



Beyond Appreciation Weeks: Building Teacher Recognition Into the Everyday Work of K–12 Leadership

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For more than a decade, the public face of teacher recognition in American schools has been the appreciation week, with its donuts in the lounge, handwritten notes, themed dress days, and end-of-year luncheons standing in for the deeper work of acknowledging teachers as professionals. These gestures are not harmful, and the goodwill behind them is real, yet they were never designed to do the heavy lifting of keeping good teachers in the classroom, and the time and money they consume would do far more if spent differently. The American K–12 system has spent a generation trying to hold on to teachers by celebrating them, and the celebration has grown more elaborate even as attrition has refused to ease, which should tell us that the instrument was wrong for the outcome sought.

This paper makes one plain claim: ceremonial appreciation is necessary but not sufficient, and the resources now directed toward ceremony would produce stronger gains in retention and morale if they were redirected toward substantive recognition built into the daily life of the school. The purpose here is not to argue that schools should abolish appreciation weeks, but to show why leaders should stop mistaking them for recognition, and to lay out a small set of practices that treat recognition as a leadership discipline that can be named, taught, measured, and protected from the turnover that so often dismantles it. The argument rests on convergent evidence from recent research on teacher engagement (Hoque *et al.*, 2023; Murwaningsih & Fauziah, 2023; Shao *et al.*, 2025), from established motivation theory (Dagher, 2023; Krettenauer & Curren, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020), and from narrative interviews with current and former teachers at a faith-based private school in the southeastern United States.

Background and Context

Recognition, as this paper uses the term, refers to a leadership practice that acknowledges a specific professional contribution by a particular teacher, and is distinct from appreciation, which is a general expression of gratitude aimed at teachers as a group. The difference is not a matter of wording. Recognition is tied to something the leader actually saw the teacher do, while appreciation is not, and that single distinction explains why the two produce such different effects. Both belong in the life of a school, but research treats them differently, and so should the leaders who allocate time and money to them.

Appreciation programs do three things well. They mark a school's public commitment to the value of teaching, create regular occasions for the whole staff to feel affirmed together, and allow principals and teachers to meet outside the tense frame of evaluation. These are real goods, and no one should dismiss them. What appreciation programs do not do is address the measures that actually drive retention: the working conditions teachers face, their sense of being good at the work, and their sense of being known and valued by the people who lead them. The recent research is steady on where the weight really lies. Hoque *et al.* (2023) argued that teacher job satisfaction is fundamental to every school because it enhances productivity and creates a healthier environment for teaching and learning, while Shao *et al.* (2025) showed that teacher work engagement directly shapes the overall quality of teaching across schools. Li and Li (2025) found that when teachers feel supported by their organization, steadier traits such as conscientiousness and agreeableness come

through more strongly, along with greater emotional stability and confidence. Olushola and Adewumi (2021) reported that rewards handed out inconsistently weaken teacher motivation rather than build it, and Steiner *et al.* (2023) found that recognition tied to one-off events or to a change in leadership, rather than to lasting policy, fails to produce the engagement leaders hope for.

Main Analysis

A Theoretical Foundation for Substantive Recognition

Four frameworks, used together, make testable predictions about which recognition practices should move teacher engagement, and which should not, and they all point the same way. Herzberg's two-factor theory, as worked through by Dagher (2023), predicts that recognition, when cut loose from any specific achievement, will function only as a hygiene factor, so its absence is noticed. However, its presence provides no motivation, whereas recognition tied to real achievement, growth, and meaningful responsibility serves as a genuine motivator. Self-determination theory sharpens the prediction (Krettenauer & Curren, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020), holding that recognition, which supports a teacher's autonomy, competence, and relatedness, produces motivation that comes from within, while recognition that fails to support those needs produces, at best, a controlled motivation that breaks down under stress. Manela's (2022) account of moral gratitude supplies what the motivation theories do not, a sense of why recognition is owed and not merely useful, since to recognize a teacher in the morally serious sense is to name an actual contribution accurately, without feeding individualism or competition. Maslow's hierarchy, revisited by Navy (2020) and Compton (2024), rounds out the picture with the reminder that esteem and belonging must be in place before professional growth can happen, and Wu (2023) carried this into school leadership by showing that emotionally aware leaders build stronger ties with teachers through everyday affirmation rather than through special events.

Methods and Findings

To see how substantive recognition works, this study conducted narrative interviews with ten current and former teachers at a faith-based private school in the southeastern United States, following Connelly and Clandinin's (2000) approach to narrative inquiry, which treats teachers' own stories of their professional lives as primary evidence. The sample was purposeful and chosen for what it could reveal. Interviews were semi-structured, audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes; six themes emerged clearly.

Inconsistent Recognition

Teachers described recognition that had no structure and rose or fell with the personal taste of whoever was leading, rather than with any settled practice, as one current teacher put it: "They just base whatever they give on emotions. It was random and not part of any regular program" (P3). That unpredictability was itself the message, telling teachers that recognition was a favor rather than a value, which is what Dagher (2023) describes as hygiene rather than motivator practice, and

Osguthorpe and Jensen (2023) and Steiner *et al.* (2023) found the same fragility in schools where recognition depended on leadership transitions rather than lasting policy.

