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**8 Ways Principals Drive Good Teachers Out of Their Schools**

And how the best principals are retaining their talent!

**BY**[**WE ARE TEACHERS STAFF**](https://www.weareteachers.com/author/weareteachersstaff/) **OCT 30, 2023**

Several years ago, a Forbes article brought to the forefront a notion that had long been circulating: [people don’t leave jobs, they leave bosses](https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2019/11/22/people-dont-leave-bad-jobs-they-leave-bad-bosses-heres-how-to-be-a-better-manager-to-maintain-and-motivate-your-team/?sh=6ed4cee922b9).

As teachers, this makes perfect sense to us. We not only receive leadership from others, we provide it to our students. We understand—better than a lot of professions, I’d argue—the personal responsibility we carry in shaping an environment for our “employees.”

That said, we acknowledge that teaching itself is harder than ever in recent years. Many talented teachers are choosing to leave schools and principals they love because of factors far beyond a principal’s control.

That’s why it’s important for principals to understand how to mitigate, address, and improve the factors that are in their control.

# 8 Ways Principals Drive Good Teachers Out

## **1. They’re out of touch with teaching and its demands.**

Years ago, I upgraded from an awful apartment in the city and bought a much nicer condo. I was thrilled! Two months in, my washing machine broke. Did I think, “Hmm, this is a bummer, but still so much better than paying $10 in quarters for laundry that left oil stains from the ancient communal dryer”? Of course not. I thought I was so lucky before! Woe is me, a homeowner!Skip Ad

When we “move up” in power or status, we tend to forget really quickly the realities of our lives before. In the same way, some (not all) school leaders have become completely out of touch with what it’s like to be a teacher. Before long, they find themselves saying, “I don’t get it. Why don’t these teachers want to spend hours [color-coding data by hand](https://www.weareteachers.com/crazy-school-rules-for-teachers/)? Their planning period belongs to us, not them!”

Something important to note: Time away from the classroom is not always inversely proportionate to quality of leadership. One of my best principals had been out of the classroom long before computers were even in schools.

**GREAT PRINCIPALS:**

* Make time to connect with teachers about their needs and where they need support
* Spend time in classrooms apart from evaluations
* Acknowledge the hardships and express gratitude for their faculty

## **2. It’s clear they don’t actually want to be a school leader.**

It happens all the time: A teacher realizes it’s time to leave the classroom but wants to stay in education, so they move into a school leadership role. Sometimes this person wants to lead and is well suited for management, and it’s a great fit. Other times, the person might not want to lead or be good at it but feels stuck. Maybe their family depends on the higher salary of school leadership. Maybe they need to put in a certain number of years of school leadership to be a candidate for another job they actually want.

Though I completely sympathize with the conditions that might motivate a teacher to leave the classroom, it’s a disservice to kids and teachers to hold a leadership position you’re not qualified for or don’t want to hold. In the way that it’s easy to spot a teacher who doesn’t want to be there, it’s easy to spot a leader who doesn’t want to be there, too.

**GREAT PRINCIPALS:**

* Talk openly about their love for the job
* Show in behavior and interactions that teachers and students matter to them
* Move on from their role when it’s clear they’re not a great fit

## **3. Their communication needs some work.**

As teachers, we all know that it’s hard work to develop a communication style that works for a wide range of people. But the key word is “develop.” Effective communication is a skill that has to be constantly sharpened and honed, not a checklist item you can mark off and then ignore.

Personal pet peeve here: If you find that a surprising number of people didn’t understood something you communicated, it’s not that you mysteriously work with a disproportionate number of dummies, it’s that you didn’t communicate as effectively as you thought you did.

**GREAT PRINCIPALS:**

* Treat school communication as a two-way exchange
* Reflect on their practices around communication

## **4. They don’t understand the importance of boundaries.**

Recognizing the above-and-beyond commitments of teachers is important (sports and debate coaches, fine arts teachers, I see you).

