

Principals Tackle Teacher Performance

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Abstract

Research provides an undeniable connection between teacher quality and student outcomes. This quantitative study investigated reasons that principals recommend non-renewal of a teacher's contract and the barriers that challenge their ability to address ineffective teachers. Data were gathered using a survey that was completed by over 3,200 principals in 35 states over a nine-year time period. Principals are most likely to non-renew a teacher's contract for incompetence or ethical violations and less likely to do so for lack of student achievement. Principals felt supported by their superintendent and school boards; they identified time and laws protecting teachers as the most significant barriers. Findings of this study are valuable for superintendents as they plan for the professional development of principals.

Key Words

teacher contract non-renewal; teacher effectiveness; principal development; teacher evaluation; teacher dismissal

Success for students in the 21st century increasingly relies on competencies and proficiencies typically accessible through formal educational processes. Numerous researchers have noted the paramount importance of quality teaching as the important criterion for student success (Darling-Hammond 2006; Hanushek, 2008; Haycock, 1998; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2007; Marzano, 2006; Stronge & Tucker, 2000; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). While many variables impact student learning (curriculum, student demographics, poverty, among others) the teacher's instructional skill is the most critical factor in student learning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Stronge & Hindman, 2003).

Generally, effective teachers are expected to support student's growth measured by grade level equivalents on standardized tests (Hanushek, 2010). School principals face pressure from state accountability legislation to produce evidence of student learning, often using standardized assessments.

In this high-stakes environment, principals' decisions play a vital part in determining teacher effectiveness and strategies to address ineffective teacher performance. Bridges (1992), Lavelly, Berger, and Follman (1992), and Tucker (2001) estimated the number of incompetent teachers ranges from five to fifteen percent.

When an ineffective teacher is identified, principals may employ several strategies including professional growth plans, changing assignments, securing a resignation, or contract non-renewal. This study focuses primarily on contract non-renewal, noting that Bridges (1992) and Tucker (2001) found the teacher dismissal rate is less than one percent. Inevitably, principals and superintendents confront challenges to addressing ineffective

teaching such as time, teacher unions, collective bargaining agreements, and laws protecting teachers (Nixon, Packard, & Dam 2014; Painter, 2000). Learning more about the criteria and decision making that principals apply to ineffective teacher situations and contract non-renewals affords an opportunity to determine if principals have the tools that they need to work toward the critical outcome of an effective teacher in every classroom. Results from this study may help determine what is needed for superintendents and district office administrators to better support principals.

Summary of the Literature

Legal reasons for contract non-renewals

Teacher contract non-renewals are legal procedures that are defined in courts, by hearing examiners, through state statutes, and by means of master contracts and local policies and procedures. All states uniquely define the requirements for ending the employment of teachers, depending on the teachers' tenure status. More recent versions of school reform, however, have led to conditions where it is becoming easier to dismiss teachers who are ineffective (Darden, 2013; Zirkel, 2013). Zirkel (2013) found that in published court rulings since 1982, the school district won the dismissal conclusively 81% of the time.

Even though probationary teachers may have their contracts non-renewed without cause, common reasons exist. Legal reasons are defined in state statutes and often include incompetency, insubordination, immorality, reduction in force, contract violations, and good and just cause. The legal reasons manifest themselves in behaviors such as excessive absenteeism and tardiness, neglect of duty, abusive language, administering corporal punishment, unethical conduct, sexual misconduct, abuse of a controlled substance, theft or fraud, misuse of a school computer, criminal misconduct outside the work setting,

and conduct unbecoming a teacher, among others. (Lawrence, Vashon, Leake, & Leake, 2005). Saultz (2018) found that “most teachers are terminated or non-renewed because they violated terms of their contract relating to communication, the use of force, or not following a specific directive” (p. 8). Saultz (2018) found that only about four percent of teacher dismissal cases mentioned teacher effectiveness, teacher quality, instruction, or student learning (p. 8).

A primary legal reason for contract non-renewal, teacher incompetence, is viewed as a pattern of behavior rather than a single event. Significant legal and bureaucratic hurdles must be met to establish incompetency (Range, Duncan, Scherz, & Haines, 2012). Alexander and Alexander (2009) defined incompetence in the context of fitness to teach, noting that “fitness to teach is essential and contains a broad range of factors...lack of knowledge of subject matter, lack of discipline, unreasonable discipline, unprofessional conduct, and willful neglect of duty” (p. 796).

