Marks & Louis, 1999), and research on high-performing schools show a direct link between student achievement and effective principal leadership (Cotton, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). (as cited in Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2008, p. 19)

Nationally, the concern of principal attrition has been evident throughout the past 10 years (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). The national average of tenure of principals in their schools was 4 years as of 2016–2017. This is when data started to arise linking teacher retention to principal attrition. For example, the *Churn* report (School Leaders Network, 2014) estimated a principal turnover rate of 27%, translating to an annual loss of 29.7 principal positions for a district with approximately 110 principals. If turnover were reduced to 24%—meaning only 26.4 principals leaving—such a district could save an estimated \$476,602 by needing to replace 3.3 fewer principals. While this proportional impact is significant for larger districts, smaller districts with fewer principals might see a reduced but still meaningful financial benefit from lowering turnover rates. If churn were reduced to 24% only having 26.4 principals turnover, school districts would save \$476,602 just by having 3.3 fewer candidates to hire. Recently, the Wallace Editorial Team (2019) wrote a blog entitled “What We’re Learning About the Impact of Principal Turnover – And How to Reduce It.” In addition, the Wallace Foundation has focused on identifying the factors that lead to principal attrition (Grissom et al., 2021). Factors uncovered in the Grissom et al. (2021) study for principal attrition included lack of administrative support, job dissatisfaction, and inadequate compensation. Additionally, their research showed principals from traditionally underrepresented or minority backgrounds, racially or ethnically, are more

likely to leave their positions. One other major factor was principal burnout, which resulted from high-stress levels and job demands.

### **Lack of Administrative Support**

A lack of administrative support significantly contributes to principal attrition. Principals require support from their executive directors and district teams to effectively manage the school and address challenges that arise (Lochmiller, 2014). When this support is lacking, principals may become overwhelmed and frustrated, leading to burnout and a desire to leave the profession. In addition, inadequate district support can prevent principals from implementing new initiatives and making necessary changes to improve their school's environment (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2008).

A lack of support can leave principals feeling overwhelmed and isolated, negatively impacting their job performance and overall well-being. Levin (2020) asserted, "By fostering a collaborative culture and ensuring that principals have needed resources and supports, districts play an essential role in the success of site leaders and the students, staff, and families in the school community" (para. 4). Cieminski and Asmus (2023) mentioned some signs that a principal may be feeling a lack of support—principals feel isolated, disconnected from the school community, lack a sense of belonging, experience high-stress levels that overwhelm them, struggle to manage workloads and responsibilities and need help, experience low morale, and job dissatisfaction.

### **Principal Dissatisfaction Due to High Workload**

An integral part of the literature review was finding strategies of job satisfaction, which signifies an employee's pleasurable emotional conditions resulting from achieving a job and the value (Demirtas, 2010). Principal dissatisfaction with their job can arise from various factors such as excessive workload, lack of support, feeling disconnected from the school community,

low job satisfaction, and insufficient resources. Yan (2020) conducted a study to examine the influence of working conditions on different types of principal turnover. Yan (2020), Cieminski and Asmus (2023), and Bartanen et al. (2019) stated some common signs of principal dissatisfaction include:

1. Increased absenteeism: Principals may start taking more time off work due to stress or lack of motivation.
2. Decreased productivity: Principals may be less productive, taking longer to complete tasks or neglecting specific responsibilities.
3. Apathy towards work: Principals may become disengaged from their job and school community, lacking enthusiasm or interest.
4. Poor communication: Principals may need help to communicate with staff, parents, or students, resulting in misunderstandings or conflicts.
5. Reduced morale: The school's overall morale may be negatively impacted if the principal is unhappy with their job.

DeMatthews et al. (2021) stated principals reported a wide array of time-consuming duties: (a) instructional support: classroom observations and feedback, professional learning communities and data meetings, and coaching or giving feedback to teachers; (b) campus administrative work: emails, administrative meetings, and completing district reports/paperwork; (c) parent concerns; and (d) student discipline. Although these duties fall within the scope and sequence of a principal's day, the time allotment for most is very time-consuming. In addition, DeMatthews et al. found principals reported context-specific issues that were both time-consuming and stressful such as interpersonal conflict between teachers, dealing with staff absences, managing building operations, and removing troublesome teachers.

Principal dissatisfaction due to excessive workload is a common issue in many schools (DeMatthews et al., 2019, 2021). Principals are responsible for various tasks, including managing staff, overseeing curriculum, and handling disciplinary issues. As a result, they often have long work hours and heavy workloads, which can lead to stress and burnout. When overworked and overwhelmed, principals may become dissatisfied with their jobs and even consider leaving their positions.

### **Work-Life Balance and Inadequate Compensation**

Principals often need help achieving a work-life balance and need to be more adequately compensated for their demanding work (Leiter & Maslach, 2004). The responsibilities of principals can be all-consuming, including overseeing staff, managing budgets, and maintaining relationships with parents and community members (Levin et al., 2019). This can result in long work hours and little time for personal pursuits or family time. In addition, principals may need more compensation for the demanding workload, which can lead to job dissatisfaction.

School principals are responsible for the overall administration and management of a school, including overseeing academic programs, managing budgets, coordinating with teachers and staff, and ensuring a safe and positive learning environment for students (Rousmaniere, 2013). Despite their essential role, and often times long hours, many school principals receive inadequate compensation, especially principals who work in low-income communities (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Low compensation can make attracting and retaining highly-qualified principals challenging, and as a result negatively affect the school and its students. For example, using the pay scale of a teacher and a new elementary principal in Texas, consider an elementary school teacher under contract for 187 days at a base salary of \$55,500. This teacher earns approximately \$296 per day. Now assume this teacher moves into a principalship position with a contract for

220 days at a salary of \$84,436. The person now earns only \$87 per day more but has added over 1 month to the annual work time, added to the daily work hours most days (considering extra curricular activities [at home and away], after school meetings, community events, etc.), and taking on all the significant responsibilities associated with this leadership role. Although the preceding example is arbitrary, it serves to make a point.

In many cases, the move from teaching to a school principalship position results in a slight salary increase. When the increased workdays are considered along with the actual salary earned, the person often earns only slightly more proportionally than in the previous teaching role. (Levin, 2020, p. 4)

When school principals receive inadequate compensation, it can also impact their ability to perform their duties effectively. For example, if a principal struggles to make ends meet or has to take on additional work to supplement their income, they may have less energy (possibly due to emotional exhaustion) and time to devote to their job.

### **Principal Emotional Demands**

The emotional demands on school principals are among the most critical factors contributing to the high rate at which principals leave their positions. Being a school principal is a highly demanding job that requires a great deal of emotional labor (Levin, 2020). “Emotional labor refers to the work involved in managing one’s own emotions and expressions when interacting with others...it often involves suppressing negative emotions like frustration to present a calm, pleasant demeanor” (Guy-Evans, 2023, para. 1). Principals manage various stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and community members. They are also responsible for ensuring the school runs smoothly and all students receive a high-quality education.

Principals must be able to manage their own emotions while also responding to the emotional needs of others. One experience that can contribute to the emotional demands of principals is compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue has been defined as “stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person” (Figley, 1995, p. 7). This can be highly challenging, mainly when dealing with complex or contentious issues such as disciplinary actions, teacher evaluations, or budget cuts. DeMatthews et al. (2019) identified high levels of compassion fatigue among some urban principals along the U.S.-Mexico border. DeMatthews et al. identified how some principals faced “acute and chronic problems outside of their immediate control” (e.g., students with home-life issues in Mexico, children exposed to physical and sexual abuse and still suffering trauma, students separated from their parents due to deportation), all of which contributed to principal burnout (p. 681).

Over time the emotional demands of the job can take a toll on principals leading to burnout, stress, and, ultimately, attrition (Levin, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2019, 2021). Principals are responsible for managing complex interpersonal relationships with students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders, which can be emotionally taxing. Additionally, principals often face high levels of stress and pressure, leading to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1986). In order to address this issue, schools’ and districts’ leaders need to provide principals with the support and resources they need to manage their emotional labor effectively.

### **Principal Burnout**

Burnout has been described as a psychological phenomenon in which “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’” (Maslach & Jackson, 1986, p. 1). Principal burnout is

a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress and overwork in the role of a school principal. The job demands can be overwhelming and result in burnout if not appropriately managed. Although symptoms of principal burnout may vary in degree and specificity between individuals, the primary symptoms resemble a similar pattern. Lack of engagement, task involvement, and low energy levels characterize principal burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). National longitudinal principal data show principals who leave their position report that low levels of job satisfaction were most highly correlated to a lack of enthusiasm—14.4%, chronic fatigue—14.1%, and a feeling that the stress and disappointments involved in being a principal at their schools are not worth it—13.3% (Goldring & Taie, 2018).

