

## Article

# Understanding School Leadership's Influence on Teacher Retention in High-Poverty Settings: An Exploratory Study in the U.S.

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**Abstract:** Research has identified principal leadership as one of the most salient school-level predictors of teacher retention. However, the survey-based quantitative nature and specific survey questions used in this research make it difficult to discern which leadership behaviors or approaches contribute most to teacher retention. As a result, school leaders and those responsible for preparing and/or employing them lack clear, research-based information about specific practices that could be effectively utilized, particularly in high-poverty schools. This qualitative case study, set in a high-poverty U. S. elementary school with high retention rates, utilized Simon and Johnson's (2015) framework of how principal behaviors that increase teacher retention in the quantitative research are exhibited in under-resourced schools. The study generates qualitative understandings of how a principal's actions contributed to retention by reaffirming a mission to serve high-poverty students, recognizing teachers for their work, developing and fostering within-faculty relationships, strengthening relationships with families, and providing disciplinary support. In doing so, the study also provides support for an existing framework for leading for retention and insights into how these actions may influence or be seen in survey responses used in survey-based research.

**Keywords:** principal leadership; teacher retention; high-poverty schools



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## 1. Introduction

Understanding the actions and behaviors that school leaders can employ to increase teacher retention in under-resourced schools is critical to advancing educational quality and equity in the United States. Average teacher turnover rates have historically been higher in high-poverty schools, as measured by household income, than in schools serving more affluent student populations. Further, teachers tend to leave high-poverty schools for more affluent schools as they gain experience and, in turn, effectiveness [1–5]. On the surface, these staffing trends are troubling for high-poverty schools because teacher quality is so critical to student learning and other important student outcomes [6,7]. Teacher turnover also tends to have a negative impact on student achievement in the subsequent year that is disproportionately experienced by students of color and students in lower-income households [8,9]. Furthermore, high turnover rates are associated with lower levels of long-term faculty quality and composition [10].

The negative implications of teacher turnover for high-poverty schools may have become even greater since the COVID-19 pandemic [11]. Students in lower-income households experienced greater pandemic learning loss in the U.S., and corresponding teacher labor markets appear to be becoming more constrained in the wake of the pandemic [11]. Research shows that traditional U.S. teacher preparation program enrollments that dipped in the early 2010s have remained low and relatively stagnant, with slight national-level decreases in the U.S. from 2015 to 2021 [12,13]. The number of teacher preparation program enrollees in the state in which this study was conducted dropped by over 50% from 2008–2009 to 2020–2021. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in the prevalence of teacher attitudes predictive of actual turnover [14]. For example, teachers are planning to

leave the profession in greater numbers, and job satisfaction is at or close to the lowest on record [15]. In sum, high-poverty schools, which have conventionally been at a disadvantage in retaining quality teachers and replacing those who do turnover, are expected to face increased competition for quality teachers in a shrinking teacher labor market [1,16]. As a result, the retention of teachers from one year to the next may be even more imperative for low-income students' educational quality than ever before.

It is important to note that high-poverty schools do not lose teachers simply because of their students' socioeconomic statuses (SES) or teachers' preferences for working with students of various income levels. Rather, research from the U.S. repeatedly finds that working conditions positively predict teacher retention when holding school demographics (e.g., student body SES, race/ethnicity, size) constant, and many of these relationships naturally hold in high-poverty contexts [1,17]. Most prominent of these working conditions tends to reside in teacher perceptions of school leadership, followed by factors that are generally influenced by school leaders (e.g., structures for teacher collaboration and school disciplinary practices) [1,18].

Though teacher retention research has continued to confirm that teacher perceptions of a set of school climate factors, headed by school leadership, predicts teacher retention, research reveals little about *how* school leaders can increase teacher retention or which specific *behaviors* and *practices* encourage teacher retention [17]. Rather, the research connecting school leadership and leadership-influenced factors to teacher retention is predominantly quantitative, relying mostly on teacher responses to surveys. Survey items directly measuring teacher perceptions of school leadership are often limited in number and tend to be general and open to interpretation. For example, the field knows that teacher perceptions of "administrative support" are critical to teacher retention, but what "administrative support" constitutes or how it is exhibited is much more unclear [19]. Calls to qualitatively understand how principals can exhibit this and other commonly employed survey items or how teachers define them have remained largely unanswered [19].

This pilot study seeks to determine which, if any, specific leadership behaviors contribute to teacher retention in a high-poverty school setting. This qualitative case study makes an important contribution by beginning to describe behaviors that are often represented in quantitative research and corresponding survey item responses. The present study explores two research questions:

1. Which leadership behaviors does a principal working in a high-poverty U.S. school setting take to improve teacher retention?
2. How are these leadership behaviors aligned with and elaborate on quantitative research and surveys commonly used to predict teacher retention?

This study aims to inform school leadership practice and corresponding preparation of school leaders that increase teacher retention in high-poverty schools in a post-pandemic K-12 educator labor market. We also assert that understandings from this work can be used to inform and help narrow existing surveys to improve how accurately they reflect the work of leaders.

## 2. Literature Review

The research examining teacher turnover has grown substantively over time and is predominantly quantitative. The field has found that working conditions, especially those created by school leadership, moderate the predictiveness of school (e.g., SES, level) and teacher characteristics (e.g., sex/gender, race/ethnicity) [1]. This growth in understanding, especially through quantitative research, can be seen through an overview of one review and two meta-analyses of the teacher turnover literature. It should be noted before proceeding that the overview of literature below is U.S.-centered because the overwhelming majority of teacher retention research has been conducted in U.S. contexts. Only 8 of the 120 studies meeting Nguyen and colleagues' teacher turnover meta-analysis were conducted outside of the U.S., and only 2 of these definitively used data collected more recently than 2010 [17]. Pertinent to our study, none of these non-U.S. studies prior to 2020 ex-

amined relationships between school leadership and teacher retention. Sims and Jerrim, however, have since explored this relationship in England, as seen in this literature review section [20].

### 2.1. Overview of the Teacher Retention Literature

First, Guarino and colleagues' review of teacher recruitment and retention research found a growing evidence base showing that working conditions were core to why teachers left high-poverty schools for more affluent ones [21]. The conditions they deemed most influential were administrative support, mentoring/induction, class size, teacher autonomy, and salary. In analyzing 46 studies, both quantitative and qualitative, published in or before 2004 and using data collected in or after 1990, the authors found that most student demographics (e.g., SES) were not predictive of turnover when accounting for working conditions. Borman and Dowling's meta-analysis of correlates of teacher turnover and intent to turnover in 34 studies published between 1980 and 2005 quantitatively supported Guarino and colleagues' turnover findings [21,22]. Borman and Dowling determined that the role of working conditions played a larger role in turnover decisions than earlier research revealed; research had previously suggested that student demographics were influential, but the majority of those studies did not account for working conditions [22].

