

ORIGINAL PAPER

Culture and Candor: How Oakbrook Middle School Leaders Balance High Expectations and Teacher Retention**Authors:** Sean M. Keiper, Bentli Lewis

Abstract: Amid widespread teacher shortages and rising turnover in middle schools, school leaders are increasingly challenged to implement effective strategies for retaining high-performing educators in the classrooms (García & Weiss, 2019; T. D. Nguyen et al., 2024). At times, principals are tempted to believe that lowering expectations is the solution, believing that if things are “easier,” the outcomes will be better. This article demonstrates that school leaders can leverage high expectations to enhance teacher efficacy, morale, and retention, which in turn will positively impact student outcomes. Drawing on leadership practices at Oakbrook Middle School, this article reframes high expectations not as added pressure, but as a consistent, supportive approach to fostering teacher growth and long-term commitment to the school community. Emphasis is placed on how each practice positively influences a teacher’s sense of belonging and investment. Implications for educational practitioners highlight practices that leadership teams can use to strengthen both instructional practice and organizational stability at the middle school level.

Introduction

Middle schools across the United States continue to face challenges recruiting and retaining effective teachers, negatively impacting student achievement and overall school performance (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Shell et al., 2023). Several factors contribute to teacher attrition, including unclear expectations, limited communication, inadequate feedback, excessive workload, and diminished trust between teachers and school leaders (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017; Miles & Knipe, 2018; D. Nguyen et al., 2024; Shell et al., 2023). In response, improving teacher retention has become a priority for federal, state, and local education leaders seeking to strengthen the teacher workforce and improve student outcomes (Hurd et al., 2023; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022).

However, retention efforts require more than isolated initiatives; true improvement depends on leadership practices that create supportive professional environments and address the organizational conditions that influence educators’ decisions to stay (Rheume et al., 2021).

Supportive school leadership is frequently highlighted as a critical factor in teacher retention (Lochmiller et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2023). Teachers are more likely to remain in schools when leaders foster a strong sense of belonging through a shared vision characterized by encouragement, recognition, clear expectations, opportunities for teacher voice, and trusting relationships (Sanzo et al., 2011; Lochmiller et al., 2024; D. Nguyen et al., 2024; Rheume et al., 2021; Shell et al., 2023). In addition to cultivating a positive school culture, effective leaders strengthen teacher

commitment by prioritizing professional growth through meaningful feedback, instructional support, and manageable working conditions (Muir, 2020; D. Nguyen et al., 2024). Collectively, these leadership practices align with broader policy recommendations emphasizing the importance of both supportive environments and professional development in addressing teacher turnover (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2022).

Building on this evidence, leaders at Oakbrook Middle School have implemented strategies that have led to significant improvements in teacher satisfaction and retention. The purpose of this article is to highlight four leadership practices used at Oakbrook Middle School that can serve as a model for strengthening teacher retention through a shared vision of high expectations:

1. Building a Culture of Shared Identity and Collective Ownership
2. Using Data as a Tool for Action Rather Than Compliance
3. Prioritizing Relationships and Staff Investment as a Leadership Strategy
4. Establishing High Expectations Through Consistency, Clarity, and Support

Oakbrook Middle School Outcomes

Oakbrook Middle School, located in the Lowcountry of South Carolina, serves almost 900 students. The school has experienced significant improvements in student learning growth and teacher satisfaction since 2023. In that year, 92% of teachers reported being satisfied with the learning environment, teachers' perceptions of working conditions averaged 6.58, and their perceptions of instructional focus averaged 6.73 on the South Carolina School Report Card (South Carolina Department of Education, 2023). Teachers' perceptions of working conditions and instructional focus

are rated on a 10-point scale, ranging from 1 (low) to 10 (high). By 2025, these measures showed substantial improvement: 100% of teachers reported satisfaction with the learning environment, perceptions of working conditions rose to 8.87, more than a full point above the state average, and perceptions of instructional focus increased to 8.49 (South Carolina Department of Education, 2025). Retention numbers have also increased significantly over the same period, further indicating that improvements in climate, expectations, and instructional coherence have contributed to stronger teacher commitment and stability. The following four evidence-based practices have been central to strengthening school culture and retaining a team of highly effective educators.