Freudenberger (1974) introduced burnout into the psychological sphere, describing burnout as a state of exhaustion, fatigue, and frustration due to professional activity that fails to produce the expected outcome. Shortly after, in 1976, Maslach introduced burnout in the scientific literature and defined it as a gradual process of fatigue, cynicism, and reduced commitment among social care professionals. Leiter and Maslach (2004) argued that burnout is partly related to the degree of experienced congruence between the six domains within the work context and the individual. They describe six organizational domains that correlate to whether workers will be engaged or burned out by their work: workload, reward, control, fairness, community, and value. Below I explain each of the six domains:

- **Workload:** related to people having too much work and too little time. People who experience chronic work overload can suffer from a lack of rest, recovery, and restoring a balanced work life. Consequently, this exhaustion can lead to underperformance of work tasks and challenges with colleagues.

- Control: the ability for an individual to influence decisions that impact their work, exercise autonomy, and have access to needed resources when problem-solving. Issues will occur when principals feel they have no authority over their decision-making.
- Reward: Monetary, social, and intrinsic rewards that provide recognition for work by colleagues, directors, and other stakeholders. When an individual feels undervalued or neglected, they begin to feel inefficient.
- Community: support and social interactions at work. Principals feeling a sense of belonging and comfort will do well, while conflict and unresolved issues with others will produce negative feelings and frustration.
- Fairness: the perception by an individual that decisions are fair and communicate respect and self-worth. Unfairness can come from inequity in workload or pay, inadequate evaluations or lack of promotions, and no resolution to disputes.
- Values: one's ideals that attract individuals to their jobs. Conflicting values can create tension in the work environment.

Burnout can negatively impact the principal's job performance and overall well-being, as well as the academic success of the students in the school. Principal burnout can lead to dissatisfaction at work.

In summary, lack of administrative support, high workloads, emotional demands, compensation, and burnout are all meaningful components that can contribute to principal attrition. Addressing these pivotal aspects through supportive administrative practices, workload management, and adequate compensation can help reduce turnover rates and increase the retention of school principals.

## **Principal Retention**

To address the growing issue of principal attrition, researchers have identified several key strategies. These include offering comprehensive support systems through mentoring and professional development, improving compensation, and cultivating an inclusive, supportive district culture (Daresh & Playko, 1992; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). Maslach's Burnout Framework is particularly relevant here, as it provides insight into how these strategies directly mitigate the risk of burnout—an underlying factor in principal turnover. Burnout, as defined by Maslach, is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment, all of which are prominent in the high-stress role of a school principal. By reducing these symptoms, districts can foster retention and build stronger leadership.

### **Support System**

A robust support system is a fundamental strategy for increasing principal retention, as it directly addresses the emotional exhaustion component of burnout. Support can take many forms, including mentorship, ongoing professional development, and peer networks, which help principals manage stress and maintain their sense of direction and purpose. Researchers such as Daresh and Playko (1992) and Peterson and Deal (1998) emphasize that mentoring provides new and experienced principals with guidance and consistent feedback, which helps them navigate the complexities of their roles. Without these supports, principals are at risk of experiencing the disorientation and isolation that contribute to burnout.

In a study conducted by Gimbel and Kefor (2018), 16 new principals reported that mentoring played a crucial role in their professional growth. This research underscores the importance of extending mentoring programs, offering more hours of mentor availability, and

providing a structured support system that aligns with the district's leadership framework. This direct support can help principals feel more capable and connected, reducing the likelihood of burnout and turnover.

Additionally, the Learning Policy Institute found that principals must have access to professional development that goes beyond lecture-based workshops and instead focuses on collaborative, context-relevant learning opportunities (Levin, 2020). These experiences empower principals to develop the skills needed to lead effectively while reducing the isolation that often accompanies their role. Maslach's Burnout Framework points to the importance of fostering personal accomplishment, which can be nurtured through ongoing professional development, peer support, and a strong district leadership network. Principals who feel connected to a support system are more likely to thrive and stay in their positions longer, thus increasing retention rates.

### **Self-Care**

Self-care is another critical strategy for preventing burnout among school principals, particularly in addressing emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Su-Keene and DeMatthews (2022) highlight positive psychological strategies like savoring moments of joy, which help principals focus on the rewarding aspects of their work. Principals can find relief from stress by taking time to appreciate moments of pride, such as student achievements or school-wide successes. This reframing technique is essential for combating the daily stressors that lead to burnout.

King et al. (2022) further argue that principals should adopt regular self-care practices, such as setting daily intentions or engaging in laughter, to protect their well-being and maintain a healthy work-life balance. When principals prioritize self-care, they can better manage their emotional and psychological needs, reducing the likelihood of burnout. This aligns directly with

Maslach's assertion that personal accomplishment is a buffer against burnout. By proactively focusing on self-care, principals can maintain the resilience needed to handle the pressures of their role.

Moreover, Mahfouz et al. (2022) advocate for reducing after-hours work expectations, such as responding to emails over weekends, to promote work-life balance. Ensuring that principals have time to recharge away from their professional responsibilities helps to prevent emotional exhaustion. Districts that prioritize these practices not only support their principals but also create an environment where self-care is valued as part of the leadership culture. Incorporating these self-care strategies directly addresses the burnout framework, fostering well-being and long-term commitment among principals.

## **Compensation**

Inadequate compensation is a significant factor in principal attrition, as it can exacerbate feelings of depersonalization and diminished accomplishment, both of which are central to Maslach's Burnout Framework. When principals perceive their compensation as inequitable, particularly in comparison to the high demands and time commitments of their roles, they are more likely to experience dissatisfaction and ultimately leave the profession. Levin et al. (2020) found that principals frequently cited salary dissatisfaction as a key reason for seeking positions elsewhere, a trend that worsens retention.

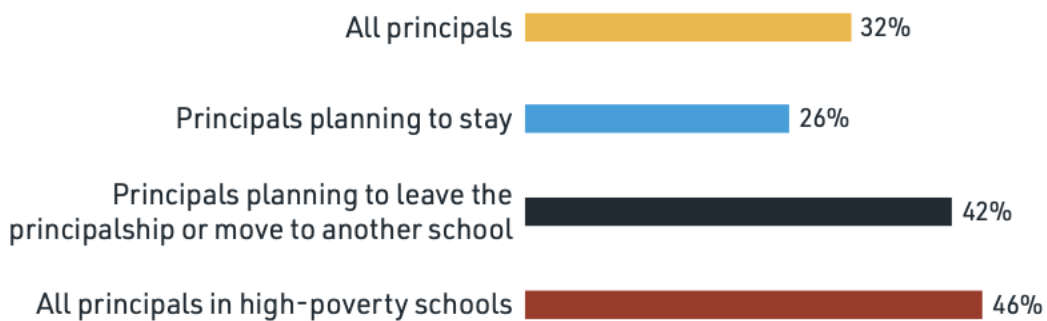
Grissom and Bartanen (2019) support this by noting that compensation directly influences principals' decisions to remain in or leave their positions. Competitive salaries that reflect the demands of the role are crucial in retaining skilled leaders. Districts that fail to address salary disparities, especially when principals' pay does not align with the increased workload and responsibilities they manage, risk higher turnover rates. Addressing compensation not only

attracts talent but also affirms the value placed on principals’ contributions, which helps mitigate burnout.

Figure 2 shows the data regarding principal retention and salary.

**Figure 2**

*Principals Who Believe Their Salaries and Benefits are not Fair Compensation*



Source: NASSP-LPI Principal Survey, 2019.

*Note.* From “Supporting a Strong, Stable Principal Workforce: What Matters and What Can Be Done” by S. Levin, C. Scott, M. Yang, M. Leung, and K. Bradley, 2020b, p. 18

(<https://www.nassp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/LPI-and-NASSP-Research-Agenda-Final-Report.pdf>).

**Positive School Culture**

A positive school culture is another essential element in reducing burnout and increasing retention, as it fosters an environment where principals feel supported and valued. Dinsdale (2017) and Shafer (2018) stress that principals play a critical role in shaping the culture of their schools, and in turn, a healthy school culture promotes collaboration and well-being among staff. Principals who foster a supportive culture can reduce feelings of isolation and depersonalization in their leadership roles, directly aligning with the burnout framework.

Peterson and Deal (1998) suggest that a positive school culture emerges from shared values, norms, and collaboration among staff, all of which contribute to the overall success of the school. When principals are part of a positive, collaborative environment, their work feels more rewarding, reinforcing a sense of accomplishment. This reduces the risk of burnout and encourages longevity in their leadership roles. Furthermore, district leaders can support principals by creating inclusive and supportive climates at the district level, which strengthens the overall culture of collaboration and care.