More recently, Nguyen and colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of 120 quantitative studies of teacher turnover published from 1980 to 2018 [17]. They found that negative perceptions of working conditions, particularly teacher perceptions of school leadership and disciplinary issues, consistently predicted turnover. They also determined that measures of principal effectiveness and induction/mentoring were also predictive. Nguyen and colleagues also found that other factors, largely outside of a school district or building's control, were also predictors of turnover, namely lower compensation, absence of merit pay, and a teacher having high prior academic achievement; teaching in science, math, or special education; being a person of color; being younger; and/or being less experienced [17]. Consistent with Guarino and colleagues and Borman and Dowling, student characteristics outside of achievement on standardized tests (e.g., SES, race/ethnicity) did not predict teacher turnover when school conditions were included in study models [17,21,22].

Given school leadership's prominent role in turnover and the influence school leaders have over other key retention-related working conditions, understanding the behaviors and actions school leaders in high-poverty schools can take to increase retention seems critical [17,23]. As Perrone [18] described, the finding that teacher perceptions of school leadership have a chief role in turnover extends across time periods and characteristics that studies are commonly constrained to or control for in quantitative studies, including but not limited to the subject a teacher teaches [24,25], race/ethnicity and sex/gender [26,27], level of teacher experience [28,29], school locale (e.g., urban, suburban) [29], a range of student and school demographics [26], traditional public and charter school status [30], and international status [31]. Studies controlling for these and similar factors have also found that school leadership predicts other antecedents of teacher turnover, such as teacher intent to turnover [32,33], job satisfaction [34], and burnout [35]. It should be noted again, however, that the majority of findings described above come from studies using U.S. data. While country context may play a role in teacher turnover intentions (e.g., variation in prestige of teaching profession by country) [36], Sims and Jerrim's analysis of TIMS data from England revealed salient relationships between positive perceptions of school leadership and teacher retention [20].

### 2.2. Conceptualizing Leadership Actions That Reduce Turnover

The aim of this pilot study is to identify actions that a principal who is effective at retaining teachers used in her schools and to elaborate from this case on possible changes that could be introduced to survey instruments that measure teacher retention. This study addresses an urgent need to understand how to mitigate teacher turnover, especially for high-poverty schools. Indeed, leadership itself appears capable of mitigating turnover, and

leaders often have the capacity to influence a variety of other correlates of teacher turnover (e.g., collegial climate, teacher induction, and mentoring) [17]. Thus, the principal's actions may be the *most* pressing factor in creating, maintaining, or changing working conditions. And, as noted by others, leadership actions are more cost-effective than other approaches to addressing turnover, especially in a financially constrained K-12 environment [24].

Simon and Johnson developed a framework to explain predictors of teacher turnover in high-poverty schools and to move the discourse about turnover away from simply debating student demographics [1]. Though valuable research has provided insights into ways school leaders can successfully lead in high-poverty schools, Simon and Johnson noted that there was less research on actions leaders could take specifically to improve retention in such contexts [1,37]. Simon and Johnson began by identifying six studies that they used to primarily inform their framework and to describe conditions that are imperative for retention in high-poverty schools [3,14,19,32,38,39]. These studies informed the authors' proposition that three conditions drive retention in high-poverty schools and include (1) school leadership (organizational management, instructional leadership, inclusive decision-making), (2) collegial support (inclusive environment that exhibits mutual respect and trust, structures for collaboration and support, shared goals and purposes), and (3) school culture (student discipline, parent engagement). Simon and Johnson also pointed to a need for qualitative research that helps explain these quantitative relationships with turnover and understand how these dimensions of high-poverty school working conditions may interact with one another [1]. Our pilot study begins to explicitly address this call along with continued appeals for qualitative examinations of the school leadership–teacher turnover relationship more generally [19].

The present case study focuses primarily on leadership behaviors that link back to specific survey items commonly used to measure school leadership in teacher retention research. One issue that initially complicates creating qualitative explanations for broad quantitative findings is that the teacher turnover studies that account for working conditions vary in how many leadership-focused items they include. For instance, the most widely cited study informing Simon and Johnson's framework employed five leadership items, while the third-most cited used asked 24 leadership questions [1,14,19]. Different survey questions across studies can measure different aspects of school leadership and work to comprise different leadership factors (e.g., Liebowitz & Porter) [40]. Given these broader inconsistencies, we concentrate on the five most-used survey items that constitute the leadership measure in all the relevant turnover research using nationally representative U.S. data. These same items are also either explicitly included in other influential studies' surveys or inherent in at least some questions used in most other prominent turnover studies [3,19,41].

The present study focuses on principal behaviors that are reflected in five survey items used on the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)/Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS), a survey suite that was renamed in 2015 and includes items corresponding teacher-focused turnover research.) The U.S. Department of Education administers the SASS every four years. The survey includes a nationally representative survey of U.S. districts, schools, teachers, and principals. Of primary interest to our study, the SASS Teacher Survey asks a rich set of questions about teacher backgrounds, working conditions, and attitudes. In the year immediately following SASS administration, the TFS is distributed to a representative subsample of SASS respondents, asking teachers about their subsequent employment decisions and corresponding attitudes and conditions <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/> (accessed on 9 May 2024). Individual-level, restricted-use data licenses are available to researchers free of charge through an application process that requires levels of data security. Questions focused on school leadership used in the vast majority of SASS/TFS teacher turnover studies are as follows:

- “The school administration’s behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging”.
- “My principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it”.

- “The principal knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the staff”.
- “In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done”.
- “I like the way things are run at this school”. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/questionnaire.asp> (accessed on 9 May 2024)

Teacher responses are based on a four-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These questions address teacher perceptions of school leadership overall, but researchers most often interpret them as indicative of the principal as a school leader [42]. In our qualitative study, we focus on the principal because of the principal’s influential role in other correlates of teacher turnover [23].

The SASS’ wide use in the literature on leadership’s association with teacher retention is clear. Some examples of widely-cited studies that have used these SASS items to determine that school leadership is critical to retention include, but are not limited to, Boyd et al. [19], Grissom [26], Husain et al. [41], Ingersoll [43], Kelly and Northrop [27], Kim [28], Player et al. [44], Redding et al. [25], and Stuit and Smith [30]. These and other studies using the SASS, including studies of leadership’s relationship with predictors of turnover, such as job satisfaction [34] and intent to return [33], comprise a substantial portion of what the field has established in the importance of leadership on retention. Therefore, qualitatively explaining *how* these survey items are exhibited in behaviors and actions in high-poverty schools takes on greater importance.

While a substantial proportion of the relevant research uses the SASS and can be expected to continue to do so in the future, studies *not* using the SASS also tend to incorporate many or all of these same items using the same or similar wording. For example, Kraft and colleagues and Husain and colleagues used the New York City Teachers Survey (NYCTS), which includes items strikingly similar to those five SASS leadership survey items [41,45]. It is possible, too, that the SASS measures leadership in a way like more comprehensive surveys. For instance, Husain and colleagues found leadership’s relationship with turnover was essentially the same when they limited their leadership measure to five NYCTS items that mirror the SASS leadership questions as when they tested the full set of New York City Teacher Survey leadership-focused questions [41].

