

School Principals' Work and Well-Being in Ontario: What They Say and Why It Matters

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this age of unprecedented accountability and countless reforms, principals feel that they are being asked to continually step up and add more tasks to their list of day-to-day duties with limited or reduced resources. Principals have been known to work long hours, struggle with work-life balance, and experience significant stress and mental health issues. The aim of this study was to build on previous work and investigate how work intensification influences overall principal well-being in Ontario and British Columbia. In this report, we focus specifically on Ontario. For more information on the British Columbia survey results, please see <https://bit.ly/BCprincipals2020>.

We used a survey research approach to collect data on principals and the factors that contribute to their well-being at work. We developed an online survey in collaboration with the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) and focus groups with different stakeholders. Principals in all 31 of Ontario's English-language, non-Catholic, publicly funded school districts were invited via email to participate in this study. The response rate was 35.6%. Of these responses, a total of 860 out of 959 responses were accepted for analysis, including principals from 33 different school districts. Most participants worked in elementary schools (76.8%), were female (64.2%), and had an average of 8.7 years of experience as a principal. More than half of the principals who responded to the survey worked in larger cities with populations over 100,000.

We conducted data analysis using descriptive statistics under four main headings: (a) work intensification, (b) well-being (including physical, emotional, cognitive, social, psychological and spiritual), (c) health and safety, and (d) coping strategies.

Work Intensification

Results revealed that principals worked long hours, with an overall average of 57.3 hours per week. The highest number of hours on average were spent on email (10.5 hours), student discipline and attendance (10.3 hours), and informal (i.e., impromptu) meetings (7.8 hours). Three quarters of participating principals would like to spend more time on matters related to instructional leadership, such as their own professional development, classroom walkthroughs, and overall curriculum and instructional leadership. Many

principals would like to spend less time on matters related to managerial and administrative matters such as internal school management, administrative directives, and school board committees.

Despite the demands of the job, most participating principals maintained a positive outlook about their role and their workplace. Almost all felt they knew how to get the job done (92.7%). Most also agreed that their job made a difference in the school community (87.2%) and their school was a good place to work (85.9%). However, the large majority of participating principals also indicated the job was highly challenging, as over 90% felt that their work put them in emotionally draining situations and that they always had to be available or “on call.” Most also encountered increased demands from different stakeholders with competing priorities (91.5%), and felt it was impossible to take a day off or a sick day (77.5%) or felt they were unable to take a break during the work day (72.5%). Principals indicated they can make their own decisions about how they do their work (60.0%), but increased threats of litigation and complaints have influenced the way they do their work (65.3%).

When asked how the political climate surrounding public education has influenced their work as a principal, some of the biggest concerns raised were the rising number of mental health issues among students, teachers, and parents (94.5%), as well as a general sense of anxiety within the overall public education system (86.0%). This was followed by issues caused by a changing government (82.2%).

Well-Being

Less than half of the principals described their well-being as good or excellent. We found distinct differences when closely examining each of the different types of well-being. For example, 61.9% of the principals ranked their social well-being at work as either good or excellent, followed by cognitive well-being at 54.0%. However, only 26.0% of principals felt this way about their physical well-being. Results showed that most principals highly ranked certain aspects of social well-being, such as respect (71.6%), and satisfaction with relationships (64.8%). Principals felt positively about their work relationships with vice-principals, administrative assistants, and students most often. Their least positive working relationship was with union representatives, which may have been due to the labour interruptions principals were experiencing at the time of the data collection. In contrast to social well-being, principals felt that physical well-being attributes such as healthy eating (52.1%), adequate sleep (56.0%), and doing physical activities (58.3%) were highly affected by their work. Out of eight positive and eight negative physical well-being descriptors, the top seven that principals selected were all negative: *stressed*, *fatigued*, *drained*, *exhausted*, *weary*, *burnt-out*, and *taxed*. The descriptor *stressed* ranked the second for principals’ emotional well-being (the top descriptor was *frustrated*).

Health and Safety

Some of the negative results with regards to physical well-being might be explained by our health and safety findings, as almost all principals have experienced unsafe situations at their workplace. These types of negative interactions most often included passive aggressive behaviours (86.6%), gossip and slander (66.2%), and escalated conflicts (61.3%). Other unsafe situations included harassment and threats by different groups such as teachers, union representatives, superintendents, and other school staff members. But most often, parents or guardians were responsible for harassment (70.7%) and threats (64.5%). Unsafe incidents directed at principals from students were also of significant concern. Students were the second highest group to threaten principals (55.2%) and the highest group to physically assault principals (57.8%). Additionally, principals have also personally experienced discrimination on the basis of their gender (27.0%), age (14.4%), race (10.6%), sexual orientation (5.9%), religion (4.3%), and ability (2.9%).

Thus, it was unsurprising that principals named issues with students as primarily leading to draining situations at work. Many principals found a lack of special education supports and resources (74.0%), mental health issues among students (79.9%), and dealing with student discipline (63.3%) to be often or always tiring. Also quite draining were situations with parents or guardians, such as dealing with mental health issues (57.0%) or attending parent/guardian meetings (38.8%). However, consistent with the social well-being results, relationships with certain groups were found to be supportive as opposed to tiring, as the majority of principals never or rarely found relationships with administrative assistants, support staff, or vice-principals to be draining.

Coping Strategies

To help manage their well-being and stress, principals often chose positive strategies to cope with a draining day at work. Many spent time with their family or friends (66.4%). About half of the respondents (54.9%) also watched TV or movies, undertook physical activities or exercise (50.8%), or spent time talking with family and friends (53.7%), or with colleagues (49.2%). In addition to self-care measures, principals indicated many organizational supports were also effective or very effective in supporting their well-being: their professional associations (e.g., Ontario Principals’ Council) (45.7%), health and well-being benefits (46.3%), mentoring (33.2%), and adequate resource allocation (31.3%). When asked to comment on which skills they felt were the most necessary to effectively manage their work, over 80% of principals chose the top five skills to be: conflict resolution skills, emotional intelligence, communication skills, problem-solving, and the ability to de-escalate situations.

Final Comments from Principals

The survey allowed for participating principals to add their optional comments at the end, and 376 principals (43.7%) took the time to add their thoughts. These comments added further insights to the closed-ended survey questions. A number of principals indicated how passionate they were about the principalship, but this was often coupled with a comment on how the role has changed over time and how difficult the job was becoming.

Recommendations

The recommendations put forth are for all education stakeholders, including practicing and aspiring principals. Specifically, the recommendations focus on four main areas: (a) addressing work intensification, (b) promoting well-being, (c) ensuring safety, and (d) exploring coping strategies. They are intended to ensure, if enacted, that principals are set up for success in their role of school principal.

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

In 2014, the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) commissioned us to conduct a study on principals' work. In that study, *The Changing Nature of Principals' Work*, we found that principals have little autonomy in their work, and that they struggle to achieve work-life balance while working long work hours and meeting the demands associated with increased layers of accountability. Findings from the 2014 survey also revealed that implementing provincial initiatives and managing the many diverse concerns of stakeholders in the school and in the school community present challenges for contemporary principals. Participating principals reported coping with these challenges in different ways. In the time that has passed since this study, the nature of principals' work continues to change, including an increased focus on the mental health and well-being of staff, students, and parents. This current study is federally funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and aims to build on our previous work by developing a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary factors that influence principals' work intensification, including health and safety concerns. This research includes an additional focus on principals' perceptions of their own well-being and how their various types of well-being (including physical, emotional, cognitive, social, psychological, and spiritual) are affected by draining situations they encounter at work.

Background and Rationale for Research

The principal role and the nature of their work have transformed on a global scale (Day, 2014; Grissom, Loeb, & Mitani, 2015; Hauseman, 2018; Horng, Klasek, & Loeb, 2010; Miller, 2018a; Sebastian, Camburn, & Spillane, 2018); this transformation has been influenced by an increase in the pace and scale of educational reform in the last two decades (Ball, 2011; Eacott, 2011; Fullan, 2008; Grissom, Loeb, & Mitani, 2015; Miller, 2018b; Owens & Valesky, 2011; Sebastian, Camburn, & Spillane, 2018; Spillane & Hunt, 2010). Some of the changes have been driven by globalization, growing global awareness of social equity and human rights issues, and persistent technological innovation (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017; Pollock, 2016). Rapid changes in information technology have also impacted the work and personal lives of school leaders (Dibbon & Pollock, 2007; Gurr, 2000, 2004; Pollock &

Hauseman, 2015, 2019). This is coupled with the growing diversity (and growing awareness of diversity) of student populations and student needs (Ryan, 2006; Pollock & Briscoe, 2019; Pollock, 2016; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2015).

These factors have put pressure on education systems to respond and adapt and principals are finding it more challenging to keep up with the pace of their work (Leithwood & Azah, 2014a, 2014b; Hauseman, Pollock, & Wang, 2017; Pollock & Hauseman, 2015, 2018; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2014, 2015; Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018). The resulting escalation in workload brought about by these shifts has been described as “principal work intensification”—a phenomenon defined by an increasing volume and complexity of school leaders’ work, roles, and responsibilities (Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018). A small but growing body of research is investigating the rise in principal work intensification. For example, in Australia, Riley (2018) has led extensive studies into principal work and uncovered an escalation in principal work hours well above the standard 40-hour work week. Studies in Alberta (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2014) and Ontario (Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2015; Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018) found similar results, including that principals felt pressure to work long hours and never seemed to have enough time to get their work done (Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2014).

Work intensification involves not only principals’ escalated work hours, but also includes increased complexity in their roles and responsibilities. Both significantly impact principals in a number of different ways, including hindering the development of a healthy work-life balance, which has significant implications for principal mental health and well-being (Evans, 2016; Leithwood & Azah, 2014a, 2014b; Ontario Principals’ Council, 2017; Pollock, 2016, 2017; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2017; Riley, 2018). Although there are differing approaches to defining well-being, it can generally be viewed as a state for an individual that occurs in the absence of any kind of physical, social, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive distress (La Placa, McNaught, & Knight, 2013).

Research in this area is still emerging and more needs to be done to fully understand the status of principal well-being and the factors that influence principal well-being at work (Mahfouz, 2018; Pollock, Wang, & Mahfouz, 2020; Ray, Pijanowski, & Lasater, 2020; Walker, 2020). The potential negative impacts of the changing nature of the principalship should not be overlooked, as the health and well-being of principals are essential to the current and future success of schools and school systems. Researchers and policy-makers need to gain a deeper understanding of how work influences principals’ well-being. This understanding will enable them to better pinpoint the issues that make the principalship difficult and accordingly make policy changes and put targeted supports in place to significantly alleviate some of the unsustainable challenges that principals face on a daily basis.

METHODOLOGY

We used a survey approach to collect data on principals and the factors that contribute to their well-being at work. The Ontario data collection and findings reported here were made possible because of OPC focus groups, which helped ensure the survey concentrated on areas that principals felt were essential. The online survey format allowed for extended reach to a large geographical area throughout the province. Each component of the study is described in greater detail below.

Data Collection and Analysis

Focus Groups

During the development phase, we held two types of focus group sessions to increase the reliability and validity of the survey. First, we conducted a face-to-face focus group with principals. The information gathered at this session helped us refine the survey tool and ensure that it represented the issues principals face in their daily work. After multiple revisions to the survey instrument, it was transferred to an online version; this version was then reviewed and tested for content, accuracy, and flow by a second focus group of five graduate-level researchers with a knowledge of the field. Feedback from this group helped us finalize the survey before it was distributed to the study population.

Online Survey

The survey was designed to gather information about principals who worked in Ontario’s public school system at the time of the study and investigate different components of principals’ well-being in relation to their work. In addition to general demographic questions about principal and school characteristics, the survey included questions that focused on four different themes:

- 1. Work intensification,
- 2. Well-being (including physical, emotional, cognitive, social, psychological and spiritual),
- 3. Health and safety, and
- 4. Coping strategies.

The survey contained 56 questions in total and we estimated it could take up to 60 minutes to complete. The majority of questions in the survey were closed-ended, using a mix of question types including five-point Likert-scale questions, matrix questions, or multiple choice “choose all that apply” questions. For a number of survey questions, additional comments could be added, which provided respondents with an opportunity to qualify their responses or add contextual information. These additional responses produced qualitative data, which added depth to the quantitative survey data; we have included this qualitative data throughout the report to support and strengthen the quantitative survey data. The survey also encouraged participating principals to provide an additional open-ended comment at the end. This final comment section received 376 unique responses.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and respondents were told they had the right to not answer individual questions, or to ask to withdraw from the study while the survey distribution phase was still open. Participants were also told that they could complete the survey in more than one sitting, as the survey link they were sent was unique to them and all inputted responses would be saved after each page. Upon closing the online survey, all email addresses were removed and the identity of participants’ individual responses were no longer linked to their data.

Data Analysis

We analyzed study data using descriptive statistics. For example, we used frequency distributions and cross tabulations to determine the central tendencies of the variables, including the mean, median, and mode. We charted data using graphs and figures to better determine trends, clusters, and outliers. Calculations were occasionally rounded to the nearest decimal, and as a result the percentages may not always add up to 100%.

Sampling

Principals in all 33 of Ontario’s English-language, non-Catholic, publicly funded school districts were invited to participate in this study. We sent invitations via individual email to all current OPC principal members. The survey window to respond was open for 36 days (approximately five weeks). We used a number of strategies to encourage principals to share their insights and opinions about their well-being and their work. In addition to sending weekly

email reminders to all potential respondents, updates were posted to the OPC website and tweets were sent from the OPC’s official Twitter account to encourage participation. Due to the effectiveness of these strategies, the survey achieved a response rate of 35.6%.

Description of the Sample

A total of 2,419 OPC principals were invited to participate in the online survey. Although we collected a total of 959 responses during the five-week period, 99 responses were incomplete and thus excluded from analysis. As a result, the response rate for the survey was 35.6%, based on a total of 860 responses accepted for analysis (715 completed surveys and an additional 145 partially completed surveys, where respondents completed over two thirds of the questions). The sample included principals from all 33 of Ontario’s English-language, non-Catholic, publicly funded school districts, located within a broad range of different school and community contexts. Both elementary (76.8%) and secondary school principals (17.5%) participated in the survey. Figure 1 also shows that 3.3% were middle school principals, and 1.7% of participating principals worked in schools that included both elementary and secondary students. Five principals in the study (0.7%) were system-level principals.

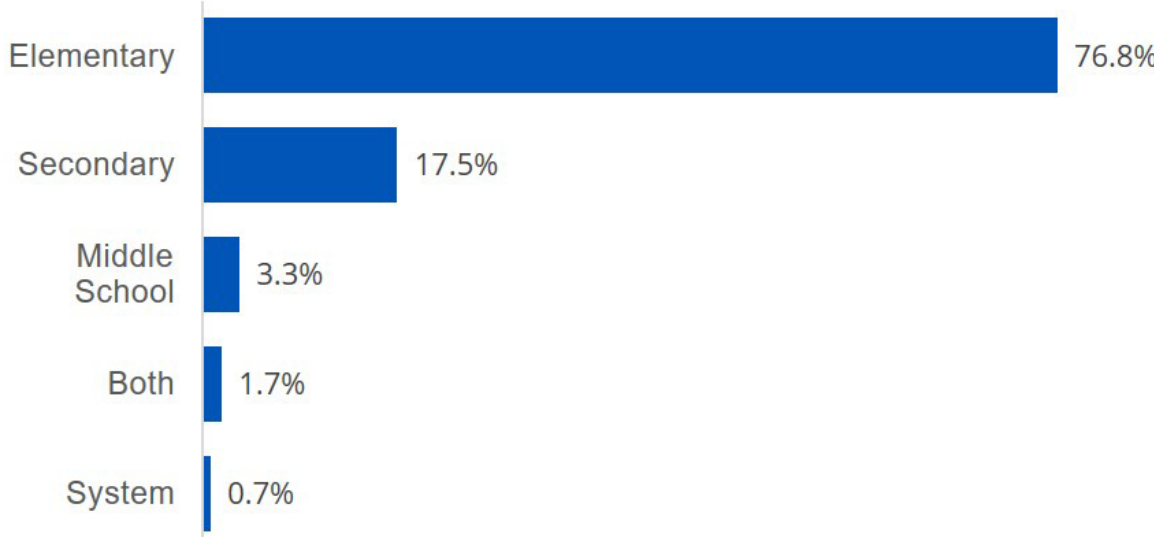


Figure 1. School Characteristics: Percentage of Participating Principals at Each School Type

Well over half of the principals who participated in this survey identified as female (64.2%). As also shown in Figure 2, 35.0% of respondents self-identified as male, and 0.7% preferred not to answer. One participant identified as nonbinary.

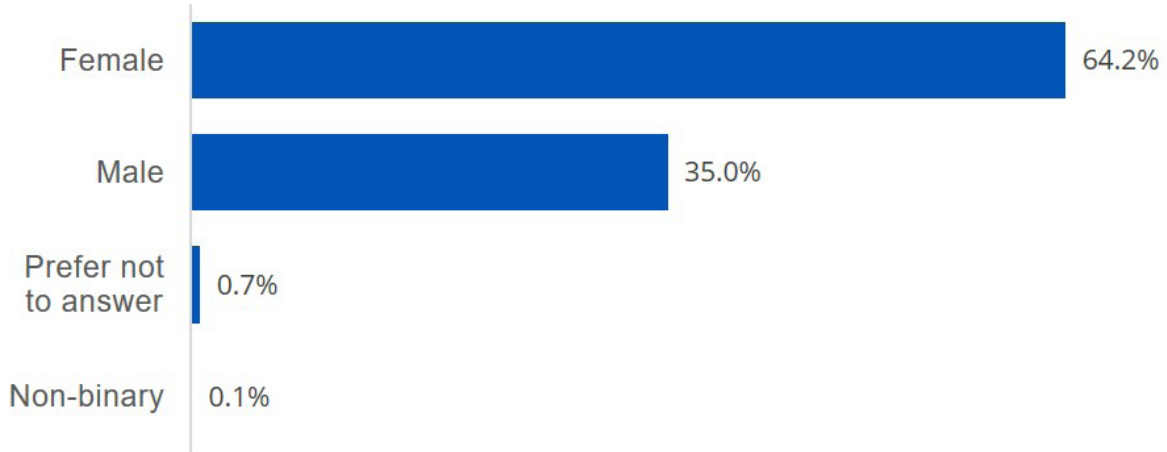


Figure 2. Participant Characteristics: Gender

As displayed in Figure 3, just over one third (36.4%) of the participating principals indicated that a bachelor’s degree was the highest level of formal education they had completed. Slightly over half (55.6%) of respondents had obtained a master’s degree. Smaller numbers of participating principals had obtained other formal qualifications, such as 3.7% of respondents who indicated they had earned a professional degree (e.g., MD, LLB, JD, etc.), and 2.0% who had obtained a doctorate degree.