### **Conclusion**

Incorporating the Maslach Burnout Framework into the study of principal retention allows for a deeper understanding of how burnout factors—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment—impact turnover. By addressing these elements through comprehensive support systems, self-care practices, fair compensation, and positive school culture, districts can create environments that not only retain principals but also help them thrive. As school leaders experience less burnout, they are better equipped to lead their schools successfully, contributing to the overall stability and success of the educational system.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore and understand the lived experiences of principals who have either chosen to leave or continue in their roles, focusing on the personal and systemic factors influencing these decisions. Given the demands and complexities of the principalship, phenomenology is well-suited for this inquiry, as it enables an exploration of how principals perceive, internalize, and react to factors like burnout and organizational support (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2023). This method allows for a deep examination of the overt and nuanced elements of participants' experiences, essential for understanding the multi-dimensional phenomenon of principal attrition (Duke, 1984).

#### **Research Questions**

The study is guided by the following research questions, which underscore the commitment to understanding both the challenges and supportive elements in the principal role:

Q1. What influences lead principals in public schools to leave their positions?

Q2. What conditions contribute to principals remaining in their roles?

The structure of this methodology includes sections on research design, participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis, each rooted in the phenomenological framework.

#### **Research Design**

The phenomenological research design adopted here emphasizes capturing participants' subjective experiences, providing insight into the internal and external pressures faced by principals. This design allows for the identification of themes across participants' accounts,

highlighting the shared nature of these experiences without losing individual context (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994), prioritizes "meaning-making" as individuals retrospectively interpret their experiences, making it ideal for studying how principals understand and make sense of their roles.

The adoption of phenomenology aligns with Duke's (1984) emphasis on understanding educators' narratives through a combination of retrospective insight and contextual analysis. Phenomenology offers a holistic approach to capturing not only the emotional strain but also the deeper motivations and resilience mechanisms that influence the principal role (Van Manen, 2023). Through this lens, I seek to address the broader, systemic factors alongside individual challenges, providing a balanced view of the role's demands and the factors that support or hinder longevity.

In-depth interviews were conducted with six principals: three who have served as principals for one to five years and three who left the principalship within one to five years. This approach aligns with Duke's (1984) emphasis on the importance of capturing educators' reflections on their experiences to understand career shifts and professional challenges.

### **Participant Selection**

This study used purposive criterion sampling to select participants, ensuring that individuals with relevant characteristics were included (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). The sample consisted of six public school principals from urban districts in Texas, including three who are currently serving and three who exited their roles within the past five years. This purposive sampling approach provided a robust basis for exploring the nuanced dynamics of principal attrition and retention.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Principals serving in Texas urban public schools.
2. Experience in the principal role for at least one year but no more than five years.
3. Exclusion of principals from charter schools, alternative schools, and single-grade or single-gender schools.

Participants were recruited via email, with contact information for those who had exited their roles sourced from current principals and district administrators. Six principals consented to participate, and interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through a secure video platform, scheduled at mutually convenient times.

**Figure 3:**

*Participant Data Table*

<b>Current / Former Principal</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years as Principal</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>School Type</b>
Former	Mr. Bob	52	5	Male	Middle School
Former	Ms. Eva	45	2	Female	Elementary School
Current	Ms. Jacobs	38	3	Female	Elementary School
Current	Ms. Kay	37	1	Female	Elementary School
Former	Ms. Love	43	1	Female	Middle School
Current	Ms. Miranda	44	4	Female	Middle School

## **Instrumentation**

As the primary research instrument, I designed the study, adapted interview protocols initially developed by Jimerson (n.d.), and ensured methodological rigor throughout (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The interview questions were informed by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) framework, which includes dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. This aligns with the study's focus on burnout as a significant contributor to attrition.

For current principals, the interviews also explored coping mechanisms, such as administrative support, compensation, and a positive school culture, that mitigate burnout and promote retention. For former principals, questions focused on the critical moments when burnout and other factors became unmanageable, culminating in their departure.

## **Trustworthiness of the Instrument**

To establish trustworthiness in this qualitative inquiry, I engaged an expert panel of three seasoned principals, each with over three years of experience, to validate the interview questions and ensure alignment with the study's objectives (Olson, 2010). Additionally, I conducted a pilot with practicing principals, incorporating their feedback to refine the questions for clarity and depth, ensuring they elicited detailed responses relevant to the study's aims.

## **Data Collection**

The data collection process for this study followed a phenomenological approach designed to deeply engage with participants' lived experiences to understand the complexities of burnout and retention among principals (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2023). Using semi-structured interviews, each conversation lasted between 90–120 minutes, allowing participants

ample time to share their reflections on the challenges and motivations influencing their career paths. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via a secure video platform, digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim to capture rich, accurate accounts, following the guidelines provided by Saldana (2021). Each transcript was meticulously reviewed and cross-checked for consistency, aligning with Creswell and Poth's (2018) emphasis on achieving depth and accuracy in phenomenological studies.

The interview questions, based on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) framework, were crafted to encourage participants to explore specific facets of burnout, including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Drawing on Creswell's (2013) guidance for phenomenological interviews, the questions allowed participants to freely narrate their experiences, reflecting on both their challenges and the resources that helped them cope. Active listening techniques such as summarizing and asking clarifying questions, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), were used to facilitate participant comfort and deepen the conversation, fostering rapport essential for obtaining authentic insights. This process, as Creswell (2014) emphasizes, helps participants feel understood, enabling richer, more meaningful responses about the complex personal and professional dynamics impacting their decisions to remain in or leave the principalship.

Follow-up conversations were conducted as needed to ensure clarity and deepen understanding, a technique encouraged by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) to enrich qualitative data. Throughout data collection, I maintained a reflexive journal to document personal biases, aligning with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendations for ensuring reflexivity, a critical practice in phenomenological research. By consistently engaging in self-reflection, I was able to separate my own assumptions from the participants' narratives, enhancing the reliability and

depth of the findings. Duke's (1984) perspective on the principal's evolving role further informed this process, as participants' insights illuminated how the pressures and expectations unique to their positions influenced burnout and retention factors.

### **Data Analysis**

Following Creswell's (2013) guidelines for qualitative analysis, data were analyzed using thematic coding. I systematically coded and categorized the data around themes derived from the MBI framework—specifically, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment—as primary lenses. The coding process involved repeated readings of interview transcripts to immerse myself in participants' narratives, followed by categorical aggregation (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) to identify shared themes. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout to bracket personal biases, thus preserving the authenticity of participants' experiences. Steps in analysis included:

1. Reading and re-reading transcripts to immerse fully in the data and identify preliminary themes.
2. Categorizing responses according to the MBI dimensions and other emergent themes relevant to attrition and retention.
3. Journaling throughout the coding process to maintain reflexivity and minimize potential researcher bias, in line with phenomenological best practices (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study is its sample size; though rich in data, the findings may have limited generalizability beyond Texas urban districts. Additional limitations include:

1. Demographic constraints: The focus on Texas urban public schools may not represent principals in other regions or school types.
2. Temporal constraints: Conducted at a specific time, the study may not capture evolving factors influencing principal attrition.

Efforts were made to foster rapport with participants to encourage reflective, honest responses, mitigating some of these limitations.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Strict ethical guidelines were followed to protect participants, including completion of the CITI Human Subjects Research course in February 2022 and securing Texas Christian University IRB approval before recruitment. Informed consent was obtained, and participant confidentiality was ensured through pseudonyms and secure storage of data. Upon study completion, data will be transferred to the office of the committee chair at Texas Christian University.

### **Timeline**

Following IRB approval in March 2024, recruitment commenced immediately. Data collection, including interviews and initial analysis, was scheduled for June to July 2024, with comprehensive analysis completed by August 2024 and the final report submitted by September 2024.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the phenomenological methodology guiding the exploration of six school principals' experiences with burnout and attrition. It covered research design, participant

selection, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis methods, with attention to limitations and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 will present the study's findings, highlighting key themes and insights emerging from the data.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

In Chapter 4, I present the findings from the research conducted on principal attrition. The high turnover rate of principals in public schools poses a significant challenge for school districts. When principals leave their positions, it affects the school's culture, stability, and academic performance (Grissom et al., 2021; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of principals and examine the factors that influence their decisions to remain in or exit the principalship. It includes an analysis of data gathered from interviews with current principals and those who have left the role. The study was guided by two broad questions:

1. What influences principals in public schools to depart from their positions?
2. What conditions influence principals to remain in their current role?