Practice #1: Building a Culture of Shared Identity and Collective Ownership

At Oakbrook Middle School, the leadership team intentionally treats culture as part of the instructional program, rather than a separate initiative. Through consistent recognition systems, schoolwide traditions, and visible leadership, students and staff are continuously reminded that they are part of something bigger than themselves. Acting on this belief, since 2023, Oakbrook has integrated Jostens Renaissance programming to strengthen the school community and enhance belonging at the school. Jostens Renaissance is a school culture initiative developed by Jostens, an organization that partners with schools to promote student and staff engagement through structured recognition and positive reinforcement systems.

Additionally, unique initiatives are planned to celebrate themed weeks, recognize students and staff, and provide opportunities for shared experiences across the school community. Purposeful events

such as Kindness Week and International Night are examples of this effort. Events like International Night bring students, families, and teachers together to celebrate the school's diverse cultures, strengthening relationships and helping students feel valued and connected to the broader Oakbrook community. Community-centric strategies can take many forms; yet, when chosen and implemented effectively, they play a significant role in shaping the organization's identity (Lochmiller et al., 2024).

As a result of these efforts, Oakbrook Middle School's intentional focus on belonging and shared ownership has strengthened relationships and fostered a more connected educational community where teachers feel a sense of ownership. A shared identity and sense of belonging are foundational to teacher retention (Lochmiller et al., 2024; Shell et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2023). At Oakbrook, culture is not viewed as an accessory to school success but as an essential condition for building a sustainable school community.

Practice #2: Using Data as a Tool for Action Rather Than Compliance

The importance of culture also shapes how academic data is interpreted and applied at Oakbrook. Data conversations focus on actionable insights, student growth, and meaningful support. Rather than simply reviewing scores, they emphasize responsive strategies that help students succeed. The leadership team works closely with teachers to use Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP), South Carolina College- and Career-Ready Assessments (SC Ready), classroom observations and walkthroughs, and behavior data to identify needs, target interventions, and adjust instruction in real time. Effective action planning with data

requires great effort from teachers. Yet, this effort transforms the teacher's role from compliance to ownership, fostering collective efficacy throughout the school building.

Furthermore, interpreting and responding to student data is a collaborative team effort. Action-oriented and data-driven collaboration drives the work of professional learning communities at Oakbrook Middle School. Teachers and staff engage in instructional decision-making together, informed by meaningful analysis of student data. Data systems reflect a culture of high expectations and action at Oakbrook; action rooted in student growth. By inviting teachers in and making data discussions collaborative, practical, and action-oriented, teachers are more invested through instructional decision-making (Sanzo et al., 2011; Rheume et al., 2021). This investment cultivates shared ownership and unity where teachers feel both connected and committed to staying in the classroom (D. Nguyen et al., 2024).

Practice #3: Prioritizing Relationships and Staff Investment as a Leadership Strategy

The alignment of high expectations and teacher support is further grounded in authentic relationships among faculty, staff, and school leaders. The leadership team emphasizes staff morale and relationship-building as key drivers of school improvement. Teachers are treated as professionals and are consistently recognized, empowered to lead, and supported through clear, transparent communication and intentional expressions of appreciation. When teachers are genuinely respected, they are more likely to stay in their positions (Tran et al., 2023). Ongoing appreciation is sustained through personalized gestures such as handwritten

notes, public shout-outs, and small acts of encouragement, along with celebrations that highlight individuals who go above and beyond.

These acknowledgments are complemented by monthly recognitions that honor staff members' contributions, character, and impact. Together, these ongoing and meaningful expressions of gratitude support a shared commitment to high expectations while ensuring that every staff member feels valued and a part of the team throughout the year. Rather than confining recognition to a single appreciation week, Oakbrook's consistent and intentional approach fosters trust and contributes to a positive climate where both adults and students feel truly valued, ultimately improving teacher retention.

