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**Teacher Retention: Retaining Teachers in High-Needs, Urban Secondary Schools in  
a Midwest State Post-Pandemic**

Christopher K. Schmit, Erin Lehmann, David Swank, Sue Alborn-Yilek, and Tasha  
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**Abstract**

Teacher retention has been a challenge for most schools for several years. High-needs schools have been known to have twice the trouble with teacher retention as schools not considered high-needs. The purpose of this study was to identify effective practices school principals can implement to retain teachers at high-needs, urban secondary schools. This quantitative study called on teachers from high-needs schools in Iowa to complete a survey identifying principal qualities related to retention, perceived reasons for teacher attrition, and reasons they continue to teach at their current school. Three hundred eighty-five teachers from five different Iowa school districts participated in the study. The findings of the study suggest teacher attrition and retention revolves around three main elements—Leader Member Exchange (LMX), teacher allocations, and school climate.

**Introduction**

Each year approximately 16% of teachers transfer schools, retire from teaching, or completely leave the teaching profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Even more concerning, Ansley et al. (2019) found high-needs schools experience teacher attrition at nearly twice the rate of schools not identified as high-needs. In Iowa, the schools located in the Des Moines metro area report more than 500 teachers are resigning or retiring from their position at the end of the 2021–22 school year—over 300 from one school district with many high-needs schools (Ta, 2022). The high rate of turnover is concerning due to the need for schools to fill

positions with high-quality teachers and not settle for anyone licensed to teach regardless of their qualifications. Improving teacher retention is necessary for schools to enhance the overall learning experience of students, build an inclusive culture in the school building, create a strong connection to the community, and stimulate the growth of teachers. For this study, a school is considered high-needs when it is deemed eligible for Title I funds by the federal government when children from low-income families make up at least 40% of the enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

As the leader of the school, the building principal is responsible for creating conditions in the school conducive to the learning of students and growth of teachers (Mawhinney & Rinke, 2019). This work begins with creating a school culture where students and staff are valued (Mawhinney & Rinke, 2019; Simon & Moore Johnson, 2015), stakeholder input is requested and listened to (Boyd et al., 2011; Mawhinney & Rinke, 2019; Simon & Moore Johnson, 2015), and learning is the primary focus (Simon & Moore Johnson, 2015). Additionally, hiring high-quality teachers whose mindset aligns with the beliefs and direction of the building is important (Miller & Youngs, 2021). Once assembled, the team of teachers must be uniquely supported. Support looks different for each teacher. Support may include assistance with classroom management, coaching on instructional strategies, teaching the curriculum, providing emotional support for work or personal issues, or assisting with parent communication to name a few. Whatever is needed, the principal is responsible for creating the system where support is provided to teachers (Boyd et al., 2011). By creating an environment where students and teachers can thrive, teacher retention becomes a reality, students achieve at high levels, and the school becomes a focal point in the community.

Building a strong relationship with teachers is one way the principal can support teachers. Each teacher may require different kinds of support to succeed based on their capacity to take on additional duties. When this type of relationship is a reality, the principal may know what each teacher needs to continue growth toward self-efficacy (Northouse, 2019). Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory concentrates on the relationship leaders of an organization have with each of their followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Regardless of their willingness or ability to take on additional responsibilities, the leader and the follower should have a strong working relationship that does not impede the development of the follower or their desire to remain with the organization (Covella et al., 2017). In fact, the followers may reciprocate trust, loyalty, and offer mutual respect to the leader (Tierney & Bauer, 1996). In this study, LMX theory is used as an approach for school principals to promote support for teachers, stimulate the growth of teachers, increase student achievement, achieve school goals and, ultimately, retain teachers.

The teacher shortage in high-needs, urban secondary schools has hit a crisis. Because of the negative political discourse about teachers, school safety issues, and the added stress of the COVID-19 pandemic, school principals have found a clear need to support teachers in a variety of new ways. These issues stemming from outside factors have taken a toll on educators and have resulted in teachers questioning their commitment to an undervalued profession they once loved.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore effective practices school principals can implement to retain teachers at high-needs, urban secondary schools in the Midwest post-pandemic. Survey data was collected to examine the relationship between having a supportive

principal at a high-needs, urban secondary school and retaining teachers at these schools despite the challenges.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are teacher perceptions of school principal qualities promoting teacher retention in high-needs, urban secondary schools?
2. What are perceived reasons teachers leave high-needs, urban secondary schools?
3. What are reasons teachers continue to teach at high-needs, urban secondary schools?
4. What is the relationship among teacher perceptions of leadership qualities and teacher retention in high-needs, urban secondary schools?

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Staffing High-Needs Urban Schools**

Leaders serving high-needs schools have increased staffing concerns (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019). Berry and Shields (2017) share the turnover rate in the United States is twice as high as more successfully performing countries. In fact, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) shared the national teacher turnover rate to be approximately 16%; however, high-needs schools have an attrition rate 50% higher than schools who are not considered high-needs. Cross and Thomas (2017) shared how teacher attrition is elevated in high-needs secondary schools and greatest in urban middle schools.

