

# Trauma-Sensitive School Leadership Study Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# Trauma-Sensitive School Leadership

## Executive Summary and Recommendations

### Background

In 2009, the [\*Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act\*](#) came into effect in Ontario. The Act requires that schools promote student well-being along with achievement. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided unprecedented evidence that school is vital to the mental health and well-being of students. This is especially true for students who are already at risk due to factors such as poverty, marginalization or adverse childhood experiences.

### Purpose of Study

Trauma-sensitive education has been promoted as a potentially powerful tool to more effectively support students at-risk, as well as a comprehensive approach to further developing student resilience.<sup>4</sup> However, becoming a trauma-sensitive school can require a substantial rethinking of both educator unconscious biases and conventional pedagogical practices.<sup>5</sup> Implementing trauma-sensitive education, therefore, poses genuine challenges for school leaders. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences, challenges and opportunities of school administrators in Ontario toward leading a trauma-sensitive approach to education.

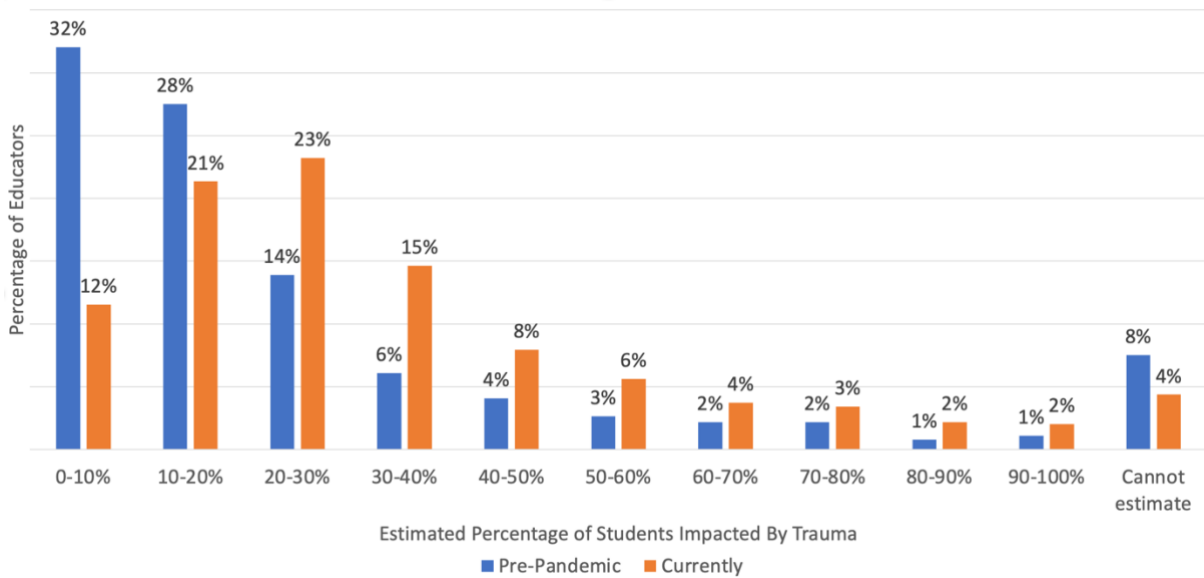
### Study Method

A voluntary, anonymous online survey was sent to principals and vice-principals (VPs) in Ontario via their membership through the Ontario Principals' Council. In all, 652 school administrators (of 5400 OPC Members) completed the survey. Just over half (54.1%) of survey respondents were elementary principals, 18.1% were elementary VPs, 10.8% were secondary principals and 12.4% were secondary VPs. The remaining respondents served different administrative roles including system principals, acting principals and retired principals. In all, 25 school boards across the province were represented, including larger urban boards, such as the York Region District School Board, to smaller, rural and northern boards, such as the Rainy River District School Board.

### Prevalence of Student Trauma

The administrators were asked to estimate the percentage of students in their schools impacted by trauma, both prior to the pandemic and following it (Figure 1a). While pre-pandemic estimates varied considerably, almost one-third of administrators estimated that 10% or fewer of their student population was impacted by trauma. A further 28% of administrators placed their estimate at 20% or more. Estimates grew significantly when school administrators were asked to consider their students within the context of the pandemic. Almost one in four administrators believed that 20-30% of their students were impacted by trauma. The number of administrators who believed that 30-50% of their students were impacted by trauma doubled when considering the pandemic, as compared to prior to it.

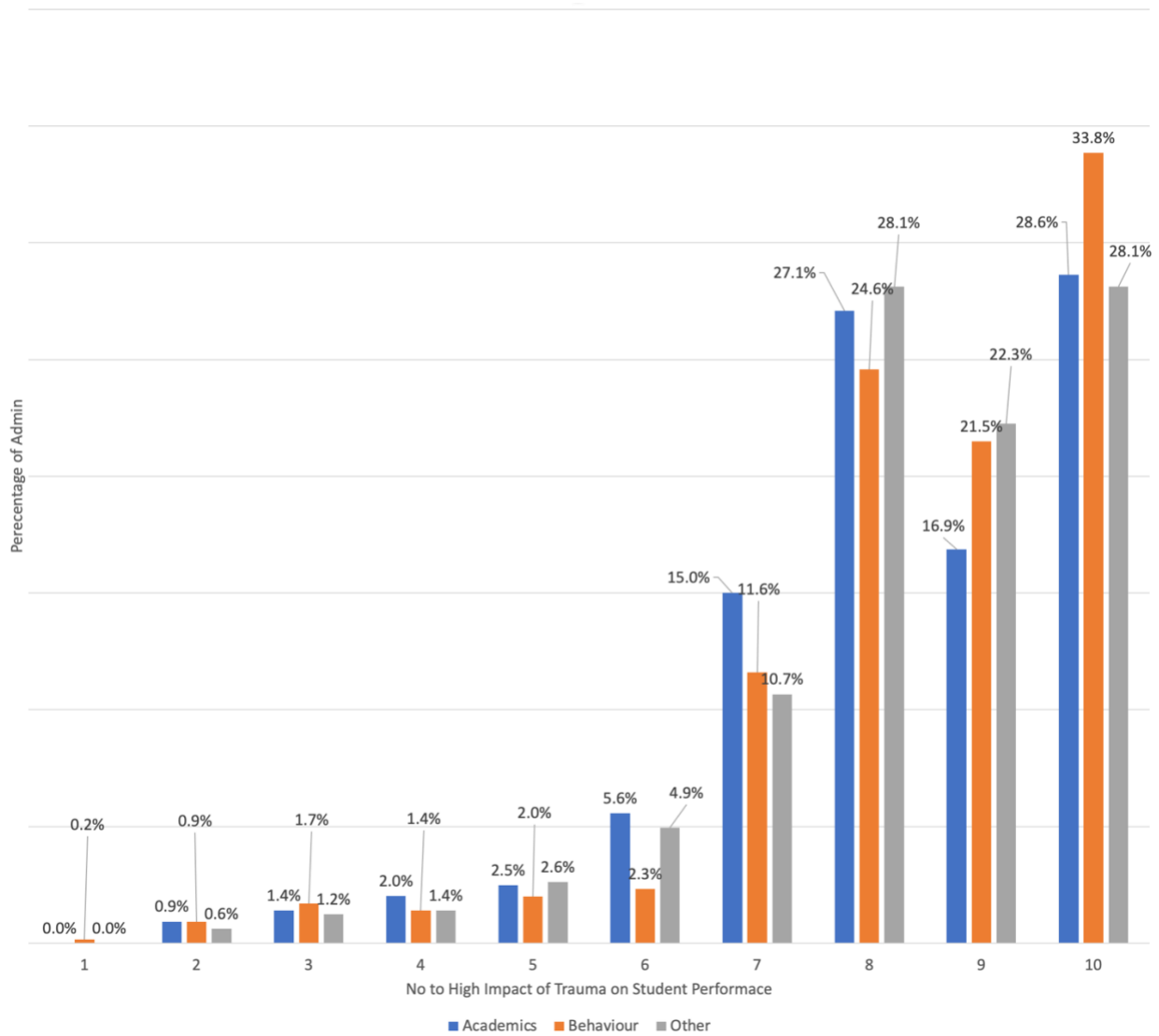
Figure 1a: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and currently, what percentage of students (and their families) at your school would you estimate have been significantly impacted by trauma?



