

# Educational Leadership as a Determinant of Teacher Well-Being: A Review of the Relationship between Leadership Styles, Teacher Mental Health, and Burnout

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	Abstract
<b>Article history:</b> Received: 14 Oct 2025 Accepted: 13 Dec 2025 Available online: 19 Dec 2025	<b>Background:</b> The global teaching profession faces a sustainability crisis characterized by escalating attrition rates linked to deteriorating mental health and professional burnout. School leadership has emerged as a critical, modifiable organizational factor influencing these teacher outcomes, with significant implications for educational quality and equity. <b>Objective:</b> This review evaluated empirical research from 2000-2025 to investigate relationships between distinct educational leadership styles and teachers' mental health and burnout levels, identify mediating mechanisms, and highlight implications for educational practice and policy. <b>Methods:</b> A comprehensive narrative systematic review was conducted using electronic databases (ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science). Search terms combined leadership constructs ("educational leadership," "transformational leadership"), well-being indicators ("teacher burnout," "mental health"), and contextual factors ("school climate," "organizational support"). Inclusion criteria encompassed empirical studies examining leadership as an independent variable and teacher well-being as dependent variables in K-12 settings. <b>Results:</b> Transformational and distributed leadership styles demonstrate consistent protective effects against teacher burnout while promoting psychological well-being. Laissez-faire leadership emerges as the most robust predictor of adverse mental health outcomes. Transactional leadership shows context-dependent effects, while abusive leadership produces unequivocally negative consequences. Key mediating pathways include perceived organizational support, self-efficacy, and school climate quality. <b>Conclusion:</b> Educational leadership style constitutes a fundamental determinant of teacher psychological functioning and professional sustainability. Prioritizing leadership development focused on supportive, empowering practices represents an essential strategy for creating healthier schools and retaining high-quality teaching professionals.
<b>Keywords:</b> Educational Leadership Teacher Well-Being Systematic Review Mental Health	

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## Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape presents unprecedented challenges to teacher sustainability worldwide. Escalating demands stemming from accountability pressures, evolving student needs, resource constraints, and post-pandemic recovery have converged to create what scholars term a "perfect

storm" for teacher attrition and psychological distress [1]. Within this context, teacher burnout—a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism), and diminished personal accomplishment—has reached epidemic proportions across diverse educational systems [2]. Concomitantly, broader mental health concerns including chronic stress, anxiety

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disorders, and depressive symptoms have become increasingly prevalent among teaching professionals, with significant implications for instructional quality, student outcomes, and educational equity [3].

While external systemic factors undoubtedly contribute to this crisis, organizational research increasingly identifies school-level variables as critical determinants of teacher well-being [4]. Among these, educational leadership occupies a central position as both a potential buffer against occupational stressors and a possible source of additional strain [5]. School principals and administrative teams function not merely as managers of educational operations but as architects of the institution's psychological environment—their decisions, behaviors, and relational patterns fundamentally shape the daily experiences of teaching professionals [6]. The conceptualization of leadership "style"—defined as the relatively stable constellation of behaviors, attitudes, and approaches exhibited by educational leaders—provides a particularly valuable framework for understanding how administrative practices differentially influence teacher psychological outcomes [7].

The theoretical foundations of this relationship draw from multiple disciplines. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory suggests that effective leadership provides psychological resources that help teachers manage job demands, while inadequate leadership depletes these resources [8]. Similarly, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model posits that leadership behaviors directly influence both the demands teachers experience and the resources available to them, thereby affecting burnout and engagement trajectories [9]. Social exchange theory further illuminates how reciprocal relationships between leaders and teachers establish normative expectations that either support or undermine professional well-being [10].

Despite growing recognition of these connections, several critical gaps persist in the literature. First, while numerous studies examine specific leadership styles in isolation, comprehensive syntheses comparing multiple leadership frameworks within the teacher well-being context remain limited. Second, the mediating mechanisms through which leadership styles influence mental health outcomes require clearer articulation. Third, post-pandemic research examining leadership adaptations during periods of extreme disruption warrants integration into existing frameworks. Finally, practical implications for leadership development programs demand more explicit connection to empirical findings.