Research has identified numerous factors influencing a teacher's decision to continue teaching, move schools, or leave the profession entirely. The lack of adequate compensation (Bryner, 2021; Espinoza et al., 2018; Podolsky et al., 2016), teacher self-efficacy (Büyüksahin Çevik, 2017; Espinoza et al., 2018; Hughes, 2012; Podolsky et al., 2016), poor working

conditions (Bryner, 2021; Cross & Thomas, 2017; Hammonds, 2017; Podolsky et al., 2016), lack of a strong, supportive principal (Espinoza et al., 2018; Hammonds, 2017; Kim, 2019; Podolsky et al., 2016) and, most recently, the effects of COVID-19 (Bryner, 2021) have been identified as reasons for teacher attrition.

### **Current Issues in Education**

Teacher retention is a pervasive problem in high-needs, secondary urban schools. A lack of funding, lack of parental support, and negative student behavior are typical challenges in education. Over the past few years, more intense challenges have emerged leading teachers to question their professional commitment. In fact, in early 2022, the National Education Association found 55% of its members were considering leaving the teaching profession early, an 18% increase since August 2021 (Walker, 2022). Most recently, topics concerning the political discourse about teachers and education, school safety, and the COVID-19 pandemic have caused restlessness and anxiety among teachers.

### ***Political Discourse***

Each year, state representatives convene to discuss new bills potentially becoming laws to improve the educational experience of students and teachers. For example, the topic of Critical Race Theory has been highly debated. Early in the 2022 state legislative sessions, several bills had been introduced to ban Critical Race Theory and the teaching of divisive concepts in schools throughout the United States (Greene, 2022). Some of these contentious bills may pass, while others will be dismissed.

More specifically, representatives in Indiana have introduced Senate Bill 167 requiring all curricular materials to be posted online and allowing parents to opt children out of topics under certain circumstances (Lindsay, 2022). Politicians in Iowa were discussing a bill requiring

each public-school classroom to have a live-streamed camera for parents to log into and view instruction throughout the day (Perreault, 2022). Across multiple Midwest states, representatives are debating books taught in classrooms and available in school libraries (Perreault, 2022). Some politicians have recommended teachers choosing to share material deemed obscene be charged with felonies. One Iowa representative referred to teachers as “sinister” and accused teachers of pushing a deviant agenda normalizing incest and pedophilia (Rushing, 2022). The political discourse taking place in many states is frustrating, negatively affecting teachers and, ultimately, leading to teachers leaving the profession (Rushing, 2022).

### ***School Safety***

School safety is another current issue in schools impacting teacher retention. Since the 1999 school shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, where 13 people were killed and 24 people were injured (Wellbank, 2021), school safety has been a top priority for school leaders around the nation. In Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943), safety needs are positioned just above the basic needs of food, water, clothing, and shelter. The security of schools is a paramount concern for educators, further intensified by the escalating levels of violence observed in the Midwest and across the United States

Both aspiring teachers and experienced teachers in urban high schools feel unequipped to handle violence in schools (Brooks, 2020). Bryner (2021) concurred finding teachers are unprepared for the many variables potentially occurring during a school shooting or any other violent occurrence at school. Additionally, Bass et al. (2016) noted violence at school against school staff increases the level of stress experienced by teachers, ultimately leading to increased levels of teacher burnout.

Safety concerns around the social media application Tik Tok have recently increased due to the promotion of theft, violence, and vandalism—also known as *devious licks*—at schools by its users. In September 2021, Tik Tok users widely shared recordings of these devious licks taking place in middle schools, high schools, and college campuses around the country (Marples, 2021). These acts included, but were not limited to, the theft of urinals, floor tiles, and soap dispensers from schools (Marples, 2021). The October 2021 Tik Tok challenge encouraged slapping a teacher (Morrison, 2021), while the most concerning posts shared called for shootings and bomb threats at schools on December 17, 2021 (Frishberg, 2021). These negative and often threatening social media posts are an attack on the morale of teachers often leading to fatigue and increased teacher attrition.

Additionally, school shootings result in long-term challenges for staff and students involved (Lee, 2013) including the mental health of staff (Walters, 2018). Highly publicized school shootings such as Columbine High School in 1999, Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, Oxford High School in 2021, and most recently, Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas in 2022 are examples of tragic events in schools weighing on the minds of educators throughout the country. In April 2020, CBS News identified March 2020 as the first March in 18 years without a school shooting in the United States (Lewis, 2020). The constant concern of school shootings and overall safety in schools is a current issue affecting the mental health and the retention of teachers in the profession.

### ***COVID-19 Pandemic***

Since March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on the lives of people throughout the world. The positive rate of COVID-19 cases was used by school officials and, in some cases, governors, to make decisions about the learning experiences of students. These



decisions left teachers, on either side of the argument, in the middle and without a voice (Walter & Fox, 2021).