## Impact of Trauma on Student Performance

When asked to rate on a scale of 1 (Low Impact) to 10 (High Impact), the degree to which they believe trauma negatively affects student performance, administrators indicated a strong conviction that trauma impacts academics, behaviour and other student issues such as attendance or overall attitude toward school (Figure 2a). For example, more than one-quarter of administrators rated the impact of trauma on academic performance as 10/10. One-third of administrators rated trauma's impact on behaviour as 10/10. More than one-quarter of administrators rated the impact of trauma on attendance or overall attitude toward school as 10/10.

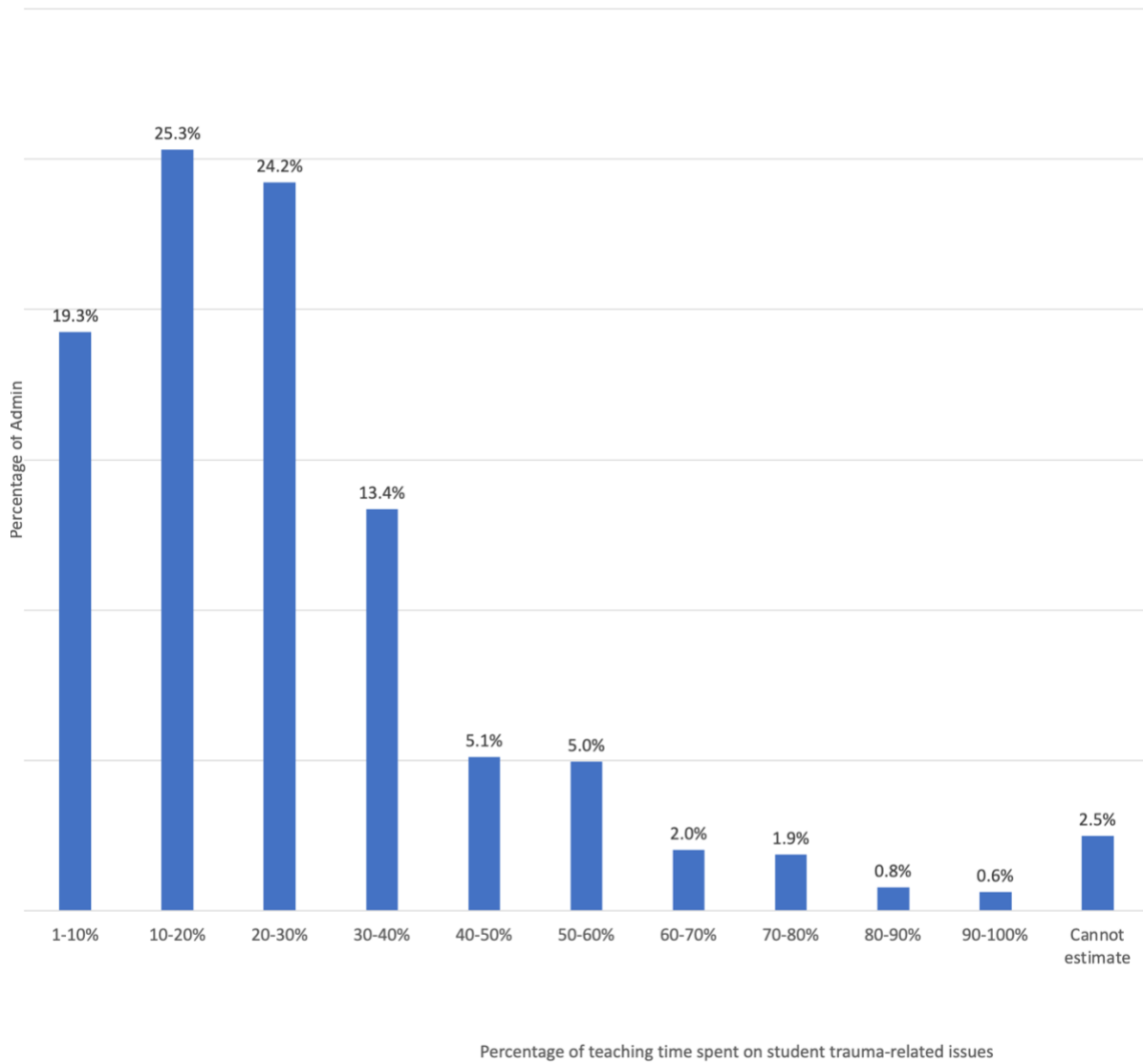
Figure 2a: Overall, what impact do you believe the effects of trauma have on your students' academic performance, behaviour and other student issues such as attendance or attitude toward school?