The preponderance of quantitative teacher turnover research does not mean that relevant qualitative research is fully absent. Rigorous qualitative studies have investigated leadership’s role in teacher retention with data derived from earlier K-12 contexts. For instance, and with regard to the dimensions of school leadership seen in the SASS questions on which we focus, administrative support’s role can be seen in work using data from the 2000s by Brown and Wynn and Scallon and colleagues [46,47]. The importance of the principal as a supporter in disciplinary matters has also been illustrated in research on beginning teachers’ career trajectories in Johnson and Birkeland and both novice and veteran teachers alike in Gonzalez and colleagues [48,49]. Aspects of teacher recognition have also been examined using data from previous decades [50]. However, we are unaware of qualitative, peer-reviewed research that explicitly seeks to explain principal behaviors and actions that can be directly traced back to the quantitative research on leadership’s role in teacher turnover or conducted in a more recent teacher labor market with more difficult conditions for teachers [51].

### 3. Materials and Methods

This pilot study used a single-case qualitative design focused on one high-poverty elementary school to understand which actions were undertaken by the principal and how these contributed to improved teacher retention. This case study spanned one academic year (i.e., August to May) and included teachers, staff, and administrators working at the school. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, observations of school and classroom activities, as well as the retrieval of documents and electronic artifacts. This section discusses the research setting, data collection strategies used, as well as the analytic approach that guided this study.



## Research Setting

Researchers reviewed retention data for elementary schools within the district and identified those that had shown increasing retention over time. Rossdale Elementary School (pseudonym) was purposefully selected for this study, given it had demonstrated improved teacher retention despite serving the lowest-income neighborhood in the district. As shown in Table 1, the school enrolls approximately 300 students in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. Nearly half of the school's students identify as a racial or ethnic minority, and nearly 80 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. One-quarter of the school's students receive special education support services, with a smaller proportion receiving support for language acquisition. The school employs 39 full-time classroom teachers. Nearly half of the teachers in the building have between 6 and 15 years of teaching experience. According to the district's teacher evaluation program, all of the school's teachers are rated as effective or highly effective. The researchers selected Rossdale for this study because it was a high-poverty school in which teacher retention had substantially improved under the current principal's leadership. In the years prior to the principal's tenure, the school experienced chronic teacher turnover. Teachers left the school for other teaching assignments in the district, moved out of the district to pursue teaching positions in less challenging settings, or resigned from the teaching profession entirely. The current principal, who spent the majority of her roughly 25 years as an educator in leadership positions at the school level, reversed this trend and created significant stability during her five-year tenure at Rossdale. Thus, the school serves as a unique case to consider what leadership actions were taken to improve retention despite its challenging conditions and high-poverty classification.

**Table 1.** School characteristics compared with district characteristics (2022–2023).

|   | Rossdale | District |
|---|----------|----------|
| <b>Enrollment</b>                                   | 305      | 10,613   |
| <b>Student Demographics</b>                         |          |          |
| Asian   | 0.4%     | 4.8%     |
| Black   | 18.9%    | 6.0%     |
| Hawaiian  | 0.0%     | 0.1%     |
| Hispanic  | 10.5%    | 6.3%     |
| Multi-Racial  | 16.1%    | 7.5%     |
| Native American                                     | 0.4%     | 0.2%     |
| White   | 53.7%    | 75.2%    |
| Percentage of English-Language Learners             | 5.6%     | 3.3%     |
| Percentage Receiving Special Education Services     | 24.9%    | 16.7%    |
| Percentage of Students with >94% Attendance         | 41.8%    | 63.6%    |
| Percentage Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch | 74.8%    | 30.7%    |
| <b>Student Achievement</b>                          |          |          |
| 3rd-Grade Literacy/English Language Arts            | 65.8%    | 84.8%    |
| 6th-Grade Math                                      | 58.8%    | 44.6%    |

*Note.* Categories are represented in bold text while specific measures are reported in plain text. *Source.* Data were obtained from state education department website.

### 3.1. Research Participants

As shown in Table 2, this study included 13 research participants purposefully selected from the school's teaching and administrative staff. The participants included the principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, social worker, and nine classroom teachers. Overall, the sample consisted of 11 women and 2 men who ranged in age from 29 to 64 years old, and the teacher sample was made up of 8 women and 1 man from 29 to 55 years of age. The teacher participants had between 1 and 33 years of professional experience in education and had worked at Rossdale from 1 to 33 years at the time of this study. All of the teacher participants had been retained in the building. Consistent with the broader composition of

the district's teacher workforce, the participants in this study were White. Most teacher participants had earned a graduate degree at the time of this study's completion, and one held a doctorate.

**Table 2.** Research participants.

| Position            | Age | Gender | Education | Years of Experience | Years at School |
|---------------------|-----|--------|-----------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Principal           | 64  | Female | MA        | 27                  | 5               |
| Assistant Principal | 58  | Male   | MA        | 25                  | 5               |
| Instructional Coach | 39  | Female | MA        | 16                  | 9               |
| Social Worker       | 32  | Female | MA        | 6                   | 6               |
| Kindergarten        | 46  | Female | MA        | 23                  | 5               |
| Grade 1             | 30  | Female | MA        | 9                   | 3               |
| Grade 2             | 31  | Female | MA        | 1                   | 1               |
| Grade 4             | 29  | Female | BA        | 6                   | 5               |
| Grade 6             | 55  | Female | BA        | 7                   | 1               |
| Special Education   | 30  | Female | MA        | 7                   | 7               |
| Special Education   | 55  | Female | MA        | 33                  | 33              |
| Art Teacher         | 43  | Male   | EdD       | 18                  | 8               |
| Music Teacher       | 41  | Female | MA        | 18                  | 4               |

### 3.2. Data Collection

To complete this case study, the researchers completed semi-structured interviews and onsite observations and retrieved documents from research participants, the district's human resource department, and the school's public-facing website. We describe each data collection technique below.

#### 3.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The researchers completed semi-structured interviews with participants during the data collection phase of this study. Each participant participated in two interviews (please see Appendix A for a copy of the interview protocol). The first interview was completed early in the fall of 2019. The first interview averaged 34 minutes in total length and focused on the participant's impressions of the school leadership, the conditions within the school, and the support provided to them as classroom teachers by their peers and members of school's leadership team. Questions presented during the interviews sought to identify the actions or behaviors taken by the principal and members of her leadership team that teachers perceived positively influenced their desire to continue working within the school or contributed to improved working conditions. The second interview was completed in late fall and averaged 29 minutes. The interview sought to understand how the principal's actions influenced or did not influence teachers' working conditions. Throughout the interviews, the researchers probed for specific examples to illustrate the principal's leadership actions and their impact (e.g., "What would that look like in your classroom or grade level team?"). All the interviews were conducted via Zoom, digitally recorded, and later professionally transcribed. Prior to analysis, the researchers shared the completed transcripts with the study participants to ensure the accuracy of the interview record.

#### 3.2.2. Onsite Observations

Throughout the 2019–2020 academic year, the researchers conducted onsite observations at the school to document conditions within the school that participants described in their interviews, as well as to record administrative structures, processes, and actions that could be readily observed. Most observations took place during the fall semester, as fewer opportunities to observe were present in the spring due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The observations focused on classrooms and other public spaces within the school (e.g., administrative office, hallways, cafeteria, library) and confirmed participants' perceptions of the school environment. Where possible, the researchers observed school

meetings involving the principal and members of the school staff, as these provided the researchers with opportunities to document interactions between administrators and the school's teaching staff. The observations were completed across the academic year and generally lasted one to two hours each. During observations, the researchers recorded their observations using a legal pad and later transcribed their notes to a Microsoft Word document. The observation notes were then uploaded to MaxQDA for analysis.