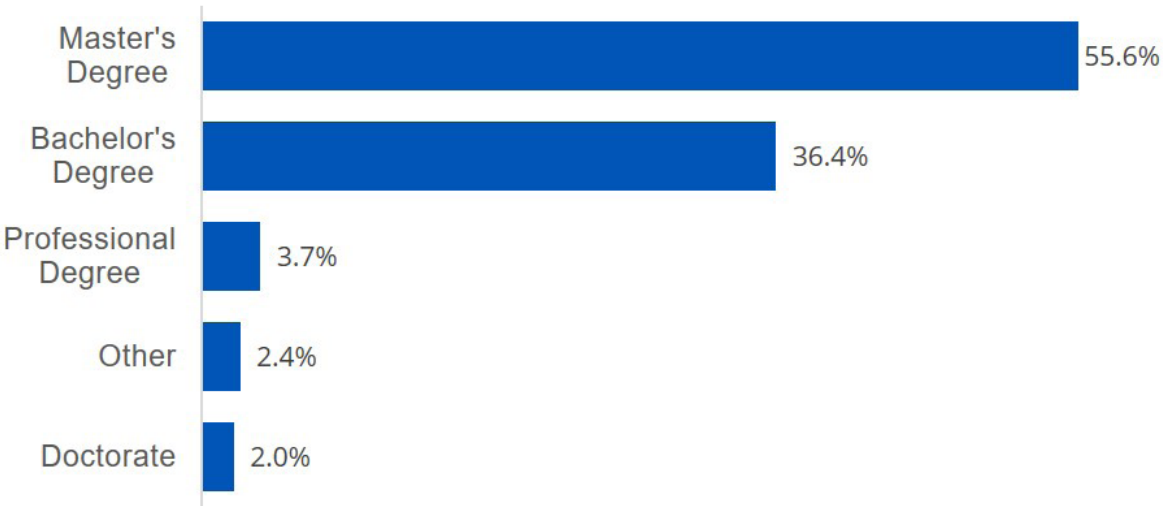


Figure 3. Participant Characteristics: Highest Level of Education

Many of the participating principals were still in the early stages of their careers. Almost one third of the participants (31.4%) in the survey had five or less than five years of experience as a principal (not including years of experience as a vice-principal), with an average of 8.7 years of experience across the total sample. Figure 4 shows that approximately another third of the participating principals (34.9%) had between 6 and 10 years of experience, 23.5% indicated being in the position for 11 to 15 years, and 8.6% had 16 to 20 years of experience. A small number of principals (1.6%) reported being in the role for more than 20 years.

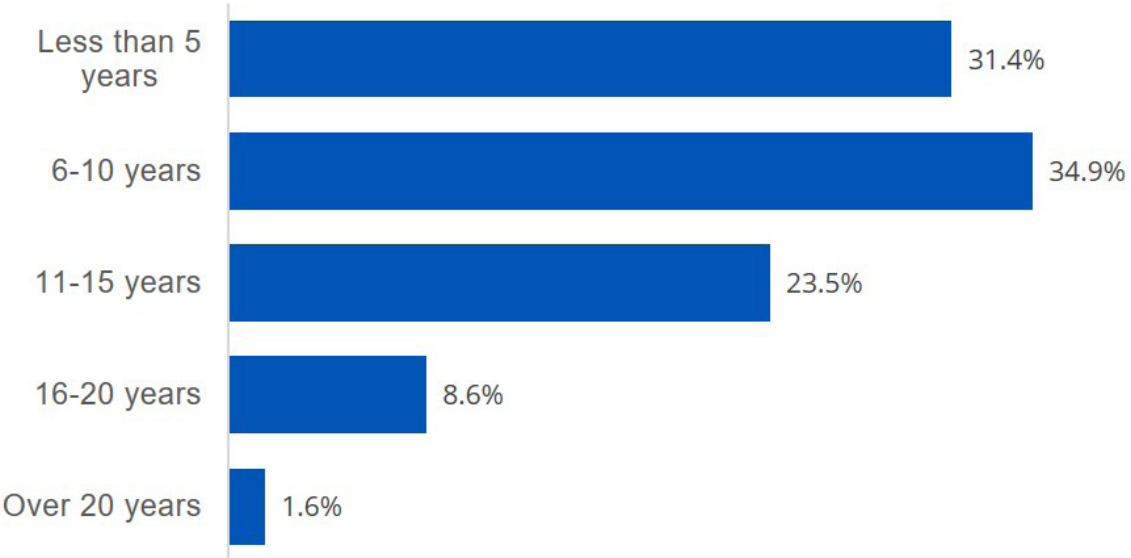


Figure 4. Participant Characteristics: Years of Experience in the Principal Role

Figure 5 shows the ages of the participating principals grouped by category. Most participants were between the ages of 50 and 54 (38.2%), followed closely by those who were slightly younger, between 45 and 49 years of age (28.2%). Principals who were between 55 and 59 years of age made up 17.4% of the sample. A total of 10.2% principals were between 40 and 44 years of age. Very few participating principals were younger than 39 or older than 60 years of age. No principals were younger than 30 years old.

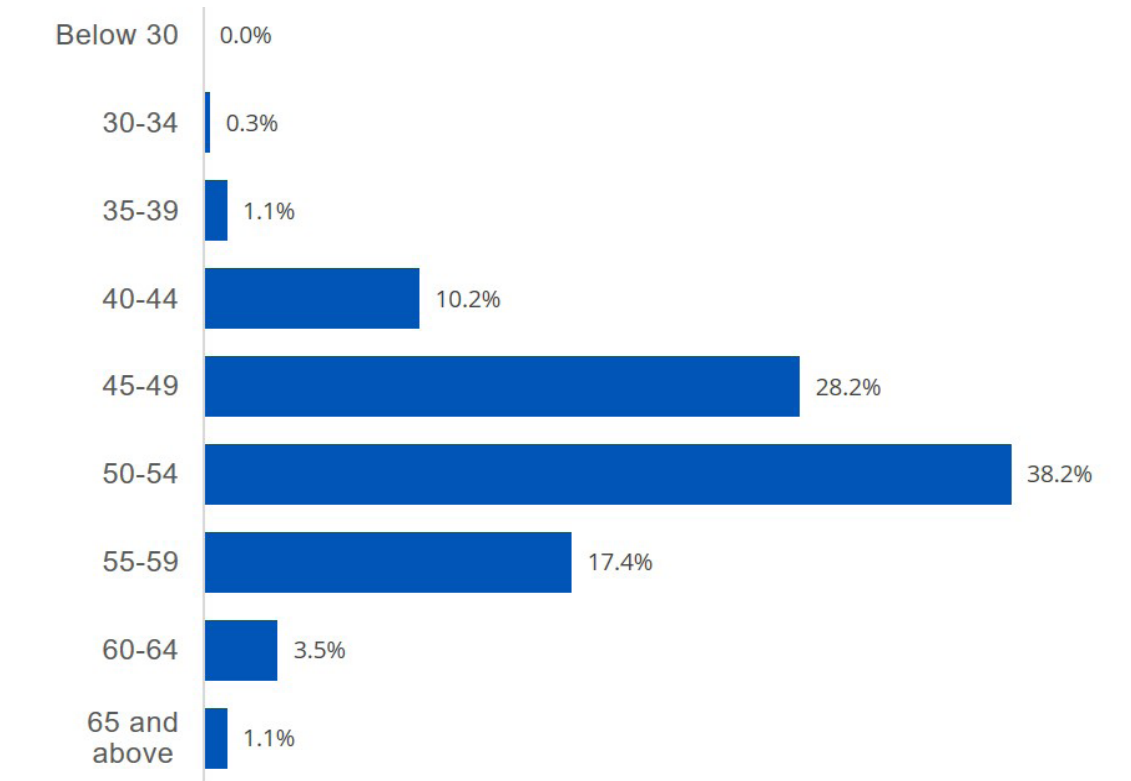


Figure 5. Participant Characteristics: Age Range of Participating Principals

The survey sample had differences in terms of gender, age, years of experience as a principal, the level of education brought to the role, and the types of schools in which they worked. However, as illustrated by Table 1, the sample was less diverse in terms of ethnic background: 87.7% of participating principals described themselves as White. The categories for ethnic background were taken from the Statistics Canada *Visible Minority and Population Group Reference Guide*. Only 3.3% of the sample self-identified as Black, and 2.7% of principals identified as South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.). Principals who identified as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI) represented 0.7% of the sample, and an additional 0.7% identified as Chinese. A few identified as Arab (0.6%), Korean (0.4%), Latin American (0.3%), or Japanese (0.1%).

| Ethnic Background | Frequency | % |
|---|-----------|-------|
| White | 619 | 87.7% |
| Other | 25 | 3.5% |
| Black | 23 | 3.3% |
| South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.) | 19 | 2.7% |
| First Nation, Metis, or Inuit (FNMI) | 5 | 0.7% |
| Chinese | 5 | 0.7% |
| Arab | 4 | 0.6% |
| Korean | 3 | 0.4% |
| Latin American | 2 | 0.3% |
| Japanese | 1 | 0.1% |
| Filipino | 0 | 0.0% |
| Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, Laotian, etc.) | 0 | 0.0% |
| West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, etc.) | 0 | 0.0% |

Table 1. Participant Characteristics: Ethnic Background of Participating Principals

More than half of the principals who responded to the survey worked in larger cities with populations over 100,000 (100,000 to 1,000,000, 39.2%; over 1,000,000, 17.1%). As displayed in Figure 6, principals who worked in towns with populations between 15,000 and 100,000 accounted for 17.7% of the sample, and 13.5% of respondents were employed in schools located in a village, hamlet, or rural area of less than 3,000 people. Very few respondents were employed in schools located in small towns with between 3,000 and 15,000 people (11.0%).

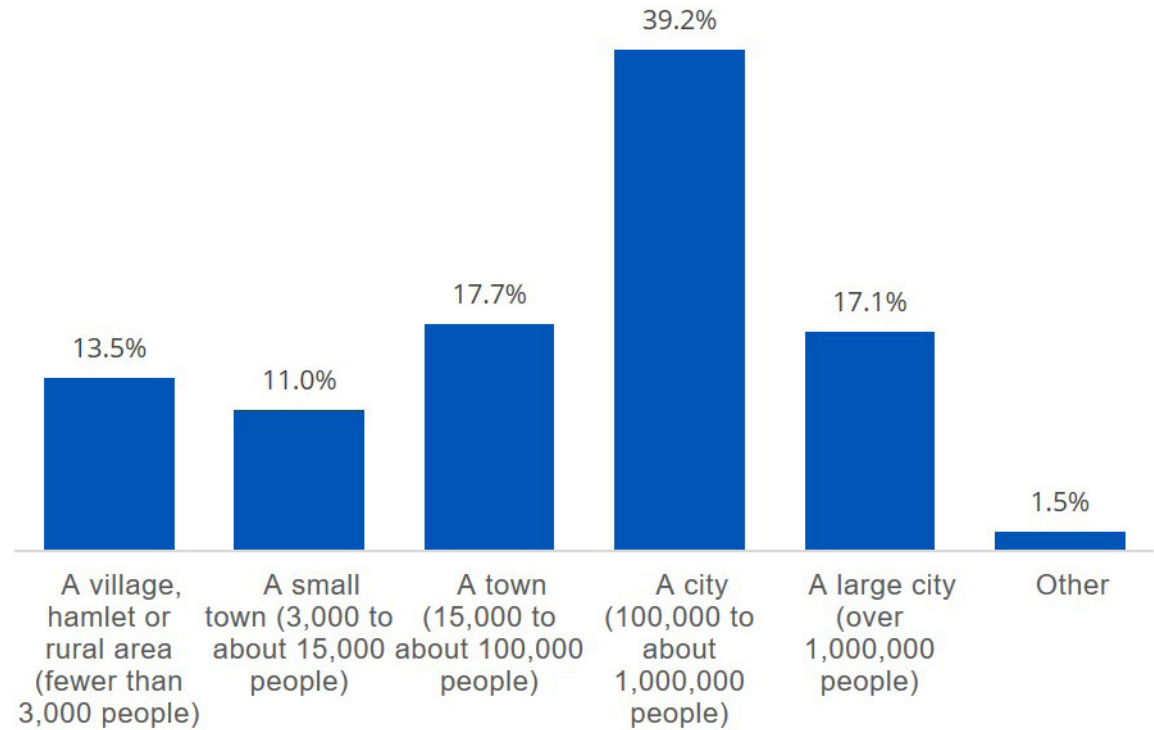


Figure 6. School Characteristics: Size of Surrounding Communities

Less than half of the participating principals (42.0%) indicated they worked at schools that had less than 20% of students living in lower income households. As shown in Figure 7, the remaining principals worked in schools with increasing percentages of students living in households with low incomes. For example, 18.1% of principals worked in schools with 21 to 30% of students living in lower income households, 9.7% in schools with 31 to 40% of students living in lower income households, and 9.4% in schools with 41 to 50% of students living in lower income households. A few principals (1.9%) worked at a school with more than 90% of their students living in a lower income family household.

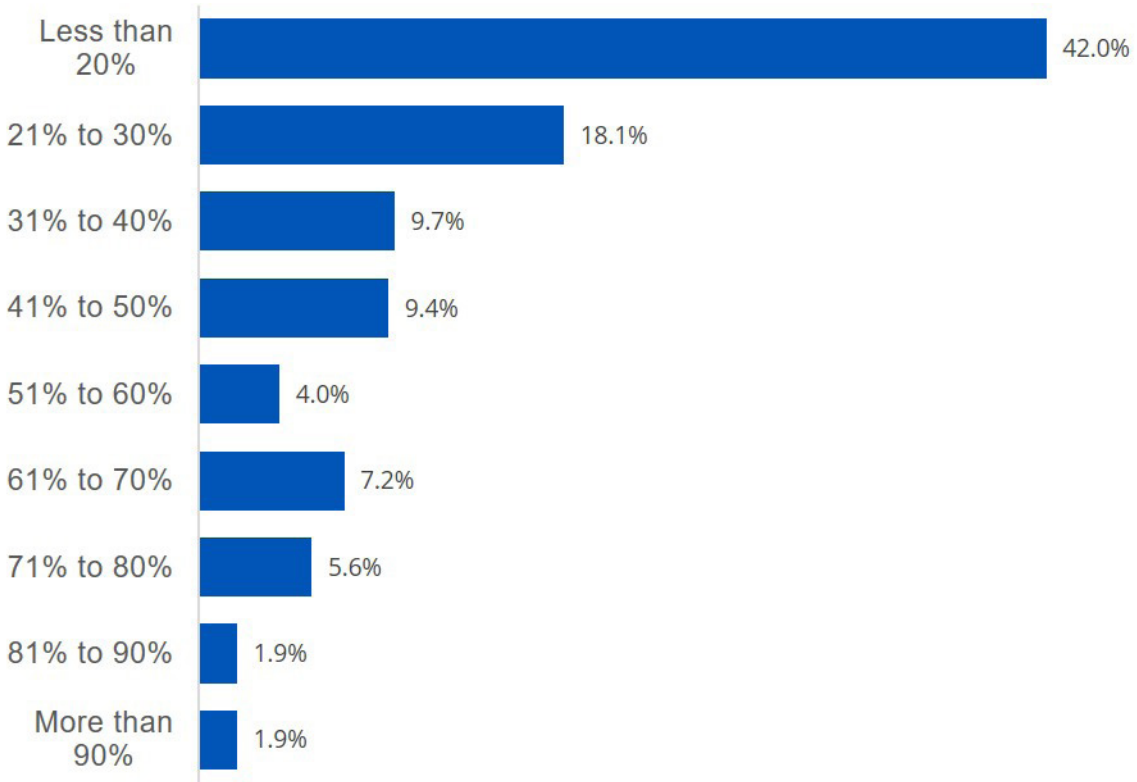


Figure 7. School Characteristics: Schools and Percentages of Students who Live in Lower Income Family Households

FINDINGS

In this section, we present the key findings that emerged from the survey data. We report the findings across four themes, organized according to the aspects of principals' well-being as it may relate to their work. The themes are as follows: (a) work intensification, (b) well-being (including physical, emotional, cognitive, social, psychological and spiritual), (c) health and safety, and (d) coping strategies.

Theme 1: Work Intensification

Overall Management of Work

When asked to rank their overall ability to manage their work, over half of the participating principals (56.3%) selected good. As Figure 8 shows, 30.5% felt their ability to manage was average, 6.1% chose poor, and 5.5% chose outstanding. Very few principals chose very poor (1.6%).

