



From teacher shortage to opportunity

GUIDEBOOK TO SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

BY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS



International
Task Force on Teachers
for Education 2030



**VARKEY
FOUNDATION**

Changing lives through education



**GLOBAL
SCHOOL
LEADERS**

2025



School leaders are the anchors of their communities — the ones who hold vision, nurture talent, and ensure that every teacher feels seen and supported so that every student can flourish. Within their schools, principals become more than administrators; they are translators of policy into purpose, turning ideas into lived experiences that shape both teachers and learners.

Every school leader has faced that moment when a great teacher leaves — and felt the ripple it sends through classrooms, students, and hearts. This guide was born from those moments of loss and reflection, but also from the hope and ingenuity that followed. It brings together the voices of principals who transformed scarcity into creativity, and challenge into opportunity — proving that even in times of shortage, leadership can light the way forward.

About the network

The School Leadership Network (SLN) is not just another initiative; it is the **global influence hub where school leadership meets transformative action.**

Driven by the Varkey Foundation, Global School Leaders, and the UNESCO Teacher Task Force, our network was created with a singular mission: **to strengthen the principal as the fundamental change agent for equitable and quality education.**

With a community that today surpasses 600 school leaders and 100 experts from 62 countries, the SLN has achieved something essential: closing the gap between education policy and daily practice.

In the SLN, the principal's experience becomes strategic knowledge. Here, **leaders exchange proven practices and analyze academic frameworks to turn them into real tools that work in the classroom.** At the end of the day, SLN exists to ensure that every principal has the support, connection, and peer-validated solutions to lead transformation in their own school.

Teacher Shortage's journey in the network

Teacher shortage is not a future challenge: **it is the educational crisis that defines and limits the potential of our school systems in the present.** Reports from UNESCO, OECD, and our own analyses in the School Leadership Network (SLN) confirm an inescapable reality: demand for teachers exceeds supply, and the emotional and administrative burden is pushing many excellent educators out of the classroom.

Since 2023, this challenge has been the central focus of our Global Meetings and dialogues, mobilizing not only hundreds of principals, but also a list of top international experts and scholars in leadership and retention. **We have moved from a deep understanding of systemic causes (salaries, administrative load, education policy) to identifying the most effective local levers.**



Beatriz Pont
Director of Global
Training at IIEP
(UNESCO)



Carlos Vargas
Head of secretariat
Teacher Task Force



Abraham Okumba
Senior Manager of
Programs
Global School Leaders



Suzanne Freedman
PhD Professor at
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Iowa

In the face of this global situation, the institutional response has focused on recruitment and compensation policies. However, the SLN LAB has validated the central hypothesis of our network: the most sustainable and powerful solution lies in local school leadership.

The principal is the architect of culture, the builder of the conditions that make a teacher decide to stay and thrive.

This Guidebook is not a passive report. It is the culmination of an action-research process with four SLN principals who, through practical experimentation, have demonstrated the Critical Role of the School Leader in transforming teacher retention. It is a manifesto for action, with proven tools, ready to be implemented in your school.

The Global Tension vs. The Local Lever: Learnings 2025

Throughout our 2025 Global Meetings, the SLN delved into the dichotomy between the Systemic Causes of teacher shortages (salaries, administrative load, education policy) and the Local Levers of Retention (culture, recognition, professional development).

Our conclusion is that, while the principal cannot change salary policy, they are the only ones who can modify the three cultural factors that guarantee permanence:

PILLAR 1: THE CULTURE OF LEADERSHIP VS. THE SYSTEM

The decisive factor for a teacher to remain in their school is no longer the entry salary, but the sense of professional value and belonging. Our dialogues confirmed that retention happens when the principal:

- Creates a Sense of Community (a professional refuge within the school).
- Ensures that effort and impact are Visible, Formal, and Genuinely Recognized.
- Fosters Professional Autonomy and access to Growth Pathways that meet the ambitions of high-performing educators.

PILLAR 2: DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP (DL) AS A SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

Distributed Leadership (DL) is not simply about delegating tasks; it is the institutional strategy to build a professionally enriching environment that reduces turnover caused by overload.

By empowering teachers with leadership roles and responsibilities (such as peer coordinators, innovation leaders, or mentors), the principal achieves:

- Reducing Principal Fatigue by sharing the weight of management.
- Increasing Teacher Self-Efficacy, transforming "followers" into "owners" of school success.
- Institutionalizing Growth, so that the school is perceived not only as a workplace, but as a hub of professional development.