Cultural and Religious Influence

In the faith-based setting, values of humility and service shaped what recognition could even look like, and one participant observed plainly that “the culture itself did not know how to affirm people” (FP5). Several teachers explained that leaders held back praise out of concern that it would promote pride or breed division, yet the teachers did not want the culture changed so much as honored, hoping for private notes or a quiet word that fit the community’s values (Manela, 2022; Wu, 2023). McAnally and Hagger (2024) noted that silence around achievement can isolate even mission-driven staff, which helps explain why teachers in this setting still longed for affirmation that respected their shared beliefs.

Leadership’s Role

The single strongest predictor of recognition in these accounts was the individual leader, as one teacher made clear: “Last year was the first time I got recognized because of the new principal” (P1). Recognition tied to a person rather than built into the institution collapsed the moment that person left, which left teachers cautious and slow to trust new initiatives (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Steiner *et al.*, 2023).

Recognition and Morale

Small, specific gestures had morale effects far out of proportion to their size, while the absence of recognition was felt as a slow emotional fatigue, as one current teacher said: “Recognition pushes me to do more, even though I work hard anyway” (P1). McAnally and Hagger (2024) wrote that emotional fatigue rises when needs such as relatedness and affirmation go unmet, and Murwaningsih and Fauziah (2023) found that timely affirmation built resilience among teachers during periods of strain.

Desire for Tangible Recognition

Teachers wanted recognition that left a visible record, something they could hold or display, and one former teacher recalled, “They gave me a basket and a speech when I retired, and I wish all teachers could experience that” (FP1). This does not cut against the argument because tangible recognition tied to a specific contribution is simply substantive recognition in lasting form (Navy, 2020; Osguthorpe & Jensen, 2023).

Public and Private Comparison

Teachers who had worked in both settings noticed that public systems offered steadier recognition through structured programs and financial incentives, as one observed: “You get more consistent appreciation in public schools. They have more financial resources” (P4). The contrast

underscores the central point that recognition is far more reliable when it is structural than when it rests on one person's goodwill (Merkerson, 2021; Olushola & Adewumi, 2021).

Across all ten interviews, the pattern held to the theory's predictions. The recognition teachers called meaningful was specific and tied to something they had actually done, while the recognition they called empty was generic, scheduled, or dependent on a single person. The former teachers traced their departure not to a lack of appreciation but to a lack of acknowledgment, which is exactly the distinction the moral gratitude framework anticipates and explains (Manela, 2022).

Implications and Recommendations

These findings matter for teachers, who deserve recognition equal to the work they do; for school and district leaders, who carry the chief responsibility for the conditions in which teaching either thrives or erodes; and for the profession itself, which cannot absorb attrition at present rates without lasting harm to the children it serves. Five practices follow from the analysis, each one something leaders can begin now and can measure over time.

First

Replace generic praise with named-action feedback. Within forty-eight hours of any observation, a teacher should receive written or spoken feedback that names one specific instructional move and its effect; because frequency and specificity can both be tracked, the practice can be audited rather than left to chance (Bhat, 2021; Liu & Li, 2025).

Second

Turn the post-observation conversation into a recognition event. Treat that conversation as the primary place where substantive recognition is delivered, rather than as a compliance step in the evaluation cycle, since it is where a leader can name real contribution in ways that support competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Third

Protect planning time as a form of recognition. The decision to defend a teacher's prep period from being swallowed by coverage is, in the moral grammar of a school, an act of recognition (Manela, 2022), and schools should track and report the share of planning periods they manage to preserve.

Fourth

Build recognition that survives a change in leadership. The finding about leader-dependent recognition is decisive, since recognition tied to a particular principal leaves when that principal does (Steiner *et al.*, 2023), so codified practices, calendared review cycles, and explicit recognition duties written into the principal's job description are what reduce that fragility.

Fifth

Train principals in specific recognition. These practices are skills, unevenly held and built through coaching (Wu, 2023), and naming specific recognition as a competency in principal evaluation would accelerate their spread across schools that now leave it to chance.

Conclusion

This argument has real limits, which are worth stating plainly. The teacher narratives come from ten people at a single faith-based private school in the southeastern United States, so the work should be replicated in public schools and in other regions, and the recommendations have not yet been tested together as a single intervention. Those limits do not unsettle the central claim, which rests on three sources of evidence pointing in the same direction: motivation theory, recent population-level research, and the testimony of teachers themselves.

The persistence of attrition through a generation of rising appreciation suggests the underlying theory was simply mistaken, because the problem was never that teachers are insufficiently grateful for the appreciation they receive. However, that appreciation was never the right instrument for the outcome being sought. Substantive recognition, grounded in what leaders actually observe and in the moral seriousness of the work, is a leadership discipline that can be built into the ordinary structure of the school day; it costs less than appreciation weeks, and it produces more. Most important of all, it treats teachers as the professionals they are, whose work shapes the next generation, and who deserve recognition equal to that responsibility.

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