

Teachers Quit Principals, Not Schools

By Shawnta S. Barnes – March 13, 2017

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NBC's new show *This Is Us* has captured the hearts of America. It highlights the real struggles and triumphs that we as humans face on our journey through life. On a recent episode, "What Now?" Randall was grappling with his father's death and how much he had sacrificed and given to his job.

Ten years Tyler. I've worked here for ten years. I've brought in 80% of our clients. I grew this company from a six man operation into a sixty person machine. I've given you 20 hour days man and nights away from my wife and children. My father died man and on the day of his memorial, you sent me pears which I'm allergic to and you know this because at the lunch where you hired me we ate roquefort salad and I went into anaphylactic shock. And along with the pears that could have killed me, you sent a card with a one line Hallmark message and a typed out signature from the team. And for all this Tyler I thank you. You see for days I've been plagued by this question, "How do I honor my father's legacy?" And I realize I honor it by taking what I learned from how he lived his life and having it shape how I go on living mine's and so here it is Tyler. Um, I quit. No hard feelings man I walk out of here in triumph. I came. I saw. I conquered. Sanjay, It's all you now brother. Peace.

Randall did not quit because he didn't love his job. He quit because of issues stemming from his boss Tyler. It's been said many times before, "People don't quit jobs; they quit bosses." In education, as pointed out in the *New York Times* article, "Want to Fix Schools? Go to the Principal's Office." there has not been much focus on school leaders. The principal helps set the culture which helps retain teachers. The brief, "Musical Chairs: Teacher Churn and its impact on Indianapolis Public Schools" published by Teach Plus stated, "For teachers who voluntarily left a school at some point in their career, 49 percent cited school leadership and 40 percent cited school culture as reasons for leaving." The principal is the one who steers the ship and when the principal cannot steer the ship in the right direction families and teachers look for a different school environment.

I once worked for a principal who avoided having difficult conversations and avoided dealing with conflict. At a staff meeting this principal said, "Nobody has a gun to your head. If you don't want to be here, leave." When minority staff complained about other staff members stating we were affirmative action hires, the principal told us we should move on and not worry about it. Although I earned a highly effective evaluation rating and loved the students, I eventually resigned from the school. Working in an environment where the culture is toxic was not good for my mental health. When a teacher's mental health is compromised, the teacher cannot be the best he or she can be for his or her students.

This is why a strong leader is key. School districts across our country need to invest more resources into developing their leaders. Yes, teacher development is important, but a great teacher under a poor leader is a teacher who is likely to leave and a school that is not likely to succeed.

The school leader also has to be a cheerleader for his or her school. I recently heard Julie Bakehorn principal of Arsenal Technical High School in Indianapolis Public Schools and recipient of the prestigious Hubbard Life-Changing School Leadership award, speak. She shared with a cohort of future administrators they had to be the best pitch person and cheerleader for their school because no one wants to work at a school where the principal is not passionate. She also shared you had to have the right structures and relationships in place to operate a successful school. She said, “I don’t want an assistant principal who is waiting for me to retire to become principal of this school. I want to build assistant principals who can go on and lead another school.”

Just like Ms. Bakehorn is intentional about building strong leaders in her building, we need other principals to do the same. We need districts to include improving principal leadership in their strategic plans. We need the community and other important stakeholders to hold schools accountable for developing the best leaders. We know when a school has strong relationships with the community and high student success, there is a great leader leading the charge.

Follow Shawnta S. Barnes on Twitter @educatorbarnes

24 thoughts on “Teachers Quit Principals, Not Schools”



Matthew Abel says:

[March 21, 2017 at 12:52 pm](#)

Depends on the district. My principal is great, as was my last – but the top-heavy district above them is terrible at teaching it’s teachers with respect and admiration outside of some random lip service.



L Michelle says:

[March 21, 2017 at 1:21 pm](#)

I resent this article. This could be argued in any profession as well as the fact that it goes both ways – Passionate Principals deal everyday with unmotivated teachers. There is a lack of substance to this piece and what it is trying to convey.



