

# 2021 Virginia School Survey Research Brief

## Series: School Leadership

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### Key Findings

The 2021 Virginia School Survey of Climate and Working Conditions asked public school employees (e.g., teachers, teacher's aides, licensed staff, and non-licensed staff) to respond to 10 items designed to measure how effective they perceived their schools' leadership (SL) to be. [1] A total of 101,691 employees responded. We analyzed their responses and found:

- Most employees have a positive view of their schools' leadership effectiveness.
- Teachers reported the lowest levels of SL effectiveness among the four employee groups. These levels were meaningfully lower than those reported by licensed or non-licensed staff.
- There were no meaningful differences in perceived SL effectiveness between schools with higher and lower concentrations of Black or Hispanic students or economically disadvantaged students.
- Employees with the highest levels of job satisfaction and those who intend to remain in their current school in the following year viewed their school's leadership as more effective than other employees.

### School Leadership

Effective school leadership is essential for equitable student and school outcomes through its significant and indirect effect on teaching and learning. School leadership is comprised of a set of skills and activities that include professional interactions with educators and staff to improve instruction, fostering a positive school culture and climate, facilitating opportunities for professional growth, organizational management, and setting and communicating a clear vision for the school. [2] Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of school leadership are among the most influential aspects of teacher working conditions and school climate and are a driver of teachers' retention decisions. [3] Though school leadership is distributed across roles within a school, the survey analyzed here asked employees about the leadership of school administrators. The purpose of this brief is to explore and describe Virginia public school employees' experiences of school leadership effectiveness.

### Measuring School Leadership

Virginia's public school employees' perceptions of SL were measured using a set of 10 survey items (see Table 1 for the wording of each item and summary of responses across school employee groups). School employees were the most positive

**Table 1.** Responses to School Leadership Survey Items Aggregated Across All Employees

Survey Item	Mean	% of All Respondents					
		Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Disagree (3)	Somewhat Agree (4)	Agree (5)	Strongly Agree (5)
I feel respected by this school's administrators.	5.1	2.4	2.5	3.9	11.3	36.0	43.9
This school's administrators understand how children learn.	5.1	1.1	1.6	3.6	12.7	43.4	37.7
This school's administrators communicate a clear vision for this school.	5.0	2.0	2.5	4.4	13.5	40.7	37.1
This school's administrators set high expectations for all students.	5.0	1.4	1.9	4.0	13.2	42.7	36.8
Teacher/staff performance is assessed objectively.	5.0	1.6	1.9	4.1	14.1	47.4	30.9
I trust this school's administrators to do what they say they will do.	4.9	2.8	3.1	5.1	14.7	37.6	36.8
Teachers and administrators have a shared vision for this school.	4.9	1.8	2.5	4.9	16.1	42.5	32.2
The procedures for teacher/staff evaluation are consistent.	4.9	1.8	2.3	4.6	13.7	46.4	31.2
Teachers/staff receive feedback that can help them improve their performance.	4.9	1.6	2.4	5.0	16.5	44.8	29.8
I feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to me with school administrators.	4.8	3.5	3.8	6.0	14.4	36.4	35.9

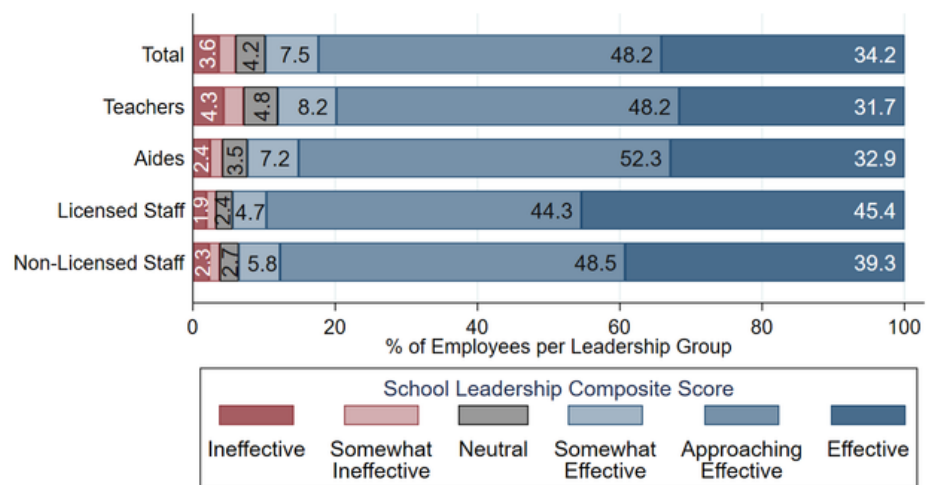
Note.  $N = 101,691$

about feeling respected by their school administrators (44% strongly agreed and 36% agreed) and that their school administrators understood how children learn (38% strongly agreed and 43% agreed). Employees were most critical about feeling that they could comfortably raise issues and concerns of importance with school administrators (13% somewhat disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed), though most still agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Psychometric analyses confirmed that the set of 10 survey items collectively captured employee's perceptions of SL effectiveness in their schools. We averaged responses to this set of items to create an Effective SL composite score. [4] As shown in Figure 1, employees were generally positive in their perceptions of SL, though only 34% reported experiencing effective SL. This means that the responses of roughly two-thirds of employees indicate areas where the effectiveness of their school's leadership could be improved, though 4% of employees reported experiencing ineffective SL.