In this study, I utilized a qualitative research design to investigate the experiences and perspectives of school principals. In-depth data were collected through semi-structured interviews. I first gathered general information about each principal's educational background, followed by an analysis that identified emergent themes.

#### **Participants**

The participants included current principals still in their roles and former principals who left their roles within the past 5 years. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant data. In this phenomenological research study, I used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to collect data from six principals in urban educational settings who have remained in their positions or left their positions as principal

within 5 years (Creswell & Gutterman, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants' data were collected during the summer of 2024.

### **Former Principals**

Ms. Love, a 43-year-old bi-racial woman of Black and White heritage, has dedicated 20 years to the field of education, culminating in her role as a middle school principal for a brief period at a Texas public school serving 600 students, 80% of whom are African American and 20% Hispanic. Prior to her principalship, Ms. Love amassed extensive experience in various educational capacities, including middle school English language arts teacher, department chair, district instructional coach, and assistant principal. This multifaceted background underscores her comprehensive understanding of instructional practices and leadership dynamics. Although her tenure as a principal was limited to one year, her diverse roles in education equipped her with valuable insights into curriculum development and pedagogical strategies, enabling her to address the unique challenges faced by her student population. Her commitment to fostering an inclusive and equitable learning environment highlights her dedication to educational leadership.

Ms. Eva, a 45-year-old White Latina fluent in both English and Spanish, possesses 22 years of experience in education, having served as an elementary school principal for two years in an urban public school in Texas. Her career trajectory includes significant roles such as bilingual elementary teacher, district bilingual coach, literacy coach, and assistant principal. While her principalship was relatively short, her extensive background in bilingual education positions her to effectively advocate for the needs of linguistically diverse students. Ms. Eva's dedication to bilingual literacy initiatives demonstrates her commitment to fostering an educational atmosphere that values linguistic diversity and cultural competence. Her leadership

practices reflect a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural factors influencing student success, reinforcing her capacity to implement effective educational policies.

Mr. Bob, a 52-year-old African American male, has devoted 22 years to education, including a five-year tenure as a middle school principal overseeing a diverse student body of over 700, with 65% Hispanic and 30% African American representation. His career commenced as a special education inclusion teacher at the elementary level, followed by a role as a district special education coach and subsequently as a middle school assistant principal. Mr. Bob's extensive experience in special education enriches his administrative approach, allowing him to implement inclusive practices and advocate for at-risk students. His leadership emphasizes the importance of equity in educational access, showcasing his commitment to addressing systemic barriers that impact marginalized communities. Mr. Bob's contributions to fostering an inclusive school climate demonstrate his capacity to inspire and empower both staff and students.

### **Current Principals**

Ms. Kay, a 37-year-old White female, currently leads an urban elementary school in Texas, where she oversees a student population of 372, with an impressive 96% Hispanic demographic. Initially not inclined towards a career in education, Ms. Kay dedicated ten years to teaching pre-kindergarten and fourth-grade students, which catalyzed her transition into an instructional coach. This pivotal role facilitated her development as an educational leader and ultimately propelled her into the principalship. Ms. Kay's commitment to improving educational practices and addressing the cultural and linguistic needs of her students underscores her focus on equity and inclusivity. Her leadership style fosters collaboration and community engagement, positioning her as an advocate for systemic change within her school.

At 44 years old, Ms. Miranda, a White female bilingual in English and Spanish, serves as the principal of an urban middle school with a student body of 700, 98% of whom are Hispanic. Initially pursuing a career in journalism, her transition into education began with four years of teaching, followed by nine years as an assistant principal. Ms. Miranda's ongoing pursuit of a doctoral degree reflects her commitment to professional growth and academic excellence. Her leadership in a predominantly Hispanic school emphasizes her dedication to fostering a culturally responsive educational environment. Ms. Miranda's efforts to implement evidence-based practices demonstrate her capacity to effect positive change and improve student outcomes, reinforcing her role as a transformative leader in education.

Ms. Jacobs, a 38-year-old Hispanic female and bilingual educator, currently serves as the principal of a public elementary school in Texas, overseeing 511 students, with 92% identifying as Hispanic and 85% classified as economically disadvantaged. Her educational journey began with five years of teaching reading to students in grades 6–9, followed by a role as an instructional coach and two years as an assistant principal. Now in her third year as principal, Ms. Jacobs holds a master's degree and actively engages in initiatives aimed at promoting literacy and academic achievement. Her leadership approach is characterized by a commitment to equity and social justice, as she seeks to address the unique challenges faced by her students. Ms. Jacobs's strategies for fostering a supportive learning environment reflect her dedication to enhancing educational outcomes for economically disadvantaged populations, affirming her role as a champion for educational equity.

### **What Influences Principal Retention and Attrition**

The analysis was guided by Maslach's Burnout Theory, which provides a framework for understanding the emotional and psychological experiences influencing individuals in high-stress

professions, such as educational leadership. This theoretical lens emphasizes the interplay between workload, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of efficacy, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the data collected from participants.

The themes that emerged not only address the direct responses to the research questions but also reflect the broader context of principals' experiences in their roles. By incorporating Maslach's theory, the analysis seeks to illuminate the conditions that lead to both the departure from and retention of principal positions, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. Each theme will be explored in detail, illustrating how the data aligns with the theoretical framework and contributes to the ongoing discourse on educational leadership and job satisfaction. This structured approach enables a deeper insight into the motivations and challenges faced by principals, ultimately informing recommendations for practice and policy in the field of education.

## **Principals' Perspectives on Principal Retention**

### ***Theme 1: Fulfillment Amidst Friction***

The theme of "Fulfillment Amidst Friction" encapsulates the complex interplay between job satisfaction and the myriad challenges faced by principals in public schools. Many current principals expressed profound job satisfaction, primarily derived from their ability to positively influence students and staff. As Ms. Kay shared, "The best part of my day is when a student tells me they're succeeding because they know someone believes in them. That's what keeps me going." This deep sense of fulfillment often serves as a powerful motivator, enabling principals to persevere in their roles despite significant difficulties.

However, the narrative of satisfaction is frequently mixed with substantial challenges. Participants highlighted that excessive workloads and administrative tasks create barriers to achieving their educational vision. Ms. Miranda, for instance, lamented, “I came into this role to lead learning, but sometimes I feel buried under paperwork. It’s like there’s always one more form, one more compliance report, that takes me away from what I want to do.” This sentiment reflects the frustration many principals feel when managerial demands detract from their core purpose as educational leaders.

Additionally, principals often grapple with a sense of isolation due to a lack of adequate support from district administration and peers. As Mr. Bob expressed, “I often feel like I’m on an island. There’s so much pressure from the top, but not enough support to really make it work.” This isolation exacerbates stress levels, making it more challenging for principals to sustain their job satisfaction in the long term.

Thus, while principals derive immense joy from their impact on the educational community, the friction created by workload, administrative burdens, and insufficient support structures cannot be overlooked. This duality of fulfillment and friction reveals the nuanced reality of their experiences and underscores the need for systemic changes to enhance the conditions under which principals operate. Addressing these challenges is critical not only for principal retention but also for sustaining the overall health of educational institutions.

**Impact on Students and Staff.** The role of a principal in shaping both student and staff success is undeniably profound, as their leadership directly influences the educational environment and overall outcomes. Ms. Eva emphasized this responsibility, noting, “One of the biggest responsibilities is ensuring that students are successful, making the necessary growth, and along with that comes the responsibility that teachers have the resources and materials they

need to make the scholars successful." This statement underscores the principal's pivotal role in not only fostering student achievement but also in equipping teachers with the necessary tools to ensure academic growth.

Further emphasizing the broader scope of leadership, Ms. Miranda reflected on the principal's responsibility to unify diverse stakeholders toward a common vision. She explained,

The biggest responsibility for a principal is getting everyone to understand our priorities. Even though we might have different visions for how to get there, the priority is the mission of the school... getting buy-in from not just your teaching staff and community, but from students, parents, and other community members who exert political power.

This highlights the importance of clear communication and alignment of goals to ensure collective effort and minimize resistance. As Ms. Miranda further explained, establishing a clear vision and ensuring all stakeholders understand and align with it can reduce pushback, ultimately making the principal's role more manageable.

Ms. Jacobs offered another perspective, focusing on the difficult decisions principals must sometimes make for the well-being of students. Reflecting on her experience with a teacher underperforming both academically and emotionally, she shared,

I had to put a teacher on a growth plan to support her, but when she was not successful, having the final conversation was tough... I realized, looking at the data of students' performance, both academic and social-emotional, that she had no business in education. It was hard to have that crucial conversation... but at the same time, I knew it was the best decision based on the emotional and academic damage done to the students.