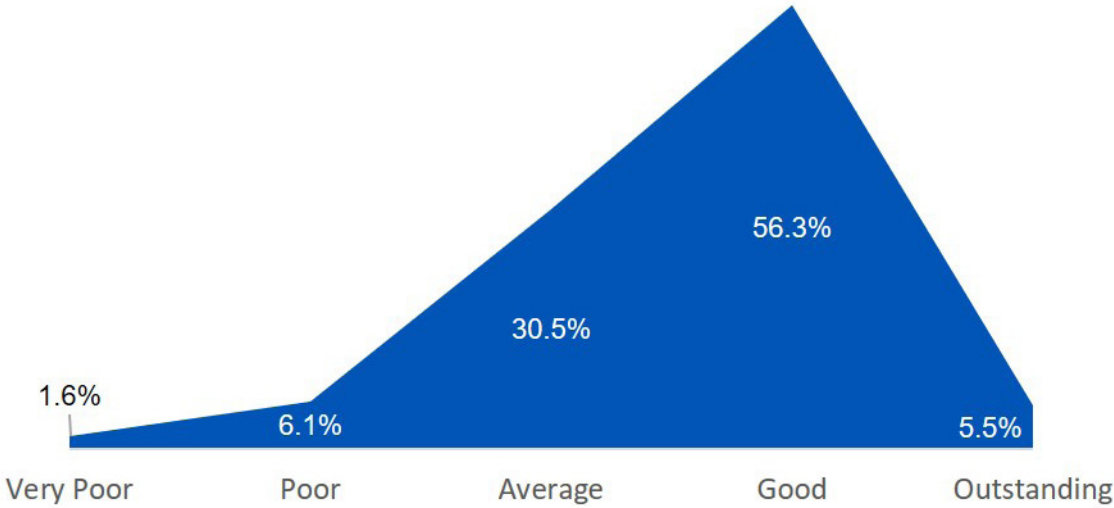


Figure 8. How Principals Feel About Their Overall Ability to Manage Their Work

However, some principals who offered additional comments at the end of the survey qualified their responses to the above question by stating that even though they feel positive about their work, their workload is increasing every year. For example, one survey respondent stated:

My work is very rewarding, but after over 15 years in administration, the workload of school administrators has increased without meaningful realignment or evaluation to determine what practices could be removed from us and absorbed by other areas of the organization.

Another participating principal stated:

I LOVE my job. I'm inspired by it, empowered by it, and I'm proud of it. At the same time, it can be completely overwhelming as far as workload. I feel that every year I do this job, I put in more hours, partly because I have a greater sense of the impact that can be made if I'm tenacious enough, and also because the workload increases every year.

In the next sections, we probe more deeply into principals’ perceptions of specific workload issues.

How Principals Spend Their Time

Previous studies indicated that principals are putting in increasingly long hours and that this work intensification is affecting not only their work–life balance (Pollock, 2017), but also their well-being (Leithwood & Azah, 2014a, 2014b; Ontario Principals’ Council, 2017; Pollock, 2016, 2017; Pollock & Wang, 2019; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2017; Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018; Wells & Klocko, 2018). In this study, our findings were similar: The results that follow show that principals worked long hours and spent ample time not only on managerial tasks such as emails and school management, but also on tasks perceived as draining, such as student discipline, special education issues, and student and staff well-being.

In this section, we detail the status of work intensification for principals in Ontario—specifically how they spend their time and whether they feel they should spend more or less time on these tasks. In a regular work week, principals worked an average of 57.3 hours. As Figure 9 highlights, almost all participating principals (97.5%) worked more than the normal 40 hour work week: almost half of the participants reported (47.3%) working between 50 and 60 hours per week. In addition, 21.4% worked more than 60 hours per week.

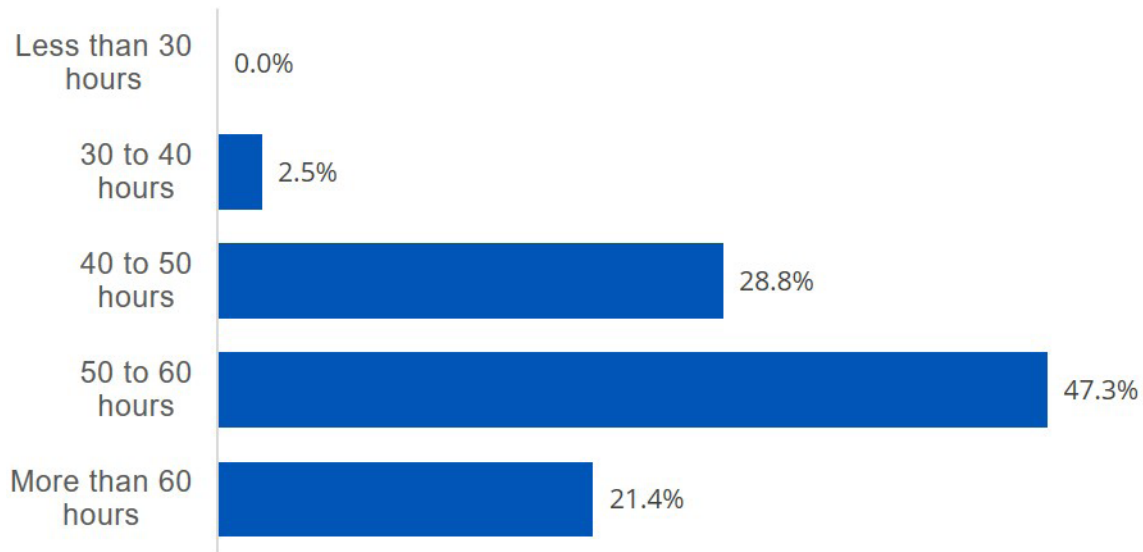


Figure 9. Average Number of Hours Participating Principals Worked Per Week

Principals spent their time on a wide variety of tasks. When comparing average hours spent on tasks as shown in Figure 10, student discipline and attendance was the highest at 10.3 hours. The next highest average weekly hours also included activities focused on students: special education (7.0 hours), student well-being (6.8 hours), and walking hallways, the playground, the lunchroom, and so forth (6.7 hours). Also taking over five hours each week were school management tasks such as administrative directives (6.6 hours) and internal school management that included the calendar, office, memos, the newsletter, the website, and so forth (5.9 hours).

However, there was a range in the hours that principals spent on different tasks, as many principals worked beyond the regular work day. As one principal stated in their additional comments:

The working day is long and requires a great amount of work to be done every night and on weekends. Work that requires strategic thinking or planning and reflection cannot be done while working at school. For example, most nights are focused on work, email, planning, and student follow-up for supportive practices.

A number of survey respondents indicated that hours could fluctuate depending on the situation and the issue: *“It was difficult to accurately assess the number of hours per week devoted to each activity you indicated as it can fluctuate so that some weeks require more than others.”*

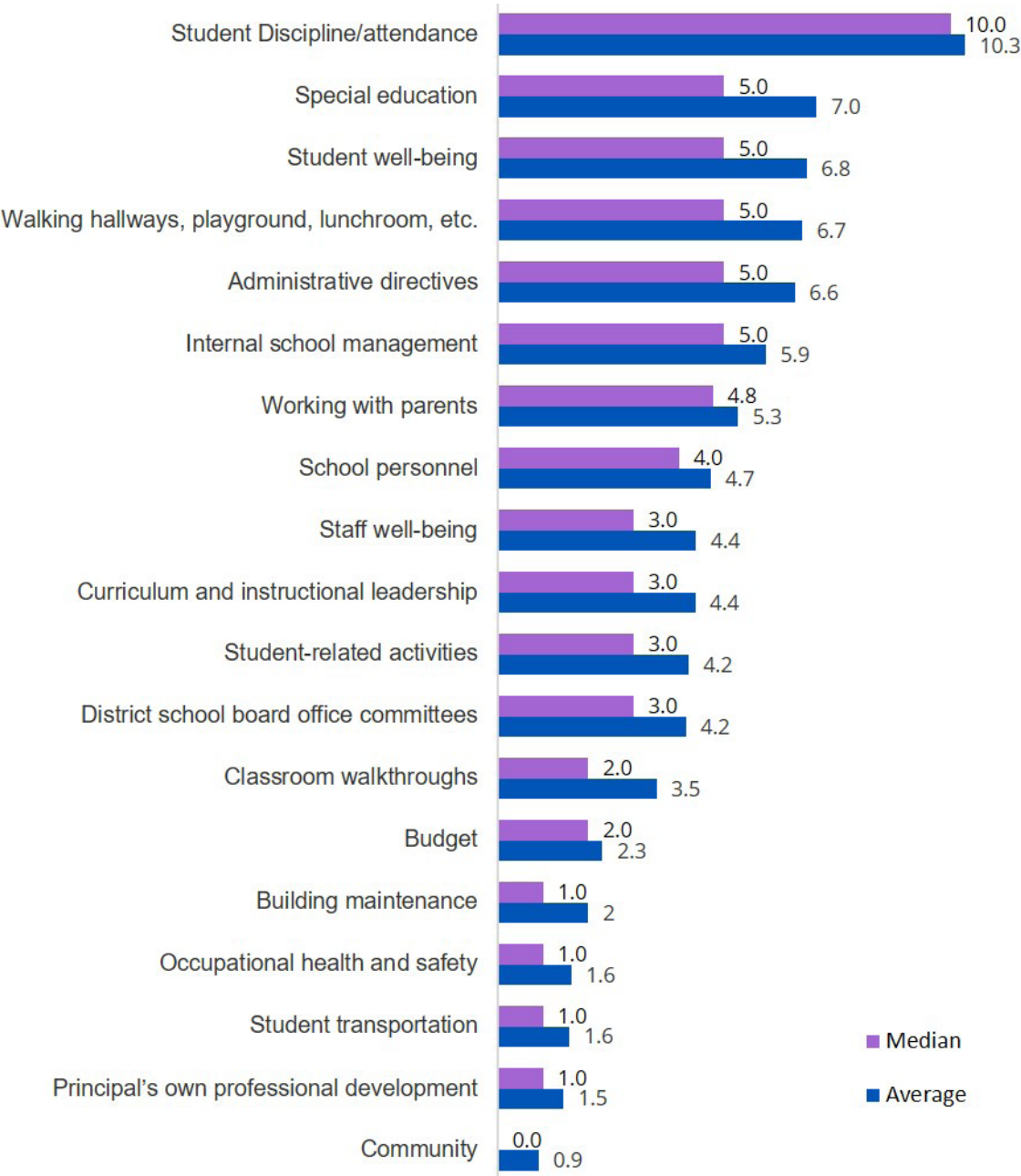


Figure 10. Average Number of Hours Principals Spent on a Task and Activities in One Week

As stated previously, the task that principals spent the highest number of average hours on was student discipline and attendance, and almost half of the participating principals would like to spend less time on this task (57.7%). As shown in Figure 11, approximately three quarters of the participating principals indicated that they would like to spend more time on matters related to instructional leadership, such as classroom walkthroughs (75.2%), curriculum and instructional leadership (74.5%), and their own professional development (74.0%). The participants also indicated that they would like to spend less time on matters related to managerial matters, such as

administrative directives (53.1%), internal school management (43.8%), school board committees (29.6%), and building maintenance (28.0%). As one participant stated:

The most difficult part about this is that we are all here to move our schools forward but that can only happen if we keep our buildings compliant to all departments, leaving the instructional leadership planning to our evenings and weekends. The amount of emails and tasks to complete (paperwork) continues to increase and our building management role is slowly pushing out our instructional leadership influence. Tougher and tougher to maintain balance!

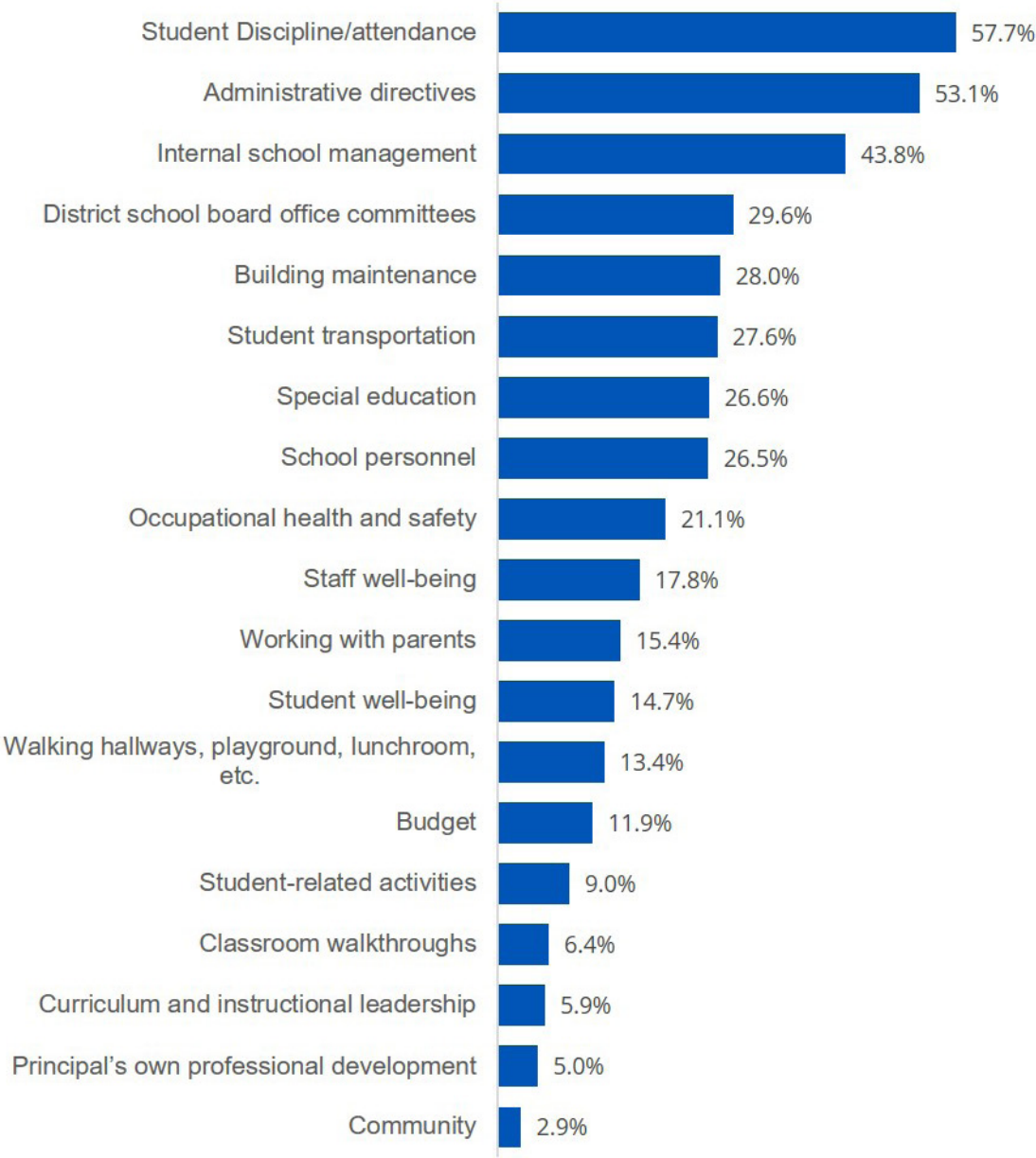


Figure 11. Principal Perspectives on Various Activities they Feel they Should be Spending Less Time on

Principals in this study also spent many hours each week undertaking communication tasks. Email took up the most time, with an average of 10.5 hours every week, and 82.0% of principals indicated that they would prefer to spend less time on this task. Attending to email took more hours than the average number of hours spent on student discipline/attendance (as shown previously in Figure 10 at 10.3 hours). As Figure 12 shows, meetings also took up a significant amount of a time. With many principals adopting an “open door” policy, informal (i.e., impromptu) meetings were next in terms of the highest number of hours, averaging 7.8 hours a week. This was followed by formal, scheduled meetings (5.4 hours).

When looking at the range of hours reported by participating principals, some principals spent exceedingly far more than the average number of hours on communication tasks.

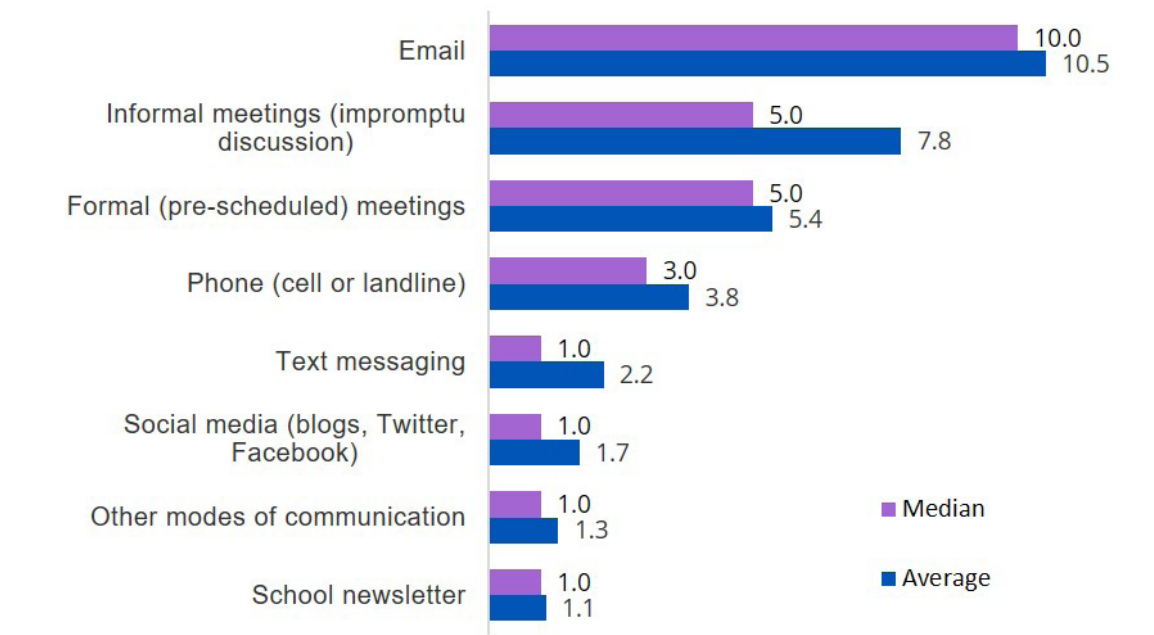


Figure 12. The Average Number of Hours Principals Spent on Various Communication Tasks, and the Range of Hours that Participating Principals Spent on These Activities in One Week

In summary, what tasks do principals spend the most time on? Figure 13 recaps the results from both regular and communication tasks and demonstrates that principals spent an average of more than 6 hours a week on each of the top seven tasks: email (10.5 hours); student discipline and attendance (10.3 hours); informal meetings (7.8 hours); special education (7.0 hours); student well-being (6.8 hours); walking hallways, the playground, and the lunchroom (6.7 hours); and administrative directives (6.6 hours).