Early in the pandemic, measures such as schools being closed for extended amounts of time, social distancing of at least six feet, and stay-at-home orders were put in place as ways to provide safety (Shaw et al., 2021). Marroquin et al. (2020) shared social distancing, stay-at-home policies, and social support are associated with a negative impact on adult mental health conditions including increased anxiety, depression, and insomnia.

In the educational world, schools were physically closed during the last few months of the 2019–20 school year, and school district leaders were left to determine how to proceed with the 2020–21 school year. Adding to the challenge, building principals and teachers were tasked with finding ways to meet the various needs of students and educate them in a variety of modalities including in-person learning, remote learning, and, in some situations, both in-person and remote learning during the same class period (Correa & First, 2021; Etchells et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2021). Despite their best efforts, most teachers were not trained on how to effectively teach in these new modalities (Pressley & Ha, 2021). An additional concern for school leaders was the impact of their decision on the teachers questioning the safety of returning to classes during the pandemic without evidence it would be safe (Bryner, 2021).

Throughout all the uncertainty and concern caused by the pandemic, many teachers felt their safety, love, or self-esteem needs were not met (Walter & Fox, 2021). The lack of training combined with the numerous adjustments to teachers' roles and responsibilities associated with COVID-19 has resulted in high levels of teachers experiencing anxiety and decreased levels of teacher self-efficacy (Correa & First, 2021; Etchells et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). In January 2022, the National Education Association (NEA) released data from a

survey it conducted showing 90% of teachers were experiencing burnout and approximately 55% of teachers were considering leaving education due to the increased levels of stress they experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Walker, 2022). The full extent of trauma experienced by teachers due to COVID-19 has not yet been reached, and the potential impact on teacher retention is concerning (Etchells et al., 2021; Walter & Fox, 2021).

### **The Cost of Teacher Turnover**

The process of replacing teachers is costly. Podolsky et al. (2016) identified the financial cost of recruiting, hiring, and training a teacher in 2007 to be between \$4,600 in rural districts up to \$18,000 in an urban district. Nationally, teacher turnover is estimated to cost schools more than \$7 billion dollars each year (Reitman & Karge, 2019). Glazer (2021) found most teacher attrition is not a result of teachers leaving the profession; instead, most attrition is due to teachers moving from school-to-school often within the same district and to a school with lower student needs. The movement of teachers between schools often results in higher numbers of inexperienced teachers at high-need schools and frequently leads to continued instability (Glazer, 2021).

The cost of hiring a new teacher goes beyond the financial commitment. Sorensen and Ladd (2020) pointed out the turnover of teachers leads to a different quality and make up of school staff. These changes tend to negatively impact student achievement and, ultimately, may lead to greater staff turnover in the subsequent year due to the change in staff dynamics. Podolsky et al. (2016) shared student achievement suffers from regular turnover due to teachers never gaining experience which leading to a lack of compounding academic benefit for students. According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019), school leaders often resort to filling positions with inexperienced or unqualified teachers when hiring is difficult. This practice is

common in high-needs schools and leads to lower student achievement and, ultimately, the need to fill the same teaching position again in the near future (Ingersoll, 2001).

### **Factors Related to Retaining Staff**

Teacher retention at high-needs secondary schools has been an issue for many years. Tran and Smith (2020) suggested high-needs schools have more of an issue retaining teachers than attracting them to the position. Additionally, Cross and Thomas (2017) noted teachers in high-needs schools tend to leave at a higher rate than teachers from schools not considered high-needs. In fact, it was determined high-needs middle schools have the highest rate of teacher attrition (Cross & Thomas, 2017). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) found experienced teachers tend to leave high-needs schools 80% more often than in schools not considered high-needs (p. 8). Considering this, leaders must consider the impact teacher retention has on the achievement of students with the highest needs.

Multiple studies on how to retain highly qualified teachers at high-needs schools have been completed. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) suggested increased monetary compensation, improved teacher preparation and support, and further development of school leaders to help retain teachers. Reitman and Karge (2019) identified structured support for new teachers and meaningful professional development as key factors to improve teacher retention. Further, Okilwa and Barnett (2019) found providing teachers with the resources necessary to do their job and providing them with voice on school-based decisions as factors potentially leading to teacher retention. Poor working conditions are identified as a major reason for teacher turnover (Kim, 2019). In high-needs schools, Dixon (2019) found principal turnover was one of the biggest reasons for schools having a high rate of teacher turnover. Dixon (2019) noted many

similar reasons for principal turnover as teacher turnover including challenging work environment, long hours, and negative impacts on physical and/or mental health.