This insight highlights the difficult yet necessary role principals play in safeguarding the educational and emotional well-being of students, sometimes requiring them to make decisions that prioritize student success over the retention of staff.

These lived experiences collectively illustrate the substantial influence principals have on both student achievement and staff performance. Their leadership shapes the academic environment, drives success, and fosters a positive school culture, making their role integral to the functioning and success of schools.

**Workload.** The workload of school principals is extensive and frequently overwhelming, significantly affecting their capacity to lead effectively. Many principals, while passionate about making a difference, find themselves weighed down by administrative duties that detract from their ability to focus on instructional leadership. Ms. Miranda, for instance, expressed her commitment to positively impacting her school but acknowledged that the demands of the job often made it difficult to prioritize instructional matters. "The administrative burden is so heavy that it leaves little time for instructional leadership," she noted during an interview.

Time management is another critical challenge for principals, particularly when there is a lack of established structures within the school. Ms. Miranda shared an incident highlighting this issue, recalling how she noticed that students often congregated in an unsupervised hallway, which led to frequent altercations. In response, she created a new teacher duty station to address the problem.

I had noticed that we had many fights in a particular hallway. The students would congregate there because there was no teacher supervision in the area. I then had to create a new teacher duty station in that particular hallway and walk the halls to ensure that

teachers were on duty and students were not hanging around the area. This allowed for our fights to decrease in that one spot.

This example illustrates the proactive measures principals often take to manage both student behavior and staff responsibilities in real-time.

In addition to these day-to-day responsibilities, principals are frequently tasked with addressing emotional and traumatic events that affect the entire school community. Mr. Bob recounted a particularly difficult experience of leading his school through the aftermath of a teacher's death during the COVID-19 pandemic. Balancing sensitivity with leadership, he had to make decisions that would both respect the memory of the deceased and maintain the emotional well-being of students and staff.

I had to make a decision to close the room off, and then there were some who wanted to reopen it. But we still had three to four months left in the school year, so I decided to leave it closed for the remainder of the year and reopen it the next year.

The emotional strain of such decisions is a reminder of the complex, human-centered challenges principals face, often without a roadmap for how to proceed.

Ms. Love similarly described the unexpected challenges of managing adult staff members, recounting a situation where two assistant principals nearly came to physical blows over a disagreement. Her swift intervention highlighted not only the conflict resolution skills required of principals but also their role as role models for staff and students.

I had to get off a Zoom meeting because they were physically getting ready to fight each other over some disagreement. I spoke to them one-on-one, gave them time and space without each other, and by the end of the day, we crafted a plan moving forward. I reminded them that students look up to them and that teachers were already terrified of

being in a pandemic. They needed to put their differences aside for the greater good, and that approach worked.

These personal accounts underscore the immense pressures placed on principals as they navigate a wide range of duties, often with little preparation or support for the multifaceted nature of their roles. From administrative tasks and time management to crisis leadership and conflict resolution, principals are expected to perform a multitude of roles that demand not only managerial skills but also emotional resilience. The combination of these demands contributes to the high levels of stress and burnout that many school leaders experience, further complicating efforts to retain them in the profession.

### ***Theme 2: Support Systems***

Support systems, particularly mentorship and peer support, were identified as essential aspects of principal retention. Participants highlighted the importance of mentorship in providing guidance, feedback, and emotional support, helping them navigate the challenges of leadership. Mentors offered experienced perspectives, which helped principals develop strategies and make informed decisions. Peer support and networking also played a key role, as principals described how connecting with colleagues allowed them to share experiences, exchange ideas, and find reassurance in a collaborative environment. These support systems helped principals manage the demands of the role and contributed to their decision to stay in their positions.

**Mentorship.** Mentorship is a pivotal phenomenon in the lived experiences of principals, shaping their professional growth and development through both formal and informal interactions. Mr. Bob reflected on his experience of being mentored by his former principal and executive director, illustrating how these relationships were central to his development. He stated:

My prior principal was there to support me, essentially allowing me to do much of the work as an assistant principal, so when I became a principal, the transition was minimal because he had already handed over the reins to me in my previous role.

His narrative highlights how the experience of gradually assuming responsibility fostered a smoother transition to the principalship, emphasizing the importance of experiential learning facilitated by mentorship.

The essence of mentorship, as perceived by the participants, is further illustrated through Ms. Jacobs' account. She expressed,

My former principal was definitely a major resource. I would text her constantly, asking questions or running ideas by her. Since she had been the principal at the school before me, it felt like she was still guiding me, helping me navigate my steps.

Her lived experience underscores the significance of sustained, accessible mentorship, which provided a sense of continuity and psychological safety as she assumed the responsibilities of principal leadership.

Ms. Love shared a similar phenomenological perspective, recalling the enduring influence of her former principal: "My previous principal, when I was in the system, was very instrumental. Even now, I occasionally reach out to him, as well as an executive director I worked with. They were key figures in providing me with support." Her description reveals the long-term relational impact of mentorship, wherein supportive figures continue to play a role in her professional journey even beyond her initial transition into leadership.

In essence, the lived experiences of these principals reveal that mentorship is not only critical for their initial preparation but also provides an ongoing relational framework for navigating the complexities of leadership. The phenomenological accounts highlight how

personalized and sustained mentorship facilitates professional growth, fosters resilience, and enhances the principal's ability to meet the demands of their role. The meaning of mentorship, as experienced by these participants, underscores its essential role in cultivating a sense of readiness and support throughout their leadership journey.

**Peer Support and Networking.** Peer support and networking are pivotal in the professional development and success of school principals, as demonstrated by the experiences of several educational leaders. The ability to consult with colleagues and build a network of trusted advisors plays an essential role in navigating the complexities of school leadership.

Mr. Bob, for example, highlighted how crucial it was to seek guidance from more experienced principals during his first year. He noted, "I would ask other principals that I met along the way, like Dr. CJ. I would pick ideas from them every now and then if I needed assistance or had questions regarding procedures and systems as a principal." This statement emphasizes how novice principals often rely on the insights and advice of seasoned leaders to establish effective operational systems and gain confidence in their decision-making.

Similarly, Ms. Jacobs shared how peer support empowered her to embrace her role as the school's leader. She recalled receiving valuable advice from a trusted member of her leadership team, who encouraged her to step fully into the principalship.

My very first year, I had a very good leadership team, and I would constantly make reference to my former principal. One day, my data analyst said, 'We need to talk.' At that moment, she told me, 'You need to stop making reference to the previous principal because now you are the principal. This is your school, and you are smart and capable of making decisions.'"

This experience reflects the importance of having a supportive team that not only provides guidance but also fosters confidence and autonomy in leadership.

Ms. Eva also illustrated the value of professional networks, particularly during the early stages of her principalship. She described how her connections with former leaders served as a critical source of support.

My previous administrators—previous leaders that I have had—I relied on them a lot. I asked a lot of questions. I called them daily to get help or just assurance that I wasn't doing something completely off, and that really did help a lot. I felt like we were on the same playing field that entire time, but then slowly things began to shift to where I was like, 'Oh, now I'm actually able to give them advice as well as get advice from them.'"

Her experience highlights the reciprocal nature of peer support, where mentoring relationships can evolve into collaborative exchanges of expertise.

The lived experiences of these principals demonstrate the profound impact that peer support and networking have on school leadership. Access to a community of colleagues, whether through formal mentoring or informal consultations, provides principals with not only practical solutions but also emotional and moral encouragement. This shared network becomes a vital resource in developing confidence and competence, ultimately fostering both individual growth and leadership effectiveness.

## **Principals' Perspectives on Principal Attrition**

### ***Theme 1: Pulled to the Brink or Pushed to the Exit***

Participants' lived experiences revealed that principal attrition was primarily driven by feelings of burnout, overwhelming stress, an inability to maintain work-life balance and no support. Many former principals described how the constant demands of the role, combined with

insufficient support, led to emotional exhaustion and a diminished sense of accomplishment. This imbalance between personal and professional life deeply affected their well-being, ultimately influencing their decision to leave. These experiences highlight the emotional and mental strain associated with the principalship, underscoring the complex, personal reasons behind their departure.

**Burnout.** Principal burnout represents a significant challenge that can deeply affect both the effectiveness and the sustainability of leadership within schools. Emotional exhaustion, one of the key dimensions of burnout, is marked by feelings of being emotionally depleted and overwhelmed by the responsibilities inherent to the role of a principal. This emotional toll is compounded by the personal investment required in addressing the needs of students, staff, and the wider school community.

Ms. Love, a first-year principal, highlighted the importance of maintaining a professional detachment and leading by example as critical strategies for mitigating emotional exhaustion. She emphasized,

Now we're in a pandemic, and so the priority was making sure that they knew that I heard them, understood them, and knew that their safety was a priority for me as well, so that was a responsibility and a challenge that I faced into my first school year.

