

2016

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Recommended Citation

Bailey, Scott and Marz, Allison (2016) "Examining How Campus Contextual Factors Correlate to Teacher Morale in a Secondary Setting," *School Leadership Review*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol11/iss1/4>

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Examining How Campus Contextual Factors Correlate to Teacher Morale in a Secondary Setting

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Introduction

Far too often in education the term “burnout” is used to describe a teacher who has been disenchanted with education and seems to be waiting till the day retirement becomes available. A teacher suffering from burnout exhibits signs of low morale for teaching, involvement with staff and involvement in the school and community. There is no specific clue or symptom that leads to burnout, and there isn’t a specific amount of years leading to teacher burnout. Interestingly enough, new teachers suffer burnout in aggressive numbers similar to experienced teachers. Alliance for Excellent Education (2005) found that 14% of new teachers leave by the end of their first year, 30% leave within three years, and 50% leave by the end of year five. With these statistics, it’s not surprising that class sizes are larger than ever and “burnout” is synonymous with “I’ve given up.” As teacher retention continues to be a problem, it is important to look at the reasons behind the dissatisfaction in order to find a solution. It is the principal’s responsibility to anticipate possible threats to morale and satisfaction to create a happier, more productive environment.

Problem

Many teachers have voiced their frustrations at what appears to be a lack of effort to boost teacher morale. New teachers, in particular, have increasingly made comments about the lack of morale amongst teachers. From a teacher’s perspective, low morale seems to be distributed across groups rather than focused in one particular discipline or age group. The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not contextual variables in a school impact teacher morale and, subsequently, student performance. Lack of morale is a problem for both teachers and students. The aim for this study is to examine the controllable variables, including school leadership and climate, contributing to low morale and to determine the issues that can be reasonably fixed.

Research Questions

1. What is the role of contextual variables (administration, involvement in extracurricular activities, team planning vs. individual planning, location of classrooms, schedule, amount of preps, class sizes, and more) on teacher morale?

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2. What can reasonably be changed in a school to increase morale?
3. Is there a correlation between teacher morale and student performance?

Perspective

When evaluating morale levels across the state of Texas, Lumsden (1998) found that, of Texas teachers surveyed from across the state in 1996, more than 40 percent of respondents would not choose to select teaching as a profession again and 57 percent planned on leaving education if something “better comes along.” The purpose of this study is to determine the contextual variables, both positive and negative, contributing to the state of morale on a campus.

For the purpose of this research, contextual variables are defined as factors pertaining to a particular school or district outside of a teacher’s control. Thus, a teacher suffering from a bad mood will not be examined as a contextual variable contributing to low morale because emotional expression would be an internal factor the teacher has the ability to control. In fact, Prieto, Martinez, & Schaufeli (2008) discovered via a series of experiments testing many factors, that mental demands in fact were not a significant predictor of burnout making the examination of external factors more relevant. Briggs & Richardson (1992) found several external causes of low morale, including lack of recognition (or none at all), excessive extra duties, criticism, large classes, autocratic administration, and lack of support for good discipline. The perception of a principal’s support is also a weighty factor in engagement levels (Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Ludtke, & Baumert, 2008). Those findings were corroborated by the study of Klassen, Perry, and Frenzel (2012) that contended teachers who perceive autonomy support from administration connected better with students and staff members. Higher relatedness, they argued, resulted in increased engagement and less emotional exhaustion. Relatedness is also a psychological need crucial to meet to form social connections necessary for building relationships with students and enhancing student success. Prieto et. al (2008) noted perception of an imbalance between demands of the job and resources provided by the job can also lead to burnout.

In addition to resources and job demands, some studies argued gender and age play a significant role in teacher morale. Klusmann et. al (2008) found that male teachers are more likely to be less engaged, with increasing age also indicated as predictor for decreased engagement. Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald (2011) added male teachers typically have lower levels of teaching efficacy. Since this was not a prevalent theory or common in many of the studies, it will not be considered as a contextual factor for the purposes of this review. It is mentioned only to expose other factors and methods for evaluating teacher morale and engagement.

In order to examine the effects of contextual variables on teacher morale, the aforementioned causes will be grouped into three categories based on the current research available: job demands (extra duties, class size, discipline management, hours on the job), administrative support (perception and availability of support from administration, views of leadership, autonomy), and school climate (environment, opportunities to be heard, classroom locations, staff relationships and interactions, and pressure on teachers). Is one category more straining on a teacher than the other, or do they all combine to equally contribute to dissatisfaction? Zhang & Yu (2007) deduced that all of the causes are factors possibly leading to burnout and low morale, and none of them are more significant than the others. Briggs & Richardson (1992) argued that the most

common cause of morale is lack of recognition, which was also related to the feeling of being “ignored.” Jao-Nan (2013) contended type of leadership was the most significant cause (or prevention) of low morale, and believed a leadership relying on empathy and care was most effective for improving teachers’ work performance and attitudes. Regardless of the differing opinions, it is clear that low morale cannot be traced back to one singular factor, but is instead a combination of many contextual factors perhaps responsible for detrimental effects across a school.