This systematic review therefore addresses the following research questions: (1) How do different educational leadership styles relate to teachers' levels of burnout and mental health? (2) What psychological and

organizational mechanisms mediate these relationships? (3) What are the implications for leadership development, school improvement, and educational policy? By synthesizing two decades of empirical research, this article aims to advance both scholarly understanding and practical applications, ultimately contributing to the development of healthier, more sustainable educational environments.

## Methods

This review employed a narrative systematic review methodology designed to comprehensively synthesize empirical evidence while maintaining methodological rigor and transparency [11]. The review process adhered to established guidelines for systematic knowledge synthesis in educational research, with particular attention to clarity in search strategy, inclusion criteria, and analytical procedures.

**Search Strategy and Databases:** Electronic database searches were conducted in ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science for publications between January 2000 and March 2024. The search strategy utilized Boolean operators to combine terms from three conceptual domains: leadership constructs ("educational leadership" OR "principal leadership" OR "school leadership" OR "transformational leadership" OR "instructional leadership" OR "distributed leadership"), well-being indicators ("teacher burnout" OR "teacher stress" OR "teacher mental health" OR "teacher well-being" OR "emotional exhaustion" OR "depersonalization"), and contextual mediators ("school climate" OR "organizational support" OR "self-efficacy" OR "professional agency"). Reference lists of included articles and relevant reviews were manually searched for additional studies.

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:** Studies meeting the following criteria were included: (1) peer-reviewed empirical research (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods); (2) focused on K-12 educational settings; (3) examined leadership style or behavior as a primary independent variable; (4) measured teacher burnout, stress, anxiety, depression, or psychological well-being as a key dependent variable; (5) published in English. Exclusion criteria encompassed: (1) theoretical papers without empirical data; (2) studies focused exclusively on student outcomes or higher education contexts; (3) non-peer-reviewed publications; (4) studies examining leadership as a dependent variable.

**Study Selection and Data Extraction:** The selection process followed PRISMA guidelines with modifications appropriate for narrative synthesis [12]. After duplicate removal, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance by two independent reviewers, with disagreements resolved through discussion. Full-text articles of potentially relevant studies were then

assessed against inclusion criteria. Data extraction utilized a standardized form capturing: authors, publication year, research design, sample characteristics, leadership measures, well-being measures, key findings, and identified mediators. Given methodological diversity across included studies, a narrative synthesis approach was employed rather than meta-analytic techniques [13]. Studies were organized thematically by leadership style, with particular attention to consistency of findings across different methodological approaches and cultural contexts. Quality assessment considered methodological rigor, measurement validity, and analytical appropriateness, though formal quality scoring was not employed due to the narrative synthesis approach.

## Results

The systematic search and screening process yielded 86 studies meeting inclusion criteria. Results are organized by leadership style, with additional sections addressing mediating mechanisms and contextual moderators.

### *Protective Leadership Styles: Evidence and Mechanisms*

**Transformational Leadership (TL):** This constituted the most extensively researched leadership style, with 38 studies examining its relationship to teacher well-being. Meta-analytic evidence confirms significant negative correlations between TL dimensions and all three Maslach Burnout Inventory components: emotional exhaustion ( $r = -.42$ ), depersonalization ( $r = -.38$ ), and reduced personal accomplishment ( $r = -.31$ ) [14]. Longitudinal studies provide particularly compelling evidence; for instance, Wang et al. demonstrated that TL predicted slower progression of burnout symptoms over a three-year period, even when controlling for baseline well-being and demographic factors [15]. The protective effects appear strongest for TL's relational components—individualized consideration and inspirational motivation—which directly address teachers' psychological needs for support and meaning [16].

**Distributed/Shared Leadership (SL):** Twenty-two studies examined this collaborative approach, with consistent findings regarding its positive impact on teacher well-being. SL's emphasis on professional autonomy, collective decision-making, and shared responsibility appears to mitigate key burnout antecedents including role ambiguity and professional isolation [17]. Quantitative studies employing structural equation modeling indicate that SL influences burnout indirectly through enhanced collective efficacy and reduced psychological strain [18]. Qualitative investigations further reveal that teachers in schools with strong distributed leadership report greater

professional agency, which serves as a buffer against emotional exhaustion [19].

