



Supportive Leadership, Teacher Wellness, and School Promotion

Matthew H. Lee^a  and Lynn E. Swaner^b

^aKennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, USA; ^bCardus, Hamilton, ON, Canada

ABSTRACT

Effective school leadership contributes to school success by improving student learning and reducing teacher turnover. Prior research has documented that supportive leadership can help retain effective teachers and improve teacher efficacy, thereby reducing the financial and human costs associated with teacher turnover. Within the private Christian school sector, we examined the relationship between supportive leadership, teacher well-being, and teacher willingness to promote the school. Our findings show a significant, robust, meaningful relationship between teachers' perception of their leaders as supportive, higher levels of teacher well-being, and greater willingness to promote their schools to both prospective families and teachers.

School leadership is critical to school success. Effective school leadership promotes student learning (Grissom et al., 2021) and reduces teacher turnover (Branch et al., 2012; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). To date, however, no research has examined the relationship between teachers' perception of supportive leadership, teacher wellness, and teacher satisfaction in the private Christian school sector. This study aims to help close that research gap.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 reviews the relevant research on school leadership; Section 2 describes the study methodology, including data, sample, survey instrument, and empirical strategy; and Section 3 presents the study results. The final section discusses the study results and concludes with the implications for schools and directions for further research.

Literature Review

School leadership matters to student learning. Previous research on school leadership has found evidence of variation in effectiveness among school

principals, with the general conclusion that effective principals can positively influence student learning (Branch et al., 2012; Coelli & Green, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003). A systematic review of principal value-added research concluded that replacing an ineffective principal with a more effective principal can add almost three months of student learning in math and reading (Grissom et al., 2021). Further research suggests that principal effectiveness may be mediated by the match between school and principal (Dhuey & Smith, 2018) or leadership style (Robinson et al., 2008). However, estimates of principal effectiveness are sensitive to model specification (Grissom et al., 2015). In addition, the use of value-added models on which many of these studies rely to examine principal contributions to student learning has recently been called into question (Bartanen et al., 2022; Chiang et al., 2016).

School leadership also matters to school finances. For example, in many schools, staffing is a principal responsibility (Farkas et al., 2003), and teacher turnover can be costly for schools, not merely in terms of financial cost (Barnes et al., 2007; Birkeland & Curtis, 2006; Milanowski & Odden, 2007), but also in terms of student achievement (Hanushek et al., 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Teachers' perceptions of school leadership are among the factors most strongly associated with teacher turnover and retention (Boyd et al., 2011; Leithwood et al., 1996). One experimental study of teachers' "willingness-to-pay" found that the value to teachers of having a supportive principal is equal to a 17% increase in salary (Johnston, 2021). Principals may help reduce teacher turnover (Branch et al., 2012) and may help reduce turnover in disadvantaged schools by promoting a positive school climate (Grissom, 2011). Moreover, effective principals retain high-performing teachers while allowing turnover of low-performing teachers at higher rates (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Teacher perceptions of working conditions also matter (Burkhauser, 2017; Ladd, 2011), and principals may promote a positive work climate (Leahy & Shore, 2019) by emphasizing student learning (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012) or promoting teacher efficacy (Çalik et al., 2012).

To the extent that these findings from district public schools generalize to private schools, supportive leadership may prove to be an effective strategy for promoting the long-term sustainability of private schools. Financial sustainability is an important concern for private schools, which must compete for student enrollment to stay financially viable, especially in light of the fact that the enrollment gap between high- and middle-income families is widening (Murnane et al., 2018). Practices that improve teachers' perception of supportive leadership may help private schools reduce the costs associated with addressing turnover and retain effective teachers against the generally higher compensation rates of the public school sector

(Lee et al., 2021; Swaner & Ferguson, 2020). Furthermore, one may reasonably expect that retaining teachers who are generally satisfied with their schools can improve both enrollment and employment pipelines. Finally, the presence of a supportive leader may help to mitigate teacher burnout, which was greatly exacerbated by the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic (Chang, 2009; Kim et al., 2017; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Yorulmaz et al., 2017). Despite the potential benefits of supportive leadership for school sustainability, the relationship between supportive leadership and teachers who are flourishing, as indicated by their well-being and willingness to recommend the school, has not been examined for private Christian schools.

A nascent but growing literature examines leadership in the context of Christian schools. Several studies have examined the spiritual or servant leadership of Christian school administrators (Banke et al., 2012; Beckman et al., 2012; Burch et al., 2015; Greenleaf, 2002; Harrison, 2012). Quantitative analyses have sought to determine differences in academic emphases, spiritual role modeling, and leadership preparation across Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and secular contexts (Lee & Cheng, 2021; Sikkink, 2012). However, no prior research has examined how teachers' perception of supportive leadership is associated with teacher wellness and satisfaction. We aimed to help close that gap with this present study. We hypothesized that teachers who feel supported by their leadership will express higher levels of well-being and will be more likely to recommend their schools to both prospective families and teachers.