Positive relationships between leaders and followers have been an avenue to improve teacher retention at high-needs, urban secondary schools. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) recognized the impact of positive relationships between leaders and followers. Positive LMX resulted in feelings of loyalty, support, mutual respect, and trust between the leader and the follower (Graen & Uhl Bien, 1995), as well as increased levels of job satisfaction, autonomous motivation, work engagement (Graves & Luciano, 2013), additional engagement, and decrease employee turnover (Covella et al., 2017).

### ***Teacher Support***

Teacher support emerged as an overarching theme during the literature review process. Ideas for teacher support such as collaboration (Berry & Shields, 2017; Gunther, 2019; Hammonds, 2017), professional development (Gunther, 2019; Hammonds, 2017; Reitman & Karge, 2019), good working conditions (Berry & Shields, 2017; Glennie et al., 2016; Podolsky et al., 2016), and hiring staff for positions they are certified to teach (Glennie et al., 2016; Gunther, 2019) were identified as ways to improve teacher retention. Additionally, Gunther (2019) identified ideas such as providing 45-minutes of daily planning time and decreasing class sizes as ways to help support teachers. Auletto (2021) recognized authentic principal support, such as frequent meaningful interactions with teachers, as necessary to increase teacher retention rather than principals completing tasks to “check a box.” LMX theory promoted these positive interactions being implemented by leaders to develop positive and establish meaningful support for teachers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Through the work of appropriately supporting teachers,

teacher self-efficacy increases and, ultimately, leads to more positive outcomes for students (Podolsky et al., 2016).

Teachers in high-needs, urban schools benefit from collaboration (Gunther, 2019; Hammonds, 2017; Kuriloff et al., 2019), professional development (Gunther, 2019; Hammonds, 2017), good working conditions (Glazer, 2021; Hammonds, 2017; Papay et al., 2017), appropriate teaching placement (Glennie et al., 2016), and mentoring (Hammonds, 2017; Kuriloff et al., 2019). Hammonds (2017) also suggested providing teachers assistance on teaching students who are below grade level in a content area as well as build positive relationships with students and families as ways to support teachers. Kuriloff et al. (2019) found many teachers feel unprepared to work in urban classrooms, teach diverse students, plan and deliver instruction, and maintain high expectations for student learning. Kuriloff et al. (2019) suggested a collaborative effort between teacher preparation programs and high-needs, urban schools to increase the field experience and student teaching time in an urban setting.

## **Methods**

### **Study Design**

This descriptive and correlational quantitative study utilized a survey to collect data on teacher perceptions of leadership qualities promoting teacher retention in high-needs, urban secondary schools. Purposive sampling from five urban school districts in Iowa was used in this study to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of teachers actively working in these challenging situations (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Teacher perceptions were collected using an online survey emailed to teachers at identified schools.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument employed for this study was a 42-item scale survey including eight items addressing teacher demographics, 10 items were used to collect teacher perceptions on school principal qualities promoting teacher retention; 12 items related to reasons teacher leave a high-needs, urban secondary school; and 12 items regarding reasons teacher continue to teach at high-needs, urban secondary schools. Items were modified from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS, n.d.) from the 2011-12 school year, the Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS) from the 2012-13 school year, and author-devised items relating to research around teacher retention. Peer feedback was attained to ensure the clarity of survey items for participants. The survey for this study was created on Qualtrics and was delivered to participants through email.

### **Data Analysis**

This study focused on teachers serving in high-needs, urban secondary schools in Iowa, post-pandemic. A list of all the schools' designations was provided by the Iowa Department of Education (2021) upon request. The survey in this study contained multiple choice questions related to participant demographics and questions constructed on a 5-point Likert scale. Quantitative information was gathered on the 5-point Likert scale responses. Survey data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software by IBM.

## **Results**

### **Study Participants**

Teachers from five high-needs, urban secondary school districts in Iowa elected to participate in this study. Thirty-four schools were represented with a total staff population of 2,433. Approximately 29,987 students are served in these schools. Of the 34 schools included in this study, 21 were middle level schools, 11 were high schools, two of the schools serve students in grades six through 12, and one school was virtual. Thirteen of the schools receive Title I

funding for schoolwide services, one school receives Title I funding for targeted services, and 20 schools are eligible to receive Title I funding but have no program.

***Demographic Data***

Participants in this study were required to be teachers or staff members in teacher-licensed positions such as counselor or teacher-licensed support staff and a total of 385 eligible participants fully completed the survey. See Table 1 for participant demographic data.

**Table 1**

*Count of Teaching Longevity of Study Participants by Position*

	Total Number of Years Teaching				Number of Years at Current School		
	0-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	More than 15 years	0-2 years	3-5 years	More than 5 years
Classroom Teacher	89	61	41	158	102	65	182
Counselor	1	2	0	5	3	0	5
Teacher licensed support staff	3	3	6	16	8	6	14
Total	93	66	47	179	113	71	201

***Teacher Satisfaction***

Table 2 provides study participants' level of satisfaction teaching at their current school. Most of the study participants (59%, N = 226) selected *agree* or *strongly agree* with being satisfied teaching at their current schools. Of the remaining participants, 16% (N = 60) responded *neutral* to their level of satisfaction with their current school, 18% (N = 71) chose *disagree*, and 7% (N = 28) responded *strongly disagree*.