Ms. Love's reflection speaks to the importance of fostering emotional resilience, especially in the face of the unique and often personal challenges posed by leadership in such a turbulent period. Her experience underlines the necessity of leaders balancing empathy with self-preservation to navigate the emotional demands of their role.

In addition to emotional exhaustion, the physical and mental strains associated with long working hours and the constant pressure to meet performance expectations further contribute to

burnout. These pressures not only exacerbate emotional strain but can also lead to physical health issues, emphasizing the critical need for principals to prioritize their own health and well-being to maintain their leadership capacities over time.

The inability to manage the relentless demands of the role is another major contributor to burnout. Ms. Eva, an experienced principal, stressed the importance of seeking support and embracing delegation as essential tools for reducing the burden of leadership. She explained,

One thing that I have learned is to really delegate and rely on others—not completely, but trust them that they can do the job which I’ve assigned them to do, and tell them some of the parameters and let them do it the way they want because they are going to be the owner, so they have to take ownership of it.

This insight underscores the significance of trusting one’s team and distributing responsibility, which not only alleviates personal stress but also empowers others within the organization.

Collectively, these experiences illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of principal burnout, highlighting the emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion that can arise from the role. The strategies of emotional resilience, self-care, effective delegation, and trust in one’s team emerge as crucial in mitigating burnout and fostering sustainable leadership within the demanding context of school administration.

Burnout among school principals, particularly in the form of emotional exhaustion, represents a serious threat to their ability to lead effectively over time. Insights from principals, such as the need for emotional resilience, delegation, and self-care, reflect the importance of coping strategies in addressing the multi-dimensional nature of burnout. By prioritizing their own well-being and relying on supportive systems, principals can mitigate the effects of burnout and sustain their leadership despite the challenges of the role.

**Stress.** Stress is a pervasive and inescapable reality for principals, driven by the high demands and multifaceted responsibilities of their roles. One of the most significant contributors to stress is the intense job-related pressure, which often encroaches on personal and family life. Ms. Love, a principal with one year of experience, described the stress she encountered as "unbearable," noting its profound impact on her ability to maintain a balance between her professional and personal obligations. She remarked,

The biggest stress were always the adults and them being in their feelings, causing many challenges each and every day. As for the students, you can normally talk to and guide them, but with adults, you have to work magic when it comes to handling them.

Her reflection underscores how interpersonal challenges with staff members, rather than interactions with students, can often be the most stressful aspect of the role, necessitating complex emotional and diplomatic skills.

Similarly, Ms. Eva highlighted the strain associated with administrative responsibilities that frequently divert attention away from instructional leadership. She expressed frustration over the excessive documentation and resource management tasks that interfered with her ability to focus on classroom instruction.

I feel that we're constantly dealing with different resources and people, especially at a Title I campus that is already struggling. We're given so many materials that we don't know what to do with, so I have to spend time reviewing the resources and not able to get into classrooms to see the instruction.

Her experience points to the competing demands that exacerbate stress for school leaders, particularly when administrative duties hinder their ability to engage directly in teaching and learning, which should be their primary focus.

Ms. Jacobs further illuminated the stressful nature of managing relationships with staff, particularly when staff members resist decisions made in the best interest of students. She explained,

When it comes to some of my staff members, again, having those crucial conversations—that every decision that I make is in the best interest of the child and not necessarily in the best interest of them. I feel like some of them have a hard time understanding that it is not personal, but we are in the education business to do whatever is best for the student.

This tension between prioritizing student needs while managing staff expectations creates a significant source of stress, requiring principals to engage in difficult conversations while maintaining the overarching mission of the school.

The role of a principal requires balancing the needs and expectations of various stakeholders, including students, staff, parents, and the broader school community. This balancing act is particularly stressful when confronting challenging situations or conflicts, as it demands both diplomatic finesse and decisive action. Navigating these pressures, especially within the constraints of time and resources, can make the role of a principal overwhelming, contributing to the high levels of stress experienced by educational leaders.

**Lack of Work-Life Balance.** Work-life balance is a significant concern for school principals, whose demanding roles often encroach upon their personal lives, leading to adverse effects on their well-being. One of the primary challenges faced by principals is the insufficient time available for family and personal life.

Ms. Love, a first year principal, emphasized that retaining principals requires a concerted effort to reduce unnecessary paperwork and provide more comprehensive support. Her insight highlights the administrative burdens that consume valuable time, which could otherwise be

spent with family or pursuing personal interests. Ms. Love said she “wish[ed] the district learned how to facilitate better mandating things especially since many of them have been out of the classroom for quite a while.” The excessive workload not only diminishes time for personal life but also contributes to long-term stress and burnout, making it difficult for principals to maintain a healthy work-life balance. The overwhelming work hours that principals endure further exacerbate the struggle to achieve balance.

Mr. Bob, another experienced principal, pointed out that the demands placed on him by multiple executive directors, each with different expectations—some rooted in secondary education, others not—created an additional layer of complexity and strain. Mr. Bob said,

I had multiple directors, one person operating one particular way another director operating another way so that was hectic but definitely even more so when that particular director didn't have any type of secondary experience it became challenge to run a school.

The varied and often conflicting demands from the leadership above add to the already heavy workload, making it challenging for principals to manage their time effectively. This relentless pace leaves little room for personal activities, contributing to a sense of imbalance that can be difficult to rectify. The impact of these overwhelming responsibilities on personal well-being cannot be overstated. The constant pressure to meet diverse expectations, coupled with the extensive hours required to fulfill the role, often leads to physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. The erosion of personal time and the resulting strain on well-being can diminish a principal's effectiveness and satisfaction in their role, ultimately affecting their ability to lead and inspire others.

**Inadequate Support.** Inadequate support from higher administration poses a significant challenge that can profoundly impact the effectiveness and well-being of school principals. This lack of support manifests in various ways, often undermining principals' authority and ability to lead effectively. Ms. Love, for example, shared a vivid experience that underscores this issue. She recounted,

I called my executive director and informed her that we lost Mr. So So. I was ready to give her a synopsis of what the teacher had informed me about his issues and why he was leaving, but she stopped me and interrupted, saying, 'I don't care about people. I only care about numbers. So what do you have to share with me pertaining to numbers?' I thought she was joking, but her face was stone cold. I explained that the teacher's departure would affect our numbers because he was our math teacher. This was an eye-opening moment, something I'd only expected to see in a movie. Yet, during a pandemic, the leader above me told me that people don't matter—only numbers do.

Ms. Love further recalled an occasion where her executive director arranged for her to shadow another principal, an experience that led her to question her own core beliefs. Ms. Love noted,

My executive director has a different philosophy than mine. I am more of a people-centered leader, while she strictly deals in numbers. During an observation, we watched a principal from her previous district who was very harsh with a teacher. Although she wasn't cursing, her manner was close to it, and then she looked at me and said, 'This is what you need to do.' I nodded, but I was thinking, 'I'm not going to do that to anyone—that's somebody's daughter, somebody's mother.' This experience was frightening and made me question my place in this role.

Similarly, Ms. Eva described a situation where her staff bypassed her to communicate directly with the executive director, who then approached her with demands to correct the situation without first consulting her. Ms. Eva shared, “I felt very overlooked because I was not asked what had occurred or if I was even aware of the situation. Instead, I was chastised and told to correct it without being heard.” Such undermining behavior not only erodes trust but also weakens the principal's authority, making it challenging to maintain effective leadership.

In the absence of supportive relationships with both their staff and higher administration, principals can find themselves in precarious situations where their leadership is frequently questioned or overridden. This lack of backing creates an environment of heightened stress and a pervasive sense of professional inadequacy.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter 4 provided a comprehensive phenomenological examination of the lived experiences of current and former school principals, highlighting key themes that shaped their job satisfaction, challenges, and the factors influencing their decisions to either remain in or leave the profession. These findings offer deep insights into the emotional and psychological landscapes of school leadership, with connections to the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) framework, which provides a structured lens for understanding the experiences of burnout within the principalship.

Theme 1: Fulfillment Amidst Friction illuminated the complex dynamic that principals experience between professional satisfaction and the daily friction associated with their roles. Many participants reported high levels of job satisfaction, particularly when reflecting on their positive impact on students, staff, and the broader school community. However, this sense of fulfillment was often counterbalanced by the strain of an overwhelming workload, numerous

administrative tasks, and inadequate systemic support. According to the Maslach Burnout Inventory, this theme aligns closely with the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, where principals, despite their achievements, face the depletion of emotional resources and struggle to maintain personal connections in the face of persistent demands. The balance between the rewards and challenges of the role is crucial in shaping their emotional well-being and long-term commitment.