Methodology

Data

The data used in this analysis are from three years of cross-sectional data from the Flourishing School Culture Instrument (FSCI), a validated survey instrument administered by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) (Swaner et al., 2019).

Sample

For this analysis, we focused on a sample of approximately 3,600 private Christian school teachers who completed the FSCI between 2018–2019 and 2020–2021. Teachers in our sample represent all grade levels, including early education (10%) and elementary (41%), middle (42%), and high school grade levels (46%). The most common subjects taught include math (23%), Bible studies (23%), and English language arts (21%), but the sample includes respondents who teach physical education (7%), technology (6%), and special education (3%) as well. The sample was predominantly female

(75%) and white (85%). Regarding age and experience, the median teacher was born after 1974 and had 0–15 years of teaching experience, including 0–5 years of experience at the current school (See Table 1).

Survey Instrument

Flourishing School Culture Instrument (FSCI). Our survey instrument included two validated constructs from the FSCI (Swaner et al., 2019). Each construct is composed of three items to which respondents indicated on a 5-point Likert scale their degree of agreement (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neutral/Don't know*, 4 = *Agree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*).

Supportive leadership is composed of the following three items:

1. I trust the principal of my school.
2. My principal has my back.
3. My principal empowers me to make independent decisions.

In our analytic sample, the construct demonstrated strong internal reliability with a Cronbach's α of 0.85 (mean = 4.33).

Table 1. Sample descriptive statistics.

Sample Descriptor	<i>n</i> (1)	Mean (2)	SD (3)
<i>Demographics</i>			
Born before 1974	3,019	0.48	0.50
Female	3,019	0.75	0.43
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>			
White	3,019	0.85	0.39
Black	3,019	0.03	0.17
Hispanic	3,019	0.05	0.21
Asian	3,019	0.05	0.21
Indian	3,019	0.01	0.09
<i>Level Taught</i>			
Early Education	3,019	0.10	0.30
Elementary	3,019	0.41	0.49
Middle	3,019	0.42	0.49
High	3,019	0.46	0.50
<i>Subject Taught</i>			
Math	3,019	0.23	0.42
Science	3,019	0.19	0.39
Social Studies	3,019	0.17	0.38
English Language Arts	3,019	0.21	0.41
Foreign Language	3,019	0.06	0.24
Bible	3,019	0.23	0.42
Fine Arts	3,019	0.10	0.30
Physical Education	3,019	0.07	0.26
Technology	3,019	0.06	0.24
Life Skills	3,019	0.03	0.18
Special Education, English as a Second Language	3,019	0.03	0.16
Other	3,019	0.10	0.30
<i>Teaching Experience</i>			
0–15 years' experience	3,019	0.61	0.49
0–5 years at current school	3,019	0.53	0.50

Note. Means represent the proportion of respondents indicating each category.

Well-being is composed of the following three items:

1. I constantly feel stressed about work (R).
2. The stress of my job is often overwhelming (R).
3. I don't have enough planning time to prepare for my classes (R).

In our analytic sample, the construct demonstrated strong internal reliability with a Cronbach's α of 0.82 (mean = 3.16).

Recommendation. In addition, to measure how strongly teachers would consider recommending their school to others the following three questions were used:

1. How likely are you to recommend your school to a friend or family member?
2. How likely are you to recommend your school as a place to work?
3. How likely are you to recommend a friend or family member enroll their child at your school?

The *Overall Recommendation* was posed as a net promoter score question, for which teachers could indicate on an 11-point Likert scale how likely they would recommend their school (0 = *Highly unlikely*, 10 = *Highly likely*). On average, teachers were highly likely to recommend their schools (mean = 8.97). For the *Employment* and *Enrollment* recommendations, teachers could indicate on a 5-point Likert scale how likely they would recommend their school as a place to work or that a friend or family member enroll their child (1 = *Not at all likely*, 2 = *Somewhat unlikely*, 3 = *Neutral*, 4 = *Somewhat likely*, 5 = *Extremely likely*). Teachers on average were likely to recommend their school both as a place of employment (mean = 4.46) and as a place of enrollment (mean = 4.61) (See [Table 2](#)).

Empirical Strategy

To analyze the relationship between teachers' perception of *Supportive Leadership*, *Well-Being*, and *Recommendation*, we used the following model

Table 2. Survey instrument.