**Table 2**

*Study Participant Satisfaction Teaching at Their Current School*

	N	%
<i>strongly disagree</i>	28	7%
<i>disagree</i>	71	18%
<i>neutral</i>	60	16%
<i>agree</i>	168	44%
<i>strongly agree</i>	58	15%

**Teacher Longevity**

This study asked teachers how long they plan to remain in teaching. Table 3 provides teacher responses showing 61% (N = 237) plan to remain in the field of teaching. Only 23% (N = 88) were seeking other options, and 16% (N = 60) were undecided on their future in teaching.

**Table 3**

*How Long Do You Plan to Remain in Teaching?*

	N	%
As long as I am able	96	25%



	N	%
Until I am eligible for retirement from this job	122	32%
Until I am eligible for social security benefits	9	2%
Until a specific life event occurs (i.e., Parenthood, marriage, etc.)	6	1%
Until I am eligible for retirement from a previous job	4	1%
Definitely plan to leave as soon as I can	28	7%
Until a more desirable job opportunity comes along	60	16%
Undecided	60	16%

### Findings

Four research questions framed the scope of this research, relating to perceived principal qualities, teacher attrition and retention, and the relationship among those constructs. Each section included multiple statements accompanied by a Likert scale for participants to choose their level of agreement (1–*strongly disagree*, 2–*disagree*, 3–*neutral*, 4–*agree*, 5–*strongly agree*). Table 4 includes the key finding from research questions one through three.

**Table 4***Key Findings from Research Questions 1-3*

	Key Findings
RQ 1: Principal Qualities	Participants are generally satisfied with their school principal. Teachers feel their principal encourages professional collaboration, supports staff members, communicates respect for teachers, and promotes professional development.
RQ 2: Teacher Attrition	The top factors leading to teacher attrition include student behavior, lack of support for behavior expectations, and school culture.
RQ 3: Teacher Retention	The top factors leading to teacher retention include positive school leadership, teacher autonomy in the classroom, and school culture.

**Research Question 1: Principal Qualities**

Study participants displayed an overall positive opinion of their school principal. The highest rated qualities relate to the value of the teaching profession. Participants strongly felt their school principal encouraged professional collaboration among teachers when 89% selected *agree* or *strongly agree*. Likewise, 84% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement their principal supports staff. Eighty-three percent *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement their principal communicated respect and value for teachers. Participants also found professional

development was encouraged by the school principal with 82% choosing *agree* or *strongly agree* in response to this statement.

### ***Principal Sentiment***

An additional field was created from teachers' perceptions of school principal qualities in the survey. This field became the mean of the scores each teacher provided in the 10 questions related to principal qualities and is labeled as the Principal Sentiment score. The higher the Principal Sentiment score, the more positive opinion the teacher had for the principal. Over half of the study participants had a positive opinion of their school principal by recording a Principal Sentiment score between four and five. Three hundred twenty-five study participants (84%) provided a Principal Sentiment score of three or higher. This left 60 study participants (16%) with an unfavorable Principal Sentiment score of one or two.

### **Research Question 2: Teacher Attrition**

With well over half of participants having selected *agree* or *strongly agree*, responses to questions related to teacher attrition point toward items related to student conduct and support for student conduct as perceived reasons teachers have left their school in the past three years. Eighty-nine percent of participants *agree* or *strongly agree* student behavior was a factor leading to teacher attrition, 77% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* lack of support for behavior expectations led to teacher attrition and 71% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* school culture was a factor impacting colleagues' decisions to leave the school over the past three years. Additionally, lack of work-life balance was seen as a leading factor resulting in teacher attrition over the past three years.

### **Research Question 3: Teacher Retention**

#### ***Teacher Leadership***

Three factors related to teacher leadership appeared to be more strongly related to the reasons that teachers remain in their current school. Most participants *agreed* or *strongly agreed* positive school leadership kept them teaching at their current school. Almost half of the participants *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that teacher autonomy in their classroom was a factor keeping them teaching at their current school. Additionally, half of the study participants thought school culture was a reason they continued teaching at their current school.

#### ***Student Conduct and Support for Student Behavior***

Teacher support for student behavior expectations, meaningful professional development, and student behavior were somewhat related to retention in their school. Only 26% of teachers *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that teacher support for behavior expectations was related to reasons teachers stay at their school. A mere 19% of participants selected *agree* or *strongly agree* for student behavior as a reason teachers chose to remain at their current school. Additionally, less than one-fourth of the participants thought meaningful professional development was related to teacher retention at their school.

#### **Research Question 4: Relationship Between Principal Qualities and Teacher Retention**

To evaluate the relationship between principal qualities and teacher retention, factor reduction was necessary to distill continuous fields to be used in evaluating the relationship using a Pearson Correlation. Factor reduction “takes a large set of variables and identifies a way the data may be reduced, or summarized, using a smaller set of factors or components” (Pallant, 2020).