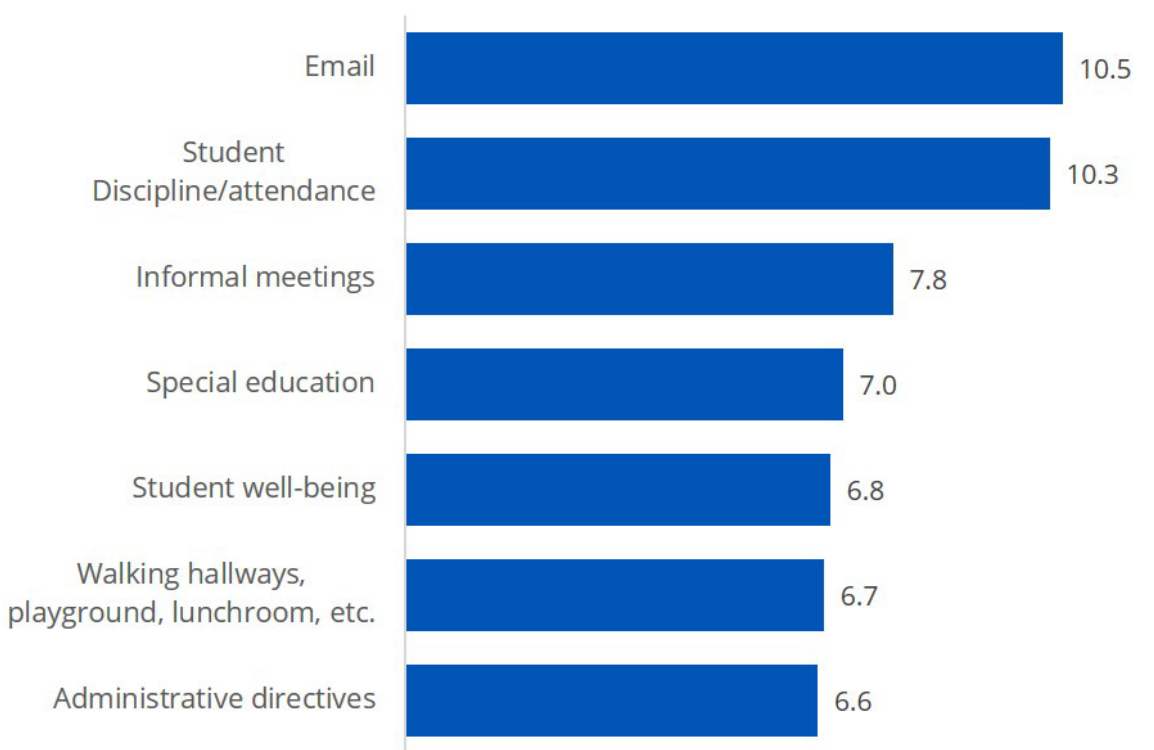


Figure 13. Principals Spent an Average of More than 6 Hours a Week Doing These Top Seven Tasks

Work-Related Challenges and Possibilities

Most participating principals, despite the demands of the job, maintained a positive outlook on their role and their workplace. Almost all participants (92.7%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* when asked if they felt they knew how to get their work done, and most felt their job made a difference in the school community (87.2%). Most also *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that their school was a good place to work (85.9%).

However, the large majority of participating principals also indicated that the job was highly challenging, as 92.0% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they always had to be available or “on call,” and that they encountered increased demands from different stakeholders with competing priorities (91.5%). Most also *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that their work has put them in emotionally draining situations (90.3%), and that they found it impossible to take a day off or a sick day (77.5%). Many principals felt they were unable to take a break during the work day (72.5%) and that they felt pressured to work long hours (70.9%). When asked if they had time to complete all their tasks, 71.2% *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with this statement.

The parental/guardian influence as well as fear of litigation have also impacted principals’ work. Almost two thirds of the participating principals *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that increased threats of litigation and complaints have influenced the way they do their work (65.3%). Many felt that increased

parental engagement has also influenced how they go about doing their work (61.5%). As one survey respondent explained:

What is being asked of principals on a daily basis is unmanageable. Our workload continues to increase as do accountability and expectations. Parental support for our work has decreased while at the same time litigation and threats to litigate have increased.

For a complete list of results on how principals were impacted by different work-related issues, see Table 2.

| Statement | Disagree/ Strongly Disagree | Neither Disagree Nor Agree | Agree/ Strongly Agree |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I know how to get my job done | 1.5% | 5.9% | 92.7% |
| My work requires me to always be available or “on call” | 2.6% | 5.4% | 92.0% |
| I encounter increased demands from competing priorities from different stakeholders | 1.5% | 6.9% | 91.5% |
| My work puts me in emotionally draining situations | 1.9% | 7.8% | 90.3% |
| My job makes a difference in the school community | 2.6% | 10.2% | 87.2% |
| My school is a good place to work | 4.8% | 9.4% | 85.9% |
| My work requires extensive memory recall | 2.6% | 11.5% | 85.8% |
| I find it impossible to take a day off or a sick | 11.2% | 11.4% | 77.5% |
| I find my work unpredictable | 6.5% | 16.6% | 76.8% |
| I am unable to take a break during the work day | 18.2% | 9.3% | 72.5% |
| I feel pressured to work long hours | 12.3% | 16.7% | 70.9% |
| Increased threats of litigation and complaints have influenced the way I do my work | 14.4% | 20.3% | 65.3% |
| I get behind on my work | 18.9% | 17.4% | 63.6% |
| Increased parental engagement has influenced how I go about doing my work | 11.5% | 26.9% | 61.5% |
| I can make my own decisions about how I do my work | 17.6% | 22.3% | 60.0% |
| The pace of my work is too fast | 15.0% | 30.2% | 54.8% |
| I find it impossible to attend professional development events | 21.8% | 30.2% | 48.1% |
| I often have time to complete all my work tasks | 71.2% | 14.4% | 40.9% |
| I have the appropriate resources to do my job | 44.9% | 23.4% | 31.7% |

Table 2. *How Principals Responded to Statements on Various Work-Related Issues*

The challenging nature of principals’ work was further revealed when participants were asked to respond to questions about how they felt about various situations. Although almost every principal indicated they *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they had compassion for people at their work (97.4%), almost all also admitted that the demands of everyday work life had an impact on them (94.2%). Table 3 also shows that over half *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they often felt overwhelmed by their work responsibilities (56.7%).

Yet, despite less than one third of participating principals *agreeing* or *strongly agreeing* that the role of the principalship was what they expected (30.1%), many demonstrated perseverance. More than half *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that they had given up on trying to make big improvements or changes in their professional life (55.7%), and most *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that they did not enjoy new situations that required them to change familiar ways of doing things (74.7%). As one principal expressed in their additional comments: *“I love the work I do. I love being able to lead change; every day is new and different when working with a diverse group of people.”*

| Statement | Disagree/ Strongly Disagree | Neither Disagree Nor Agree | Agree/ Strongly Agree |
|--|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I have compassion for people at my work | 0.2% | 2.4% | 97.4% |
| The demands of everyday work life have an impact on me | 1.5% | 4.2% | 94.2% |
| I often feel overwhelmed by my work responsibilities | 18.5% | 24.8% | 56.7% |
| My work negatively impacts my relationship with my family and friends | 29.9% | 22.7% | 47.4% |
| I do not find current professional activities helpful for my work | 20.4% | 32.6% | 46.9% |
| The role of principalship is what I expected | 43.5% | 26.3% | 30.1% |
| I have given up trying to make big improvements or changes in my professional life | 55.7% | 21.3% | 22.9% |
| I do not fit very well with the communities my school serves | 73.8% | 19.6% | 6.6% |
| I do not enjoy being in a new situation that requires me to change old familiar ways of doing things | 74.7% | 20.3% | 5.1% |

Table 3. *How Principals Feel Regarding Various Situations Pertaining to Their Work*

Principal interactions with teachers are a large part of their work as school leaders. Sometimes situations related to teachers are difficult, as shown in Table 4. Many principals stated that they *often* or *always* had difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers (73.3%). In addition, concerns involved in supporting special education issues were also ranked highly, as 70.0% of participating principals were *often* or *always* affected by a lack of special education support for the teachers themselves. Supply teachers¹ were also a concern for many of the participating principals, as 68.6% *often* or *always* found there was a lack of supply teachers, and 56.8% *often* or *always* found there was a lack of qualified supply teachers.

Two thirds of the participating participants indicated that the teacher performance appraisal process was a source of difficulty, as 67.0% *often* or *always* had difficulty terminating underperforming teachers, and over half found they had a lack of time to evaluate teachers (55.5%). Principals were not as frequently affected by teacher turnover (34.1%) or lack of trust between teachers and parents/guardians (32.5%).

| Situation | Never/ Rarely | Somewhat | Often/ Always |
|--|------------------|----------|------------------|
| Difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers | 8.1% | 18.6% | 73.3% |
| Lack of special education support for teachers | 10.7% | 19.3% | 70.0% |
| Lack of supply teachers | 9.2% | 22.1% | 68.6% |
| Difficulty terminating under-performing teachers from the school | 15.8% | 17.2% | 67.0% |
| Lack of qualified substitute teachers | 18.5% | 24.7% | 56.8% |
| Lack of time for teacher planning and professional development | 13.5% | 30.8% | 55.7% |
| Lack of time to evaluate teachers | 12.4% | 32.1% | 55.5% |
| Teacher and staff apathy and resistance to change | 16.0% | 30.6% | 53.3% |
| Lack of teachers with special education expertise | 18.0% | 28.7% | 53.3% |
| Lack of teacher knowledge and skills | 16.1% | 43.3% | 40.5% |
| Lack of replacement staff | 30.8% | 33.1% | 36.1% |
| Teacher turnover | 31.8% | 34.2% | 34.1% |
| Lack of trust between teachers and parents/guardians | 27.9% | 39.7% | 32.5% |

Table 4. Principals’ Responses on How Often Situations Involving Teachers Affect Their Work

¹ Supply teachers are also known as substitute teachers or teachers on call.

Policy and External Influence

The political landscape is ever-changing. The survey asked principals to what extent, over the past two years, the political climate surrounding public education has influenced their work in relation to a number of different factors.

The largest concerns that principals were *very* or *extremely* influenced by were the rising number of mental health issues among students, teachers, and parents (94.5%). This was followed by a general sense of anxiety within the education system (86.0%) and impact of the changing government² (82.2%). Also ranked highly were limited resources available to meet the demands of multiple stakeholders (68.9%), a culture of complaints and litigation in the education system (63.8%), and a growing list of approaches to student discipline (59.6%).

Even the two lowest impact factors had many principals indicating they were *very* or *extremely* influenced by them: for example, the rapidity and multiplicity of policy enactment (44.0%) and the diversity of community values (38.2%). For a list of how other political climate factors surrounding public education have influenced principals, refer to Table 5.

² Prior to June 2018, the Ontario provincial government was Liberal for 15 years. In June, 2018, the province elected a Conservative government. The current new conservative government made several policy changes that were not popular within the education sector. During the autumn of 2019, many labour contracts were being negotiated with the Conservative government and teacher unions and the education sector experienced rolling teacher strikes and work-to-rule action. Principals are not a part of the teacher unions in Ontario.

| Factor | Not At All/ Slightly | Somewhat | Very/ Extremely |
|--|-------------------------|----------|--------------------|
| Growing mental health issues among students, teachers, and parents | 0.9% | 4.6% | 94.5% |
| A system of anxiety in education | 3.0% | 11.0% | 86.0% |
| Impact of the changing government (e.g., reduced resources, recent policy and program changes) | 3.5% | 14.4% | 82.2% |
| Finite resources available to meet demanding constituents | 10.3% | 20.9% | 68.9% |
| A culture of complaints and litigation in educational system | 14.0% | 22.1% | 63.8% |
| Diversification of student discipline | 10.2% | 30.3% | 59.6% |
| Advances in information communication technology | 10.5% | 30.1% | 59.3% |
| Consumer mentality among parents | 15.0% | 27.6% | 57.3% |
| Operational & building management demands | 15.3% | 31.1% | 53.6% |
| Other | 37.1% | 13.0% | 50.0% |
| Increasingly diverse student populations | 23.3% | 32.5% | 44.2% |
| Rapidity and multiplicity of policy enactment | 25.3% | 30.8% | 44.0% |
| Diversity of community values | 26.5% | 35.3% | 38.2% |

Table 5. *How the Political Climate Surrounding Public Education has Influenced Principals in Relation to a Number of Different Factors*

Principals are responsible for implementing numerous Ministry policies but they feel there is a lack of control over their own work. As one participant expressed, this can sometimes be overwhelming:

Our job just keeps getting bigger and bigger. New policies and procedures are refined to reduce risk and litigation, but the onus for implementation is on the principal. In my experience, if something goes wrong, it is very easy for the senior administration to find fault in the principal's actions.

The top 10 policies that principals indicated as impacting their work *a lot* are shown in Table 6. The four policies that over 50% of principals ranked as impacting their work *a lot* were: Reg. 274/12: Hiring Practices³ (73.1%), Safe

³ Note: Reg. 274/12: Hiring Practices was revoked in 2019 by the current Conservative government.

Schools Act: Bill 212 (57.5%), Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (55.0%), and Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools (52.3%).

Additional policies not shown that impacted approximately 20% or less of principals *a lot* were the Anti-Racism Act (21.7%), Fluctuating Enrollment/School Closures (ARC) (20.4%), Parents in Partnership: Parent Engagement Policy (17.7%), policies related to Truth and Reconciliation (17.7%), Collaborative Professionalism (PPM 159) (17.3%), and the Urban Priority High Schools (UPHS) initiative (2.0%).

| Policy | % |
|--|-------|
| Reg. 274/12: Hiring Practices | 73.1% |
| Bill 212 - Safe Schools Act | 57.5% |
| Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy | 55.0% |
| Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools | 52.3% |
| Bill 13 - Anti-Bullying | 46.4% |
| Occupational Health and Safety Act (including workplace harassment and violence) | 44.3% |
| Student Well-Being Strategy | 41.5% |
| Bill 115 - Putting Students First Act | 36.9% |
| Full Day Kindergarten - Full Day Early Learning Statute Amendment Act | 35.0% |
| Aboriginal Education Strategy/First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) Policy Framework | 24.3% |

Table 6. *Percentage of Principals Who Chose the Top Ten Policies that Impacted Their Work “A Lot”*

Theme 2: Well-Being

Our understanding of *mental health* and *well-being* in this study was consistent with that used by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2013): “A state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

Overall Well-Being

When asked to rank their overall well-being at work, less than half of participating principals chose positive descriptors: 39.6% used *good* to describe their feelings and only 4.8% chose *excellent*. As Figure 14 shows, 25.3% were *neutral*, and 25.1% chose *poor*. Out of the sample, 44 principals felt their overall well-being was *very poor* (5.2%).

Many of the open-ended responses at the end of the survey commented on the issue of well-being. Many said they enjoy the role, but find the nature of the job to be taking a toll. For example, one principal stated:

I find the job extremely challenging and becoming more so each day. The expectations of parents and the complexity of what we are dealing with makes this such a challenging role. That being said, I also feel very fortunate to do this work and really do love it. The challenge for so many of us is that because we love it, we put more and more of ourselves into the work which is problematic for our overall well-being and ability to continue long term in the roles.

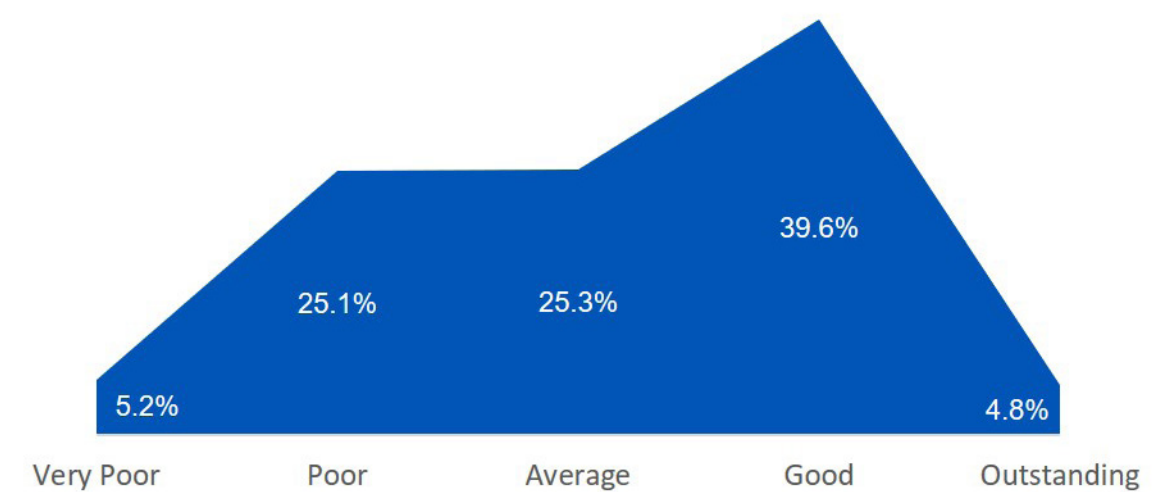


Figure 14. How Principals Feel About Their Overall Well-Being at Work

When participating principals were asked to rank how they felt about their overall well-being in the six specific categories (i.e., physical, emotional, cognitive, social, psychological, and spiritual), there were notable differences. Table 7 illustrates the participating principals ranked social well-being most often as either *good* (51.9%) or *excellent* (10.0%), followed by cognitive well-being (*good*, 47.8%; *excellent*, 6.2%).