## Impact of Trauma on Teaching Time

Administrators also felt that a significant amount of teaching time is spent dealing with issues connected to student trauma (Figure 3a). For example, one-quarter of administrators estimated that their staff spend 10-20% of their teaching time dealing with issues related to student trauma. Another quarter of administrators estimated the time spent dealing with trauma-related issues as 20-30% of teaching time. One in 10 administrators estimated that 40-60% of teaching time is spent dealing with student trauma-related concerns.

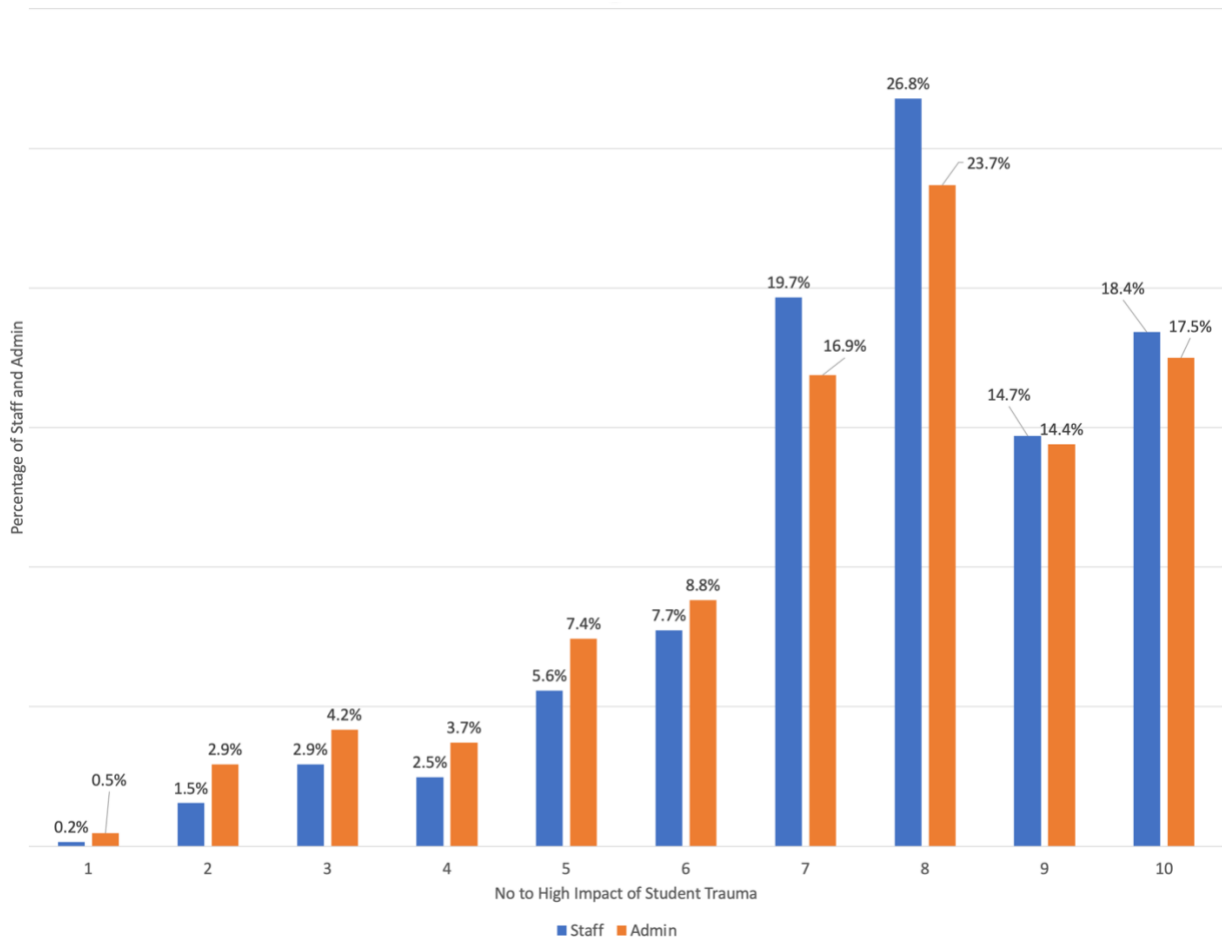
Figure 3a: On average, what percentage of your staff's overall teaching time would you estimate is spent on dealing with issues related to student trauma?



## Impact of Student Trauma on Staff Well-Being

The impact of trauma often goes beyond the individual student. When asked, “To what degree does dealing with student trauma negatively impact your staff's well-being and contribute to their stress?,” 80% of administrators rated the negative impact of dealing with student trauma on educator well-being as 7/10 or higher (Figure 4a). One-third of administrators rated the negative impact as 9/10 or higher. School administrators also reported experiencing the effects of dealing with student trauma on their own well-being. Almost three-quarters of administrators rated the impact as 7/10 or higher. Close to 1 in 5 administrators reported the impact as 10/10.

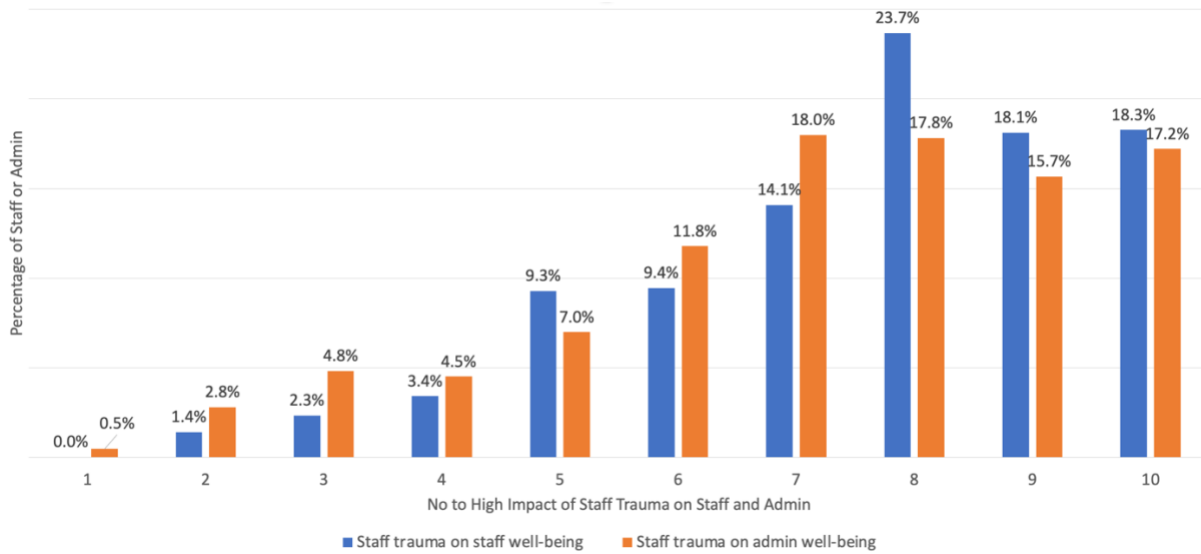
Figure 4a: To what degree does dealing with student trauma negatively impact your staff's well-being, or your well-being?