Theme 2: Support Systems underscored the vital role that interpersonal and organizational support plays in sustaining principals' resilience and job satisfaction. The participants' lived experiences revealed that strong mentorship, peer support, and networking opportunities significantly enhanced their ability to navigate the complexities of leadership. From an MBI perspective, these support systems help mitigate burnout by reducing emotional exhaustion and fostering personal accomplishment, the third key dimension of the framework. Access to empathetic peers and ongoing opportunities for collaboration not only strengthens principals' ability to manage their responsibilities but also contributes to their psychological well-being, enhancing their sense of competence and efficacy, which is essential for retention.

The participants' Perspectives on Principal Attrition offered further phenomenological insights into the factors driving principals to leave the profession. Theme 1: Reasons for Leaving revealed that burnout—characterized by chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, and a lack of work-life balance—was a central factor in their decisions to exit the role. This theme is directly aligned with the MBI framework, as former principals described the gradual erosion of their personal well-being, driven by excessive demands, insufficient time for recovery, and limited access to effective support systems. The experiences of burnout, particularly the dimensions of

emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, were evident in their narratives, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions to address these stressors and prevent attrition.

In summary, this phenomenological exploration, supported by elements of the Maslach Burnout Framework, reveals the duality inherent in the principalship. While the role can be deeply fulfilling, it is often accompanied by significant emotional and psychological challenges, such as burnout and stress, that can lead to high attrition. The presence of robust support systems—mentorship, peer networks, and professional collaboration—plays a critical role in reducing emotional exhaustion and fostering personal accomplishment, essential factors in retaining principals. Conversely, addressing burnout, stress, and work-life balance is crucial to mitigate attrition risk. These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and educational leaders to develop comprehensive strategies that support current principals and strengthen retention within the profession. Although burnout, stress, lack of work-life balance, and inadequate support were identified as reasons for leaving, it was challenging to make a strong claim about the degree of burnout among participants based on the interview data. Additionally, a key limitation of this design is that it does not fully reveal how principals in both groups may contribute to or sustain the contexts they found or find untenable. A more nuanced exploration of how principals' actions and choices shape their environments could further enrich these findings.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The pivotal role of school principals in influencing school success has been extensively documented. The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that in 2017 approximately 35% of principals left their positions before completing two years of service (Taie & Goldring, 2019). Although principals do not directly impact student learning, their influence on school-level factors such as climate, culture, and human capital decisions has a significant, albeit indirect, effect on student achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Grissom et al., 2021; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). In this study, I aimed to examine the antecedents of principal attrition, focusing on those who remain in public education for five years compared to those who leave the profession within the same period. In this chapter, I synthesize the findings presented in Chapter 4, discussing their implications for theory, practice, and future research.

#### Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study revealed principal attrition is influenced by several interrelated meaningful components, including job satisfaction, workload, support systems, and the challenges inherent in educational leadership. These components are critical in understanding why some principals choose to leave the profession early, while others remain committed to their roles despite the challenges.

#### Job Satisfaction and Challenges

The data suggested that while many principals experience high levels of job satisfaction, particularly due to their impact on students and staff, this satisfaction is often tempered by the significant challenges they face. Principals like Ms. Eva and Ms. Kay highlighted the importance of their roles in shaping student success and supporting teachers. However, the demands of

administrative tasks, workload, and lack of adequate support were frequently cited as overwhelming. This aligns with existing literature, which underscores the heavy burden placed on principals, often at the expense of their ability to focus on instructional leadership (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2008; Levin & Bradley, 2019).

The impact of a principal's leadership on school culture and climate is profound, with principals directly influencing both teacher retention and student outcomes (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). However, as this study demonstrated, the overwhelming workload and the expectation to manage multiple roles often detract from principals' capacity to fulfill these responsibilities effectively. This supports the findings of Bartanen et al. (2019) and Branch et al. (2009), who noted that principal turnover disrupts school stability and can lead to negative outcomes for students and staff.

### **Workload and Lack of Support**

The findings highlighted the immense workload that principals endure, often exacerbated by a lack of support from higher administration. Principals such as Ms. Miranda and Mr. Bob expressed that the sheer volume of administrative tasks left them with little time for instructional leadership, a sentiment echoed in the literature on principal burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2019). The challenge of managing crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, further underscored the need for better support systems to help principals navigate the complexities of their roles (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The lack of adequate support was a significant issue that contributed to principal attrition. As illustrated by Ms. Love's experience, insufficient guidance from higher administration can leave principals feeling isolated and overwhelmed. This was consistent with research indicating principals often struggle with the lack of professional development and support, particularly

when faced with unprecedented challenges (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). The need for timely and effective mentorship and professional development is critical to sustaining principal leadership and preventing burnout (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022).

### **Support Systems**

Effective support systems, including mentorship and peer networking, were identified as significant influences in principal retention. The findings suggested that mentorship, particularly when personalized and consistent, played a significant role in a principal's professional growth and effectiveness. Mr. Bob and Ms. Kay's experiences highlight the importance of having access to experienced leaders who can provide guidance and support. This is in line with research that emphasizes the value of mentorship in enhancing leadership capacity and reducing turnover (Levin et al., 2020).

Peer support and networking were also found to be essential for principals, providing a platform for sharing best practices and emotional support. The collaborative relationships described by Mr. Bob and Ms. Love illustrate the importance of a strong professional network in helping principals navigate the complexities of their roles. This aligns with findings by Mitchell et al. (2001) and Levin et al. (2019), who noted that job embeddedness, or the extent to which an individual is integrated into their professional network, is a key factor in reducing turnover.

### **Reasons for Leaving: Burnout, Stress, and Lack of Work-Life Balance**

Former principals in the study cited burnout, stress, and a lack of work-life balance as primary reasons for leaving their positions. The emotional, physical, and mental toll of the job was evident in the experiences shared by participants, reflecting a broader issue in educational leadership. Ms. Love's account of frequent illness and emotional exhaustion underscores the

physical and psychological impact of principalship, a finding corroborated by studies on principal burnout (Combs et al., 2009; DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Stress was another significant factor contributing to attrition, with principals describing the overwhelming demands of the job as “unbearable.” The pressure to meet performance targets, manage conflicting responsibilities, and maintain school discipline without sufficient support led to chronic stress and ultimately, decisions to leave the profession. This finding supports research by Miller (2013) and Yan (2020), who noted high-stress levels, often exacerbated by inadequate administrative support, are significant predictors of principal turnover.

The lack of work-life balance further compounds the issue, with many principals struggling to manage their professional responsibilities alongside personal and family life. As Ms. Love and Mr. Bob’s experiences illustrate, the extensive hours and administrative burdens placed on principals often leave little room for personal time, leading to burnout and attrition. This finding is consistent with research by Johnson (2005) and Levin and Bradley (2019), who identified work-life imbalance as a critical factor in principal turnover.

### **Inadequate Support and Negative Leadership**

In the study, I also found inadequate support and negative leadership practices from higher administration significantly contributed to principal attrition. Participants described instances where lack of guidance, undermining behaviors, and a focus on metrics over people led to feelings of frustration, inadequacy, and, ultimately, decisions to leave the profession. Ms. Love’s experience with her executive director, who prioritized numbers over staff well-being, exemplified the negative impact of poor leadership on principal retention. This supports findings

by Branch et al. (2009) and Levin et al. (2019), who highlighted the importance of supportive and effective leadership in retaining school principals.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational policy and practice. To reduce principal attrition and its disruptive effects on schools and communities, it is essential to implement strategies that address the challenges identified in this research.

**Enhanced Support Systems:** Principals often cite a lack of meaningful support as a primary reason for leaving the profession, particularly in high-stress school environments (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). Schools and districts should prioritize creating robust support systems tailored to the needs of individual principals, such as mentorship programs and peer networks that facilitate shared experiences and solutions. Studies show that mentorship not only aids novice principals in navigating complex challenges but also boosts their confidence and resilience (Daresh, 2004). Professional development opportunities that focus on practical leadership skills, such as conflict resolution and time management, can also enhance principals' capacity to manage their workloads and lead effectively. Tailored, consistent support that addresses principals' needs can help reduce the burnout that often leads to attrition.

**Workload Management:** Research indicates that principals are frequently overwhelmed by administrative responsibilities, which detract from their ability to focus on instructional leadership (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Reducing this burden by delegating non-essential tasks, implementing technology solutions to streamline processes, and providing additional administrative staff can allow principals to prioritize critical aspects of their role, like fostering a positive school culture and supporting teachers. Studies have found that principals who are freed from excessive paperwork and managerial tasks tend to be more effective leaders, as they have

more time to engage with instructional practices and the school community (Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010). By making workload management a priority, districts can enable principals to remain engaged and committed to their schools.

