PERSPECTIVES ON LONGEVITY: NARRATIVES FROM PROTESTANT SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN VIRGINIA’S TIDEWATER AREA

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Abstract

Education literature indicates that early departure of school principals and a paucity of applicants to take their places have resulted in leadership shortages in the nation’s schools. The length of stay for U.S. public and private school kindergarten through 12th-grade (K-12) principals is 1 to 3 years. This is problematic for implementing school change, which, according to literature, requires 5 or more years of principal incumbency for success. Although Protestant schools exhibit principal departure patterns similar to those in the public sector, unlike public schools, little information is available pertaining to Protestant school principal longevity. Using a qualitative cross-case design, this study examined the responses to interview questions on the impact of nine retention factors on job longevity in order to gain a deeper understanding of why a purposeful sample of 10 incumbent Protestant school principals in the Tidewater area of Virginia remain in their respective schools for 5 or more consecutive years. While study participants sometimes considered the nine factors when encountering the more perplexing challenges, most were found inconsequential to Protestant school principals’ decisions to continue longer in the position. Participants did attribute their decisions, in part, to passion and commitment to students and obedience to God’s call. Of significance, a tenth factor emerged during the interviews and data analysis that is markedly different from those identified in literature for public and non-Christian private school principals. A God-centered, value-focused creed appears to be a key factor that compels Protestant school principals to persevere long term. Recommendations to colleges and school boards and implications for further study of longevity relative to the tenth factor are delineated.