## Impact of Staff Trauma on Staff Well-Being

The impact of trauma on educators is further complicated by the fact that it is not just students who experience trauma. A number of educators, like any member of the adult population, have experienced trauma themselves, both in their personal lives as well as on the job. For example, three-quarters of administrators rated the impact that staff personal trauma is having on staff well-being as 7/10 or higher (Figure 5a). One third of administrators rated the impact as 9/10 or higher. Administrators also reported experiencing an impact on their own well-being from supporting personal trauma among staff. Almost 70% of administrators rated the impact of staff trauma on their own well-being as being 7/10 or higher. One-third of administrators rated the impact as 9/10 or higher.

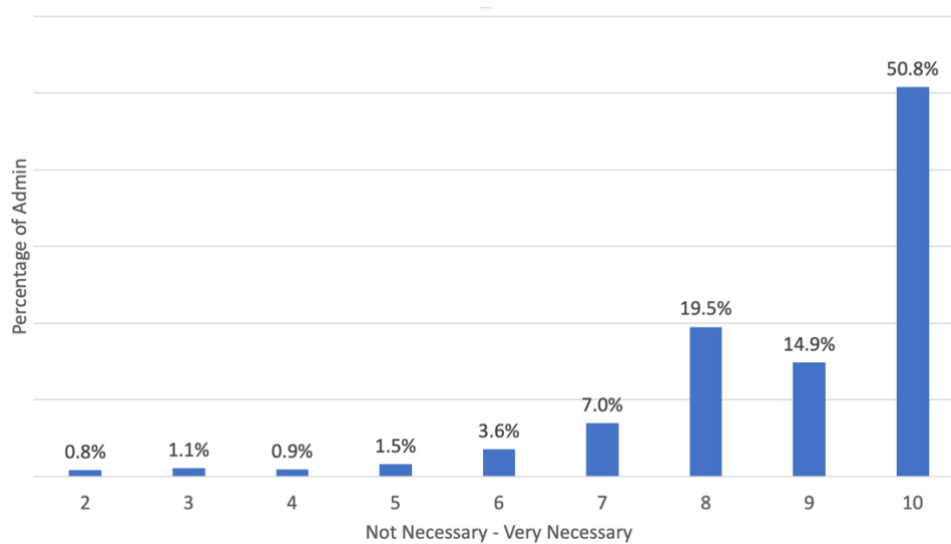
Figure 5a: To what degree does the personal trauma experienced by your staff negatively impact their well-being, negatively impact your well-being?



## Adopting a Trauma-Sensitive Approach

Consistent with their concern about the prevalence of trauma on their students and its impact on school success, administrators were strongly in favour of adopting a trauma-sensitive approach in education (Figure 6a). The majority of administrators advocated the need for a trauma-sensitive approach at school, with over half rating the necessity as 10/10. A total of 85.2% of administrators rated the necessity as 8/10 or higher.

Figure 6a: How necessary do you think it is that your school practices using a trauma-sensitive approach?

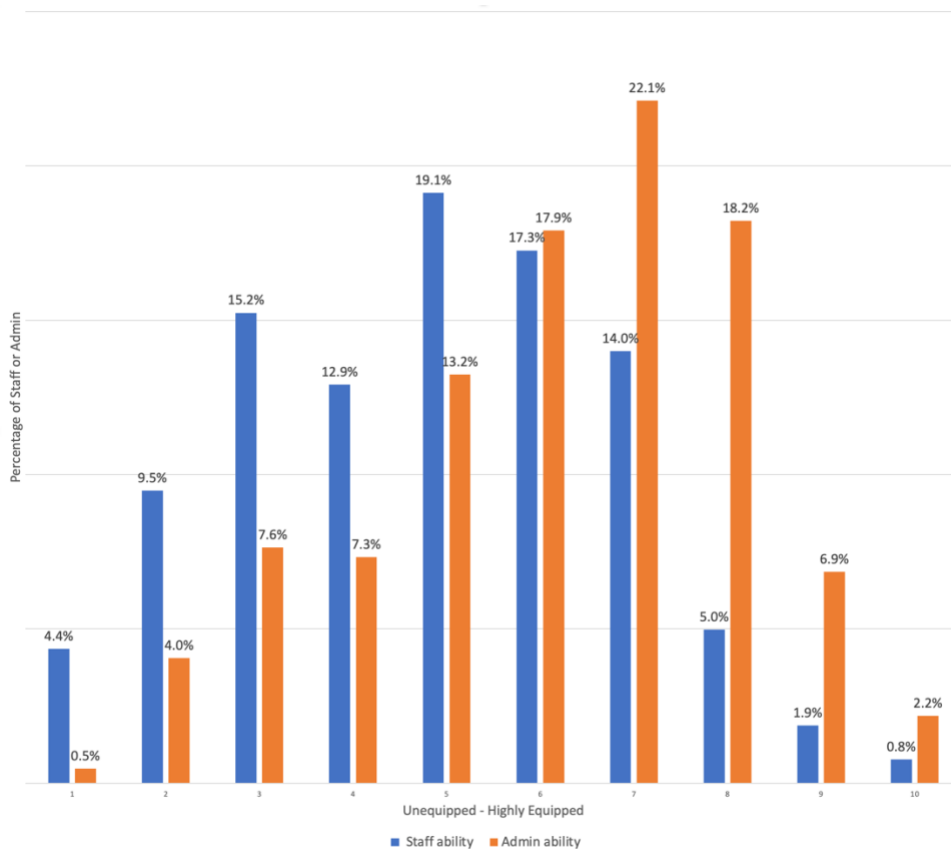




## Are Educators Properly Equipped?

There was less confidence among administrators that their staff are properly equipped to practice a trauma-sensitive approach (Figure 7a). Overall, the majority of administrators rated their staff as being moderately equipped to deal effectively with students experiencing trauma. One in seven administrators rated their staff as 1/10 or 2/10, meaning unequipped. Few rated their staff as highly equipped. Administrators rated themselves as more equipped than their staff to support student trauma, with the average response being 7/10. Only 9% of administrators rated themselves as 9/10 or higher, meaning highly equipped.