### 3.3. Documents

To augment data collected through semi-structured interviews and observations, the researchers also retrieved 20 documents from the school and district's public-facing website and directly from research participants. From the public-facing website, the researchers obtained copies of the school's improvement plan, student demographic information, recent test scores, and descriptive data related to the school's teaching staff. From the district's human resource website, the researchers obtained copies of the school district's collective bargaining agreement, salary schedule, and documents describing the school district's mentoring program for newly hired classroom teachers. From the school's principal, the researchers acquired copies of the school's master schedule, teaching roster, and information related to the school's professional development program. Finally, from teachers who participated in this study, the researchers obtained copies of mentoring and induction documents as well as other artifacts describing the school's behavior expectations and other examples of administrative support. The researchers converted all documents to Adobe PDF and uploaded them to MaxQDA for analysis.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The researchers completed data analysis using MaxQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis package. Transcripts from participant interviews, school documents, and observation notes were loaded into MaxQDA. An a priori coding scheme broadly reflecting leadership actions reported in Simon and Johnson's research served as the basis for analysis [1]. The final coding scheme included 28 codes that referred to conditions associated with teacher retention in high-poverty school settings and the leadership actions that support retention. Eleven codes were drawn directly from the Simon and Johnson framework and corresponded with prior literature on retention in high-poverty school settings [1]. During analysis, the researchers added an additional 17 codes that were deductively identified during the review of the data and that related to specific actions taken by the principal within the specific school context. These codes reflected nuanced understanding(s) of the actions taken that were not reflected in the more generic actions described by Simon and Johnson [1]. The final coding structure thus reflected this study's conceptual framework, which highlighted different aspects of administrative support that contribute to teacher retention in high-poverty school settings, as well as participants' understanding(s) of leadership in the single school context.

Both researchers completed initial coding using the a priori coding scheme. Using one interview, the researchers identified and coded statements in the interview and then compared their coding to ensure inter-coder reliability. After discussing their coding and reconciling differences, the researchers then independently coded interviews, observation notes, and documents. At this stage, codes were largely descriptive, aligned to the theoretical framework, and aimed to organize participants' comments about the actions taken by the school principal that influenced their retention decisions. After initial coding, the first author completed later rounds of coding independently and shared the results of coding with the other members of the research team. Final codes indicate the specific actions that were referenced by participants and that these actions included establishing the school's identity, assisting teachers with behavior management, providing support and feedback, and managing administrative systems or processes. Through each coding phase, codes took on higher levels of inference and reflected increasing interpretation of the participants' statements. The interpretation was rooted in literature-based understandings of the leader-



ship behaviors linked to teacher retention. The most saturated codes accentuate repeated references to leadership behaviors that contribute to working conditions associated with higher levels of teacher retention.

### 3.5. Limitations

Four limitations impact the present study. First, the present study was conducted within a single school in the United States. The conditions within school are thus specific, and so the findings may not fully reflect staffing conditions found within other school contexts or countries. As such, we treat the actions taken by this principal as specific examples and thus seek to temper our recommendations for revision based on what we observed. Further work is needed to inform audiences outside of this context, to produce recommendations that are more expansive, and to fully execute improvements to the survey instrument. Second, the case selected had shown improvements in retention over a period of time, but it is unclear whether the case is generalizable to the larger population of high-poverty schools. The use of one case is intentional, and since our aim is to begin to identify what might be missing from current surveys, the approach is appropriate for that purpose. Additional cases would be needed to better inform the development of the survey. Third, this study was partially interrupted because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, a period in which school staffing practices changed rapidly due to the shifting public health conditions. This study did not directly consider these conditions nor the immediate aftermath of the pandemic. Further work is needed to understand whether and how these conditions have impacted the leadership actions needed to effectively retain staff. Finally, this study included classroom teachers who had either remained at the school across administrations or were recruited by the current principal. This offers only one perspective on the conditions needed to improve retention. Teachers who left the school and were not retained would potentially offer additional perspectives that could add greater variation and depth to our interpretations. Since these teachers were not interviewed, future research is needed to better understand the views of both retained and turnover teachers and to integrate them into the interpretations presented.

## 4. Findings

Existing surveys of classroom teachers describe the working conditions that principals create, which could potentially contribute to increased teacher retention. What is not clear, however, is which leadership actions should be taken and in what configuration by school principals to support these improvements, particularly in schools that have shown steadily declining retention rates. In this pilot study, we found that the principal at Rosedale Elementary School (pseudonym) adapted frequently cited leadership actions to fit the specific school context she led. In particular, she placed a high priority on re-affirming the school's mission to serve a high-poverty community, strengthening professional relationships among classroom teachers through recognition, assisting with and devising responses to student behavior, and rebuilding systems that allowed teachers to remain focused on classroom instruction.

### 4.1. Re-Affirming the School's Mission to a High-Poverty Community

Serving students in a high-poverty school community depends on a teacher's commitment to working with students who have fewer economic and social resources to support their educational needs. Serving these students requires a shared belief among teachers that these students can be successful academically and have the potential to succeed when conditions facilitate their success. The principal thus recognized that establishing this commitment had to be one of her leadership priorities. She articulated that the students, parents, and families they served had needs that differed from those attending a more affluent school setting and sought to provide assurance to classroom teachers that the work of this school was rewarding and unique. Indeed, observational data collected from the school site offered evidence of aspirational messages, affirmations of student success, and

points of pride for the school community. These messages were instrumental in cultivating commitment to the school. As the principal noted,

working in a school like Rossdale involves mission work, and if that is not the kind of work you want to do, it's probably not the place for you. This is a place where you have to care about every kid that comes in your room and you have to care about their background and you have to know where they're coming from.

Probing further, we find that the term "mission work" used by the principal describes a commitment to serving high-poverty students that is unique from other school settings. Specifically, she uses this term to describe staff who want to remain at the school in order to serve its high-poverty, high-needs community. Indeed, references to mission work were reflected across our interviews with the principal as she spoke about the unique demands that working in this context required of her staff. In one interview, she observed,

I think you have to be a person who's willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. And that includes going to somebody's house and picking up a kid and bringing them in. That includes taking somebody home. That includes telling a woman who comes into your office who just got beat up by her husband, you've got to go to the women's shelter. That includes just being able for them to hear you. So, it's about a relationship. And if you're not a person who wants to lead through relationships, I don't think a high-poverty school is the place for you to be.

The principal's comments illustrate that teachers who work at Rossdale need to be able to see the challenging circumstances that follow students into their classrooms and respond to these circumstances with care and compassion. This compassion can involve providing food, clothing, and other supports to students that contribute to the student's ability to focus in the classroom. As the principal noted, "it matters that they eat breakfast and that you can send them down [to the office] when there's a hole in their shoes and they're not wearing socks and they don't have a coat and they don't have gloves and they don't have all that stuff".