Another legal reason for contract non-renewal is immorality. Immorality has been viewed as a course of conduct that offends the morals of the community (Van Berkum, Richardson, Broe, & Lane, 2008). The standards of dismissal for immorality are vague, often leaving a principal in the difficult position to evaluate whether teacher actions are immoral by a community standard.

Barriers for principals in dealing with ineffective teachers

Principals calculate whether the inevitable conflict and unpleasantness of a contract non-renewal are worth the emotional toll and whether the superintendent or board of education will ultimately support the recommendations to non-renew. The issues regarding teacher contract non-renewal are arguably the most stressful, demanding, time-consuming, and emotional task required of a school

principal (Lawrence, et al., 2005; Menuey, 2005). The principal walks a fine line between predictable claims from teachers that there is too little documentation or not enough help being given to the teacher along with assertions that the principal has developed so much documentation that the effect is harassment of the teacher.

Principals identify lack of time as one of the largest barriers to their opportunity to adequately address ineffective teachers (Nixon, Packard, & Dam, 2014; Painter, 2000). Other identified or perceived hurdles include inadequate support from the superintendent and board, limited financial support for all phases of the process, personality characteristics of the evaluator, laws protecting teachers, reluctance to pursue a dismissal without a good chance of prevailing, and the high costs of litigation (Bridges, 1992; Schweizer, 1998). Another factor is that ineffective teachers are enabled and given cover by principals who avoid writing honest performance appraisals.

Evaluations are often written euphemistically, in which satisfactory really means unsatisfactory (Bridges, 1993; Waintroob, 1995; Zirkel, 2010). In another tactic, principals may mute their evaluation criticisms by wrapping them into words of constructive suggestions. Frels and Horton (2007) noted that there is unwillingness by principals to move toward a teacher dismissal. The result, therefore, is a contract non-renewal rate that lags well below the estimated percentage of incompetent teachers. Principals most certainly calculate whether the conflict and unpleasantness of a contract non-renewal are worth the emotional toll and whether the superintendent or board of education will ultimately support the recommendation to non-renew.

Contrary to common perceptions, Zirkel (2010; 2013) pointed out that in legal disputes, defendant school districts prevail over plaintiff

teachers by a better than four-to-one ratio. This raises the question as to whether the non-renewal issue is one of principal competence, will, commitment, and other reasons rather than the improbability of success.

Research Methods

Research questions

With a large data set collected over several years, researchers have demographic and other information that will address narrow issues in future papers. For this manuscript, it is most appropriate to address the large questions of greatest interest to principals and superintendents. Therefore, the study answered three research questions:

- 1) What is the priority of reasons that school principals will recommend non-renewal of a teacher's contract?
- 2) Which behaviors do principals observe most frequently from ineffective teachers?
- 3) Which barriers challenge school principals' ability to deal with ineffective teachers?

Instrumentation

In this study, 3,221 principals in 35 states completed an online survey. The data were collected between 2009 and 2018. The initial instrument was created after extensive review of the literature on teacher contract non-renewals and was piloted and validated with 60 principals in the Southeastern United States. In subsequent data collection cycles, survey questions and format were validated and refined multiple times by subject content experts.

For research question one, principals were asked to "Rank order the following possible reasons that might lead you to recommend non-renewal of a teacher. Select most likely (8) for one of the reasons for

termination; second most likely (7) for another one; very likely (6) for another one; and so on."

The eight answer choices provided included:

- absenteeism/tardiness,
- classroom management,
- ethical violations,
- incompetence,
- professional demeanor,
- insubordination,
- lack of student achievement, and
- poor relationship/inadequate collaboration.

Further, principals were asked to "Rank order the importance of the following criteria in deciding whether to recommend non-renewal of a teacher. Select (3) for most important, (2) second most important, and (1) less important."

The three answer choices included:

- subject content knowledge,
- instructional skills, and
- disposition/interpersonal skills.

For research question two, principals responded to "Which behaviors do you observe most frequently from ineffective teachers?" The three answer choices included lack of subject content knowledge, lack of instructional skills, and unacceptable disposition/poor interpersonal skills.