Kari Maryn says:

[March 21, 2017 at 5:08 pm](#)

Yes—but a principal’s job is to boost morale and motivate! A principal has power too—which changes the dynamics!



kjohnsoncles says:

[March 22, 2017 at 3:31 pm](#)

Are you a teacher or administrator? Just curious.



Eric H. Rogie says:

[March 29, 2017 at 1:37 pm](#)

But when the principal is lacking in supporting teachers who do their jobs and try their hardest only to be cussed at, threatened or mocked by students, and nothing is done, why try? it does cut right to the heart of the matter, the ultimate leader of the school IS the principal. They are to lead and the teacher’s follow. If they are not supported or backed when the pressure is on them, then why try? Think about it in a time where the teachers get ALL the blame for the short comings of the students who do not either care about their education or respect for anyone. You can work with dumb, or work with stupid, but you CAN’T FIX I DON’T CARE! And I’m sorry to say, there are a lot of students who feel that way and their parents don’t either!



Michael Lambert says:

[March 21, 2017 at 2:31 pm](#)

While it is true that schools need effective leadership, and a weak or incompetent principal is hell on morale, the office that controls the climate, especially climate, is the superintendent's.



Michael Lambert says:

[March 21, 2017 at 2:32 pm](#)

Should say, "especially today." Haven't finished my coffee. Lol



Cathy O'Neill says:

[March 21, 2017 at 3:00 pm](#)

Don't leave out superintendents who direct the culture and can have the same effect on a dynamic dedicated principal. This is the first time I have seen an article that gets close to the heart of what real school reform must address. I would insist that one must recognize the impact on efficacy that the current leapfrogging of administrators from school to school within 3-5 years to pad salary and retirements has on the destruction of schools and staff. Consider how exit plans make climbers less invested in school improvement and more invested in building cronies (rarely most dedicated staff) to launch move to next job. Look at some school data, there are small schools that have had 15+/- superintendents and principals in 31 year periods! Looking at interum per dies and perks you would imagine high level corporate jobs not public sector if you take into account these same interums have pensions and perks of well over 100k each. There is need to change the one way patriarchy of our school systems to really improve tgem and put kids and community first. We must figure out a way to hold administrators at all levels accountable for actual school and program improves that are documented, measurable, And VERIFIED before they can leave an institution for another job. And, if being released by a school, it should be disclosed.



Cathy O'Neill says:

[March 21, 2017 at 3:11 pm](#)

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a halm says:

[March 22, 2017 at 3:17 pm Edit](#)

Beautifully said.



Ana Villanueva says:

[March 21, 2017 at 4:16 pm](#)

I heartily agree with this article. As a teacher now, and former leader (management) in my first career in the hospitality industry, there are many parallels to be made here. The leaders (principals) set the climate for the teachers. Some lead by fear or negative intimidation and others look as failures as an opportunity to learn. "Leaders" that give positive feedback on said failures, lead you to the root of your "opportunities." The others "in charge" may be on power trips, and feel better about themselves when they debase their employees. How you treat, inspire, smile at and truly like people IS contagious. Unfortunately, the me-first mentality is the Achilles heel of many leaders. Seek first to understand, then you may be understood and can begin the journey of leading people.

<https://www.loveandlogic.com/articles-advice/educators>



Brooke Burke says:

[March 22, 2017 at 1:03 am](#)

This article spoke right to my heart! So many great points regarding leaders, climate, and expectations. I am a current teacher, actively pursuing my masters degree in administration. Today I was told this article is inappropriate and should not be shared by a supervisor- an exact example of how people in power are refusing to learn or change. I will go on sharing!