On average, teachers reported the lowest SL effectiveness, meaningfully lower than those of licensed or non-licensed staff.

As seen in Figure 1, 32% of teachers reported experiencing effective SL as compared to 45% of licensed staff and 39% of non-licensed staff reporting experiencing effective SL. At the other end of the scale, 4% of teachers perceived ineffective SL compared to just 2% of both licensed and non-licensed staff. There were no meaningful differences in employees' experiences of effective SL across schools with higher and lower concentrations of Black and Hispanic students or economically disadvantaged students (results not shown).

**Figure 1.** Experiencing Effective School Leadership by Employee Group

Note:  $N = 101,691$ ; Teacher  $N = 68,419$ ; Aides  $N = 12,416$ ; Licensed Staff  $N = 13,229$ ; Non-Licensed Staff  $N = 7,627$ . Composite scores are mapped to categories as follows: 1.00 to 2.74 = ineffective, 2.75 to 3.25 = somewhat ineffective, 3.26 to 3.74 = neutral, 3.75 to 4.25 = somewhat effective, 4.26 to 5.49 = approaching effective, and 5.50 to 6.00 = effective.

## Defining Meaningful Differences Across Groups

When comparing responses to the SL survey items across respondent groups or across types of schools, we needed a way to determine if the observed differences were meaningful and worth highlighting in this brief. We adopted the commonly used definition of a meaningful difference: a difference greater than or equal to 0.2 standard deviations. The Effective SL scores and survey item responses were standardized on the pooled sample to allow comparisons both across and within respondent groups.

In the following sections of this brief, we focus on three subsets of school employees with meaningfully different perceptions of SL effectiveness: those that report experiencing effective, somewhat effective, and ineffective or somewhat ineffective SL. [5] We use these three groups to examine how experiences of SL are related to employees' job satisfaction and retention intentions.

### School Leadership and Job Satisfaction

We examined how experiences of effective SL varied among school employees with the highest levels of job satisfaction – those who strongly agreed that their school is “a good place to work and learn.” As seen in Figure 2, the percentage of school employees with the highest job satisfaction is much greater among those who experienced effective SL than those who reported ineffective or somewhat ineffective SL. There was a nearly 80-percentage-point gap in reporting the highest levels of job satisfaction between those that experienced ineffective or somewhat ineffective SL and those that experienced effective SL, which held across school employee groups.

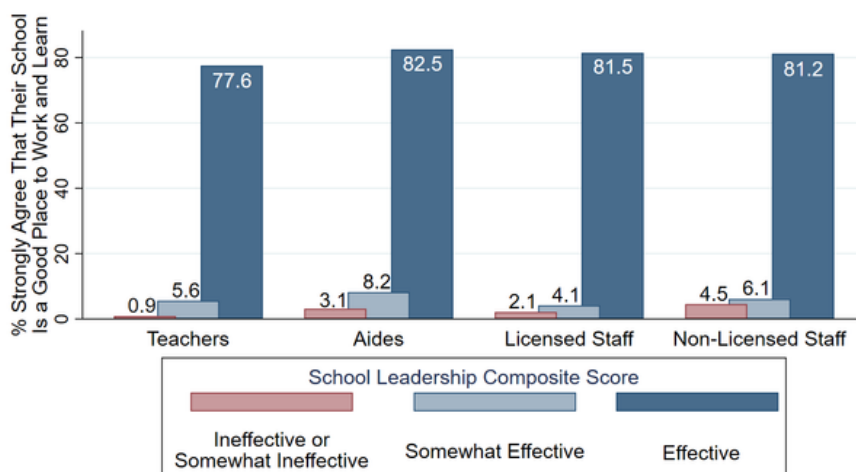
### School Leadership and Retention

Virginia public school employees who reported experiencing effective SL more often intended to remain in their