### *Ambivalent and Pathogenic Leadership Styles*

**Laissez-Faire Leadership (LFL):** Eighteen studies examined this passive-avoidant style, with remarkably consistent findings regarding its detrimental effects. Meta-analytic data indicate LFL demonstrates the strongest positive correlation with teacher emotional exhaustion among all leadership styles ( $r = .51$ ) [20]. The mechanisms appear straightforward: leader absence creates role ambiguity, inadequate support systems, and perceptions of organizational abandonment—all potent stressors that deplete teachers' psychological resources [21]. Even more concerning, LFL shows stronger associations with depersonalization than other styles, suggesting it particularly erodes teachers' relational connections with students [22].

**Transactional Leadership (TaL):** Findings regarding this exchange-based approach are decidedly mixed across 24 studies. Contingent reward behaviors demonstrate modest negative correlations with burnout ( $r = -.19$ ) when rewards align with teacher values and are administered consistently [23]. However, management-by-exception—particularly active monitoring for errors—correlates positively with both emotional exhaustion ( $r = .27$ ) and depersonalization ( $r = .22$ ) [24]. This suggests TaL's effects depend entirely on implementation: when focused on recognizing achievement, it provides modest benefits; when emphasizing compliance monitoring, it becomes an additional job demand.

**Abusive/Destructive Leadership:** Although less frequently studied within standard leadership frameworks (12 studies), this domain reveals particularly severe consequences. Behaviors including public humiliation, unjust blame, coercive tactics, and exploitation correlate strongly with clinical anxiety symptoms ( $r = .44$ ), depressive symptoms ( $r = .38$ ), and severe burnout [25]. Qualitative studies employing in-depth interviews describe how abusive leadership creates climates of fear that fundamentally compromise teachers' psychological safety and professional identity [26].

### *Critical Mediating Mechanisms*

Three primary mediators consistently emerged across studies employing mediation analysis or similar methodologies:

**Perceived Organizational Support (POS):** Thirty-one studies identified POS as a central mediator between leadership and teacher well-being. Supportive leadership behaviors—particularly those demonstrating care for teachers' welfare—strengthen POS, which in

turn reduces burnout and enhances job satisfaction [27]. The strength of this mediation pathway is substantial, with meta-analytic evidence suggesting POS explains approximately 35% of the variance in leadership-burnout relationships [28].

**Teacher Self-Efficacy and Collective Efficacy:** Twenty-seven studies identified efficacy beliefs as critical mediators. Leadership that provides resources, encouragement, and collaborative opportunities builds teachers' confidence in their instructional capabilities, which directly mitigates stress and enhances personal accomplishment [29]. Particularly compelling evidence comes from longitudinal studies showing that leadership-driven increases in collective efficacy predict reduced burnout trajectories over time [30].

**School Climate/Culture:** Twenty-three studies highlighted organizational climate as a key mediator. Leadership behaviors fundamentally shape the school's social-emotional environment—its levels of trust, collaboration, respect, and shared purpose [31]. Positive climates mediate the benefits of TL and SL, while negative climates (characterized by conflict, mistrust, or disconnection) mediate the harmful effects of LFL and destructive leadership [32].

### **Contextual Moderators**

Several contextual factors moderated leadership-well-being relationships across studies. School socioeconomic status emerged as a consistent moderator, with leadership effects on teacher well-being being stronger in high-poverty schools [33]. Cultural context also moderated relationships, with collectivist cultures showing stronger effects for collaborative leadership styles compared to individualistic cultures [34]. Teacher career stage presented another moderator, with early-career teachers showing greater sensitivity to leadership effects than mid- or late-career teachers [35].

### **Discussion**

The synthesized evidence presents a compelling narrative: educational leadership constitutes a fundamental determinant of teacher psychological functioning, with effect sizes comparable to other well-established occupational stressors. The consistent patterns across diverse methodologies and cultural contexts underscore the robustness of these relationships. Theoretical integration suggests the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides the most comprehensive framework for understanding these dynamics [9]. Effective leadership styles (TL, SL) primarily operate by building job resources—autonomy, support, feedback, meaning—and optimizing job demands. Ineffective styles (LFL, abusive) deplete resources while amplifying demands, creating the

precise conditions that precipitate burnout according to JD-R principles.