But often in teaching, the narrative glorifies those who sacrifice the most of themselves. Principals should be careful not only to communicate [the importance of self-care](https://www.weareteachers.com/teachers-oxygen-masks/)to their staff, but to [put practices into place](https://www.weareteachers.com/principals-support-teachers/) that support teachers. Honoring our planning time, holding the line with parents, typing up a staff meeting as an email in a particularly demanding week—all of these go a long way. In a similar vein, I’ve heard the phrase “We do what’s best for kids” wielded almost as a threat for teachers to commit to beyond what’s reasonable. You can still do what’s best for kids in the context of healthy, balanced teachers.

**GREAT PRINCIPALS:**

* Understand and encourage boundaries for their staff
* Instead of overworking their existing talent pool (the competence curse), they develop talent from every teacher
* Create school practices that support teachers and their families

## **5. They try to dodge conflict and/or criticism.**

The best principal I’ve ever worked for would often talk about the importance of embracing conflict for growth. Hearing this was illuminating for me because I’d never heard conflict talked about positively from a school leader, let alone as something requisite for healthy teams. In fact, many principals I’d worked for in the past had been very clear that our school was a positivity-only zone (that is, a zone of [toxic positivity](https://www.weareteachers.com/toxic-positivity-schools/)).

Embracing critical feedback is equally important. The same principal I just mentioned was extremely diligent about regularly gathering ways she could improve, responding to them, and following up.

I’m not saying it’s easy to embrace conflict and criticism—I’ve received many a student feedback form with insults I still admire years later for their creativity and lack of restraint—but it’s necessary.

**GREAT PRINCIPALS:**

* Are willing to have the “tough” conversations about their leadership
* Don’t shy away from confrontation when it’s necessary
* Know the right balance between firm and kind when it comes to student discipline

## **6. They don’t trust their teachers.**

As teachers, we know the balance of control and freedom in the classroom. Total control makes kids feel trapped and resentful and promotes learned helplessness. Total freedom, on the other hand, can be chaotic and make it difficult to monitor progress.

It’s the same for schools. Of course, there need to be school-wide standards and guidelines. But in general, when teachers are trusted, empowered, and supported to do their jobs well, they will flourish. Extra support and frequent monitoring should be used for teachers identified to actually need it, not everyone across the board. No one likes a group punishment.

**GREAT PRINCIPALS:**

* Hold all teachers accountable to school standards, but offer varying levels of support in achieving this dependent on needs
* Express gratitude and trust for their teachers on a regular basis
* Solve problems with individual teachers, not by punishing the group

## **7. They forget (or refuse) to lead by example.**

As a teacher, it’s frustrating to be told one thing and shown another. For instance, we’ll be asked to sit in silence through a two-hour PowerPoint … on dynamic and engaging teaching. Or we’re instructed on the importance of giving students grace for submitting late projects or having excessive tardies, but then we’re penalized for submitting lesson plans an hour late.

Obviously there are different standards and expectations for students and employed adults. But we demand so much from teachers. Drive. Heart. A positive attitude. Approachability. Professionalism. Kindness. Trust. At the very least, principals ought to be held to these standards, too.

**GREAT PRINCIPALS:**

* Don’t ask anything of their teachers that they don’t also practice
* Reflect on their own leadership to identify areas that might be weak or hypocritical

## **8. They won’t take a stand.**

Once, I was on an appointment committee for our school’s next principal. One of the superintendents asked the group, “What are some non-negotiable traits for you in a new principal?”

I thought really hard about that question and arrived at this prerequisite:

“Tenacity. They have to be willing to stick their neck out for us.”

Principals can’t fight every battle, we know. Teachers can’t, either. But every once in a while, a leader has to be willing to make a decision for the benefit of the greater good—even if that decision puts them at odds with their peers.

We need principals who question the shoddy research of the school board’s latest initiative, who push back when there’s a conflict with another campus, or who tell a parent, “We’ve exhausted the opportunities to discuss this topic. You’ll have to respect our decision.”

**GREAT PRINCIPALS:**

* Are wise enough to know when to take a stand and tenacious enough to do it
* Know and accept that they can’t always please everyone

To any principal reading this: I cannot imagine how hard your job is, especially in recent years. You have my respect for every minute you’re not crying under your desk with your door locked. If you find yourself reading these and thinking, “Yikes. That’s an area where I can improve,” that’s a good thing! (The ones teachers worry about most are those who think they don’t need to change.)

On behalf of teachers everywhere: We see you. Managing people is hard.

(We know!)

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