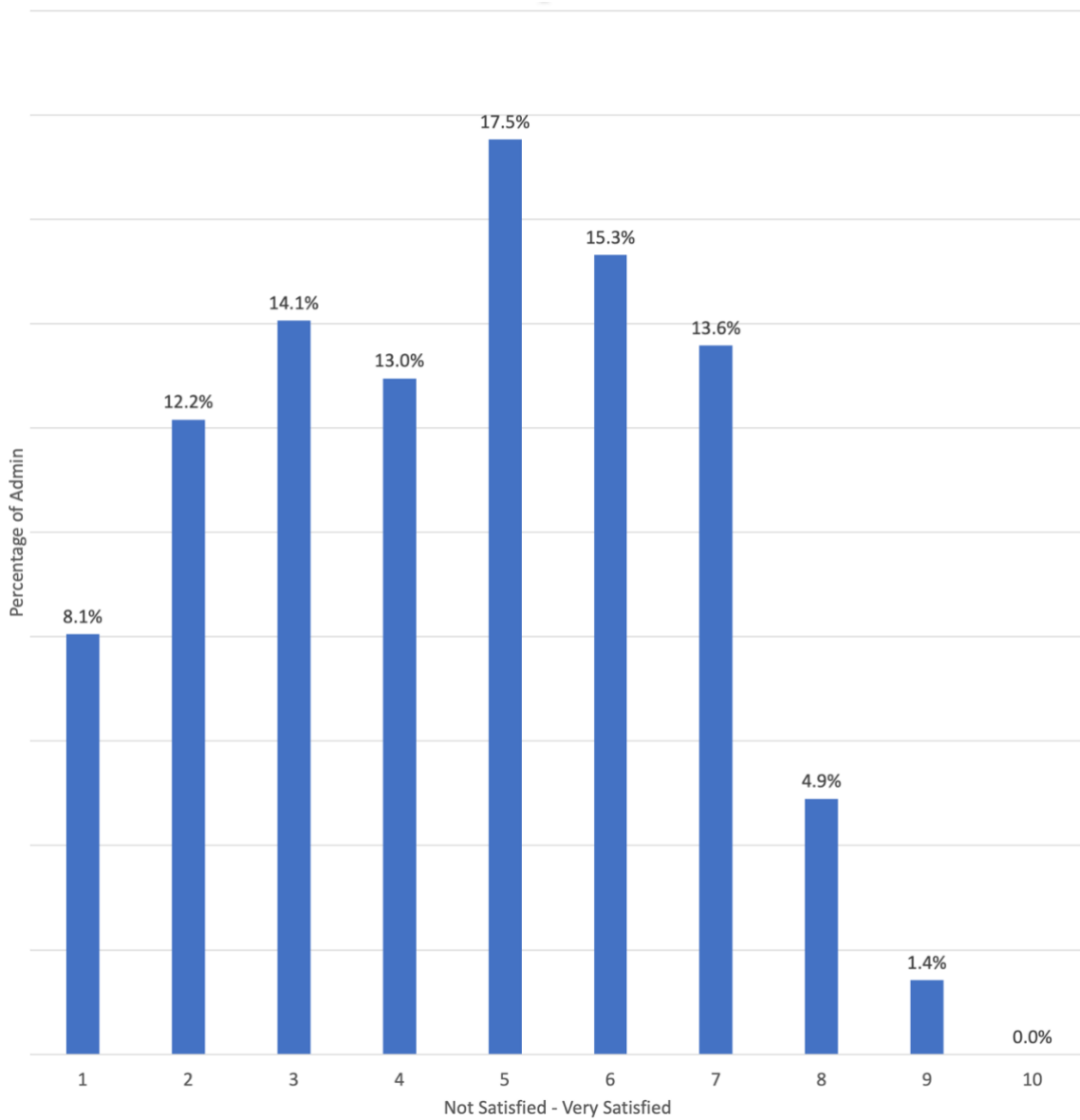
Figure 7a: Overall, how equipped are your staff, are you, to support students who are experiencing the effects of trauma at school?



## Satisfaction With Current Trauma-Sensitive Practices

Administrators were generally unsatisfied with their school's current ability to practice from a trauma-sensitive approach (Figure 8a). Only 6.3% of administrators rated their school's overall ability as 8/10 or 9/10. Slightly more than one-third of administrators rated their school's ability at 3/10 or lower. No administrator gave their school a 10/10, while 8.1% of administrators rated their school as 1/10.