However, this trend changed for the remaining four categories of well-being, as many principals rated their psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being as *very poor* or *poor*. For example, in the case of the lowest ranked category, approximately 40.8% ranked their physical well-being as *very poor* or *poor*. Only 23.8% of principals felt their physical well-being at work was *good*, and very few (2.2%) felt it was *excellent*. Furthermore, over one in three participating principals felt their emotional well-being was *very poor* or *poor* (32.7%).

| Well-Being Type | Very Poor/Poor | Neutral | Good/Excellent |
|-----------------|----------------|---------|----------------|
| Social | 11.3% | 26.8% | 61.9% |
| Cognitive | 15.8% | 30.2% | 54.0% |
| Psychological | 20.7% | 33.2% | 46.1% |
| Emotional | 32.7% | 30.5% | 36.7% |
| Spiritual | 9.9% | 55.8% | 34.3% |
| Physical | 40.8% | 33.2% | 26.0% |

Table 7. A Comparison of How Principals Feel About their Overall Well-Being as Differentiated by the Six Different Categories

The survey asked participating principals to indicate the extent to which they felt that each type of well-being was affected when they felt drained by their work. The numerous and diverse work situations principals felt to be draining are discussed in detail in the Health and Safety section of this report, and often included circumstances such as lack of support for special education and mental health issues among students, staff, and parents/guardians.

As illustrated by Table 8, draining work situations impacted all categories of well-being. Emotional well-being seemed to be the most impacted, as two thirds of the participating principals indicated that their emotional well-being was either *considerably* (48.5%) or *extremely* (16.2%) affected by draining situations. By comparison, the lowest affected well-being category was spiritual, which principals ranked as *considerably* (11.5%) or *extremely* (3.5%) affected.

| Well-Being Type | Not At All/ Slightly | Somewhat | Considerably/ Extremely |
|-----------------|-------------------------|----------|----------------------------|
| Emotional | 10.7% | 24.6% | 64.7% |
| Psychological | 24.5% | 29.6% | 45.9% |
| Physical | 22.5% | 33.5% | 44.0% |
| Social | 31.7% | 33.4% | 34.9% |
| Cognitive | 28.1% | 37.7% | 34.2% |
| Spiritual | 61.5% | 23.4% | 15.0% |

Table 8. *The Extent to Which the Principals Felt Different Types of Well-Being Are Affected by Draining Situations*

Social Well-Being

This category, which includes maintaining meaningful, supportive relationships with others, was ranked highest overall by most principals (61.9%), as being either *good* or *excellent* while at work (refer back to Table 7).

When asked to rank different social aspects of well-being at work, such as respect, relationships, and support, the majority of the participating principals (71.6%) *often* or *always* felt respected at work. As Table 9 shows, 64.8% *often* or *always* felt satisfied with their relationships at work and slightly over half (52.7%) *often* or *always* felt supported at work; 55.8% of principals indicated that they *never* or *rarely* felt socially excluded or left out, although the remaining 44.2% indicated they *sometimes* or *often/always* felt socially excluded.

| Statement | Never/Rarely | Somewhat | Often/Always |
|---|--------------|----------|--------------|
| I feel respected at work | 6.3% | 22.1% | 71.6% |
| I feel satisfied with my work relationships | 5.8% | 29.4% | 64.8% |
| I feel supported at work | 13.3% | 34.0% | 52.7% |
| I feel socially excluded or left out at my work | 55.8% | 31.4% | 12.8% |

Table 9. *How Principals Perceived Certain Aspects of Their Social Well-Being*

Table 10 shows the extent to which the participating principals felt they *always* had a positive work relationship with specific groups. Vice-principals (58.5%) and administrative assistants (45.3%) ranked highest, followed by students (38.2%) and support staff including custodial staff, settlement workers, EAs, and so forth (34.9%).

Only 20.3% of participating principals chose *always* when describing a positive relationship with trustees. Union representatives and parents/guardians tied for the lowest ranking (only 11.8% of participating principals chose *always* for each). However, despite not scoring high in the *always* category, parents/guardians were ranked highest in the *often* category (69.9%). Part of the strained relationship with trustees, union representatives, and parents/guardians may have been due to the tension arising from the labour interruptions that the Ontario public education system experienced during the time of data collection. Despite some strained relationships during the data collection period, many principals had positive working relationships with their teaching staff:

I believe the only way I am able to do my job well is because I am in a school with highly and supportive [sic] teachers and support staff. At the same time, I am exhausted at the end of the day because of the interacting we have to do—relationships are the bedrock of the job and these take time to build and sustain.

| Group | Never | Rarely | Somewhat | Often | Always |
|---|-------|--------|----------|-------|--------|
| Vice-principals (if applicable) | 1.4% | 0.8% | 5.7% | 33.6% | 58.5% |
| Administrative assistants | 0.5% | 1.9% | 10.1% | 42.2% | 45.3% |
| Students | 0.1% | 0.1% | 3.4% | 58.2% | 38.2% |
| School support staff (e.g., custodial staff, settlement workers, EAs) | 0.2% | 0.7% | 10.8% | 53.5% | 34.9% |
| Superintendents | 1.1% | 8.6% | 19.5% | 39.6% | 31.2% |
| Board office staff | 0.8% | 6.1% | 21.3% | 46.7% | 25.1% |
| Teachers | 0.0% | 0.9% | 11.9% | 63.0% | 24.2% |
| Community leaders | 0.2% | 2.5% | 14.3% | 59.9% | 23.1% |
| Trustees | 3.1% | 10.5% | 24.6% | 41.5% | 20.3% |
| Parents/guardians | 0.1% | 1.5% | 16.7% | 69.9% | 11.8% |
| Union representatives | 4.3% | 11.5% | 29.9% | 42.5% | 11.8% |

Table 10. *The Extent to Which Principals Felt They Had Positive Relationships with Certain Groups*

The survey asked principals to select from a list of 17 adjectives to describe how they felt socially at work. Figure 15 illustrates that out of the five most frequently selected descriptors, four were positive. Principals indicated that they felt *respected* (51.9%), *supported* (40.3%), *connected* (37.8%), and *accepted* (36.3%). Four of the nine social negative descriptors were ranked the lowest: from feeling *dissatisfied* (22.4%), *distrusted* (16.5%), or *invisible* (11.5%), to *rejected* (7.3%).

An outlier in this trend was that 41.6% of principals felt *isolated*, which is consistent with previous results presented in Table 9 that showed 44.2% of the participating principals indicated they *somewhat* or *often/always* feel socially excluded or left out. As one respondent stated:

This job is often a thankless job with competing demands on a daily basis...I feel pressure to perform and work hard and long hours and don't often feel supported as a single administrator, which is an isolated and lonely position.

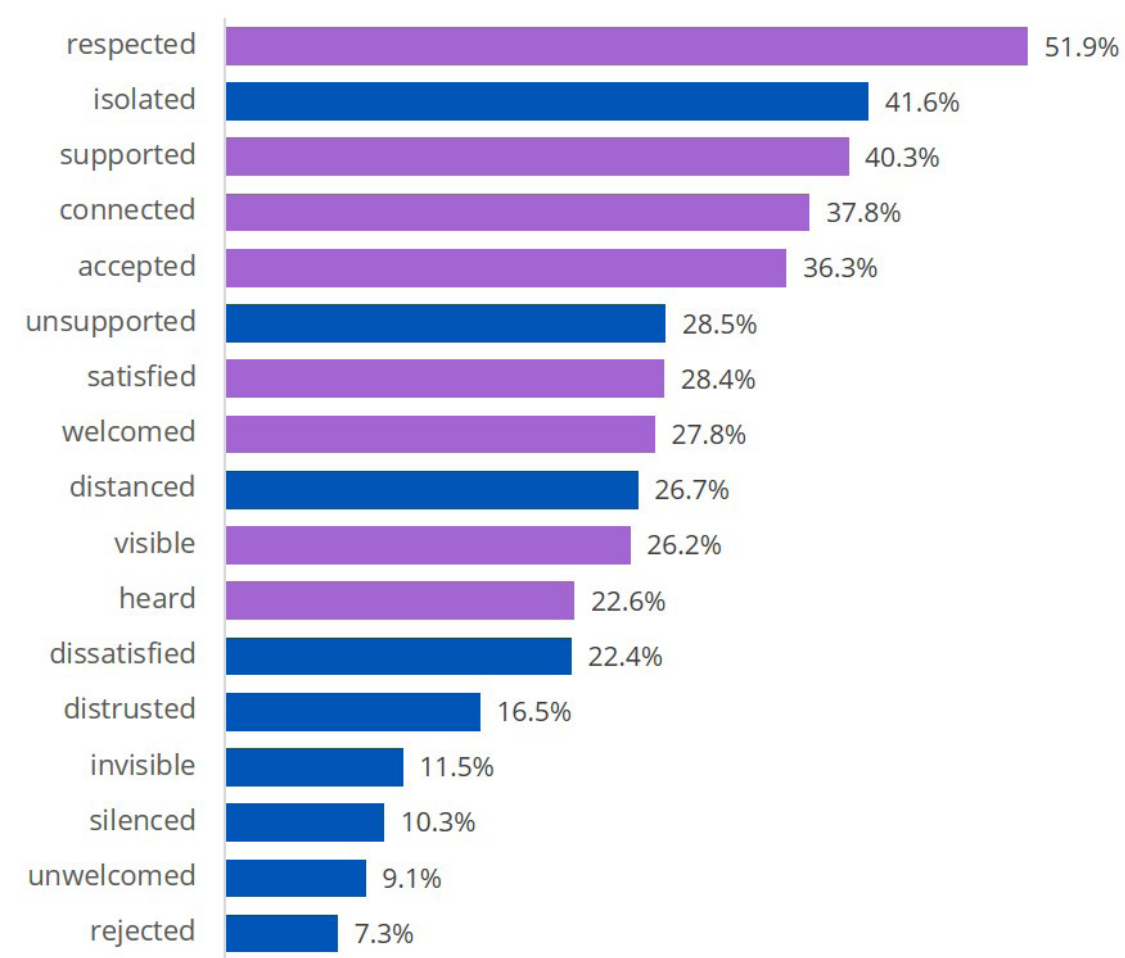


Figure 15. *Social Well-Being: How Participating Principals Felt at Work, as Described by Various Positive (Purple) and Negative (Blue) Descriptors*

Cognitive Well-Being

This category—which involves intellectual activities such as attentiveness, focus, and reasoning—had the second highest percentage of *good* and *excellent* responses: Most principals (54.0%) indicated feeling either cognitively *good* or *excellent* while at work (refer back to Table 7).

The survey further asked principals to indicate which cognitive actions they were best able to do at work. All cognitive tasks received high scores when combining the *often* and *always* categories. As seen in Table 11, most of the participating principals indicated that they were *often* or *always* able to make difficult work-related decisions (87.6%), even under high pressure (85.2%). They were also *often* or *always* able to initiate tasks (82.3%) and think clearly about work-related issues (80.5%). Overall, more than half of the participating principals selected *often* or *always* for every cognitive action, including being able to multitask (71.7%) and able to hold attention in a hectic environment (67.2%).

| Statement | Never/ Rarely | Somewhat | Often/ Always |
|--|------------------|----------|------------------|
| I am able to make difficult work-related decisions | 2.5% | 9.9% | 87.6% |
| I am able to make decisions under high pressure | 1.9% | 13.0% | 85.2% |
| I am able to initiate tasks | 1.9% | 15.9% | 82.3% |
| I am able to think clearly about work-related issues | 1.4% | 18.1% | 80.5% |
| I am able to follow complex procedures at work | 2.2% | 18.5% | 79.3% |
| I am able to prioritize competing demands | 3.7% | 18.4% | 77.9% |
| I am able to connect abstract thought to concrete issues | 2.3% | 19.8% | 77.8% |
| I am able to engage in higher order thinking | 3.5% | 18.8% | 77.7% |
| I am able to make decisions in a fast-paced manner | 2.5% | 20.6% | 77.0% |
| I am able to self-monitor | 2.9% | 21.1% | 76.0% |
| I am able to multi-task | 6.8% | 21.5% | 71.7% |
| I am able to hold attention in a hectic environment | 6.0% | 26.9% | 67.2% |
| I find my memory recall is challenged | 28.0% | 44.2% | 27.9% |

Table 11. How Often Principals Felt They Were Able to Undertake Various Cognitive Actions at Work

However, when the survey asked principals to select adjectives to describe how they felt cognitively at work, the top three out of four ranked descriptors were negative. Figure 16 shows that the many participating principals indicated that they felt *forgetful* (41.0%), *disorganized* (41.0%), or *unfocused* (39.0%). However, an equal number of principals also *often* or *always* felt *focused* (39.3%); this was the most selected positive trait, followed by *attentive* (35.5%), and *mindful* (33.0%). Small numbers indicated they felt *quick* (13.4%), *sharp* (12.8%), or *agile* (9.2%). Few participating principals indicated they felt *confused* (13.5%).

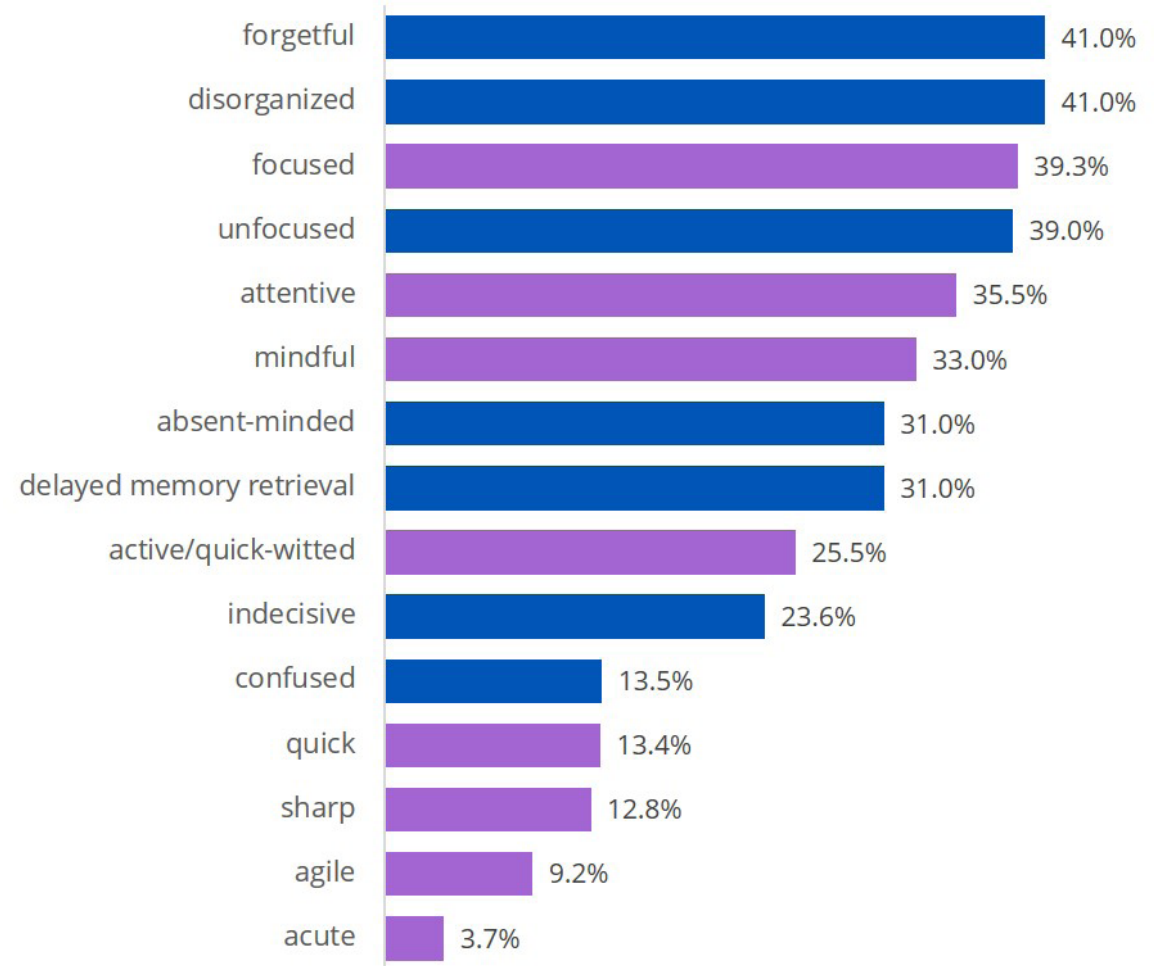


Figure 16. Cognitive Well-Being: How Participating Principals Felt at Work, as Described by Various Positive (Purple) and Negative (Blue) Descriptors

Emotional Well-Being

This category includes the ability to be resilient and manage feelings. Results showed that, even during emotionally draining situations, 69.3% of principals *often* or *always* felt passionate about work. A third of the participants *often* or *always* felt excited about going to work (30.2%), and 47% *often* or *always* felt happy about their work. In addition, close to half of participating principals *never* or *rarely* felt a sense of despair (45.8%). But, as also shown in Table 12, only 44.8% *often* or *always* felt satisfied during emotionally draining situations, and 67.7% *often* or *always* worried about work-related issues.

| Statement | Never/ Rarely | Somewhat | Often/ Always |
|--|------------------|----------|------------------|
| I feel passionate about my work | 9.7% | 21.0% | 69.3% |
| I worry about work-related issues | 7.6% | 24.7% | 67.7% |
| I feel happy about my work | 12.9% | 40.1% | 47.0% |
| I feel satisfied about my work | 17.2% | 38.1% | 44.8% |
| I feel excited when thinking about going to work | 30.7% | 39.0% | 30.2% |
| I feel a sense of despair about my work | 45.8% | 36.3% | 16.9% |

Table 12. *The Extent to Which Principals Felt Certain Statements Applied to Them During Emotionally Draining Situations at Work*

When the survey asked respondents to indicate how work had made them feel emotionally in the past week, participants selected a mix of both positive and negative emotions. However, three negative emotions were selected most often. Many principals indicated that they felt *frustrated* (66.2%), *stressed* (63.4%), and *exhausted* (54.0%). Although approximately half also felt *compassionate* (52.7%) and *empathetic* (47.9%), Figure 17 shows that many also felt *drained* (52.2%), *worried* (48.6%), *anxious* (43.0%), *strained* (36.2%), and *taxed* (32.9%). Almost one third of participating principals felt *good-humoured* (31.6%) and *resilient* (30.7%). While few felt *depressed* (15.2%) or felt *despair* (8.8%), very few felt *exuberant* about their work (2.6%).