Teachers acknowledged that the school's "mission work" motivated their desire to work there, and it served as a motivational force for their retention. As one second-grade teacher observed, students who attend Rossdale need to know that their teachers care about them to compensate for their experiences at home and to overcome deficits in their academic experiences. In her view, teachers who embrace this challenge find the work rewarding and demonstrate a commitment to the school that sustains them. As she reflected, "[the students] know that I care about them and they know that I would do anything for them. It's important, especially for these students, to know that". The teacher noted that this commitment was vital because many teachers "get focused on the bad" or "see students as having too many challenges". As she observed, "When you're coming into a low-income school, when you're teaching these students they need to have some form of structure because they're probably not getting it at home. And they need support and knowledge that they are doing great and they can reach every goal that they want". The teacher recounted her interactions with one student, who she perceived reflected the deficits that many students in her classroom faced. As she recalled, "I have some students who came in at the beginning of the year and they're just like 'My mom says I can't read'. And so, it's really about working to break that down and it takes a lot of work, but once the work is done, it's great". As this comment illustrates, part of the mission work that must occur at Rossdale involved addressing the absence of structure at home that supports learning. To do this effectively requires a collective belief that the school's contributions to the student matter and that their learning will lead to success.

#### *4.2. Establishing a Culture of Professional Relationships*

Within the school, the principal's leadership focused on strengthening professional relationships among teachers and sought to rebuild a culture within the school that valued collaboration and engagement. Several participants noted that the former principal's

leadership created a culture where professional relationships were driven by fear. These conditions mitigated opportunities for collective engagement and led many teachers to work in isolation. As one first-grade teacher noted, “I felt like they were out to get you in a way, and I hate to say that, but it’s the truth. People would say, who has the target on their back?” Teachers described experiences where the former principal berated teachers, critiqued them for their instructional practices and decisions, and threatened them with losing their jobs. The current principal noted that these conditions fueled teachers’ desire to leave and reinforced a perception among staff that their efforts were futile. As she observed, the school’s culture “was bad without end”, and many teachers were fearful of losing their jobs. As the current principal noted, “people were so afraid of [the former principal] that they didn’t talk about it or tell anybody. It was so bad and teachers, there are still some of them who are here, they have some PTSD over him”. Indeed, the principal and teachers who participated in this study noted that many well-qualified and highly dedicated teachers left because of the fear and intimidation that they experienced.

Given these conditions, the principal made it a priority to increase trust between the teaching staff and the school’s administration. In her view, “there’s a lot you can do with people and developing relationships”. Thus, she sought to facilitate improved relationships by maintaining an open-door policy with teachers, connecting with teachers on a personal level about their lives and professional needs, and encouraging teachers to care for themselves in order to be present for students. Teachers who participated in this study referred to the principal’s interactions with them as supportive, caring, and kind. As one kindergarten teacher noted, “[The principal] doesn’t pretend to be perfect and she doesn’t pretend to know all the answers, she’s approachable. If her door is open, you can knock on it and you know, she will help”. These comments illustrate why the former principal’s approach worked at cross-purposes with the retention of teachers. When teachers feel threatened, they will not seek support that improves their professional practice and stimulates growth. Creating a culture where teachers feel comfortable approaching the administrators for assistance seemed key to ensuring that they feel supported in their work and thus willing to remain in the school despite the incredible challenges that they faced.

#### *4.3. Recognizing Teachers’ Work*

In addition to enhancing professional relationships, the principal also sought to recognize teachers for their work and contributions to the school. She recognized that the demands of the school and its community meant that her staff had to work above and beyond what might normally be required. As the principal noted, “I happen to think teachers work harder and work stronger and work better when someone thinks they’re doing a good job than for someone who is criticizing them all the time”. This comment reflects well the principal’s orientation to feedback needed to affirm teachers’ contributions to the school and to single out their successes in the classroom. Teachers noted this and described the principal’s interactions with them as “supportive” and “encouraging”. Three teachers referred to positive interactions with administrators about their instruction, classroom management, and work with individual students. As one second-grade teacher noted, “they have been nothing but encouraging this year. And that’s been really nice because when we started out and not many kids were showing up or like turning things in. I kind of felt a little hopeless. But they were really encouraging”. The same teacher noted that these interactions were not isolated to the principal but included the school’s assistant principal, instructional coach, and behavioral interventionist. Collectively, the second-grade teacher found that the administrators were not “critical in a mean way” but rather offered criticisms in a supportive manner that helped teachers identify opportunities to improve without demeaning their contributions or practice.

The support offered by the principal extended to other members of the school’s administrative team, including the assistant principal, instructional coach, and counselor. When describing her approach to support, the principal explained that she deployed members of her leadership team in different ways to support teachers to mitigate both

their fear of critique as well as their willingness to hear suggestions for improvement. As one example, she noted that “if it’s something that’s core curriculum, I might send the [instructional] coach to them and they often feel less threatened that way. If it’s not me [providing the support], I will take care of people with someone else doing it very well”. She also used peer observations to offer support to teachers in the building. These observations allowed teachers to leave their own classrooms while an administrator or substitute covered their class. As the principal noted, “I ask teachers to go visit classrooms of teachers who are doing something that they aren’t handling very well. I allow for the relationship with their colleagues to flow”. As with differentiating support among members of the leadership team, the effect of this approach was to reduce resistance to feedback and to create opportunities for teachers to support each other in their efforts to improve. As the principal reflected,

I hardly ever have anybody who’s resistant to coming in and talking to me about something if they’re struggling with it. And most of the time they are so relieved that I noticed and that they know they knew they were struggling, but they certainly didn’t want to admit it because it would look like they were admitting a weakness or a flaw or something like that.

Creating this culture where the principal and other members of her staff can provide support to teachers was important for teachers’ decisions to stay in the same school from one year to the next.

#### *4.4. Assisting with Student Behavior Management*

Throughout their interviews, teachers noted that student behavior had escalated within the school to a point where it had a negative influence on their working conditions, particularly their opportunity to provide classroom instruction. Teachers received limited support when faced with the most difficult student behavior issues from the previous administration and felt that their requests for assistance displayed weaknesses in their practice. As such, teachers rarely asked for assistance and instead endured what they described as “extreme and disruptive behaviors”. Extreme behaviors included actions such as throwing desks, physical assault, or using objects as weapons. Moderately disruptive behaviors included yelling, in-class arguments, and failure to follow school results. Less disruptive behaviors included foul or inappropriate language, name-calling, and general disregard for teachers. These behaviors disrupted the classroom environment, left staff and other students feeling unsafe, and distracted teachers from their instruction. As one fourth-grade teacher noted, behaviors in this setting tended to be more extreme and contributed to her feeling that she could not succeed in this environment. As she reflected,

I feel like the behaviors are definitely more on the extreme side, at least when I first got here. Since [the current principal has been here], things have improved every year and we don’t see as many extreme behaviors. But my first year was really tough and I saw many things I did not think I would ever see.