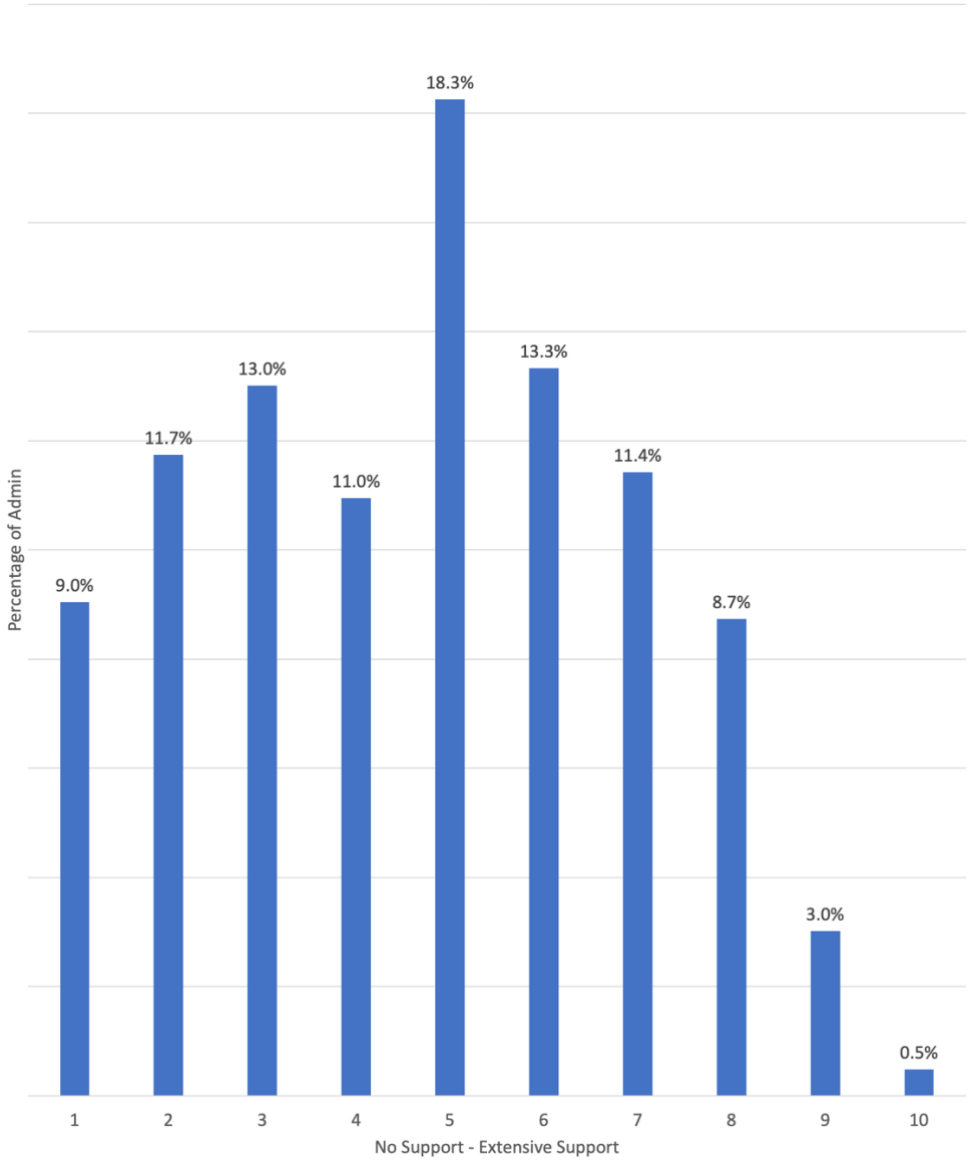
Figure 8a: Overall, how satisfied are you with your school's current ability to practice from a trauma-sensitive approach?



## Administrator Support

Administrator's experiences varied when reporting on the support they receive as a trauma-sensitive leader (Figure 9a). The largest group rated the support at 5/10. One-third of administrators rated the support received as 3/10 or lower, with almost one in 10 indicating that they receive no support. Just over one in 10 administrators rated the support they received at eight out of 10 or better.

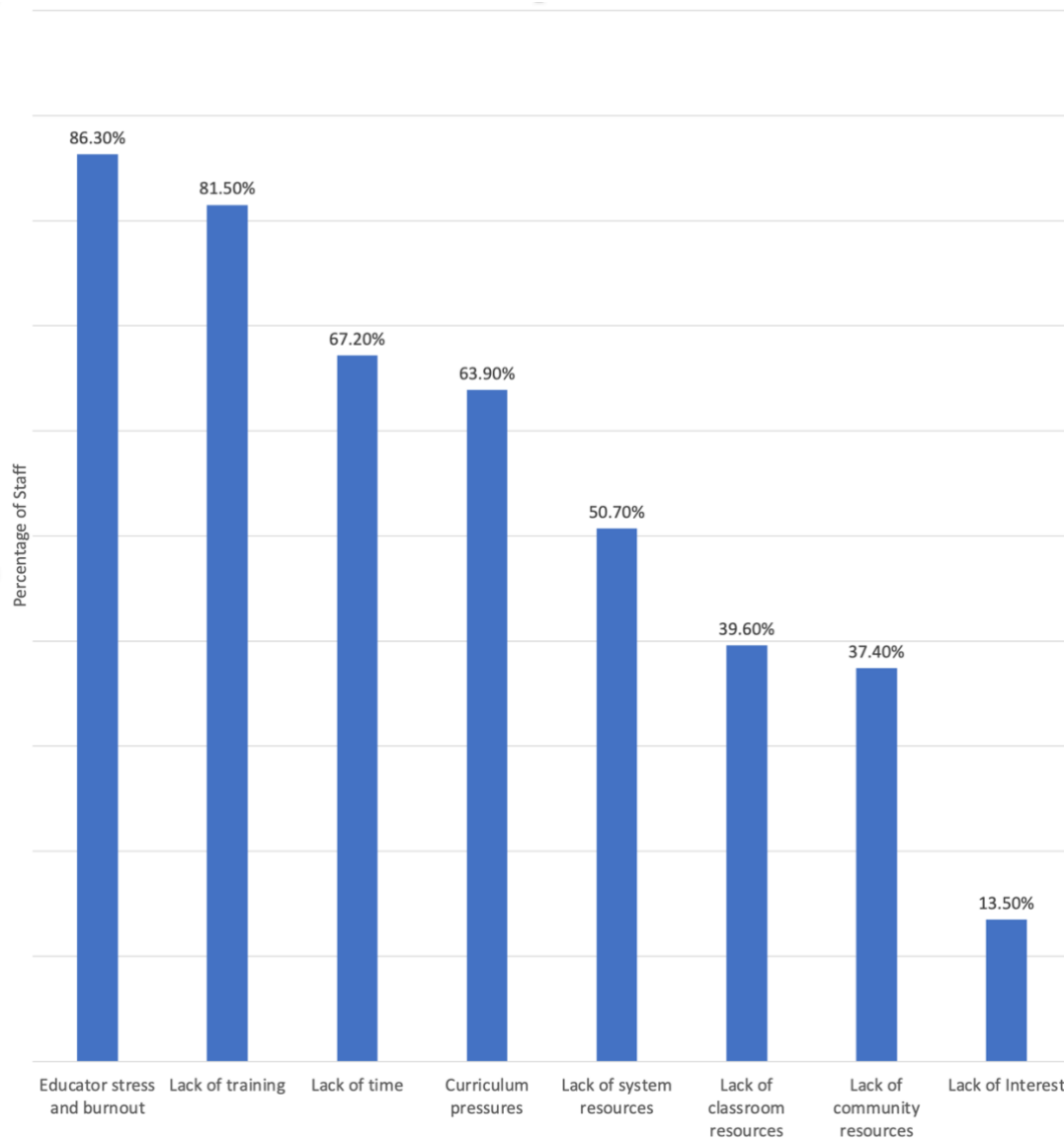
Figure 9a: Overall, to what extent do you feel supported in your promotion of trauma-sensitive leadership?