Larry Davis says:

[March 22, 2017 at 1:36 pm](#)

Principal's set the tone: As a former principal and currently, an education advocate for over 19 years, I see the influence of a principal every day for I engage in the culture of different schools all across the country through the IEP / 504 Plan process. And there's no cultural-barometer unlike these meetings; one gets a true sense of a school's character, culture, and tone through an IEP meeting. So here's the pattern from my perspective: Like in any organization or business, 20% of the personnel are truly gifted; and their efforts shine no matter who is their boss. Another 20% of a staff are pushing the edge toward incompetence, or are misplaced in their career. This is common to business, organizations, and also within schools. So that leaves 60% of the personnel in the middle; and the influence of leadership can sway this group toward excellence or incompetence. And in the case of school administration, an effective principal is able to guide the team through infectious attitude (positive), professional development resources, and developing collegial relationships. When these things happen, the school flourishes. And the 60% moves toward the extraordinary 20%. Funny thing that happens in this process, the other 20%, either quits, moves on to another school through transfer, or becomes part of the 60%. So, it's so true, principals make a difference. Big time! Larry Davis @ <http://www.specialeducationadvocacy.org>



Barnett Berry says:

[March 22, 2017 at 3:56 pm](#)

All may want to consider Teacher Powered Schools – which are student-centered and democratically led. The more modern concept has been around for 20 years – and you can learn more about it in short piece penned by Kim and me a few months back. http://www.aft.org/ae/summer2016/berry_farris-berg And some TPS have principals – but their roles are quite different – even beyond the effective school leaders identified in the NYT article. Check out Alyssa's poignant post on "the role of the principal in a Teacher Powered School. <https://www.teachingquality.org/content/blogs/lori-nazareno/role-principal-teacher-powered-school>



Cynthia Samaniego says:

[March 23, 2017 at 3:03 am](#)

This is exactly what happened to me this year. It was heartbreaking to leave my students and to this day the leadership at my school lacks professionalism and the respect needed to help teachers grow. It is sad that sometimes principals use their authority to bully teachers and it's even more devastating when teachers cannot defend themselves because they are either worried about getting fired or treated unfairly. I think if your health is deteriorating or you are unhappy, sometimes there is that opportunity for something better. Take that risk! I did. I know when I thought about leaving I was terrified not knowing whether I was going to get treated the same, if I made the wrong decision. But all I thought was...I need to stop being pinned in a corner and I need to get out...I mean what else is there to lose. I did resign, and to this day I am grateful for what is ahead of me now.



Regina Falangi says:

[March 25, 2017 at 2:33 pm](#)

Chemistry between staff members is also crucial. I'm definitely leaving my current school because of the principal- but that is not to imply that she's a bad one. For a certain kind of teacher, she's wonderful, and many of my fellow colleagues are quite content. She does recognize their strengths and offers opportunities for growth, and she's always there when we need her. She also has a strong passion for the students. But for *me*, we don't speak each other's language. I swear up and down I take what she says and apply it thoroughly, but she doesn't see it. I try to explain information that she needs to know in a professional way (I've had witnesses with us who say I did exactly this) and she accuses me of insubordination. It's enough to make me want to tear out my hair. So, yeah, teachers quit because of principals, but this may not always be one person's fault or another... it may just be an issue of square pegs and round holes.



MG Conroy says:

[March 29, 2017 at 3:31 pm Edit](#)

At the end of the movie MAGNUM FORCE, Detective Harry Callahan delivers the following line: "A man's got to know his limitations." Nowhere is that statement more accurate than in administration. Several years ago, I reached a level of stagnation and decided to go into administration. It took about 18 months as a principal for me realize that I was not cut out for

the job, so I returned to the classroom, teaching a completely different discipline than at my previous position. That was what I had needed all along, a new teaching challenge, not an administrative gig. Here is the important part: I went from private school administration to public school teaching, so I was not negatively impacted financially. I think that many principals realize very quickly that they are not cut out for the job, but "the golden handcuffs" induce them to continue in a position for which they are ill-suited, which makes them and their faculties miserable.



matt foster says:

[April 2, 2017 at 12:11 am](#)

Looks like we're on the same wave length...I posted the same idea in February of 2017. The evidence is becoming overwhelming in support of leadership development in education!<http://teamtomwaters.blogspot.com/2017/02/very-few-teachers-ever-quit-teaching.html>



Manoj Kumar says:

[April 6, 2017 at 6:51 am](#)