#### ***Teacher Attrition Factor Reduction***

Data was deemed suitable for factor reduction using the KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .853 (see Table 5), Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant ( $p \leq .001$ ), further, the Correlation Matrix included multiple items with a value of .3 or higher.

**Table 5**

*KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity for Attrition Factors*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.853
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1333.876
	Df	66
	Sig.	$p \leq .001$

Using factor reduction, three major components were identified. The first factor found was related to Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and included a lack of positive leadership, lack of teacher voice in decisions, lack of academic support, lack of meaningful professional development, and a lack of autonomy leading to attrition (see Table 6). The second factor centered around the theme of *Teacher Allocations*, and consisted of a lack of resources, lack of planning time, lack of work-life balance, and lack of compensation. The final factors included items related to *School Climate*, and contained student behavior, school culture, and a lack of behavior support as reasons for teacher attrition.

**Table 6**

*Pattern Matrix Table for Attrition and Retention Factors*

Attrition Factors			Retention Factors		
	Teacher	School		Teacher	School
LMX	Allocations	Climate	LMX	Allocations	Climate

	Attrition Factors		Retention Factors	
positive leadership	<b>0.834</b>		<b>0.856</b>	
teacher voice	<b>0.781</b>		<b>0.855</b>	
academic support	<b>0.709</b>		<b>0.816</b>	
meaningful PD	<b>0.584</b>		<b>0.341</b>	
teacher autonomy	<b>0.560</b>		<b>0.684</b>	
teacher compensation	<b>0.710</b>		<b>0.666</b>	-0.334*
classroom resources	<b>0.701</b>		<b>0.680</b>	
planning time	<b>0.655</b>	0.327*	<b>0.661</b>	
work-life balance	<b>0.490</b>	0.410*	<b>0.678</b>	
student behavior		<b>0.844</b>		<b>0.884</b>

	Attrition Factors		Retention Factors	
school	0.363*	<b>0.603</b>	0.594*	<b>0.428</b>
culture				
behavior	0.508*	<b>0.535</b>	0.631*	<b>0.336</b>
support				

*Note.* \*Indicates the number is not used for this component.

Bolded numbers are used for the component.

### ***Principal Sentiment-Teacher Attrition Correlation***

The results of the Pearson correlation between Principal Sentiment scores and the three teacher attrition components provided insight to reasons teachers leave a school (see Tables 7 and 8). LMX was found to have a strong but negative correlation ( $r = -.573, p \leq .001$ ) meaning when the Principal Sentiment score is high, the LMX score is low. Additionally, when the Principal Sentiment score is low, the LMX score is high.

Although not as strong as LMX, school climate ( $r = -.436, p \leq .001$ ) was also found to have a moderate strength, negative correlation with Principal Sentiment scores. This negative correlation results in Principal Sentiment scores and the School Climate score to be inverse. When Principal Sentiment scores are high, the School Climate score is low. When Principal Sentiment scores are low, the School Climate score is high.

Teacher Allocations ( $r = -.270, p \leq .001$ ) was found to have a weak, negative association to Principal Sentiment scores. In this correlation, Principal Sentiment scores inversely related to the access to Teacher Allocations. When Sentiment Score was high, Teacher Allocation was low.

Each of these components was found to have an inverse relationship to the teacher attrition components. Ultimately, this means when Principal Sentiment scores are high, the

likelihood of teacher attrition is low. Additionally, when Principal Sentiment scores are low, the likelihood of teacher attrition is high.

### ***Teacher Retention Factor Reduction***

Data was deemed suitable for factor reduction using the KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .878, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant ( $p \leq .001$ ), further, the Correlation Matrix included multiple items with a value of .3 or higher.

Three components were identified using factor. The first factor identified was related to LMX and included positive school leadership, teacher voice, academic support, teacher autonomy, and meaningful professional development. The second factor centered around the theme of Teacher Allocations, and consisted of classroom resources, work-life balance, appropriate planning time, and teacher compensation. The final factors included items related to School Climate, and contained student behavior, school culture, and behavior support as reasons for teacher retention.

### ***Principal Sentiment-Teacher Retention Correlation***

The descriptive statistics for the created components (see Table 7) and the results of the Pearson correlation (see Table 8) between Principal Sentiment and teacher retention components shed light on reasons teachers choose to remain teaching at high-needs, urban secondary schools. LMX ( $r = .653$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) was found to have the greatest strength. This means a high Principal Sentiment score also results in a high LMX score. Additionally, low Principal Sentiment scores would result in low LMX scores.

School Climate ( $r = .477$ ,  $p \leq .001$ ) was found to have a moderate level, positive correlation with Principal Sentiment scores. When Principal Sentiment scores increase, so do School Climate scores. When Principal Sentiment scores decrease, so do School Climate scores.