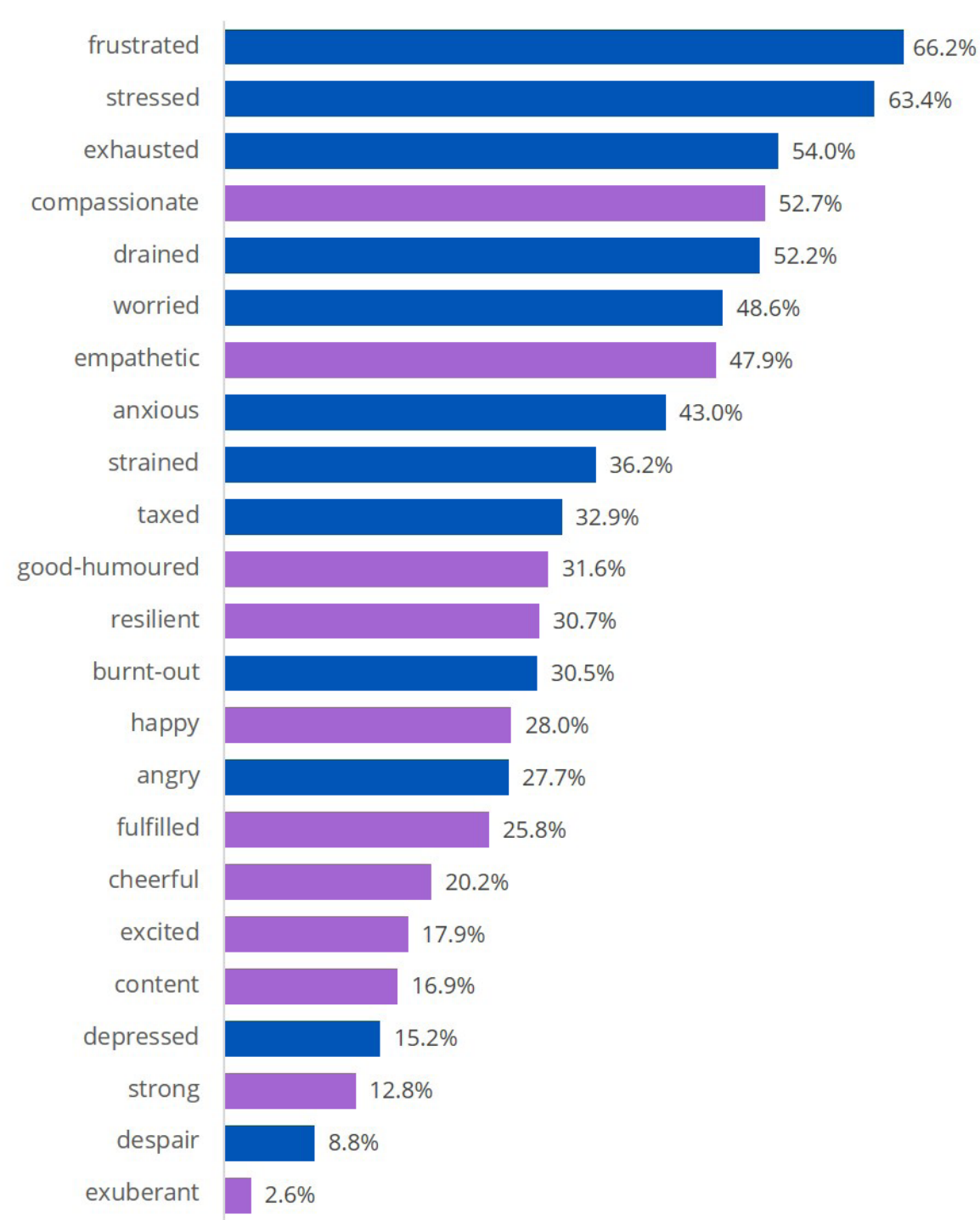


Figure 17. *Emotional Well-Being: How Participating Principals Felt at Work, as Described by Various Positive (Purple) and Negative (Blue) Descriptors*

Psychological Well-Being

The survey also asked principals to respond to a number of statements regarding their psychological well-being. Many responses reflected highly positive outlooks, with statements related to confidence and trust receiving *often/always* responses most often. Most principals *often* or *always* felt that their colleagues knew that they could trust them (92.0%), and two thirds of principals also felt they could trust their colleagues (67.7%).

As one principal commented:

The collegiality of the administrative personnel is key to long term positive school leaders. With the support and de-stressing that is possible in the admin team approach across the system, leads to positive mental health and open communication with the team. This group of professionals that I had to support me and communicate with has allowed me to “survive” and be positive in my role as principal...A trustworthy, safe group to vent and be given guidance without judgment is key.

Most principals *often* or *always* felt that they had developed a lot since they began the role (86.2%), felt confident and positive as a principal (76.4%), and enjoyed being in new situations that required them to change their old familiar ways of doing things (67.5%). Fewer principals felt they wanted to challenge policies or procedures, as less than half felt comfortable challenging the implicit “rules of the game” (42.1%) and only one third felt comfortable asking for forgiveness rather than permission (33.6%). A full list of survey responses to the 15 psychological well-being statements can be found in Table 13.

| Statement | Never/ Rarely | Somewhat | Often/ Always |
|---|------------------|----------|------------------|
| My colleagues know they can trust me | 0.5% | 7.5% | 92.0% |
| I have the sense that I have developed a lot as a principal since I began the role | 2.5% | 11.3% | 86.2% |
| In general, I feel confident and positive about myself as a principal | 4.1% | 19.5% | 76.4% |
| I know that I can trust my colleagues | 6.9% | 25.4% | 67.7% |
| I enjoy being in new situations that require me to change my old familiar ways of doing things | 4.1% | 28.4% | 67.5% |
| I judge myself by what I think is important to get the job done, not by what others think is important | 5.7% | 29.1% | 65.2% |
| In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I work | 9.3% | 28.2% | 62.6% |
| I am not afraid to voice my work opinions, even when they are in opposition to the opinions of stakeholders | 13.5% | 26.3% | 60.2% |
| I feel a sense of fulfillment | 13.2% | 28.4% | 58.4% |
| I have been able to build a work environment and a work-style for myself that is much to my liking | 13.5% | 33.4% | 53.0% |
| I enjoy making work plans for the future | 17.3% | 32.1% | 50.6% |
| I feel comfortable challenging the implicit "rules of the game" | 22.3% | 35.7% | 42.1% |
| I feel comfortable asking for forgiveness rather than permission | 30.5% | 35.8% | 33.6% |
| I feel lonely because I have few close colleagues with whom to share my concerns | 47.0% | 25.9% | 27.1% |
| I live, work one day at a time and don't really think about the future | 68.5% | 20.9% | 10.6% |

Table 13. *The Extent to Which Principals Felt Psychological Statements Applied to Them at Work*

Physical Well-Being

This category—which includes healthy eating, adequate sleep, and good exercise habits—had the lowest percentages of *good* and *excellent* responses out of the six well-being categories when participants were asked how they felt about their overall physical well-being at work. Only about a quarter of principals (26.0%) described their physical well-being as *good* or *excellent* (refer back to Table 7). This is illustrated further in Table 14, which shows that 58.3% of the participating principals shared that their physical activity level was *considerably* or *extremely* affected. More than half of the participants (56.0%) indicated their sleep was also *considerably* or *extremely* affected, as was their eating (52.1%). A number of participating principals had headaches (35.0%) or uncomfortable feelings in their stomach (28.6%). As one participant explained:

I need to eat better, sleep better, and exercise more to improve my health to enable me to meet the challenges of work and have the energy to do things that I enjoy when I get home with family and friends. Right now, I do not have the energy to make those changes, I keep putting it off.

| Aspect | Not at All/ Slightly | Somewhat | Considerably/ Extremely |
|---|-------------------------|----------|----------------------------|
| Doing physical activities | 12.1% | 29.6% | 58.3% |
| Sleeping | 18.3% | 25.7% | 56.0% |
| Eating | 16.3% | 31.6% | 52.1% |
| Having headaches | 45.1% | 20.0% | 35.0% |
| Having uncomfortable feelings in your stomach | 46.4% | 24.9% | 28.6% |

Table 14. *The Extent to Which Principals Felt Aspects of Their Physical Well-being were Affected by their Work*

When the survey asked principals to what extent their physical well-being was affected at work, specifically during draining situations, we found a number of similar factors were affected. (Refer to the Health and Safety section of this report for details on situations principals found to be draining.) As Table 15 shows, their energy level was the most affected, as 72.9% of principals selected *considerably* or *extremely* in this category. Almost two thirds (62.0%) of principals stated that fitness levels were *considerably* or *extremely* impacted by draining situations. More than half of participating principals indicated that draining situations *considerably* or *extremely* affected sleep (58.6%) and diet

(55.7%). Less than half selected *considerably* or *extremely* for physical health (38.6%) and stress-related illness (30.1%).

| Aspect | Not At All/ Slightly | Somewhat | Considerably/ Extremely |
|------------------------|-------------------------|----------|----------------------------|
| Energy level | 7.1% | 20.0% | 72.9% |
| Fitness level | 13.1% | 24.9% | 62.0% |
| Sleep | 16.7% | 24.7% | 58.6% |
| Diet | 15.6% | 28.8% | 55.7% |
| Weight | 24.3% | 27.4% | 48.2% |
| Physical health | 26.6% | 34.9% | 38.6% |
| Stress-related illness | 39.7% | 30.2% | 30.1% |

Table 15. *The Extent to Which Principals Felt that Different Physical Well-Being Aspects Were Affected by Draining Situations Work*

Figure 18 further demonstrates that principals felt their physical well-being was more affected at work than other categories of well-being. The survey gave principals eight positive and eight negative physical well-being descriptors; in contrast to social well-being, where the most selected descriptors were all positive, the top seven physical adjectives principals selected most frequently were all negative: *stressed* (69.4%), *fatigued* (69.0%), *drained* (63.3%), *exhausted* (56.5%), *weary* (38.8%), *burnt out* (36.6%), and *taxed* (33.5%). Only one negative descriptor was not selected as frequently (*weak*, 10.9%). Very few principals indicated feeling *lively* (8.8%), *vibrant* (7.6%), or *tireless* (6.3%) at work.

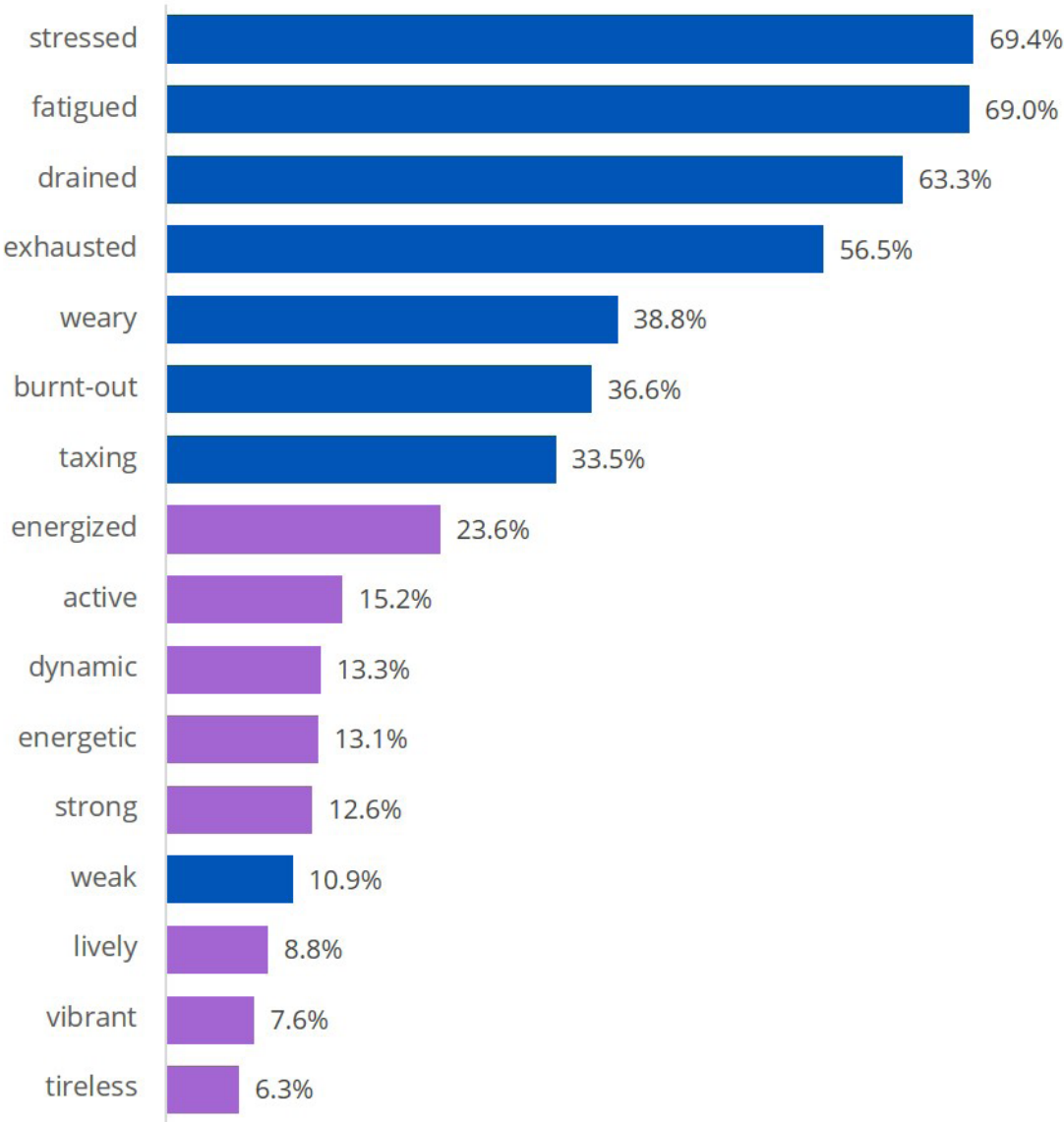


Figure 18. Physical Well-Being: How Participating Principals Felt at Work, as Described by Various Positive (Purple) and Negative (Blue) Descriptors

Spiritual Well-Being

The participants in this study were members of one of the principals’ associations in Ontario, the OPC, which represents Ontario’s English-language, non-Catholic, publicly funded school districts. They were asked to what extent spiritual and religious beliefs and practices were included as part of their practice, and results indicate that most principals do not use spiritual or religious practices to assist them with work. As Table 16 demonstrates, only 15.8% of the participating principals *often* or *always* used religious beliefs to sustain them and only 12.6% attended religious services to provide them with a sense of direction and purpose. A small portion of participants attended

religious services (10.8%) or used spiritual practices (19.0%) to give them strength to deal with work-related issues. A few more principals indicated that spiritual practice gives them direction (20.8%) or grounds them (20.4%) at work. For example, one principal wrote: “*Had it not been for my faith in Christ Jesus, I am not sure that I would have made it this far.*”

| Statement | Never/ Rarely | Somewhat | Often/ Always | Not Applicable |
|--|------------------|----------|------------------|-------------------|
| My spiritual practice provides me with a sense of direction and purpose at work | 47.3% | 18.1% | 20.8% | 13.80% |
| My spiritual practice grounds me at work | 49.8% | 16.4% | 20.4% | 13.30% |
| My religious beliefs sustain me at work | 55.4% | 14.0% | 15.8% | 14.80% |
| Attending religious services provides me with a sense of direction and purpose at work | 62.2% | 9.2% | 12.6% | 16.10% |
| I often resort to spiritual practice(s) to give me strength to deal with work-related issues | 53.5% | 16.0% | 19.0% | 11.60% |
| I often attend religious services to give me strength to deal with work-related issues | 67.8% | 7.5% | 10.8% | 13.90% |

Table 16. The Extent to Which Principals Use Spiritual Well-Being Strategies to Manage Work Situations

Theme 3: Health and Safety

The previous section of this report focused on the various components of principals well-being; in this section, we concentrate specifically on the factors that lead to draining situations at work and explore principals’ workplace health and safety as understood under the *Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act*, the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act*, and the *Human Rights Code*. Specifically, the online survey explored principals experiences of harassment, discrimination, and violence.

Draining Situations

In the previous section, we referred to well-being during draining situations at work. In this section, we describe what types of issues most often led to situations that participating principals felt were draining.

As Table 17 shows, out of 18 different issues, some of the greatest concerns were related to student issues: 79.9% of participating principals found mental health issues among students and 74.0% of principals found the lack of special education supports and resources to be *always* or *often* draining. In addition, student discipline (excluding bullying) was also *always* or *often* draining for 63.3% of principals.

Another situation of high concern was related to workload, as 72.4% of those who responded to this question cited the volume of emails they received to be *always* or *often* draining.

Situations with teachers during a difficult school year with job action such as work-to-rule and rotating strikes were also found to be quite draining, as 68.2% of principals who responded were *always* or *often* affected by mental health issues among teachers, and about half of the principals were also *always* or *often* drained by teachers’ resistance to change (52.9%), or were affected by dealing with concerns about teacher performance (46.3%).