For research question three, principals responded to "Which of the following reasons complicate your ability to deal with ineffective teachers?" Principals had eleven answer choices which included "time, teacher union, inadequate support from the superintendent, inadequate support from the board of education, high cost of litigation, desire to avoid conflict and confrontation, laws protecting teachers, collective bargaining

agreement, lack of familiarity with processes, uncertainty over definition of ineffective teaching, and extent of teacher's community connections." Respondents were given a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Because these data are self-reported, it is understood that respondents may be consciously or subconsciously influenced by social desirability.

Results

Reasons for contract non-renewal

To address research question number one, principals arranged eight reasons for non-renewal in rank order from eight (8) as the most important to one (1) as the least important. Positive response rates were calculated by combining all answers in the range of four (5) through eight (8). The categories that received the highest positive response rate from principals were "incompetence" and "ethical violations." Eighty-seven percent of principals had positive responses to "incompetence" and 86% of principals had positive responses to "ethical violations," which indicated that they would be most likely to recommend contract non-renewal for these reasons.

Principals' responses to the category of "lack of student achievement" were of interest, given that the purpose of schooling is to ensure student growth. The positive response rate of 50% was considerably lower than the top categories of ethical violations and incompetence. It is, however, important to remember that the question was structured to force principals to rank categories based on their interpretation of the terms. As indicated in the literature, principals typically view "incompetence" as an omnibus term that includes issues such as "lack of student achievement" (Alexander & Alexander, 2009).

Principals were also asked to rank the importance of "subject content knowledge," "instructional skills," and "disposition/interpersonal skills" in their non-renewal decision-making process. The results indicated that principals placed a strong emphasis on instructional skills with 67% of participants who ranked it as the most important, and 27% rated it as the second most important category. Principals indicated that subject content knowledge was somewhat important with 11% who ranked it as the most important consideration and 40% who ranked it as the second most important.

Behaviors observed most frequently from ineffective teachers

In response to the survey question designed to address research question two, 68% of principals indicated that they observe "lack of instructional skills" most frequently and 28% indicated that it was the category they observed with the second most frequency. The responses to this question further reiterated the principal's beliefs that the instructional skill of the teacher is of great importance as they make decisions about contract non-renewal.

Barriers that challenge school principals' ability to deal with ineffective teachers

In responding to the third research question, principals indicated that they saw time as the most significant challenge to their ability to deal with ineffective teachers (Table 1). Sixty-eight percent of principals either strongly agreed or agreed that time was a complicating factor. The next highest indicated barriers were "laws protecting teachers," "teacher union," and "collective bargaining agreements." Although these results are lower than the category of time, it is important to note that 67% of principals surveyed indicated that their teachers belong to a union and 33% of

principals reported that their teachers did not belong to a union. Considering that a third of the principals who responded do not have unionized teachers and therefore, collective bargaining agreements, this result becomes more significant.

Principals overwhelmingly indicated that they felt supported by their superintendent and school boards during the contract non-renewal of teachers. Only 15% of principals indicated that support from the superintendent or school board was a barrier.

Table 1

Barriers That Challenge School Principals

Question	Strongly Agree		Strongly Disagree	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Time	27%	41%	23%	8%
Teacher union	22%	25%	27%	26%
Inadequate support from the superintendent	5%	10%	41%	45%
Inadequate support from the board of education	4%	11%	44%	40%
High cost of litigation	10%	25%	42%	23%
Desire to avoid conflict and confrontation	2%	22%	43%	32%
Laws protecting teachers	15%	38%	34%	13%
Collective bargaining agreement	15%	27%	32%	25%
Lack of familiarity with processes	1%	13%	51%	35%
Uncertainty over definition of ineffective teaching	2%	13%	45%	40%
Extent of ineffective teacher's community connections	5%	28%	42%	25%

Discussion

Over the past decade, significant reforms have been made to teacher evaluation systems to assist principals in recognizing teacher effectiveness and to act on remediating or removing ineffective teachers (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017). The impact of these reforms was recently measured by researchers at Brown University, who found that less than one-third of teachers perceived as ineffective by their principals were rated as such. As was true before reforms, less than 1% of teachers were annually rated as unsatisfactory (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017). Low rates of teacher dismissals have remained constant over time. According to the Schools and Staffing Survey,

the percentage of teachers dismissed each year has held constant at around 2% from 1999 until the last time the survey was given in 2012 (NCES, n.d.). Given these unchanging numbers, the researchers sought to clarify why contract non-renewal is not pursued in proportion to the number of teachers who are identified as ineffective by their principals.