Teacher Allocations ( $r = .312, p \leq .001$ ) had a medium level, positive correlation with Principal Sentiment scores. This means Principal Sentiment scores correspond to the Teacher Allocation scores.

Each of these components was found to have a positive relationship to the teacher retention components. Ultimately, this means when Principal Sentiment scores are high, the likelihood of teacher retention is high.

**Table 7**

*Descriptive Statistics of Created Components*

	N	M	SD
Principal Sentiment	385	3.9	0.9
LMX (Attrition)	385	3.1	0.8
Teacher Allocations (Attrition)	385	3.5	0.8
School Climate (Attrition)	385	4.1	0.8
LMX (Retention)	385	3	0.9
Teacher Allocations (Retention)	385	2.9	0.8
School Climate (Retention)	385	2.7	1

**Table 8**

*Component Relationship to Principal Sentiment*

	N	R	p
LMX (Attrition)	385	-.573	.001
Teacher Allocations (Attrition)	385	-.270	.001

	N	R	p
School Climate (Attrition)	385	-.436	.001
LMX (Retention)	385	.653	.001
Teacher Allocations (Retention)	385	.312	.001
School Climate (Retention)	385	.477	.001

### ***Principal Sentiment Correlation to How Long Participants Plan to Remain Teaching***

Participants were asked about their plans to remain in the teaching profession. Slightly more than half of the respondents planned to remain in the teaching profession (61%, N = 237). These responses were rolled up into two groups, those who plan to stay in teaching and those who plan to leave teaching. Undecided responses were categorized as “plan to leave”. The rationale behind this decision was those who responded as undecided did not take a position where they planned to stay, and thus, had some consideration that they would leave the profession. A mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance was conducted to assess the mean differences of the participants that identified they would remain teaching versus participants planning to leave teaching. Table 9 shows the average Principal Sentiment for those teachers who chose to remain in the profession was 4.0, while the sentiment for those who chose to leave was 3.6. A difference of 0.4 was statistically significant at  $p < .001$ . The comparisons of the two groups were significant,  $F = 27.164$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 10) suggesting a school principal’s relationship with teachers has an impact on a teacher’s decision to continue teaching or stop teaching.

### **Table 9**

#### *Principal Sentiment Score of Participants Planning to Stay and Leave Teaching*

	N	%	Principal Sentiment	
			M	SD
Plan to stay in teaching	237	61%	4.0	0.8
Plan to leave teaching	148	39%	3.6	0.9

**Table 10**

*ANOVA Table of Principal Sentiment and How Long Will You Stay in the Teaching Profession*

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	(Combined)	19.194	1	19.194	27.164	<.001
Within Groups		270.628	383	.707		
Total		289.822	384			

## Discussion

### Principal Qualities

One of the aims of this study was to identify principal qualities that promote teacher retention in high-needs, urban secondary schools. To do this, participants were asked to rate their current principal on 10 principal qualities. The analysis of these findings showed participants' principals were adept at promoting professional collaboration but were less proficient in

enforcing school rules for student conduct. These results aligned with findings throughout this study.

One of the main findings in this study was the development of a Principal Sentiment score and its relationship to teacher's intention to continue teaching or leave teaching. Eighty-four percent (N = 325) of participants were found to have a favorable Principal Sentiment score. Additionally, 62% (N = 237) of participants indicated they intend to continue teaching. The mixed-between ANOVA showed a statistically significant difference ( $p < .001$ ) in the mean Principal Sentiment for teachers planning to stay in teaching (4.0) as compared to those planning to leave teaching (3.6). This finding showed principal qualities matter in the retention of staff and connects with the research indicating increased teacher retention and organizational commitment exists when the school principal promotes a positive relationship with teachers (Graves & Luciano, 2013).

### **Teacher Attrition**

A second goal of this study was to determine perceived reasons teachers left a school. An overwhelming majority of responses were related to school climate. Student behavior, a lack of support for behavior expectations, and school culture were identified as top reasons teachers were perceived to have left a school. The data suggested student behavior and the lack of student behavior support is inhibiting the retention of teachers. In addition to typical middle school and high school student behavior, Tik Tok trends (Marples, 2021), school violence (Brooks, 2020), and school shootings (Bryner, 2021) weigh heavily on teachers minds and caused them to question their commitment to teaching in high-needs, urban secondary schools. These findings also concur with Ingersoll's (2001) findings that school principals must work to improve school culture and support teachers with student behavior issues.

### **Teacher Retention**

Another goal of this study was to find reasons teachers continue to teach at high-needs, urban secondary schools. Many study participants felt teacher leadership factors helped retain them. The factors making up teacher leadership included positive school leadership, teacher autonomy, and school culture were the most favorably rated factors keeping teacher at their current school. This data suggested the importance of maintaining a positive LMX within the school and the positive impact it has on all who are involved translating to higher retention (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The lowest scoring items related to retention were student behavior and support for student expectations. These findings supported the data related to teacher attrition and further support the idea of creating good working conditions for teachers (Berry & Shields, 2017; Glennie et al., 2016; Podolsky et al., 2016).