What was consistent with previous results in the social well-being section of this report, however, was that participants considered relationships with certain groups to be supportive as opposed to tiring, as the majority of principals *never* or *rarely* found relationships with vice-principals (74.5%), administrative assistants (73.6%), and support staff (68.2%) to be draining.

| Issue | Never/ Rarely | Somewhat | Often/ Always |
|--|------------------|----------|------------------|
| Mental health issues among students | 3.9% | 16.1% | 79.9% |
| Lack of special education support/resources | 9.7% | 16.3% | 74.0% |
| Volume of daily emails | 7.9% | 19.7% | 72.4% |
| Mental health issues among teachers | 6.2% | 25.7% | 68.2% |
| Student discipline (excluding bullying) | 10.4% | 26.3% | 63.3% |
| Teacher resistance to change | 15.2% | 31.9% | 52.9% |
| Lack of recognition for principals throughout the system | 26.4% | 25.4% | 48.3% |
| Dealing with concerns about teacher performance | 14.0% | 39.7% | 46.3% |
| Union issues | 22.4% | 34.3% | 43.3% |
| High levels of support needed by teachers | 22.2% | 34.9% | 42.9% |
| Pressure from your superintendent and school board | 29.9% | 28.6% | 41.5% |
| Adding information to online systems | 33.4% | 30.0% | 36.6% |
| Inconsistencies of policies and practices | 30.6% | 35.1% | 34.3% |
| Cyber-bullying among students | 33.7% | 36.7% | 29.5% |
| Mentoring of new teachers | 50.7% | 33.9% | 15.3% |
| Relationship with the vice-principal (if applicable) | 74.5% | 15.6% | 9.8% |
| Relationship with administrative assistants | 73.6% | 16.9% | 9.5% |
| Relationship with support staff | 68.2% | 22.9% | 8.9% |

Table 17. The Extent to Which Principals Felt Certain Issues Led to Draining Situations at Work

Draining situations were sometimes also caused by issues in the school community. As Table 18 shows, the biggest concern that principals indicated *often* or *always* led to draining situations was a lack of special education resources and services in the community (67.6%). This was followed by three issues concerning parents/guardians. More than half of the principals found mental health issues among parents/guardians were *often* or *always* draining (57.0%), and more than a third found meetings with parents/guardians (38.8%) and parents/guardians not being involved in their child(ren)’s education (36.6%) to be *often* or *always* draining.

In contrast, the participants indicated that draining situations were *never* or *rarely* caused by racial or ethnic tensions (61.9%) or by lack of support from the school community (53.7%)

The open-ended comments provided more insight into the challenges of working with parents and how social media has now become an ever-increasing concern. As one principal wrote:

The biggest impact on my mental health/well-being at work is being vulnerable to attack on social media. Parents, who do not know what goes on behind the scenes, making judgmental statements about the school, staff, and policies. There seems to be no way to defend against this.

| Issue | Never/ Rarely | Somewhat | Often/ Always |
|---|------------------|----------|------------------|
| Lack of special education resources and services in the community | 11.7% | 20.8% | 67.6% |
| Mental health issues among parents/guardians | 11.3% | 31.8% | 57.0% |
| Meeting with parents/guardians | 16.4% | 44.8% | 38.8% |
| Parents/guardians not involved in their child(ren)’s education | 26.5% | 37.0% | 36.6% |
| Social issues in the school community (poverty, gangs, drugs, etc.) | 37.6% | 28.1% | 34.3% |
| Racial or ethnic tensions in the school community | 61.9% | 21.8% | 16.3% |
| Lack of support from the school’s community | 53.7% | 30.8% | 15.5% |

Table 18. *The Extent to Which Principals Felt Issues with the School Community Led to Draining Situations at Work*

Safety

Most participating principals considered safety to be an area of concern. The data presented here provides more insight into the low physical well-being scores described in the previous section. Almost all of the participating principals (96.9%) had experienced unsafe situations at their workplace. Figure 19 demonstrates that these types of negative interactions most often included passive aggressive behaviours (86.6%) and gossip and slander (66.2%). More than half of the participants had also been involved in escalated conflicts and quarrels (61.3%) or faced false accusations (52.4%). Also common were threats of violence (47.2%), harassment (including intimidating and

offensive jokes or innuendos, displaying or circulating offensive pictures or materials, or offensive or intimidating phone calls) (43.0%), and cyberbullying via social media, texting, emails, Facebook, or Twitter (40.9%). Some principals experienced physical assault (38.6%) or bullying (35.7%).

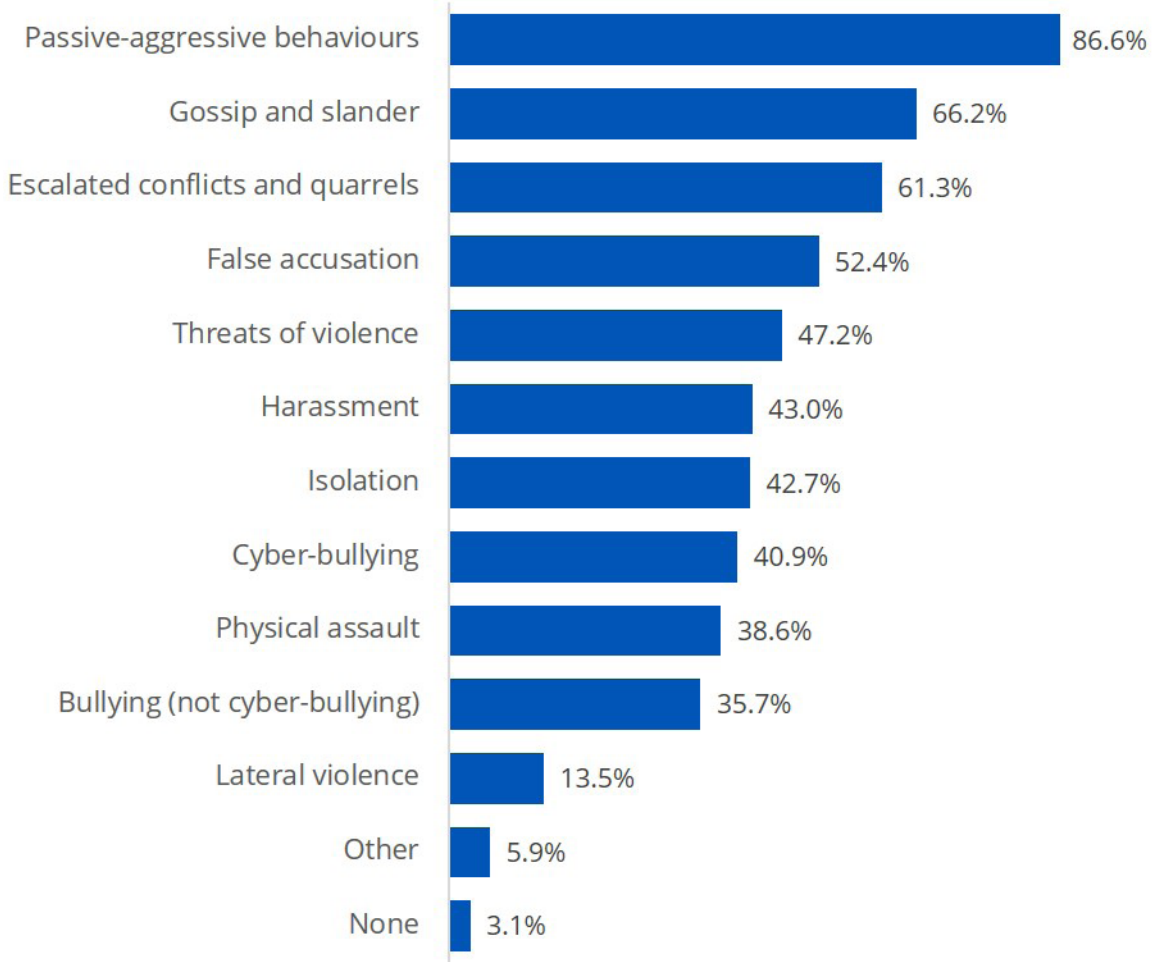


Figure 19. *The Percentage of Principals Who Have Experienced Various Unsafe Situations in the Workplace*

Table 19 highlights the different groups of individuals who have contributed to unsafe situations toward principals. Harassment (70.7%) and threats (64.5%) most often came from parents, guardians, or family members of students. This was followed, to a lesser degree, by teachers who harassed (29.2%) and threatened (12.0%) principals, and union representatives who also harassed (22.2%) and threatened (7.9%) them. Some principals indicated that they had also been physically assaulted by parents, guardians or family members (4.0%).

Unsafe incidents directed at principals from students were also of significant concern. Of the 43.0% of principals who were harassed, 25.9% of this harassment came from students. Of the 47.2% of principals who were threatened, 55.2% of these threats came from students. In addition, of the

38.6% who experienced physical assault, 57.8% of those assaults came from students. The groups who rarely (less than 5%) harassed, threatened, or physically assaulted principals included supply teachers, vice-principals, and facility services (e.g., daycare staff, rental agreement holders). Only 15.5% of principals had never been harassed and 13.5% had never been threatened; 35.6% of principals had not been physically assaulted. Physical assault occurs when a principal has experienced physical harm in an interaction with someone else.

As one principal expressed in the open-ended responses, the numbers reflected here might be underrepresenting the problem, as some principals do not consider physical injury by special needs students an assault:

I struggled to accurately answer the questions about physical assault. When working with students with autism and mental health concerns, I do not consider their physical aggression to be assault. I have been hurt numerous times last year by one student and am currently on a return to work plan following a concussion acquired at work while avoiding another student who has autism and is on medication for his mental health.

| Perpetrator | Harassed | Physically Assaulted | Threatened | # of Responses |
|--|----------|----------------------|------------|----------------|
| Parent(s)/Guardian(s)/family member(s) | 70.7% | 4.0% | 64.5% | 1660 |
| Student(s) | 25.9% | 57.8% | 55.2% | 1032 |
| None | 15.5% | 35.6% | 13.5% | 373 |
| Teacher(s) | 29.2% | 0.2% | 12.0% | 303 |
| Union representative(s) | 22.2% | 0.0% | 7.9% | 203 |
| Superintendent(s) | 14.2% | 0.0% | 4.4% | 160 |
| Other school staff member(s) | 9.0% | 0.0% | 2.8% | 102 |
| Educational assistant(s) | 8.3% | 0.0% | 1.7% | 95 |
| Other | 4.0% | 1.0% | 2.9% | 62 |
| Trustee(s) | 5.2% | 0.0% | 1.7% | 60 |
| Other principal(s) | 5.5% | 0.0% | 0.5% | 52 |
| Substitute teacher(s) | 4.4% | 0.0% | 1.6% | 51 |
| Vice-principal(s) | 4.4% | 0.0% | 1.5% | 40 |
| Facility services | 3.5% | 0.0% | 0.7% | 34 |

Table 19. The Percentage of Participating Principals who have Been Harassed (43.0%), Threatened (47.2%), or Physically Assaulted (38.6%) in their Current role, Broken Down by Perpetrator

After an incident involving being harassed, threatened, or physically assaulted, some of the participating principals spoke about the incident with others in their district school board. For example, two thirds of those who reported did so to senior management, the director, or human resources (67.7%), and half consulted with other colleagues in their board (52.2%). Of those who were harassed, threatened, or assaulted, over half also talked with family members or friends (57.7%). Depending on the situation, a lesser number of principals followed specific protocol (49.9%), reported it to the police (21.6%), or requested that support be brought to their school site (15.7%).

Others also consulted with people outside of their district school board, such as their professional organizations (36.6%) or colleagues outside of their board (6.4%). Very few principals sought permission to take time off (3.6%). The complete list of actions principals took can be found in Table 20.

| Action | % | # of Respondents |
|---|-------|------------------|
| Report to senior management/director/HR | 67.7% | 582 |
| Talk with family members/friends | 57.7% | 496 |
| Consult with other colleagues within my district school board | 52.2% | 449 |
| Follow specific protocol | 49.9% | 429 |
| Contact my professional association | 36.6% | 315 |
| Report to the police | 21.6% | 186 |
| Seek medical/health attention (e.g., physician, counsellor) | 16.3% | 140 |
| Request support be brought in school site | 15.7% | 135 |
| File a Workers' Compensation Board/Workplace Safety and Insurance Board claim | 14.1% | 121 |
| Do nothing | 13.3% | 114 |
| Consult with other colleagues outside my district school board | 6.4% | 55 |
| Not applicable | 5.9% | 51 |
| Consult a lawyer about legal action | 4.8% | 41 |
| Seek permission to take time off | 3.6% | 31 |

Table 20. Actions Principals Took After Being Harassed, Threatened, or Physically Assaulted

When asked what types of discrimination they had personally experienced in the workplace, 46.0% of principals had not experienced any. As Figure 20 shows, other participating principals had been subjected to gender-based (27.0%) or age-based bias (14.4%). Fewer principals had experienced other types of discrimination, such as discrimination based on race (10.6%), sexual orientation (5.9%), religion (4.3%), or ability (4.3%). To help to put these results in context, it is worth referring back to Table 1, which showed the majority of participating principals in this study were White (87.7%). In addition, a previous study on principals found that most identified as heterosexual (91.4%) and spoke English at home (97.1%) (Pollock, Wang & Hauseman, 2014).

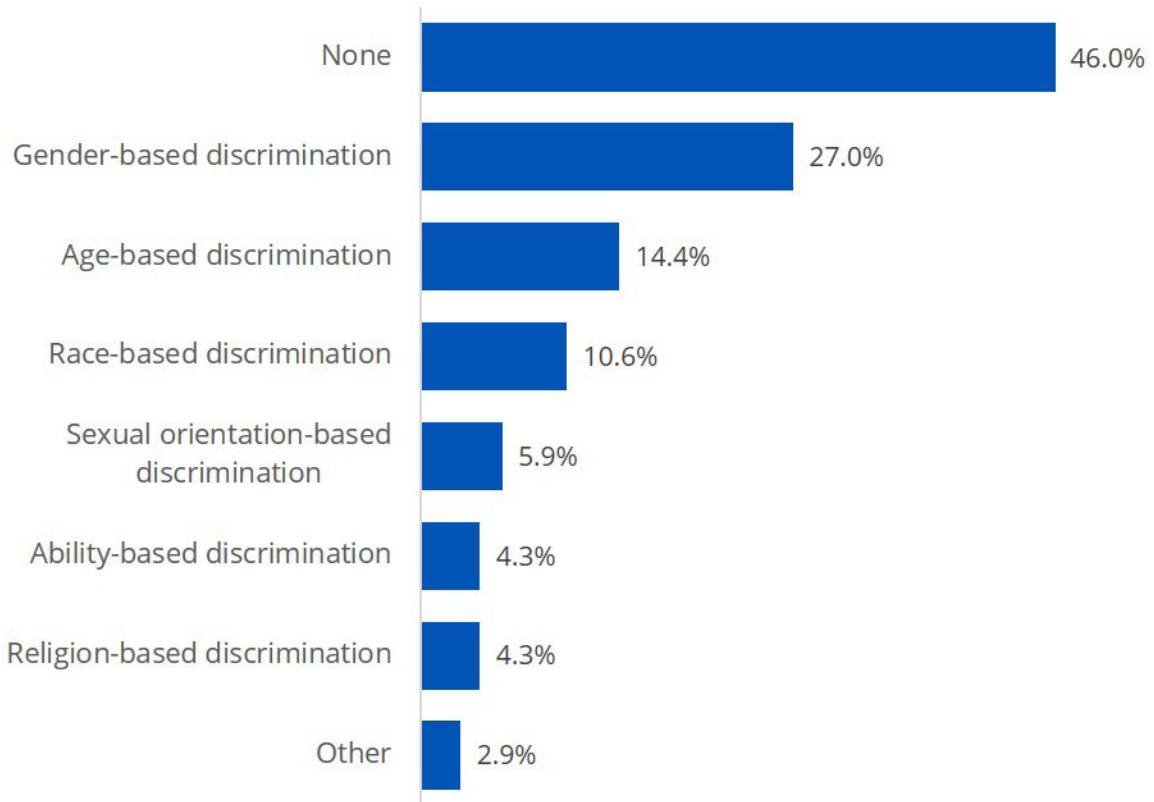


Figure 20. The Types of Discrimination Principals Have Personally Faced in the Workplace

Theme 4: Coping Strategies

Self-Care

In the previous sections of this report, we presented data that indicated principals' workload is intensifying, they regularly face a number of unsafe and draining situations, and their well-being is impacted by their role as school leader. In this section, we examine how the participating principals managed their well-being and stress.

Survey results showed that very few principals felt that they were *excellent* at managing either their well-being (3.8%) or their stress (6.9%). As Figure 21 also shows, more principals felt they were *good* at coping with work-related stress (48.7%) than they were at managing their well-being (38.9%). Although very few felt they were *very poor* at managing their well-being (4.0%), more than one in four participating principals chose *very poor* or *poor* to describe their ability to manage their well-being (28.7%).