**PILLAR 3: THE
TRUST FACTOR:
LEADING WITH
HUMANITY AND
FORGIVENESS**

As analyzed in the 2nd Global Meeting of 2025 (based on the work of Suzanne Freedman), the most effective leadership is the one that builds trust and resilience.

In a context of high pressure and burnout, the leader must be a catalyst of positive change by:

- Seeing the “person behind the role”, prioritizing educator well-being.
- Modeling a culture where vulnerability is safe and mistakes are opportunities for learning.

This humanized approach to trust is the foundation for teachers to feel secure enough to take risks, innovate, and most importantly, commit long-term to the school's mission.

Good Practices learned from experts

Our global meetings were our direct response to these findings. The practices you will see below are specifically designed to activate these three pillars of permanence in your school.

Attraction: Opening the Door to Talent

These practices focus on making the school a desirable destination and on actively building a talent pool.

Living Map

- Description: A collaborative mural or interactive map of teacher training institutes and contacts, inviting them to a coffee to exchange ideas and connect.
- Justification: Attraction must be proactive. By creating the Living Map, the leader establishes relationships with talent sources, positioning the school as a partner and not just an employer. This ensures a better cultural and professional match from the beginning.

Teacher Referrals

- Description: Current teachers recommend promising students and invite them to experience being a “Teacher for a Day” in the school.
- Justification: This leverages the power of Distributed Leadership and internal trust. A candidate recommended by a current teacher already has a connection to the school culture, significantly increasing the likelihood of long-term success and retention.

EXPERIENCE

Kavita implemented **outreach strategies with teacher training colleges** (internships and collaborations with B.Ed. colleges), as well as LinkedIn advertisements to attract new teachers. She found that engaging future teachers early in their training creates enthusiasm and builds a stronger talent pipeline, though timing and incentives remain challenges. **Starting the recruitment cycle early in the academic year proved critical to securing committed candidates.**

[Click here to learn more about the proposal.](#)



Kavita Sanghvi
Kotak Education
Foundation

Retention: Strengthening Purpose and Value

Retention is based on fostering a greater sense of autonomy and commitment. These practices focus on recognition, ongoing support, and professional development.

Weekly Deep Dive

- Description: A 15-minute conversation with teachers to discuss challenges, support needs, and aspirations.
- Justification: A key tool for personalized support. A short and regular immersion shows the teacher that the leader sees and hears them, addressing issues of workload and motivation before they become factors of attrition.

Quick Innovation Spot

- Description: A monthly 15-minute session where teachers share a classroom success, a tip, or a creative practice.
- Justification: Combats burnout and promotes Distributed Leadership. By giving teachers a formal space to share innovation, they are recognized as "knowledge producers and trusted professionals," revitalizing their motivation.

Growth Pulse

- Description: Survey teachers about their professional development interests and connect them with tailored opportunities, or create small professional development teams to explore a topic.
- Justification: Shows that the school invests in the professional trajectories of its teachers. Connecting individual interests with tailored opportunities is crucial to opening "new professional horizons" and reinforcing loyalty to the institution.

Inspiring Stories

- Description: Each week, select a teacher with a notable practice or project, and share their story and impact on student learning in a newsletter or creative format.
- Justification: A visible act of recognition. By showcasing impact, the leader reinforces a sense of purpose—a powerful retention factor—and motivates others to engage in leadership roles.

EXPERIENCE

Tatiana piloted the “**Inspiring Stories**” practice by organizing *short video interviews with teachers, which she shared internally through newsletters and QR codes.*

Teachers initially hesitated but later embraced the initiative, taking pride in sharing their classroom practices. **This recognition fostered motivation and encouraged a culture of peer-to-peer inspiration.** She also emphasized that teacher appreciation initiatives, highlighting everyday contributions, boosted morale and strengthened belonging.

[Click here to learn more about the proposal.](#)



Dario Greni
Escuela rural N° 88



Tatiana Popa
Heritage International School

EXPERIENCE

Dario also implemented the “**Inspiring Stories**” initiative with the aim of recognizing the work he already knew from his teachers. To do so, he recorded them sharing their projects, the practices they had explored, and the activities they carried out. **This initiative undoubtedly motivated his teaching team and also strengthened the connection with the community** by showcasing their experiences and achievements.