### **Relationship Between Principal Qualities and Teacher Retention**

Finally, this study aimed to find a relationship between teacher perceptions of leadership qualities and teacher retention in high-needs, urban secondary schools. The analysis of data supported the need for positive LMX, maintaining a positive school climate, and supporting allocations for teachers. Findings were significant for each component and indicate these items are positively correlated to the Principal Sentiment score. Additionally, the association between Principal Sentiment score and teacher plans to remain teaching indicate a positive LMX, maintaining a positive school climate, and supporting allocations for teachers results in higher teacher retention at high-needs, urban secondary schools.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Three main recommendations for school principals emerged from this study. The recommendations include (a) form positive LMX connections with all teachers, (b) develop distributive leadership, and (c) support teachers so they can best serve students.

### **Positive LMX**

One of the foremost conclusions from this study revolved around the need for strong LMX to retain teachers. LMX theory called on principals to have a strong relationship with all members of the organization regardless of the teacher's ability or desire to go above and beyond the expectations (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Just as teachers build positive relationships with students, the school principal must work to develop strong connections with teachers. Through these positive LMX connections with all teachers, the school principal helps create a positive culture of mutual benefit amongst the school, the teacher, and the principal (Nishii & Mayer, 2009; Tierney & Bauer, 1996).

In order to achieve positive LMX, the principal must regularly provide clear, consistent communication to all teachers and follow up with teachers to gather input on building-wide decisions (Nishii & Mayer, 2009). This communication with teachers tells them what is required and outlines opportunities to lead and provide input. By consistently communicating with teachers, everyone could contribute and feel like a part of the team (Northouse, 2019).

### **Distributive Leadership**

Closely related to the school principal developing a positive LMX is distributive leadership. Distributive leadership was described by Hartley (2007) as shared leadership among team members to achieve a common goal. Distributive leadership encourages teacher voice to be utilized when complex building decisions are being made and endorses teacher commitment and retention (Fusarelli et al., 2011; Hulpia et al., 2010). By sharing leadership responsibilities

among team members, the school principal recognized the vast expertise of teachers and promotes teacher engagement, professional growth, and school improvement (Fusarelli et al., 2011). The professional growth of the teacher provides for mutual benefit of the teacher and the school. By implementing distributive leadership, school principals build the leadership capacity of teachers and in turn, increase teacher retention at high-needs, urban secondary schools.

### **Teacher Support**

A third recommendation for school principals was the need to support teachers. Although teachers required different levels and kinds of support, the leading area of support identified in this study was around student behavior. Through improved supports for student behavior, the school principal must stimulate positive working conditions (Berry & Shields, 2017; Glennie et al., 2016; Podolsky et al., 2016) by allowing teachers to focus on content and improved student learning. Ultimately this increases the likelihood of teacher retention. The National Education Association (NEA) identified providing mental health support for students and hiring more support staff as potential ways to address student behavior concerns and decrease teacher attrition (Walker, 2022). This study also reinforced the ideas of enforcing school rules and backing up teacher decisions as ways to increase the number of teachers retained at a school.

Instructional support has been an area in which school leaders must offer assistance. This support might include providing teachers with regular collaboration time (Berry & Shields, 2017; Gunther, 2019; Hammonds, 2017), providing meaningful professional development opportunities (Gunther, 2019; Hammonds, 2017; Reitman & Karge, 2019), mentoring new teachers (Auletto, 2021), and coaching teachers working with students who are academically below grade level (Hammonds, 2017). This instructional support can be provided by observing instruction and offering feedback, working with the professional learning community (PLC) to

plan and analyze data, or through observing teachers delivering the same content. Through this instructional support, teachers developed self-efficacy in their ability to help students succeed (Podolsky et al., 2016) which has been found to be a factor in teacher retention (Büyükşahin Çevik, 2017; Espinoza et al., 2018; Hughes, 2012; Podolsky et al., 2016).

### **Areas for Further Study**

School principals play an important role in the retention of teachers at high-needs, urban secondary school. This study aimed to explore effective practices school principals can implement to retain teachers at high-needs, urban secondary schools in the Midwest post-pandemic. Future studies could focus on the impact of school district leadership on teacher retention and effective practices school principals can implement to retain teachers in rural schools districts. Additionally, teacher retention could also be considered in relation to state policies, state leadership, and the negative depiction of teachers prevalent in many states right now.

### **Summary**

School principals have an obligation to implement positive LMX, distributive leadership, and teacher support within their schools and develop a collective commitment amongst the teaching staff. These recommendations form a solid school foundation designed to provide teachers with a positive work environment where they best serve students. By applying these three practices, school principals can effectively increase teacher retention at high-needs, urban secondary schools.

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