Other teachers who participated in this study offered similar comments describing student behavior challenges as a major impediment to instruction. For example, a second-grade teacher compared her prior experience working in the service industry with her first few months working at Rosedale. As she recalled, “The behavioral issues that I was seeing in the classrooms here was nothing compared to what I had experienced before. Like, I worked in the service industry for years and I was called more names in the first few months of working here as a permanent sub than I’d ever been waiting tables or bartending”. As the teacher recounted later, her experiences with student behavior in the classroom left her feeling less confident and secure: “it was definitely a hard knock to my self-esteem and my feeling that I was able to educate or be a teacher at all, ever”.

The current principal provided considerable support to classroom teachers with student behavior issues, which had a positive effect on changing conditions in the school. Previously, the absence of a well-developed behavior system meant teachers were often left

uninformed about the steps that they should take to de-escalate behaviors with students or when to seek additional support. Teachers noted that responsibility for behavior management had shifted to classrooms and that their office referrals were met without response or assistance. Given the failure to respond to behavior concerns, teachers perceived that inaction communicated to staff that they should not write up students, and it further communicated to students that any behavior was acceptable. As one teacher noted, “I was told that teachers couldn’t write kids up in the past or send them up to the office”. This meant that teachers had to address behavior issues independently in the classroom and felt little support from the administration. The school culture around student behavior negatively impacted opportunities to teach and left many teachers feeling distracted from their work with students.

Recognizing the effect that behavior was having on conditions in the school, the current principal prioritized rebuilding the school’s behavior systems that had deteriorated and adopted a new, school-wide behavior management model known as Well-Managed Schools, which was developed by Boys Town. According to the documentation provided by the principal describing the program, the Well-Managed Schools model “provides a structured approach to school-wide behavior and social management which creates more positive and calmer classrooms”. Further, the program is based on “common language, common practices, and consistent application of positive and negative consequences”. Teachers noted that this program provided consistency across classrooms that was previously lacking and created a uniform response as behavior challenges arose. As one fourth-grade teacher noted,

We have [behavior] skills that the kids are taught. Like following directions and working with others. The language is all the same and so it’s the same across the classrooms. And then there’s very specific steps that we take when behavior arises and there’s language that deals with all that, too. And there’s types of praise. And so I love it because I feel like praise and being proactive just completely shifts the classroom environment and it keeps a lot of behaviors from happening.

The consistent language combined with the administration’s consistent response to behavior issues provided support to classroom teachers that the former school administrators failed to offer. Furthermore, the program scaffolded assistance for teachers so that student behaviors did not escalate. As one fourth-grade teacher noted, “When behaviors do happen, you have little corrections you can do and you have corrective teaching... And then there’s like a ladder of support when you send a student to the office and when you write a referral”. Observations conducted at the school identified the presence of common language, rules, and expectations across classrooms in the form of posters, signs, and other visual representations.

After the implementation of this common behavior system, teachers reported that extreme behaviors had diminished over time. The reduction in extreme behaviors improved working conditions and allowed classroom teachers to focus on the delivery of instruction. As one first-grade teacher noted,

We have so many supports. We have a full-time social worker, we have a psychologist, a school psychologist who’s here half of her time. We have a behavior specialist who is full time permanent sub. So, all of those things work together to provide our kids stability and help with behavior, because when things are predictable and adults are predictable, students don’t act up as much and they start trusting you and knowing that you’ll be there every day and building those bonds.

This comment illustrates the extent to which the current principal had established systems that provide “stability” and “help with behavior”. Teachers also noted that the principal had created a team to respond to the most pressing behavioral challenges. Under the former principal, teacher’s requests for assistance with student behavior would often



receive a muted response. This allowed behavior(s) to disrupt classroom instruction. The current principal shifted the model to provide more responsive support to classroom teachers. As one second-grade teacher noted, under the current administration, they have created

... a group of people where if somebody is dealing with behavior issues and they get on the walkies, you know, it's not just going to be one person, it could be one of many. So, there's a social worker. It could possibly be the principal. And then we have security here. So, depending on what type of a behavior issue it is, if the kids are really acting up and throwing chairs or something like that, then the security officer might come. So, there I'd say that we have quite a large team.

As this comment conveys, the presence of a large administrative team working in support of teachers provided significant assistance. This assistance meant that teachers were able to focus on classroom instruction.

The principal and other study participants also noted the importance of strengthening relationships with parents and families as part of their efforts to rebuild the school's behavior management system. Study participants viewed these relationships as critical to reducing extreme behaviors that had diminished conditions within the school. However, participants observed that these relationships were often complex and mediated by competing personal demands. Thus, classroom teachers could not rebuild these relationships without assistance from the school's administrative team. Teachers who participated in this study depended on assistance from other school staff, including the school principal and counselor, to help them cultivate these relationships with parents. These efforts extended beyond the school's behavior or discipline practices to address the student's home, family, and personal needs. As the principal offered in one example, "sometimes it's that I do a home visit to show that we care about their child and want them here", and at other times, it means "taking food to the family or getting the student a pillow so that they can sleep". Teachers noted that the difficulties that parents themselves had in school often meant that parental interactions and expectations were shaped by their own experiences and led them to be reluctant to discuss matters relating to their children. One kindergarten teacher who participated in this study observed, "I think for some parents it's the fact that they had issues in school themselves that makes talking to me harder". The kindergarten teacher noted that these difficulties often meant that parents were uncomfortable sharing details about the student's needs, would not discuss behavior issues, and did not respond to notes or emails about the student's progress. This made it difficult for teachers to reach parents as issues arose, and so required an additional level of support from the school's administration. In addition, many of the parents in the school worked multiple jobs or juggled competing demands, which meant that support for students was limited to the school setting. As the teacher recalled, "what they have the ability to do both academically and emotionally sort of compounds on this, because they're dealing with their own stuff. They have so much going on themselves, and so just the level of involvement. It's just not consistent from year to year in what I get from parents". Thus, as part of strengthening the school's behavior system, the principal also prioritized engagement with families and sought to provide assistance in ways that helped students feel connected, valued, and supported in school.

#### 4.5. Summary

The data suggest that the principal of Rosedale Elementary concentrated her leadership actions in three primary areas. First, the principal made considerable efforts to strengthen relationships with classroom teachers and to reverse conditions that had contributed to teachers experiencing the former school leadership as threatening. These efforts included changing the feedback process for teachers as well as focusing on providing feedback that supported instruction and assisted with classroom conditions. Second, the principal focused on strengthening the school's commitment to serving the high-poverty community. Her leadership actions sought to weave this commitment throughout the school. Third, the

principal sought to re-establish administrative support for classroom teachers, particularly in relation to behavioral issues and family engagement. She introduced and implemented a school-wide behavior model, strengthened the responses to behavior issues provided by the administrative team, created a tiered approach to behavior management that was designed to de-escalate issues, and worked to engage parents and families. Collectively, these actions define what principals might do to improve working conditions and thereby stabilize retention among classroom teachers.