Reasons for teacher contract non-renewal

Principals reported that the extreme circumstances presented by a teacher who demonstrates incompetence or commits an ethical violation are most likely to elicit the response of contract non-renewal. These

situations can be detrimental to students and highly visible to internal and external stakeholders. The extreme nature of ethical violations and the judgment by a principal of teacher incompetence often compels a strong reaction such as the removal of the teacher from the school.

By comparison, principals did not react as strongly to teachers who fail to produce the expected level of student achievement. When forced to rank eight possible considerations, 87% of principals rated incompetence while 86% ranked ethical violations as one of their top four considerations compared to only 50% of principals who rated lack of student achievement as one of their top four considerations.

This result was somewhat unexpected given that schools have now been subject to almost two decades of heightened federal and state accountability for student achievement and ten years of teacher evaluation reform. “Lack of student achievement” may not be a consistent reason for non-renewal because principals view it as a remediable problem that can be addressed through a professional growth plan. Additionally, because terms were not defined in the survey instrument, it is possible that principals include “Lack of student achievement” within the broader category of incompetence.

When the extreme categories of ethical violations and incompetence are taken out of the equation and principals are asked to rank reasons for contract non-renewal related more specifically to classroom performance, they indicated that teachers’ instructional skills were a more important consideration than subject area knowledge. Since the purpose of school is to cause student learning and growth, then it follows that subject area knowledge alone is insufficient for teacher success. A teacher who

understands the content but cannot deliver instruction in a manner that allows students to acquire knowledge and skills would not be considered effective.

This finding is supported by Hattie & Zierer (2018), who describe the most critical factors for teacher success as the abilities to understand learning from the perspective of the student and an understanding of how teachers’ beliefs and behaviors impact student outcomes. When asked to identify the most frequent behavior principals observe in ineffective teachers, instructional skill was again identified as the most important factor. This finding is consistent with and reinforces principals’ ranking in this study of instructional skills as the most critical classroom consideration in their contract non-renewal decisions.

Barriers to teacher contract non-renewal

The question regarding barriers to teacher contract non-renewal yielded, interesting, if not unexpected results. Principals identified time, laws protecting teachers, teacher unions, and collective bargaining agreements as the most likely barriers. These results are especially important to consider given that roughly one-third of the principals who participated in the study indicated that their teachers were not in unions. Principals continue to view unions as problematic in their quest to remove ineffective teachers, although, over the past decade, teacher union membership has declined (unionstats.com, n.d.). In 2018, 44.9% of U.S. elementary and middle school teachers were union members, down from 46.9% in 2016. High school teachers have a slightly higher rate of unionization with 50.2% membership in 2018, down from 52.3% in 2016 (unionstats.com, nd).

It is also interesting that principals continue to view collective bargaining agreements as barriers given that between 2010

and 2017 eight states passed legislation that weakened teachers' unions by reducing their ability to collectively bargain (Roth, 2017). Act 10 in Wisconsin was among the first of these laws and resulted in a 40% decrease in union membership in the state in the six years after its passage (unionstats, n.d.). Perhaps insufficient time has elapsed since the passage of the legislation for principals to fully realize a reduction in barriers from collective bargaining agreements.

Results of this study indicate that despite these changes in the culture of unions in K-12 school settings, principals still view rules regarding teacher contract non-renewal as cumbersome and unions themselves as unhelpful in implementing the often-complicated process to non-renew a teacher contract. It is likely that the barrier of "time" is also related to the complex rules set forth for teacher dismissal within collective bargaining agreements. The procedures required to contract non-renew a teacher appear to remain skewed towards protecting teachers, which may lead principals to select other strategies rather than initiating contract non-renewal.

Roughly one-third of principals also indicated concern about the political ramifications of teacher non-renewal that results in backlash from the teacher's community connections. This reluctance to create community discord may result in action by the principal to secure a voluntary resignation rather than contract non-renewal. Future research into the prevalence of the use of this strategy may produce results of use to both superintendents and principals.