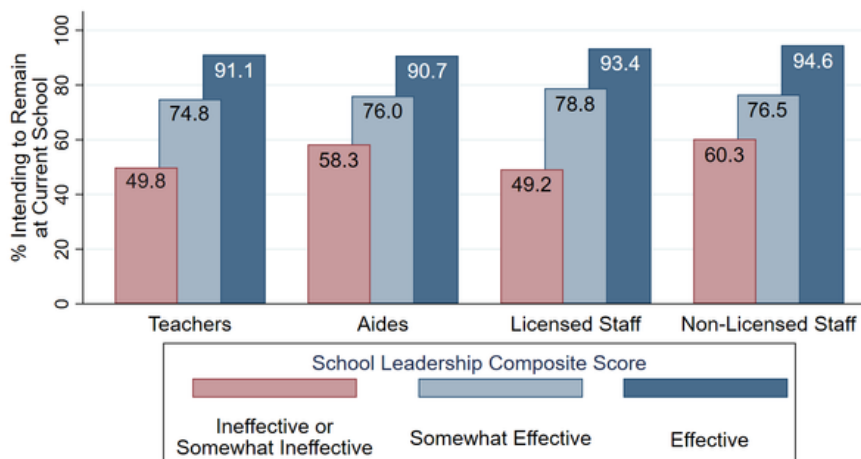
current school as compared to those who reported receiving ineffective or somewhat ineffective SL, as illustrated in Figure 3. Among Virginia teachers, 91% who experienced effective SL intended to stay in their current schools, as compared to only 50% of those who experienced ineffective or somewhat ineffective SL – a 41-percentage point gap. This gap was greatest among teachers and licensed staff, and lowest among teacher's aides and non-licensed staff.

### School Leadership and School Characteristics

In previous analyses of the 2021 Virginia School Survey, we found that job satisfaction and retention intention rates were meaningfully lower in schools serving higher concentrations of Black and Hispanic students and economically disadvantaged students. [6] Given the findings in this brief that job satisfaction and intent to remain in the same school are highest when employees experienced



**Figure 2.** Percent Expressing the Highest Job Satisfaction by SL Effectiveness and Employee Groups



**Figure 3.** Percent Intending to Remain at Current School by SL Effectiveness and Employee Groups

effective SL, we also examined the survey responses to determine whether effective SL varied across these two school characteristics. We assigned schools to four groups (i.e., quartiles) on each characteristic such that the first quartile had the lowest percentage of either Black and Hispanic or economically disadvantaged students, and the fourth quartile had the highest percentage of these students.

We observed no meaningful differences in the Effective SL factor score by either school characteristic, which also held across individual survey items. Our analyses did reveal one consistent pattern: School employees' perceptions of their school's leadership effectiveness were the highest in schools serving the lowest concentration of Black and Hispanic students. The rate was lower in the second quartile, lower still in the third quartile, and the lowest in schools serving the highest concentrations of Black and Hispanic students.

## Closing

Virginia school divisions have an opportunity to increase school employees' job satisfaction and retention by improving school leadership effectiveness. This can perhaps be accomplished by developing the knowledge and skills of school leaders as these are the drivers of the leadership behaviors experienced by school employees. [2] Given that roughly one-third of school employees reported experiencing effective SL, there is room for improvement in the quality of leadership in Virginia public schools. This is most pronounced among teachers, who reported the lowest ratings of effective SL. The VDOE should offer support to divisions, professional associations, and school leadership preparation programs that can work to develop the knowledge and skills of current school leaders and support a pipeline of effective future school leaders to improve the school leadership experienced by school employees across Virginia. This investment in school leadership would support improved and more equitable access to effective SL for school employees and students across Virginia public schools.

## End Notes

[1] Licensed staff include principals, assistant principals, guidance counselors and other student facing employees who hold a state professional license. Non-licensed staff include secretaries and other staff members who do not hold a state professional license and whose primary responsibilities are not student facing. Throughout the brief, we referred to teacher's aides as aides.

[2] Grissom, J., Egalite, A., & Lindsay, C. (2021). *How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research* (p. 136). The Wallace Foundation.

<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis>

[3] Boyd, D., Grossman, P., Ing, M., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2011). The influence of school administrators on teacher retention decisions. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(2), 303–333.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831210380788>; Kraft, M. A., Marinell, W. H., & Shen-Wei Yee, D. (2016). School organizational contexts, teacher turnover, and student achievement: Evidence from panel data. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(5), 1411–1449.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216667478>; Ladd, H. F. (2011). Teachers' perceptions of their working conditions: How predictive of planned and actual teacher movement? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33(2), 235–261.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373711398128>

[4] We assigned scores on the Effective SL factor to effectiveness categories as follows: 1.00 to 2.74 = ineffective, 2.75 to 3.25 = somewhat ineffective, 3.26 to 3.74 = neutral, 3.75 to 4.25 = somewhat effective, 4.26 to 5.49 = approaching effective, and 5.50 to 6.00 = effective.

[5] We combined the totals for ineffective and somewhat ineffective SL to present the data here due to the small cell sizes for each.

[6] Miller, L. C., & Reynolds, A. L. (2022). *An introduction to the 2021 Virginia School Survey research brief series*. Charlottesville, VA: EdPolicyWorks, University of Virginia. <https://bit.ly/EdPolicyWorksRB1>

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