## 5. Discussion

The actions taken by the principal at Rosssdale Elementary School potentially illuminate a more nuanced understanding of leadership actions described in common survey items, including those used on the SASS/NTPS in the U.S. As such, the findings from this pilot study provide opportunities to reconsider what prior research suggests are relatively opaque understandings of the leadership actions that principals take to influence teacher working conditions and thereby improve retention [1,19]. Indeed, previous studies have shown that principal leadership helps to establish conditions within schools that influence teachers' work. These conditions contribute to their (dis)satisfaction with their working environment and intent to turnover [52]. What remains somewhat unclear is what specific actions leaders take and in what configuration they need to be taken to support improved retention, especially in high-poverty contexts. Based on this score, the present study begins to provide some indication suggesting that principals likely take actions that are contextually specific to their schools.

Importantly, the findings in the present study also challenge what is known from survey-based research about the actions taken by principals to improve retention and, therefore, give some impetus for considering revising survey items commonly used in the U.S. to describe what principals do. For example, in this case, the principal did not focus on the establishment of a generic school mission, as implied by the corresponding survey item (see Table 3). Rather, the principal took actions that built commitment among staff to serve the high-poverty community. This emphasis connected with the teachers' sense of purpose and moral obligation and drew heavily on their motivation to serve families supported by the school. Second, the principal did not simply provide feedback to classroom teachers or routinely monitor instruction. Indeed, the school's former principal took these actions, and, given their delivery, they became detrimental because they became associated with fear and intimidation. Rather, the principal created a culture where teachers felt that they could seek feedback about their practice and were free to request support for practices they struggled to implement. Third, the principal sought to shift responsibility for the school's operation back to the administration to free classroom teachers to focus their efforts and energies on the students in their classrooms. This was partly achieved through a school-wide behavior model and was also supported by a redeployment of staff to ensure they could respond to teachers when needed.

As shown in Table 3 below, the findings from this study could begin to provide helpful guidance for revising existing survey items so that they better reflect conditions within schools that contribute to retention and practices that leaders can undertake to substantially increase the number of teachers retained. Future qualitative explorations with large, stratified samples would be needed to fully inform a full survey revision. However, if the findings from the current study were to be consistent with those across many schools, especially high-poverty ones, it might be beneficial to frame some items related to administrative support in terms of reducing distractions to teaching. Items that relate to disciplinary support might be best defined in terms of supporting individual teachers when behavior issues arise rather than focusing on the school-wide culture or climate related to discipline. With regard to mission, the statement or direction may be less important than the extent to which the teacher feels connected to the community served by the school. Using these qualitative insights to update these items has the potential to better reflect the conditions within the school that contribute to retention. Similar insights have

utility for international surveys (e.g., TALIS) and survey development in non-U.S. contexts where understandings of the leader’s relationship with teacher turnover is still growing.

**Table 3.** Potential revisions to survey items based on qualitative evidence.

| Focus of Survey Items        | Existing SASS/NTPS Survey Item  | Potential Revised SASS/NTPS Survey Item                            |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Administrative Support       | The school administrator’s behavior toward the staff is supportive and encouraging.                         | My principal reduces or minimizes disruptions to my teaching.      |
| Disciplinary Support         | My principal enforces school rules for student conduct and backs me up when I need it.                      | My principal and their team support me when behavior issues arise. |
| Communicating Mission        | The school principal knows what kind of school he or she wants and has communicated it to the school staff. | I feel connected to the students and communities we serve.         |
| Recognition of Faculty/Staff | In this school, staff members are recognized for a job well done.   | My principal recognizes when I need support.                       |
| Well-Run/Good Leadership     | I like the way things are run at this school.   | My principal creates systems that support my teaching.             |

At the same time, this study’s findings provide support for elements of Simon and Johnson’s framework for teacher retention in high-poverty settings [1]. For example, this case highlights the role of *school culture* in teacher retention in Simon and Johnson’s framework through improved parent engagement and student discipline. The principal and her team led and fostered relationships between teachers and parents, echoing the importance of teacher–parent relationships shown in previous quantitative research on predominantly Black, high-poverty elementary schools [1,3]. Her approach may be useful and implementable for other schools and districts. In contrast to other qualitative study findings indicating that a lack of administrative support with discipline can lead to teacher turnover [49], the principal in this study was proactive in addressing behavioral concerns. She implemented a school-wide behavioral management system that aims to improve student social skills and relationships while being responsive to individual teacher needs.

Similarly, this study found the principal effectively implemented parts of the other two domains of Simon and Johnson’s retention framework in *collegial support* and *school leadership* at the school level [1]. *Collegial support* encompasses mutual respect and trust, collaboration and support, and a shared mission, and these elements were visible in the principal’s work. The principal in this study built trust over time with intentionality, consistency, and care, fostering a positive culture of professional relationships and communicating a clear mission to serve under-served children. Though teacher–teacher relationships and aspects of relational trust are often measured in survey-based research, the actual ways in which principals engender faculty collegiality remain important but have been less studied (e.g., Torres) [53]. Simon and Johnson operationalized their domain of “school leadership” as encompassing organizational management, instructional leadership, and inclusive decision-making [1]. Although organizational management and inclusive decision-making were not as emphasized by teachers, the principal’s recognition and praise of her teachers contributed to increased retention, echoing the influential role of teacher praise for other predictors of turnover (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy) highlighted in previous research (e.g., Blasé & Kirby) [54].

#### *Future Research*

Given the findings presented in this pilot study, further work in this area is needed and would contribute to the field’s understanding of leadership that supports teacher retention. In turn, this knowledge could inform school leaders’ own actions as well as their districts’ abilities to support them effectively in increasing teacher retention. First, continuing to explore the leadership actions taken by principals in differing school contexts would be useful in guiding further improvements to the survey items commonly used. As

we see in this single case, the nuances of leadership action provide clues about what/how teachers might perceive leadership contributes to their willingness to remain in the school despite the challenges associated with the school's community. Second, revising survey items should also attend to issues of justice and equity. Given disproportionate turnover rates among teachers of color, it is imperative to consider whether items clearly reflect the experiences of teachers of color. Finally, in seeking to expand the use of these revised survey items, constructing a more nuanced survey instrument and nationally representative sample would be beneficial.

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## Appendix A. Interview Protocols

### Appendix A.1. Teacher—Interview Round 1

1. Tell me a little about yourself as an educator, including your professional experience as a teacher in this building.  
*Probes*
  - How many years have you worked in education?
  - How many years have worked in this school?
  - Where did you complete your initial training as a classroom teacher?
2. What were some of the factors that motivated you to apply for a position in this school district?
  - What appealed to you about working in this school district?
  - Why did you feel this school district was a good fit for you professionally?
  - Did anyone specifically recruit you or encourage you to apply?
3. What was your experience of the hiring process in this district?
  - How did the principal and the hiring committee work with you throughout the hiring process?
  - How were the needs of students in the school and/or professional expectations for working here presented to you?
  - What was your initial understanding of the school's instructional program?
4. How were you supported as a new member of the school staff?
  - Were you assigned a mentor when you started your tenure at this school? Would you describe this process during your first two years in the building?
  - Did you work with other teachers in your grade-level team or other members of your professional learning community? If so, can you give some examples of how this collaboration supported you?
  - Did you have any opportunities to observe other teachers in the building or district? If so, can you please tell me what you learned and/or noted in these observations that influenced your understanding of teaching expectations?
5. What type of professional development have you participated in since joining the staff at this school?