### Staff Barriers to Trauma-Sensitive Education

Administrators were asked to indicate the barriers that their staff face in more fully practicing a trauma-sensitive approach (Figure 10a). The most prevalent barrier, identified by 86.3% of administrators, was educator stress and burnout. This was closely followed by lack of staff training, lack of staff time and curriculum pressures. Rounding out the top eight barriers identified was lack of system resources (such as mental health supports), lack of classroom resources, lack of community resources (such as mental health services) and lack of interest among staff.

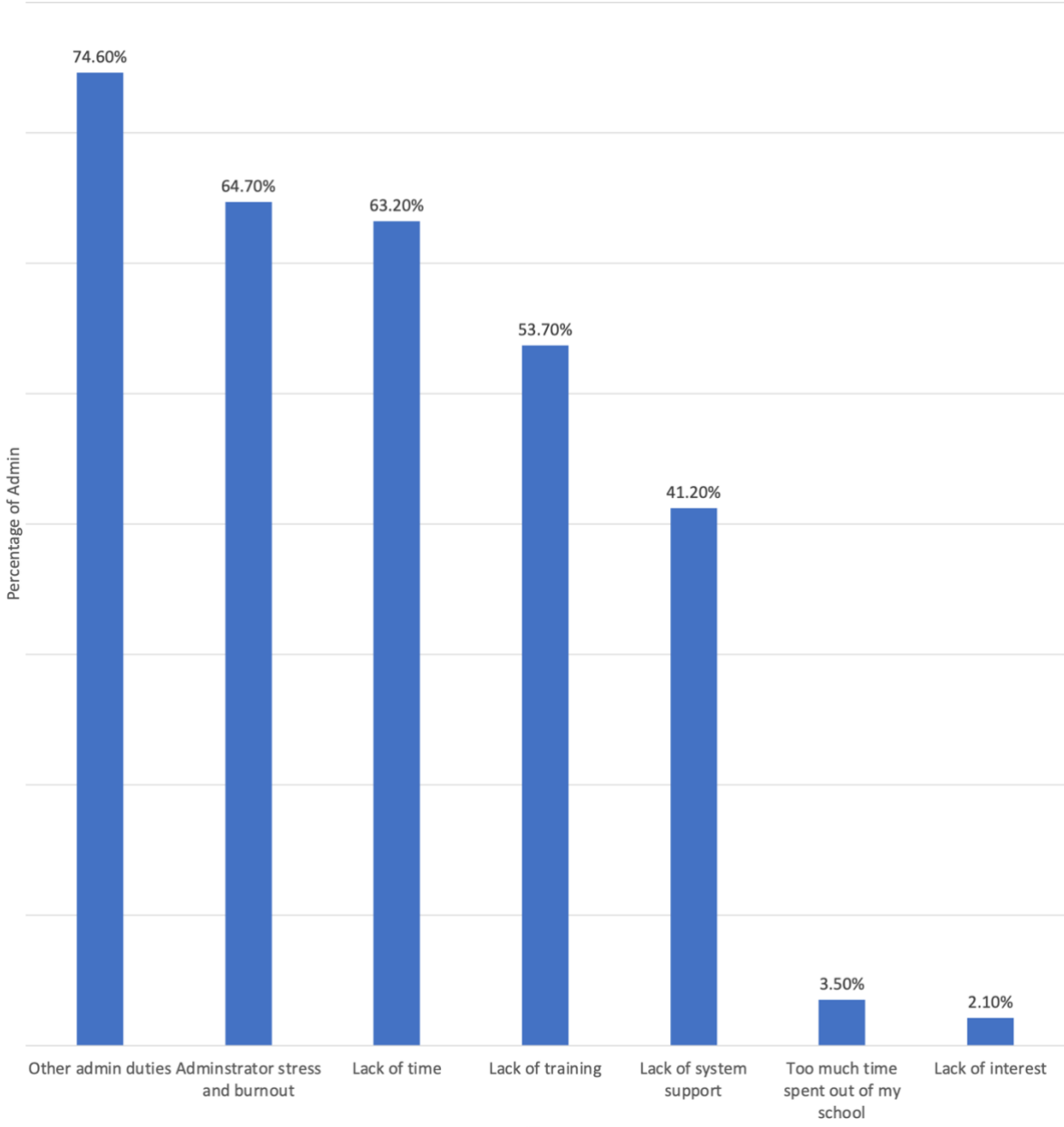
Figure 10a: What, if anything, gets in the way of your staff's ability to consistently adopt a trauma-sensitive approach?  
(Check all that apply)



## Administrator Barriers to Trauma-Sensitive Education

Administrators identified five major barriers that they faced in consistently leading a school-wide trauma-sensitive approach (Figure 11a). The most frequently reported barrier, identified by three-quarters of respondents, was competing demands placed on their time by other administrative duties. Two-thirds of administrators identified stress and burnout as a barrier. This was closely followed by lack of time. Half of the administrators also identified lack of training as a barrier, followed by lack of system support. A smaller number of administrators reported two other barriers: spending too much time out of their school and lack of interest.

Figure 11a: What, if anything, gets in the way of your ability to consistently lead a school-wide trauma-sensitive approach? (Check all that apply)



## References

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## Recommendations

Based on the research and survey responses, the OPC is making the following recommendations.

- 1. Time:** Allocate time for school administrators to learn and lead a trauma-sensitive approach by reducing day-to-day system demands and competing pressures. Consider areas in school and system planning where priorities can be consolidated to enable administrators to collaborate with their staff and students.
- 2. Training:** Provide more professional development to all school staff on trauma-sensitive practices, as well as both student and staff mental health and well-being. Also, allow more room for administrators to focus on mental health, trauma and well-being on PA days and in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).
- 3. Tools:** Provide practical in-class, trauma-sensitive tools for educators to use to support students day-to-day.
- 4. Staff:** Increase access to and/or the number of in-class and in-school staff such as child and youth workers, as well as mental health professionals such as social workers and occupational therapists.
- 5. Community:** Strengthen the connection between schools and community mental health resources, including Indigenous and Inuit elders and communities, as well as community-based identity-specific organizations to support healing. Create a stronger sense of shared community responsibility for all students.
- 6. Paradigm Shift:** Recognize that authentically supporting equity, decolonization, inclusivity, trauma, mental health and well-being requires a paradigm shift in education. The system needs to rethink education's priorities in a post-pandemic world and reduce the number of priorities, providing time for educators and students to ensure basic needs are met, and scaffold learning for all in a more responsive way.