Practice #4: Establishing High Expectations Through Consistency, Clarity, and Support

The fourth leadership priority at Oakbrook is to establish systems and clear expectations across the school while ensuring that both staff and students receive the support they need to meet those expectations successfully. At the heart of this goal is a commitment to ensure that expectations are transparent, which supports teacher retention (Sanzo et al., 2011; Shell et al., 2023). Team standards are not merely written in a handbook that collects dust at the bottom of teachers' cabinets. Rather, the expectations of leaders, teachers, and staff at Oakbrook are clearly and proactively communicated through differentiated channels during the school year, including faculty meetings, staff communications, and informal conversations. More importantly, they are modeled daily by the building administrative team and consistently upheld by staff. Clear expectations create the foundation for addressing opportunities for improvement as

growth moments, strengthened by shared trust and strong relationships. These practices have fostered stability across academics, behavior, and daily operations, strengthening a culture of collective accountability and professional trust at Oakbrook.

A unified commitment to high expectations requires sustained investment in teacher support. At Oakbrook, strong outcomes are not the result of high expectations alone; rather, it is the combination of raised standards and a positive culture that makes the difference. High expectations and teacher support should not be competing priorities in middle school settings. In fact, teachers are most supported when expectations are clear and consistently applied, leading to stronger teacher retention (Shell et al., 2023). This emphasis on both support and accountability has strengthened staff trust and contributed to stronger overall school performance at Oakbrook. Together, these four practices create the conditions that support teachers to remain committed, reinforcing what students need most at school: their teachers.

A Systems Approach

The four practices outlined in this article are not implemented in isolation; rather, they are designed to work together as an intentional, interconnected system that strengthens daily practice. Oakbrook's systems-based approach to school leadership prioritizes proactive design and alignment, ensuring that expectations and support work together to produce consistent outcomes rather than reacting to challenges as they arise. In this way, the school culture, instructional data use, relationship building, and communication of high expectations reinforce one another to sustain improvement over time.

The transformation of Oakbrook Middle School has been extraordinary, with the school's report card rating rising from "Average" to "Excellent" in 3 years, a 12-point differentiation. This growth reflects more than short-term gains; it demonstrates the power of a clear, systemwide approach to supporting teachers and students through high expectations. These results underscore the importance of intentionally building systems grounded in collective ownership and transparency. Within Oakbrook, these four strategies have contributed to increased teacher satisfaction and stronger teacher retention.

Conclusion

At Oakbrook Middle School, expectations are not used as a mechanism for pressure, but as a form of instructional and organizational support that enables teachers to focus their energy on the meaningful work they do each and every day. For school leaders, this calls for a reexamination of what "support" truly means, moving beyond lowering the bar or adding initiatives, and instead providing clear priorities, consistent practices, and trust in professional judgment. At Oakbrook, four interconnected leadership practices have made the difference: shared identity, collaborative use of data, strong relationships, and clear expectations.

In the long term, it is this clarity and coherence that forms the foundation of sustainable teaching and a stable, committed faculty. Together, anchored in relationships and a collective commitment to excellence, these practices strengthen the teaching profession and raise the bar for teacher retention in middle schools. In today's educational landscape, where turnover and vacancies have become routine in middle schools, leaders face a decision about how to respond. The Oakbrook Middle School model illustrates that holding high

expectations with a unified culture of support leads to higher teacher satisfaction and retention.

Implications for Future Research

Based on this practitioner-focused article, future research should continue to explore how principal practices contribute to teacher retention over time, particularly through longitudinal studies that capture the evolving needs of teachers and schools. Additional attention should be given to how school leader preparation programs develop principals' capacity to create supportive, collaborative environments that encourage teachers to stay. Future studies should also further consider the unique contexts in which schools operate to identify leadership practices that are responsive to the needs of diverse teachers and communities.

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