- Can you explain how this professional development informed your instructional practice?
  - Can you explain how this professional development informed your understanding of student behavior management?
  - Can you explain how this professional development involved your colleagues at this school?
6. How do the building principal and other members of the school leadership team support your instructional practice?
    - What feedback do you receive from your principal?
    - How frequently is this feedback provided to you?
    - Which aspects of the feedback are most helpful?
  7. Finally, I'm going to ask you a few questions about leadership.
    - How has the principal supported you as a classroom teacher in this school?
    - What, if anything, has the principal done to help you improve your teaching?
    - What, if anything, has the principal done to impede or prevent your improvement?
    - How has this influenced your thinking about staying in the school, if at all?
    - What recommendations do you have for teachers and principals working in high-need, low-income school communities?
    - Is there anything else you would like to add?

#### *Appendix A.2. Teacher—Interview Round 2*

8. Can you tell me about the challenges you have encountered in working with a high-need, low-income student population?

##### *Probe*

- What support does the principal provide to you to help you work with a high-need, low-income student population?
9. Reflecting on your experience of the hiring process, what specific aspects of the community were NOT discussed with you during the hiring process?
    - What do you wish you would have known then that you know now?
    - Can you explain how you were prepared or unprepared for this student population?
    - Can you explain your understanding of the school's curricular focus and instructional methods used when you first started at this school? How are the instructional methods and curricular focus different at this school than in other school communities with fewer high-poverty students?
  10. What type of collaborative grade-level or special area support did you receive, if any?
    - Describe how you work with your colleagues in your building.
  11. What type of professional development have you been involved in at this school that is specific to working with a high-need, low-income student population?
    - Can you explain how this professional development informed your instructional practice?
    - Can you explain how this professional development informed your understanding of student behavior management?
    - Can you explain how this professional development involved your colleagues at this school?
    - How would you describe the building leadership supervision and support of your instructional practice with a lens on supporting a high-need, low-income student population?
    - What feedback do you receive from your principal?
    - How frequently is this feedback provided to you?
    - Which aspects of the feedback are most helpful?



12. What are you hearing from teachers about the way the principal (or other administrators) are supporting them in their classes? Example: behavior management, instruction, curriculum, etc.
13. Finally, I'm going to ask you a few questions about leadership and working in a high-need, low-income school community.
  - What would you say is the principal's role in supporting classroom management and instruction?
  - What recommendations do you have for leadership programs that are preparing principals to work with high-need, low-income school communities?
  - After reflecting on the questions from the first and second interviews, is there anything else you would like to add?

#### *Appendix A.3. Principal—Interview Round 1*

1. Tell me a little about yourself as an educator, including your professional experience as a leader in this building.
  - How long have you been involved in education?
  - How many years have you been at this school?
  - What initially influenced you to come to this school?
  - What contributed to your decision to stay?
2. What is your process for hiring classroom teachers for vacant teaching positions?
  - How do you describe the student population to candidates for teaching positions (i.e., what do you accentuate or not)?
  - How do you give potential candidates a good understanding of the school's curricular focus and instructional methods used?
  - What challenges and/or opportunities of working in this school do you communicate to the candidates?
3. After new teachers are hired in your school, is there an intentional induction process and do you assign a mentor when a teacher starts their tenure at this school? Would you describe this process during a teacher's first two years in the building?
  - Do you schedule opportunities for teachers to work with veteran or "mentor" teachers and other teachers in their grade-level team? Can you give examples?
  - Can you explain any opportunities that novice teachers have to observe other teachers in the building or district?
4. What professional development do your teachers participate in as members of the school staff?
  - How, if at all, is professional development differentiated on the basis of the teacher's experience or needs?
  - How have you observed the professional development informing their instructional practice?
  - How have you observed the professional development informing their understanding of student behavior management?
5. How would you describe your leadership supervision and support of the teachers' instructional practice?
  - What feedback do you regularly give to your teachers regarding their classroom instruction or student behavior management?
  - How frequently is this feedback provided to novice teachers?
  - How is your feedback differentiated, if at all?
  - What feedback do you believe teachers find most helpful?
6. What opportunities exist for teachers to work with their colleagues in the school building?
  - How, if at all, are teachers invited to make or shape instructional decisions in the school?

- How, if at all, are teachers empowered to lead professional learning and/or direct school-wide conversations?
  - What feedback do you (or your leadership) often consider directly from your classroom teachers?
7. Do you receive feedback regarding the types of supports that teachers feel they need in the classroom? If so, can you give an example?
  8. Finally, I'm going to ask you a few questions about leadership.
    - What would you say is your role in supporting classroom management and instruction?
    - What recommendations do you have for principals working with high-need, low-income school communities?
  9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

#### *Appendix A.4. Principal—Interview Round 2*

10. Do you perceive that there are unique challenges in this school related to high-poverty that present challenges for this teaching staff? Also, are there aspects that inspire you and your staff?
  - How have you addressed these challenges?
  - How have you tried to provide inspiration for your staff?
  - What initially influenced you to come to this school?
  - What contributed to your decision to stay?
11. Does working in this school community impact the hiring process, and how do you address potential challenges?
  - What is the hiring process like when you have vacant positions?
  - Can you describe how you give potential candidates a good understanding of the student population they will be working with at this school?
  - Are other faculty members included in the hiring process and, if so, in what capacity?
  - How do you give potential candidates a good understanding of the school's curricular focus and the instructional methods used?
12. After new teachers are hired in your school, is there an intentional induction process and do you assign a mentor when a teacher starts their tenure at this school? Can you describe this process?
  - How is consideration given for additional training and support for potential academic and behavioral challenges?
  - Will you describe this process during a teacher's first two years in the building?
  - Do you schedule opportunities for teachers to work with a mentor teacher and other teachers in their grade-level team? Can you give examples?
  - Can you explain any opportunities that novice teachers have to observe other teachers in the building or district?
13. Is the professional development specific to the unique needs of your school community, and how is the professional development selected? Is there professional development available for teachers who haven't worked in a high-need, low-income school community, and can you describe what this professional development entails?
  - Can you explain how this professional development informs their instructional practice?
  - Can you explain how this professional development informs their understanding of student behavior management?
  - Can you explain how this professional development involves all teachers at this school?
14. How would you describe your relationships with families and students within the community?
  - What feedback, if any, do you give to your teachers regarding family support systems?

- How frequently is this feedback provided to novice teachers?
  - Which aspects of the community relationship building process do you feel are most helpful?
15. Describe how your teachers lead instructional and curricular decisions.
    - Can you give examples of times your teachers have been given opportunities to influence the school's instructional decisions and behavior management strategies?
    - Can you give examples of times teachers have led the learning at faculty meetings?
    - Can you give examples of feedback and/or suggestions that you have considered from your teachers?
    - Do you receive feedback regarding the types of supports that teachers feel they need in the classroom? If so, can you give an example?
  16. Finally, I'm going to ask you a few questions about leadership.
    - What would you say is the principal's role in supporting classroom management and instruction in a high-need, low-income school community?
    - What recommendations or advice do you have for principals working with high-need, low-income school communities?
  17. After reflecting on our interviews, is there anything else you would like to add?

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