Amazing post! Such a large number of incredible focuses in regards to pioneers, atmosphere, and desires. Thanks for this great blog.<http://www.coursecrown.com/animation-courses.php>



Kelli Myers says:

[May 11, 2017 at 5:32 pm](#)

Is Principal leadership helping or hurting your school? In my five years of teaching I've witnessed high teacher turnover. The biggest issues were teachers not feeling appreciated, time was not respected, and lack of support for resources and training needed. Issues stemmed from Principal leadership. Teachers were afraid to voice their concerns, were rarely solicited for feedback. About 75% of the staff would not return for the next school year, and the principal and administration were blindsided. Then our school transitioned to new leadership and a totally different approach to staff development, student discipline, and building school culture. The Principal led us in community building exercises regularly, we were offered instructional coaching, we implemented a new restorative justice approach to discipline. That year student growth soared and so did teacher retention! Is Principal leadership helping or hurting your

school? OpenNetReview (www.opennetreview.com) is a site that is available to advance our education system to better help each different school district. You can record your experience as multiple choice questions, indicate what matters more to you, participate in a discussion forum specific to your school or district. Answer questions on Principal leadership to record what is happening in your school and start the discussion on what is working and what needs to improve...- Principal Category: Provides a Vision For: Staff, School, Students- Principal Category: Does promote respect on campus: No, Student to Staff, Between Students, Between All- Principal Category: Ability to Energize others: Not even trying, Trying but unsuccessful, Only Temporarily, Inspires Others to Continue



Julia Sullivan says:

[May 30, 2017 at 1:55 am](#)

Oh how true this really is. Not only are teachers leaving school due to administration, but you also have administration in schools that are not supportive at all. I was a teacher for 4 years and I've already left teaching. 1. Due to mental stress teachers have on themselves 2. Absolutely no support from administration and 3. Students who treat their teachers like crap. You know, it is one thing to keep 19 kids under control, the go ahead and throw in a couple kids that constantly run away from your line laughing...then it's your fault. I'm sorry but I was more worried about the other kids doing the right thing instead of feeding into the kids doing the wrong behavior. When I would call administration to my classroom due to bad behavior, the admin would take the child out, give them candy or a ball, then send them back to my room. How in the world is a teacher supposed to teach? There should never be a time that you should be fearful of your admin coming into your room due to the negative looks and making you feel like you weren't good enough. Not only that, after receiving effective evaluations all three years in teaching then the principal decides the school was too "hard" for you. Umm I was able to make it through just fine as a 5th grade teacher in the same school and the kids I had the trouble with were in 2nd grade. I'm glad that the decided to not renew me for the next year because I was already looking for another school to go to. I couldn't take the mental abuse anymore. It wore me down. So much that my last year teaching I knew I was done. So after 4 years as a teacher, I have left the classroom to start a different career. Teaching was something I wanted to do since I was 9 years old. All the classes and dedication I took to reach my future ended that quickly because of administration. You know people blame teachers because it's easier to. Maybe if the school is failing or your teachers continue to leave every year, then maybe you need to observe the principal and see what they are doing or not doing. We get observed countless time during the year and they even count towards our final evaluation. I can't ever say I saw my superintendent watching and observing my principal. Hmm there is something really wrong with the way education is being hadled from the people high up.



Chelnor Griffin says:

[June 26, 2017 at 2:13 pm](#)

Amazing article and ringing with so much truth that I can honestly say I feel as if I've been heard. The leadership in the school has to be "right" on all levels in order for the school to be a success. I've worked for amazing principals and I've worked for horrible principals and the most important difference is the way each of them made me feel and the work environment. Besides the time I had to leave a teaching position due to my husband's job relocating us, I have left teaching positions because of the principal and extremely poor leadership. The majority of the problems in schools and in education can be readily fixed with putting the right leaders in the schools.



Lisa Wieck says:

[November 25, 2017 at 8:40 pm](#)

All said well; this is valid and THE reason for "failing schools" not to mention failing morales, values and respect of our future generation.