The mediating mechanisms identified—particularly POS and efficacy beliefs—align closely with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [8]. Supportive leadership helps teachers accumulate and protect psychological resources, while inadequate leadership threatens resource reservoirs. This resource perspective explains why LFL proves so damaging: it represents not merely an absence of positive leadership but an active threat to resource conservation through neglect and ambiguity.

### **Implications for Leadership Development and Practice**

The findings carry substantial implications for educational leadership preparation and practice. First, leadership development programs must transcend traditional administrative training to develop what might be termed "psychological leadership competencies"—skills in emotional intelligence, relationship building, climate cultivation, and supportive communication [36]. Curricular reforms should emphasize evidence-based practices for building teacher efficacy, fostering collaboration, and providing meaningful recognition.

Second, principal evaluation systems require fundamental redesign to incorporate measures of leadership impact on teacher well-being and organizational health. Current evaluation frameworks overwhelmingly emphasize student achievement metrics, creating perverse incentives that may inadvertently encourage leadership behaviors detrimental to teacher sustainability [37]. Balanced accountability systems would include climate surveys, teacher retention data, and well-being indicators alongside traditional outcome measures.

Third, the findings highlight the critical importance of supporting leaders' own well-being. Principals experience burnout rates comparable to teachers, creating a troubling cycle where stressed leaders become less capable of supporting stressed teachers [38]. Systemic interventions must include leadership wellness initiatives, coaching support, and realistic workload expectations for administrative roles.

### **Policy Implications and Systemic Considerations**

At the policy level, these findings suggest that initiatives to address teacher shortages and attrition must move beyond financial incentives to address organizational conditions. Investing in leadership development represents a potentially high-impact strategy for improving teacher retention and effectiveness [39]. Specifically, policies should: (1) fund high-quality leadership mentoring and coaching

programs, (2) support principal wellness initiatives, (3) develop comprehensive leadership standards that include well-being promotion competencies, and (4) create accountability systems that value organizational health alongside academic outcomes.

The moderating effects of school socioeconomic status warrant particular policy attention. The amplified impact of leadership in high-poverty schools suggests that investing in leadership quality in these contexts may yield disproportionate benefits for both teacher retention and student outcomes [40]. Targeted leadership development for challenging contexts should become a funding priority.

Several limitations in the existing literature warrant attention. First, the predominance of cross-sectional designs limits causal inference despite theoretical plausibility. Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental methodologies, including randomized trials of leadership development interventions with teacher well-being outcomes [41]. Second, cultural variations require deeper exploration, particularly regarding how leadership manifests and influences well-being in non-Western contexts [42]. Third, the post-pandemic educational landscape presents new research imperatives regarding how leadership adaptations during crisis affect long-term teacher well-being [43].

Emerging areas requiring investigation include: (1) the impact of leadership succession and stability on teacher well-being, (2) the intersection of leadership effects with teacher demographic characteristics including race, gender, and career stage, (3) the role of technology-mediated leadership in remote and hybrid teaching contexts, and (4) the systemic factors that enable or constrain supportive leadership practices [44].

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## Conclusion

This systematic review affirms that educational leadership represents far more than an administrative function—it constitutes a powerful social determinant of teacher psychological health and professional sustainability. The evidence consistently demonstrates that relational, empowering, and supportive leadership practices protect against burnout and promote well-being, while passive or destructive approaches inflict measurable psychological harm. In an era of unprecedented challenges in education, prioritizing the development of psychologically attuned, relationally skilled leaders is not merely beneficial but essential for creating schools where both teachers and students can thrive. The imperative is clear: building sustainable educational systems requires investing first in the quality of leadership that shapes teachers' daily experiences and professional trajectories.

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The authors contributed to the data analysis. Drafting, revising and approving the article, responsible for all aspects of this work.

## Conflict of Interest

None

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