Method

The location for this action research study was a mid-sized high school in Texas which has recently undergone substantial changes in organizational structure and leadership. A purposeful sample of 25 teachers from the campus was surveyed using a locally-developed instrument intended to measure teacher perceptions of the state of morale on campus in light of the contextual variables described above. Prior years’ AEIS reports and campus plans were analyzed to determine patterns in student performance, staff turnover, and campus initiatives to inform the survey.

Once collected, the survey data from 18 respondents was informally analyzed to discern prominent response patterns and to isolate the most affective variables, which will be discussed at length in the results. Overall, teacher responses indicated four factors had a dominant role in teacher morale: location of team members, class size, teacher interaction, and perception of administrative support. These four categories represent contextual factors within control of administrators.

Results

The findings of the study were narrowed down to four dominant categories contributing to staff morale: location of team members, class size, teacher interaction (amongst academies), and perception of administrative support. These categories were based on the responses of the teachers in the survey and examination of the most recent AEIS data and Campus Improvement Plans for the school. Upon further examination of the data, location of team members and teacher interaction were combined into the category of “teacher interaction” with the assumption that classroom location falls under that umbrella.

Perception of administrative support. One pattern in the perceived administrative support category was the greater percentage of returning teachers scoring this category negatively as compared to new teachers. Returning teachers also showed decreased support for the redo policy, as set by administration, compared to new teachers. Other information obtained by separating new and returning teachers did not offer enough a distinction to warrant further analysis.

Teacher interaction. Regardless of which academy the participant was in, only 7 out of 18 participants teachers selected “true” for the statement “I am able to connect and build relationships with teachers outside of my academy.” The academy-geared questions indicate that location of classrooms does indeed affect teacher morale negatively, and teachers do not feel as

if they are able to connect outside the academy. Since 14 out of 18 participants said that “the amount of interaction with other teachers positively affects my morale,” it can be assumed from the survey that amount of teacher interaction is a significant factor positively affecting morale.

Classroom size. The classroom size results were incongruous, as numbers reported by teachers did not match the numbers reported on AEIS. Since the numbers reported by the AEIS report are averages, it was very informative to look at individual teacher responses. One freshman English teacher had 30 honors students in one class, while her lowest average was in an on-level class at 17. A senior government teacher had 5 AP classes ranging from 30 students in a class to 35 students in the biggest class. Looking at patterns, it seems that on-level classes rise in number as the grade levels rise. The highest amount of students in a freshman on-level class was 22, while the highest amount of students in a junior class was 29. The results of the AEIS report and the survey were compared to demonstrate the marked difference in numbers with the survey results being much higher. The discrepancies between the numbers reported in the survey and the AEIS report are likely due to the special education, modification, and accommodations classes factored into the overall average. Though these classes typically include a co-teacher, they are often much smaller in number even dropping as low as six students in one modifications classroom. Whatever the cause, the discrepancies provided a continual source of angst for the teachers.

Implications

As previously noted, low staff morale can lead to serious consequences like high turnover rates, teacher burnout, and apathy towards the job and/or administration. This could even negatively impact students. It is important for administrators to not only be self-aware of how their actions affect morale, but also to notice problems immediately and take action to make sure low morale doesn't spread like an infectious disease. If problems are ignored, the perception of administration is affected, one of the main factors contributing to low morale, and negative attitudes are likely to spread if nothing changes.

Clearly, a central problem is teacher interaction and, in particular, classroom locations. A school can still have flourishing career academies, even if teachers are in their appropriate content areas. Administration should reevaluate the effectiveness of current classroom arrangements with teacher input.

Classroom sizes also need to be controlled. Most teachers can handle having a class with the maximum amount of kids, but many teachers are upset when the maximum is continually increased. Administration and counselors need to work together to set limits for classroom sizes, considering grade level and content, and then be consistent with following those limits in the next school year. Teachers want consistency, and being consistent with classroom sizes will not only fulfill that need for morale, but also increase positive perception of administrative support.

Ultimately, low teacher morale can have unforeseen consequences in the classroom, and must be avoided at all costs. It is essential to keep teachers happy in order to ensure the highest quality learning experiences for all students.

Significance of Research

Researching causes for low morale helps isolate significant problem areas and create viable solutions. Teacher morale is a concern for many schools because it can positively or negatively affect an entire staff and student body. Zhang & Yue (2007) found that teachers with low satisfaction affect students because the teachers behave coldly towards students, establish lower requirements for students, display obvious weariness, show intolerance to failure, lose interest in students, and show little to no enthusiasm for students' work. All of these emotive actions can contribute to poor student performance and attitude towards learning. As found by Briggs & Richardson (1992), teachers feeling dissatisfied become more openly hostile and likely to form cliques spreading the negative attitudes around school staff. This can create a very hostile climate especially for teachers who may not be dissatisfied, but fear social rejection from teachers who vocalize their frustrations. Frustrated teachers are more likely to resist change which can cause a barrier against any administrative pushes for improvement, and the same teachers are more likely to be absent, causing their students to miss valuable instruction (Briggs & Richardson, 1992). When disgruntled teachers are present in the classroom, they are more likely to create a poor quality classroom environment that can harmfully affect students (Klassen et. al, 2012), and while teachers enjoy teaching more when they sense student enjoyment, if the teacher has low morale, he or she will not enjoy teaching and will create a low quality environment.

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