[Click here to learn more about the proposal.](#)



Supporting Novice Teachers: Creating a Soft Landing

The induction period is critical. These practices are designed to reduce initial stress, administrative overload, and isolation.

Buddy Teacher

- Description: Pair each new teacher with an experienced mentor who guides them during their first month.
- Justification: The Buddy Teacher is not an evaluator; they are an emotional and logistical support in a low-risk format. This accelerates cultural integration, answers basic questions, and reduces initial stress, allowing the novice teacher to focus on teaching instead of navigating bureaucracy alone.

Resource Hub Orientation

- Description: A guided tour of lesson plans, assessment tools, and classroom management resources to inspire novice teachers.
- Justification: Administrative overload is one of the main causes of attrition. A clear orientation to the Resource Hub is an act of respect for professional time, ensuring the novice knows where to find tools, enabling them to be effective from day one.

Peer Feedback Exchange

- Description: Structured and supportive sessions where new teachers receive feedback from their mentor or peers on a class.
- Justification: Fosters continuous improvement in a safe environment. By receiving supportive peer feedback, novice teachers develop self-efficacy and learn to view feedback as a growth tool, not as judgment.

Cultural Immersion Activity

- Description: Introduce new teachers to the school culture through team-building exercises, informal gatherings, or participation in school events.
- Justification: Accelerates cultural integration and belonging. Understanding the ethos of the school experientially is key for the teacher to feel part of the team, reducing isolation and the likelihood of leaving within the first months.

EXPERIENCE

Denise implemented Buddy Teacher, Resource Hub Orientation, and Cultural Immersion practices in Western Australia, in response to the resignation of over 1,500 teachers. She stressed that while these practices are effective in reducing early attrition, their success depends heavily on having allocated time and resources. In her school, prioritizing induction reduced stress for new hires and accelerated integration, though sustaining retention requires consistent attention to relationships, school vision, and long-term commitment.

[Click here to learn more about the proposal.](#)



Denise Shillinglaw
Broome Senior High
School

From principals to principals: Experiences

Tatiana's story:

"When I started sharing teachers' inspiring stories through video briefings, I noticed a visible shift in how teachers saw themselves. They began to share their creative practices more openly, and students also became aware of the value teachers bring. Recognition turned into motivation."

Kavita's story:

"Through internships with B.Ed. colleges and outreach on LinkedIn, I saw young teachers get genuinely excited about joining our school community. The challenge is to start early and provide incentives, but these strategies helped us position the school as a place where careers can begin and grow."

Denise's story:

"In a context where thousands of teachers were leaving, it was urgent to rethink how we welcome new staff. By introducing buddy systems, orientation hubs, and cultural immersion activities, we reduced stress and helped new teachers connect with the school quickly. However, the biggest lesson is that retention requires long-term strategies that go beyond induction – it's about relationships, recognition, and vision."

Challenges in Implementation

While these practices proved powerful in strengthening teacher retention and attraction, principals also faced obstacles during their three-week implementation period. Recognizing these challenges is key to adapting the strategies to different school contexts:

Recognition and Storytelling: Teachers were initially hesitant to participate in storytelling and video interviews, worried about being judged or exposed. It required extra encouragement and trust-building to create a safe environment for sharing.

Recruitment through Colleges and LinkedIn: Timing was a significant challenge, as outreach late in the school year reduced the pool of available candidates. Incentives to attract and retain new teachers were also limited, highlighting the need for advance planning and sustained partnerships with training colleges.

Induction Practices: While buddy systems and orientation hubs were well received, the main obstacle was the lack of dedicated time and resources. Without explicit scheduling and support, these initiatives risk being perceived as “extra work” rather than essential components of teacher retention.

These challenges underline that good practices require not only leadership initiative, but also institutional support, resources, and time allocation to become sustainable.

Implementation Tips

1. Culture of Leadership and Recognition

Goal: Build belonging, recognition, and purpose.

- Start small, but consistently. Recognize one teacher per week—through a newsletter, QR code story, or morning announcement.
- Make recognition visible. Post stories or quotes in a shared physical space (staff room wall, bulletin board).
- Co-create recognition. Invite teachers to nominate peers or select the “story of the week.”
- Link recognition to student learning. Highlight how teacher initiatives impact learners, not only effort.
- Protect time for connection. Schedule “deep dive” or “coffee chats” as part of your weekly calendar, not as extra tasks.