The issues that principals did not see as barriers were also of interest and create opportunities for further research. "Lack of familiarity with the processes and/or resources" and "uncertainty over the definition of

ineffective teaching" were among the least identified barriers. Principals reported that they understand the contract non-renewal process and understand how to identify the qualities of effective teachers, and yet actual dismissal rates of teachers remain consistently in the low single digits. If principals understand the criteria and the process, why don't teacher non-renewal rates reflect the rates of ineffective teachers? Perhaps principals address ineffective teachers through other means such as securing a resignation or placing the teacher on a professional growth plan, but further research is necessary to determine if these types of strategies impede student growth and further deplete principal time.

Despite the other barriers, principals felt strongly supported by their superintendents and school boards as they pursue the contract non-renewal of teachers. Although data were gathered using a survey in which principals may have felt the desire to characterize their relationships in the most positive light, these findings do suggest that at a minimum, there is effective communication between school and district leaders. Given that superintendents are the primary communicators with school boards, it also implies healthy relationships between boards and superintendents and boards that support the policies and procedures that they themselves establish.

Fourteen percent of principals in this study cited lack of familiarity with the dismissal process and 15% were uncertain of the definition of effective teaching. Although these are small proportions of the overall population, superintendents and district office administrators can continue to support principals by ensuring that both the district definition of effective instruction and the dismissal process are clear and well known to all principals.

Conclusion

In order to accurately assess the experience of principals as it relates to teacher contract non-renewal and ineffective teachers, data were gathered from over 3,200 principals in 35 states over a span of ten years. Analysis of survey responses from this large group of principals across the United States made it evident that principals have a clear definition of good teaching and they recognize that teacher quality is an important consideration in ensuring student growth and meeting accountability demands.

These findings suggest that the focus over the past decade by both researchers and practitioners on teacher quality has impacted the way principals do their jobs. It is also positive that principals reported their willingness to implement the often difficult and time-consuming task of teacher contract non-renewals when faced with the egregious issues of incompetence and ethical violations of teachers that impact the education of their students. Furthermore, principals recognize that a teacher's ability to deliver high quality instruction is the most important issue when assessing teacher performance in the classroom.

Principals reported that while laws protecting teachers, unions, and collective bargaining agreements remain problematic, they nevertheless understand the non-renewal process and feel supported by their superintendents and school boards when they do choose to non-renew a teacher. The support to principals from superintendents even during one of the most difficult and often publicly challenging tasks is an encouraging finding and implies that strong and productive relationships exist between district and school leaders.

Superintendents should remain mindful of the difficulty principals face politically and

socially when they make the challenging decision to non-renew a teacher contract. The technical and emotional support of the superintendent must continue so that principals persist in their efforts to non-renew the contracts of teachers who have been deemed incompetent. Similarly, as the primary communicator with boards of education, superintendents must ensure that board members are well informed about the imperative to ensure that only competent teachers remain employed so that students can achieve at the highest possible levels.

Despite these positive findings, work remains to ensure that every student has access to a teacher with the skill to deliver high-quality instruction. The disconnect between the number of teachers whom principals identify with poor instructional skills and the very low numbers of teachers whose contracts are non-renewed must be examined further.

Superintendents and district office administrators can assist principals so that teacher contract non-renewal is a viable tool for school improvement in more than just the most egregious cases of incompetence and ethical violations. This assistance can come in the form of ongoing training regarding the technicality's teacher contract non-renewal processes, further refinement of definitions of high-quality instruction, and enhanced communication with teachers regarding the district expectations of teachers.

Additionally, superintendents can support principals' efforts by continuing to work with their teachers' unions to create collective bargaining agreements that include streamlined and well-defined teacher evaluation and remediation processes that simplify the process but continue to protect the due process rights of teachers. In states without teachers' unions, superintendents should work

with policy makers to ensure that teacher dismissal laws reflect a balance between teacher due process rights and school leaders' need to non-renew a teacher contract in a manner that is not overly burdensome or disruptive.

In addition to the considerations for practitioners, future research is required to determine if principals are addressing poor

performance through professional growth plans, securing resignations rather than terminations, reassignment, or some other methods.

If these methods are used as alternatives to contract non-renewal, study is needed to determine the impact to student outcomes, other teachers in the school, and principals' time.

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