Assessment Point	α (1)	k (2)	Mean (3)	SD (4)	Min (5)	Max (6)
Supportive Leadership	0.85	3	4.33	0.72	1	5
Well-Being	0.82	3	3.16	0.99	1	5
Recommendation (Overall)			8.97	1.48	0	10
Recommendation (Employment)			4.46	0.81	1	5
Recommendation (Enrollment)			4.61	0.67	1	5

for estimation:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SL_i + \mathbf{X}'\beta + \boldsymbol{\tau}'\beta + \gamma_i + \epsilon_i$$

where y_i represents the i th teacher's *Well-Being*, *Overall Recommendation*, *Employment Recommendation*, or *Enrollment Recommendation*, standardized with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. In our simple model specification, we regressed each outcome on SL_i , the i th teacher's perception of the supportiveness of the teacher's school leadership, only. We added a vector of teacher demographic characteristics \mathbf{X}' , including age, sex, and race; a vector of teaching characteristics $\boldsymbol{\tau}'$, including grade levels taught, subject taught, and teaching experience; and year fixed effects γ_i in each subsequent model.

Results

The study results are presented in Table 3. Each outcome is presented in a separate panel, with estimates for *Well-Being* in Panel A, *Overall Recommendation* in Panel B, *Enrollment Recommendation* in Panel C, and *Employment Recommendation* in Panel D. Within each panel, estimates from our simple model with no control covariates are presented in Column (1); control covariates for demographics, teacher characteristics, and year fixed effects are added in Columns (2), (3), and (4), respectively.

Table 3. Results.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
PANEL A. Teacher Well-Being				
Supportive Leadership	0.34	0.34	0.34	0.34
Standard Error	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
n	3,019	3,019	3,019	3,019
F -statistic	419.84	71.87	22.78	22.78
Adjusted R -squared	0.12	0.14	0.15	0.15
PANEL B. Recommendation (Overall)				
Supportive Leadership	0.50	0.49	0.49	0.49
Standard Error	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
n	3,019	3,019	3,019	3,019
F -statistic	703.47	112.60	33.37	33.37
Adjusted R -squared	0.19	0.21	0.21	0.21
PANEL C. Recommendation (Enrollment)				
Supportive Leadership	0.43	0.43	0.43	0.43
Standard Error	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
n	3,019	3,019	3,019	3,019
F -statistic	499.57	83.06	25.10	25.10
Adjusted R -squared	0.14	0.16	0.17	0.17
PANEL D. Recommendation (Employment)				
Supportive Leadership	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.62
Standard Error	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
n	3,019	3,019	3,019	3,019
F -statistic	1275.22	190.03	54.65	54.65
Adjusted R -squared	0.30	0.30	0.31	0.31
Controls				
Demographics		X	X	X
Teacher Characteristics			X	X
Year Fixed Effect				X

Note. All estimates are statistically significant, $p < 0.001$.

We found statistically significant and economically meaningful evidence that teacher perception of supportive leadership is positively associated with higher levels of reported well-being and greater likelihood that a teacher will recommend the school. Supportive leadership was associated with teachers reporting the following results, shown as the percentage of a standard deviation: 34% higher level of well-being, 50% more likely to provide a favorable overall recommendation of the school, 43% more likely to provide a favorable enrollment recommendation of the school, and 62% more likely to provide a favorable employment recommendation. All estimates were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and robust across all model specifications.

Discussion and Conclusion

School leadership is paramount to school success. Prior research has provided evidence that effective leadership can help promote student learning (Grissom et al., 2021). Particularly germane to our study, effective leadership can also reduce teacher turnover (Boyd et al., 2011; Leithwood et al., 1996) by promoting a positive school climate (Grissom, 2011; Leahy & Shore, 2019), improving working conditions (Burkhauser, 2017; Ladd, 2011), and empowering teachers (Çalik et al., 2012). Prior research has not examined the relationship between teachers' perceptions of supportive leadership, teachers' self-reported well-being, and teachers' willingness to promote their schools, particularly in the context of private Christian schools.

Our study documents statistically meaningful and robust evidence of this relationship. Teachers who perceive their leaders as supportive report higher levels of well-being and are more willing to promote their schools, both with respect to enrollment and to employment. Estimates ranged from 33% to 62% of a standard deviation and were robust to the inclusion of control covariates. These findings have clear implications for Christian schools, for which supportive leadership practices may be an effective strategy for school sustainability based on reducing personnel costs and improving a steady flow of student enrollment in the school.

One clear limitation of our study is our inability to look inside the “black box” of supportive leadership. While we are able to demonstrate that supportive leadership is positively correlated with well-being and school promotion, we are unable to identify the reasons underlying this relationship. Future research should consider ways of identifying which practices, policies, and behaviors teachers find supportive and that may contribute directly to greater teacher well-being and willingness to promote their schools. Meanwhile, private Christian schools can consider developing supportive

leadership as a strategy for both staffing continuity and financial sustainability.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Matthew H. Lee is Clinical Assistant Professor of Economics at Kennesaw State University. He previously served as Director of Research at ACSI. He holds a Ph.D. in education policy from the University of Arkansas.

Lynn E. Swaner is President of Cardus, U.S. She previously served as Chief Strategy and Innovation Officer at ACSI. She holds a doctorate in organization and leadership from Teachers College, Columbia University.

ORCID

Matthew H. Lee  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9711-2110>

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