As an extension of these general recommendations, specific recommendations are included in the following pages for different education stakeholders in Ontario: government, school districts, principals' associations and school administrators themselves. These specific recommendations are also informed by follow-up interviews, which were conducted with 13 administrators.

## Recommendations for Government

1. Recognize the context in which school administrators lead. We are still experiencing a pandemic and students, staff and administrators themselves have experienced unintended trauma, overt and hidden, that must be addressed.
2. Create a working group that will examine principal and vice-principal workload and in particular ways of reducing day-to-day system demands and competing pressures. By consolidating system and school priorities and enabling administrators to spend more time with their staff, administrators could have more time to lead with a trauma-sensitive approach.
3. Work with all education stakeholders to rethink education's priorities and redefine student success such that students' basic needs are met and they can learn in anti-oppressive and anti-colonial environments.
4. Develop a province-wide enforceable policy that clearly and concisely directs that there be consequences for anyone who assaults, harasses, threatens or otherwise demonstrates violent behaviour, including through social media, toward a school principal or vice-principal, as a means to reduce the trauma that principals themselves may experience.
5. Work with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Health to facilitate access to cross-sector resources to strengthen the connection between schools and community mental health resources.
6. Provide funding for job-embedded professional development to all school staff on trauma-sensitive practices, as well as both student and staff mental health and well-being.
7. Consider alternate models for job-embedded professional development that do not add to the existing strain of being away from the classroom or school to participate in learning programs.
8. Work with experts, including principals' associations and SMH-ON, to develop provincial resources that offer practical in-class, trauma-sensitive tools for educators to use to support students day-to-day.
9. Collaborate with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities as well as Ontario colleges and universities to increase the number of graduates in areas such as child and youth workers, mental health professionals (for example, social workers) and occupational therapists.
10. Provide funding and training of additional administrator positions in each school district (within a school or family of schools based on need and availability of staff). These individuals would be responsible for providing training and other supports needed for the creation of trauma-informed learning environments that address the trauma caused by traumatic events and the everyday trauma of oppression and colonization.



## Recommendations for School Boards

1. Meet regularly with local OPC representatives to discuss administrator tasks that can be removed, consolidated or assigned to other board or school staff such that principals have more time to lead using a trauma-sensitive approach and have more time to spend with their staff.
2. Consider piloting creative solutions to address workload issues within families of schools. For example, creating an administrative vice-principal position responsible for health and safety, staffing (day-to-day and long term) and finances allowing principals to focus on a trauma-sensitive approach and instructional leadership.
3. Take steps to protect school administrators from violent behaviour. When violence occurs, enforce consequences on the individuals responsible and ensure that there are adequate supportive resources available to principals and vice-principals who are assaulted, harassed or otherwise victims of violent behaviour, including through social media.
4. Work with provincial partners to develop and implement specific supports for principals and vice-principals who experience a traumatic event at or connected to the school, and who in turn become a pivotal trauma support for staff and students.
5. Review board priorities in an effort to reduce the number of priorities for each school, thereby freeing up time for principals and vice-principals to spend more time with staff as they seek to better support students together.
6. Create opportunities for school leaders to come together across and within schools for formal training, network-based professional learning and peer support with a focus on mental health, trauma, and well-being.
7. Work together with board and school staff to identify structures and biases in education that impede trauma-impacted students from having more equitable access to learning, and find ways of removing barriers and addressing biases to create environments where all students can succeed.
8. Work with board staff (principals, psychologists, social workers, youth workers, teachers) to develop easy-to-use tools that can be used in classrooms to help staff identify potential signs of trauma and provide opportunities for students to learn about mental health and wellness.
9. Increase the number of in-class and in-school staff who have regular access to child and youth workers, as well as mental health professionals such as social workers and occupational therapists who can offer support and resources.
10. Provide support to school staff in creating school-community task teams focused on common responses to traumatic events.
11. Provide opportunities for principals and vice-principals to come together to discuss ways in which achievement and well-being are embedded in board and school improvement plans.

## Recommendations for Principals' Associations

1. Advocate for the reduction of duplicative administrative demands and the streamlining of operational demands to reduce pressures on principals and vice-principals so that they have more time to lead using a trauma-sensitive approach.
2. Provide more professional development to aspiring and current leaders so that they continue to increase their knowledge and skills as they seek to support students who might experience trauma, including race-based trauma.
3. Continue to work with their administrator members and researchers to better understand the causes of trauma, including trauma caused by various types of oppression and colonialism, and how principals and vice-principals can develop trauma-informed leadership approaches that counter the effects of trauma and do not cause additional harm.
4. Develop resources (i.e. training, video materials, blogs, memos, conversation prompts) that support trauma-informed leadership practices that provide required support during and following traumatic events without causing further harm.
5. Create a working group which includes principals' associations, teacher federations and community-based mental health partners to discuss joint resource development and professional learning opportunities that would support efforts of all school staff to use trauma-sensitive approaches.
6. Support the creation of anti-oppressive and anti-colonial learning environments for principals, vice-principals and all students, recognizing that equity, inclusivity, trauma, mental health and well-being will require a paradigm shift in education.

## Recommendations for Individual Principals and Vice-Principals

1. Build time into staff meetings and professional development days (which may include demonstrations and role-playing) to learn and talk about trauma-informed practices with staff.
2. Participate in accessible training and learning networks to learn about trauma-informed leadership and set goals for integrating the learning into day-to-day practices.
3. Learn about, and discontinue if applicable, well-intentioned leadership practices that may cause additional trauma and learn how to respond when unintentional trauma occurs.
4. Strengthen collaborative networks with community-based agencies and partners who can support students who face trauma.
5. Create opportunities to discuss with colleagues and school staff the new paradigms and priorities of education and how these can be applied in your school to support student success in anti-oppressive and anti-colonial environments.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is needed to inform different aspects of trauma-informed practices in Ontario schools, including

1. regular research similar to that conducted for this paper to identify ongoing issues and trends over time
2. research that delves into race-based trauma and how school administrators can provide support and
3. research to better understand staff trauma and the types of support that are effective for adults who have faced trauma and have continued to work or have returned to work.