**Leadership Training:** Principals' job satisfaction is greatly influenced by the nature of support and guidance they receive from district leaders (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). Training programs for higher administration, such as superintendents and executive directors, should emphasize the significance of supportive and positive leadership practices that foster a culture of care and respect. Rather than focusing solely on performance metrics, district leaders need to prioritize principals' well-being and professional growth, which studies show are critical to retaining effective school leaders (Parylo, 2013). Training programs should incorporate modules on empathetic leadership, stress management, and collaborative problem-solving to equip district leaders to support principals more effectively, thereby contributing to greater job satisfaction and retention.

**Work-Life Balance:** The demands of the principalship often create an unsustainable work-life imbalance, leading many principals to experience burnout and leave the profession prematurely (Bauer & Brazer, 2013). Schools and districts should promote policies that support a healthy work-life balance, such as flexible scheduling options, streamlined paperwork requirements, and wellness initiatives. Research demonstrates that principals who have manageable workloads and are encouraged to engage in self-care are more likely to maintain long-term commitment to their roles (Phillips & Sen, 2011). Moreover, districts could encourage principals to establish boundaries that protect personal time, which is shown to reduce stress and prevent burnout. Implementing work-life balance policies can thus have a significant impact on

retention, as principals are more likely to remain in supportive environments.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future research should continue to explore the core aspects influencing principal attrition, with a focus on developing and testing interventions designed to support principals in their roles. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of support systems on principal retention and effectiveness. Additionally, researchers should examine the impact of different leadership styles on principal retention, with the aim of identifying best practices for fostering a positive and supportive work environment.

### **Conclusion**

Principal attrition poses a significant challenge to the stability and success of schools. The findings of this study underscore the importance of addressing the key experiences that contribute to early departure from the principalship, including workload, lack of support, stress, and burnout. By implementing targeted interventions and support systems, schools and districts can reduce principal turnover, promote stability in school leadership, and ultimately enhance student success.

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[principal-as-leader-guiding-schools-to-better-teaching-and-learning-2nd-ed.pdf](https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/the-school-principal-as-leader-guiding-schools-to-better-teaching-and-learning-2nd-ed.pdf)

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## Appendix A

### Semi-Structured Protocol: Why We Stay or Leave the Principalship

1. Please describe your academic and professional journey to the principalship? *Probe: Can you tell me a story about how you became interested in the principalship? (RQ2)*
2. Can you describe your first few months in the principalship? Who were the key people at your school site or district that influenced your experiences the first few months? First year? What was the turning point in your relationship with them? (if applicable) (RQ2)
3. What are some key responsibilities and challenges you face in your role as a principal? Can you provide specific examples or lived experiences that illustrate these challenges? (RQ1)
4. Can you tell me about a particularly memorable or transformative moment in your career as a principal? How did it impact your approach to leadership? (RQ1)
5. How do you handle conflict or difficult situations in your school or district? (RQ2)
6. Tell me about a time when you had to make a tough decision as a principal? What key experiences influenced your decision, and what were the outcomes? (RQ1)
7. How have you seen those “big problems or issues” change over your career? (RQ1)
8. Looking back over your career, what would you consider highlights? (RQ2)  
*Follow up/prompt: What makes you most proud, grateful, or joyful?*
9. Looking back over your career, what were some moments of greatest difficulty, setback challenge, or stress? (RQ1)
  - a. How did you deal with those challenges?
  - b. What kept you going through those challenges?  
*(prompt for others until they indicate they aren't any others they wish to talk about)*
10. What were these past few years like for you, given the difficulties that came with COVID? (RQ1)
  - a. What contributed to you continuing to work as a principal, despite what the past couple of years have brought, in terms of challenges?
11. Have you ever seriously considered leaving the principalship? (RQ1)
  - a. If no, “Why not? What’s kept you going?”
  - b. If yes, “tell me about that, if you will.” “Why, in the end, did you choose to remain?”
12. In your work as a principal, do you ever have to speak or act in a way that doesn’t match how you feel at the moment? (Your external doesn’t match your internal, so to speak) (RQ1)
  - a. If so, how often?
  - b. Can you give an example? (If they haven’t)
  - c. How do you navigate that tension—having to communicate or act in a way that doesn’t match those inner feelings?

13. What strategies do you use on the job or during the workday to keep recharged or motivated? (RQ2) *(If rephrasing is needed: What do you do—on the job—that puts fuel in your tank?)*
14. What do you do outside the job to put fuel in your tank? *(If rephrasing is needed: How do you stay motivated through external activities or practices?)* (RQ2)
15. To what do you attribute your longevity in the principalship? (RQ2)
16. What do you wish your district leaders or community knew or understood about your work? (RQ1)
17. What do you wish your district leaders would do or refrain from doing to sustain you in your work better? (RQ2)  
*(follow-up; to mitigate some of the stressors you've dealt with; to bolster your resilience or joy in the job)*
18. If you could write a letter that was delivered to your younger self—just starting out as a principal—what would you say? (RQ2) *(What advice or cautions would you give yourself?)*
19. If you were giving advice to other leaders on staying resilient, what would you share or advise others? (RQ2)
20. Think about the best/most impactful mentor you've had. What was it that person did or said that you've found helped sustain you in this work? (RQ2)
21. Think about your executive director. How did this relationship impact your role as a principal? (RQ 1)
22. What have I not asked you? What do we need to know as our team studies resiliency in the principalship? (RQ1)

### **Research Questions**

- Q1. What influences principals in public schools to depart from their positions?
- Q2. What conditions influence principals to remain in their current role?

### **Interviewee Information Sheet**

#### **Individual Demographic Information**

(Optional; interviewee can skip any they don't wish to answer)

The why for this section: "We'll be expected to report demographics related to our participant pool, but we don't want to make assumptions, so we have a few demographic questions. You can skip any question you'd like, for any reason, or you can share as much or as little as you'd like" (for example, can report an "about age" if they want!

Age (actual or approximate)

Gender

How do you describe your race or ethnicity?

How many/what languages do you speak?

Total years in education  
Total years as principal  
Educational background

**School Descriptors/Demographics**

Stat

Urban

# of students

Type I (Primary/Elementary/Intermediate/Middle/High)

Type II (Public/Independent)

Please describe the general demographic makeup of school

- Jo Beth Jimerson's protocol adaptation (N.D.)

## VITA

### Victor Alfaro, Jr.

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#### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

<b>PRINCIPAL</b> <i>Amon Carter-Riverside High School, Fort Worth ISD</i>	2021–Present <i>Fort Worth, TX</i>
<b>PRINCIPAL</b> <i>Riverside Middle School, Fort Worth ISD</i>	2017 – 2021 <i>Fort Worth, TX</i>
<b>PRINCIPAL</b> <i>Worth Heights Elementary, Fort Worth ISD</i>	2014 – 2017 <i>Fort Worth, TX</i>
<b>ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL</b> <i>Wedgwood Middle School, Fort Worth ISD</i>	2011 – 2014 <i>Fort Worth, TX</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <i>Data Analyst, T. A. Sims Elementary, Fort Worth, Texas 2010 – 2011</i></li><li>▪ <i>2<sup>nd</sup> Grade Bilingual Teacher, D.McRae Elementary, Fort Worth, Texas 2009 – 2010</i></li><li>▪ <i>5<sup>th</sup> Grade Bilingual Teacher, Milam Elementary, Grand Prairie, Texas 2006 – 2009</i></li><li>▪ <i>3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Bilingual Teacher, D.McRae Elementary, Fort Worth, Texas 2003 – 2006</i></li><li>▪ <i>3<sup>rd</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Grade Bilingual Teacher, Russell Elementary, Brownsville, Texas 2001 – 2003</i></li><li>▪ <i>3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Bilingual Teacher, Vermillion Elementary, Brownsville, Texas 2000 - 2001</i></li></ul>	

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#### EDUCATION:

Texas Christian University – Fort Worth, TX Doctor of Education	December 14, 2024
University of North Texas – Denton, TX Master of Education in Educational Administration	August 14, 2009
University of Texas at Brownsville – Brownsville, TX Bachelor of Liberal Arts in English / Psychology	May 13, 2000

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#### CERTIFICATIONS:

Principal (Grades EC – 12)	Texas	12/01/2024 – 11/30/2030
Bilingual / ESL – Spanish (Grade 1-6)	Texas	12/01/2024 – 11/30/2030
Elementary Self-Contained (Grade 1-6)	Texas	12/01/2024 – 11/30/2030