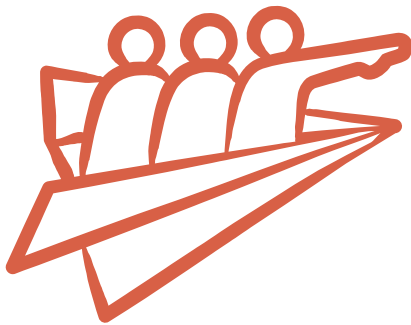
2. Distributed Leadership (DL) as a Sustainability Strategy

Goal: Empower teachers and reduce overload.

- Identify natural leaders. Look for teachers already influencing peers and formalize small leadership roles (innovation leader, peer mentor).
- Delegate with clarity. Assign ownership, not tasks—each leadership role should come with a clear purpose and outcome.
- Rotate leadership opportunities. Prevent burnout and expand leadership capacity by changing roles annually.
- Celebrate shared wins. Make sure every team success is publicly attributed to the group, not just the principal.
- Document and share. Create a “Leadership Log” or shared folder with notes, meeting summaries, and learnings to preserve continuity.

3. The Trust Factor: Leading with Humanity and Forgiveness

Goal: Strengthen relationships, empathy, and emotional safety.



- Model vulnerability. Share your own mistakes and what you learned from them. It invites authenticity.
- Check-in before checking tasks. Start meetings by asking, “How’s everyone doing?” before discussing logistics.
- Normalize feedback loops. Turn feedback sessions into collaborative learning, not evaluation.
- Protect teacher well-being. Encourage boundaries around time—avoid late-night messages or extra duties without compensation.
- Recognize emotions as data. If morale drops, explore why together—don’t dismiss it as resistance.

4. Teacher Attraction and Recruitment

Goal: Make your school a place where great teachers want to work.



- Map your talent sources. Keep an updated list of local training colleges and early-career teacher programs.
- Build relationships, not pipelines. Visit training institutes, offer mini-workshops, or invite trainees for open days.
- Start early. Begin outreach before the academic year ends.
- Leverage your team. Use teacher referrals—they attract people who already fit your culture.
- Show your culture online. Use your school’s website and social media to share teacher stories and classroom life.

5. Supporting and Retaining New Teachers

Goal: Ensure a “soft landing” for new hires.

- Assign a Buddy Teacher. Choose someone approachable, not evaluative.
- Schedule time for induction. Embed it in your school calendar to ensure continuity.
- Create a Resource Hub. Offer ready-to-use lesson plans, assessment tools, and guides.
- Use peer feedback. Organize short, supportive observation cycles.
- Plan cultural immersion. Include informal gatherings or storytelling sessions to integrate new teachers faster.



6. Sustaining Change

Goal: Turn one-time initiatives into lasting school culture.

- Measure small wins. Track teacher retention rates, satisfaction, and engagement after each cycle.
- Create an annual reflection. Ask: What worked? What needs refining?
- Institutionalize practices. Include recognition, mentoring, and storytelling in your school's yearly plan.
- Train the next leaders. Ensure others can lead the initiatives if you move on.
- Celebrate the process. Share your results within the SLN to inspire other principals globally.



Conclusions

The experiences collected in this guide reaffirm a central truth: teacher retention is not only a systemic challenge—it is a leadership opportunity. While principals cannot always change policies or salaries, they can shape the culture that defines whether teachers stay, grow, and thrive.

Across schools, three consistent lessons emerged:

- **Culture matters more than compensation.** Teachers remain where they feel valued, seen, and part of a community that recognizes their daily impact.
- **Leadership shared is leadership sustained.** Distributed leadership transforms schools into ecosystems of growth where teachers lead, innovate, and assume ownership.
- **Trust is the invisible infrastructure.** Human-centered leadership—rooted in empathy, forgiveness, and authenticity—builds resilience and loyalty.

The principals featured here remind us that change begins with small, intentional actions: a conversation, a story shared, a welcoming gesture. Each of these, multiplied across schools and systems, can redefine how we respond to teacher shortages.

The future of retention lies not in filling vacancies, but in cultivating belonging, purpose, and leadership within every school.

Visit our website!



- Discover the network's journey, **key milestones, and achievements.**
- Explore insights and reports **on leadership and school management.**
- If you are a school principal, **join our network today.**



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