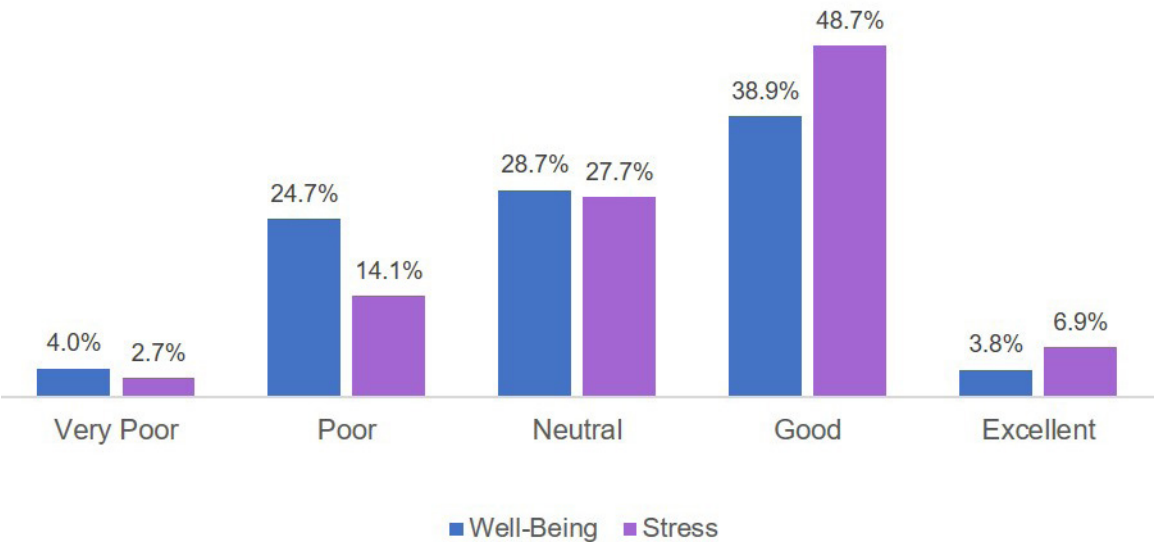


Figure 21. How Well Principals Felt They are Managing their Well-Being and Coping with Work-Related Stress

Although few principals felt they were *excellent* at managing their stress or well-being, many chose positive strategies to cope with a draining day at work. As Figure 22 shows, 66.4% spent time with their family, friends, or pets. About half of the respondents also watched TV or movies (54.9%), and spent time talking with other people (family or friends, 53.7%; colleagues, 49.2%). Half of the participating principals also undertook physical activities or exercise (50.8%). Principals also engaged in positive self-care strategies such as reading (34.4%), listening to music (33.6%), engaging in other hobbies (29.0%), or mediating/ yoga (16.4%). A small number participated in professional counselling (8.8%).

Some principals also undertook activities such as sleeping (41.6%), seeking solitude (39.2%), and eating (38.8%), which, depending on the context, could be considered either a positive or negative action. Although 34.0% indicated they used alcohol, fewer used other substances such as prescription drugs (8.0%), marijuana (4.1%), and tobacco (1.7%); only one principal indicated they had used illegal drugs. It is possible that these numbers may be higher than reported on the survey due to social desirability bias, which can lead some participants to under-report negative thoughts, behaviours, or emotions on surveys.

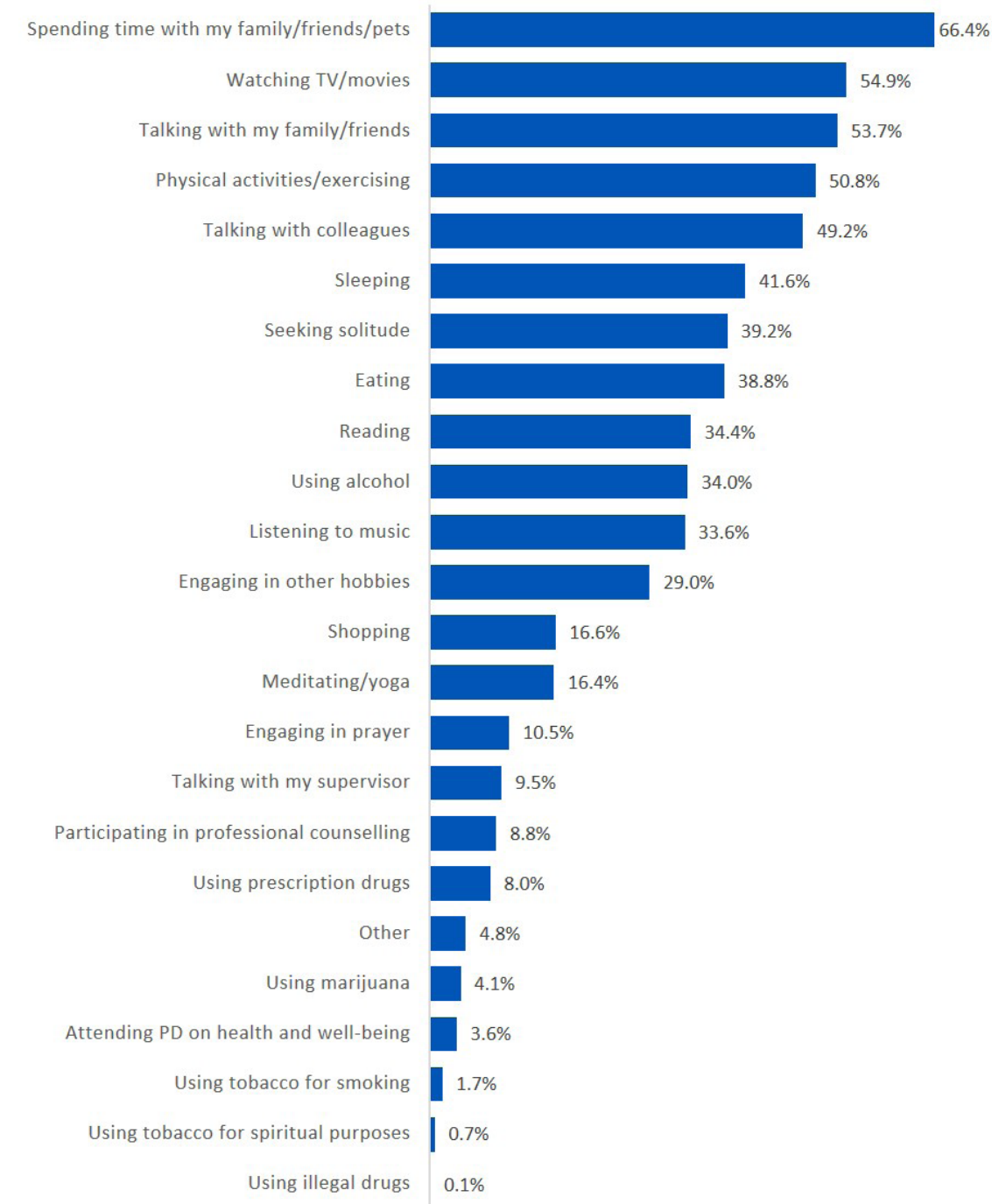


Figure 22. *The Self-Care Activities Principals Use to Cope with a Draining Day at Work*
In addition to using a variety of strategies to cope with a draining day at

work, most principals responded positively to a number of self-care related statements. As shown in Table 21, the large majority either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they managed their emotions well at work (89.5%) and felt self-efficacy (75.9%) and resiliency (69.6%) helped them manage their work. In addition, 65.1% of the participating principals *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they were able to turn adversity into achievement. Less than half of respondents engaged in mindful practices to manage work.

| Statement | Disagree/ Strongly Disagree | Neither Disagree Nor Agree | Agree/ Strongly Agree |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| I manage my emotions well at work | 2.6% | 7.9% | 89.5% |
| Self-efficacy helps me manage my work | 4.4% | 19.7% | 75.9% |
| I feel resilient at work | 11.7% | 18.7% | 69.6% |
| I am able to turn adversity into achievement | 4.4% | 30.5% | 65.1% |
| I engage in mindful practices to manage my work | 23.2% | 32.3% | 44.5% |

Table 21. *The Extent to Which Principals Felt the Following Self-Care Related Statements Applied to Them at Work*

Organizational Supports

In addition to self-care measures, principals benefit from a wide range of supports, yet some were seen to be more effective or more available than others. As Table 22 illustrates, the top five supports that principals found to be *effective* or *very effective* were: health and well-being benefits (46.3%), information sharing for members of professional associations (e.g., OPC, OCT) (45.7%), mentoring for school principals (33.2%), adequate resource allocation (31.3%), and streamlined work process (30.6%).

Although 28.5% of the participating principals found additional time for administrative work to be *effective* or *very effective*, 43.2% found this support to be unavailable. Other unavailable services included a support phone line (45.7%) and the development and use of health-assessment tools designed to support school principals (32.6%), but these were also cited as being the least effective (11.1% and 10.9% *effective* or *very effective*, respectively).

| Support | Very Ineffective/ Ineffective | Neutral | Effective/ Very Effective | Not Available |
|---|-------------------------------|---------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Health and well-being benefits | 18.8% | 29.5% | 46.3% | 5.4% |
| Information sharing for members of professional associations | 14.9% | 37.8% | 45.7% | 1.6% |
| Mentoring for school principals | 23.2% | 27.5% | 33.2% | 16.0% |
| Other | 20.0% | 21.8% | 32.7% | 25.5% |
| Adequate resource allocations | 30.4% | 20.8% | 31.3% | 17.5% |
| Streamlined work processes | 25.8% | 22.2% | 30.6% | 21.4% |
| Collaborative relationships with teacher unions | 21.8% | 35.8% | 30.3% | 12.1% |
| Additional time for administrative work | 15.6% | 12.7% | 28.5% | 43.2% |
| Coaching for school principals | 21.5% | 29.9% | 26.3% | 22.3% |
| Leadership preparation programs | 25.5% | 39.0% | 26.3% | 9.3% |
| District resource people | 32.9% | 29.0% | 25.4% | 12.7% |
| Continued professional learning in different modes | 25.3% | 41.2% | 23.7% | 9.8% |
| Professional learning focused on well-being | 35.3% | 29.9% | 23.6% | 11.3% |
| Opportunities for skill development in technology use | 23.9% | 36.7% | 23.4% | 16.0% |
| Redefine the principal's role | 18.3% | 21.3% | 22.9% | 37.5% |
| Modification to teacher hiring practice | 29.2% | 18.2% | 22.7% | 29.8% |
| Use of evidence and research to advocate for change or support | 26.3% | 33.9% | 21.0% | 18.8% |
| Early Intervention Program (EIP) | 21.4% | 33.0% | 14.8% | 30.6% |
| Work with policy makers to clarify policies and their intent | 25.3% | 32.0% | 13.0% | 29.7% |
| Support phone line | 16.4% | 26.6% | 11.1% | 45.7% |
| Development and use of health-assessment tools to support school principals | 24.6% | 31.7% | 10.9% | 32.6% |

Table 22. Supports Available to Principals and Their Perceived Effectiveness

The results of this study confirmed that principals use a wide variety of important skills to be a successful school leader. When asked which skills they felt were necessary to effectively manage their work, 53.3% or more of the participating principals selected all of the 12 suggested proficiencies in the survey, with the exception of the *other* category, which 11.3% of the principals selected. The ability to manage difficult situations and effectively communicate with others were selected most frequently, as 85.1% of principals selected conflict resolution skills, 84.4% selected communication skills, 83.6% selected the ability to de-escalate situations, and 83.8% selected problem-solving.

Other skills that principals felt were important in managing situations at work were different intelligences—emotional (84.5%) and social intelligence (79.4%). Having a good knowledge base of different aspects of work were also deemed important, such as instructional knowledge (78.7%) and legal/procedural knowledge (74.2%). Many also felt that being able to use technology and social media were also important skills (62.7%). Figure 23 shows the results for all 12 skills.

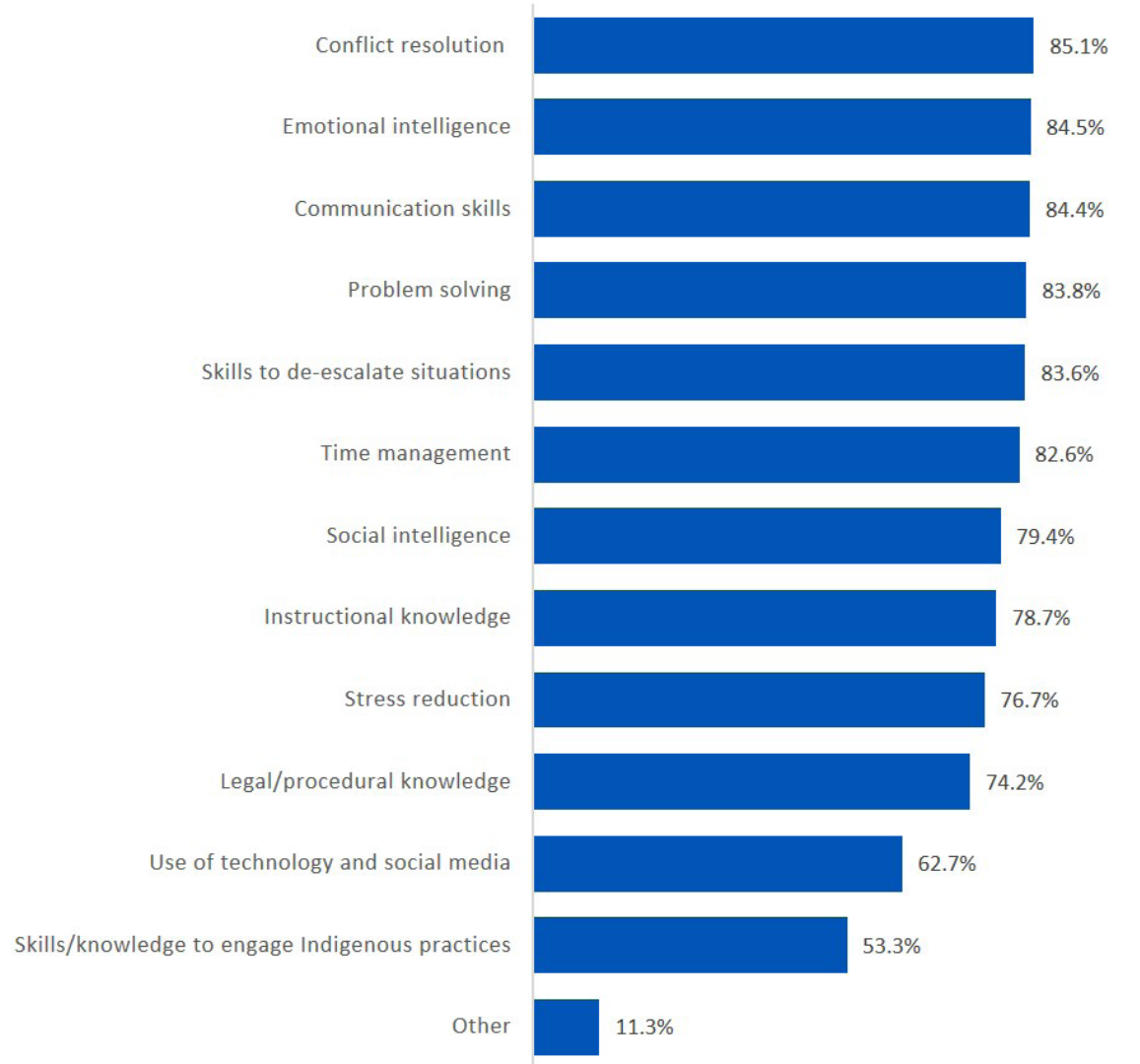


Figure 23. Skills Principals Felt Were Necessary to Effectively Manage Their Work

Results from the open-ended responses at the end of the survey indicated that some principals were able to use coping strategies to get through tough situations, but they worried about others:

My own self-reliance and resilience got me through a very tough situation. My fear is that others won't be able to cope with some of the increasing demands that are coming. We have the best job in the world but have zero respect and support when things don't go the way people think it should. That's what makes our daily walk so difficult.

Principals' ability to use coping strategies does not mean that there is not a larger systemic issue at hand, however. As one participant succinctly summed up, the Ontario principal workload is unrealistic and someone needs to start listening:

We are just expected to know how to cope and support families that have witnessed violence and been through so much trauma. This way of thinking is broken—the more principals continue to take on without appropriate resources—the more dissatisfied principals will become with their work—leading to sick leaves, etc. I am saddened by the number of my phenomenal colleagues who have gone off on leaves or left the career altogether due to the increased demands and lack of resources and support. Injuries are also increasing at the hands of students and parents since I started. Principal workload is unrealistic in Ontario schools and someone needs to start listening—someone needs to start taking this data and moving forward for change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Section 1: Principals' Work Intensification

Establish an Ad Hoc Committee to Examine the Changing Principal Role

We recommend establishing an ad hoc committee with multiple stakeholder groups (e.g., government, professional associations) that will explore how best to update and align the Education Act, role definition, and duties to identify essential and legislatively mandated duties and responsibilities of school principals to better reflect and address work realities. The aim of the ad hoc committee will be to ensure that appropriate resources and support can be provided for and to individuals in this formal position at schools.

Increase School Leadership Allocations to Address Volume of Work

Given that principals' work is intensifying and it is unlikely it will become less intense in the near future, we recommend that an additional leadership role be incorporated into schools. There are three potential ways for this to happen, depending on how schools want to address the volume of work: increasing the number of vice-principals, creating a new position, and/or limiting teaching duties for principals.

More Vice-Principals. Over the past few decades, cost-cutting practices have led to the removal of the vice-principal role from many Ontario schools; we recommend the funding formula be modified to increase the number of vice-principal roles in schools, which would help principals with their volume of work.

Creation of a New Role. Another option is adding a new leadership position with a clearly defined role. We have already seen this work in Chile and the UK. In Chile, many schools have incorporated a pedagogical leadership role that focuses on instructional leadership (Flessa, 2014); in the UK, they have incorporated a school business leadership role, which is focused on management (Armstrong, 2021).

Limit Teaching Duties. Some principals find themselves with excessive additional teaching duties. We recommend that there be a clear delineation of roles, and that principals' teaching duties be limited so that school leaders can concentrate on leading.

Conduct an Education System Work Study

We recommend that the Ministry of Education create a memorandum of agreement to conduct a system-wide study on the work of school and school system leaders that considers the additional stress currently on the system, especially as many districts and schools have experienced cuts in support staff and paraprofessionals. For example, we suspect that the increase in administrative staff at the school level and additional positions at the district school board level will help to offset the additional work demands the school system is experiencing.

Align Policy

We recommend the Ontario provincial government review existing public education policies to reduce the number of policies and procedures for which principals are responsible and to eliminate any policy conflicts that may exist. Doing so could potentially reverse the increasing volume of paperwork and administrative tasks that principals reported consume much of their day, such as follow-up tasks and documentation.

Increase Localized Discretion and Decision-Making

Decades of public policy research have demonstrated that one of the main tensions in developing policy is how to develop policies that are detailed enough to support the intended outcome while allowing for how localized contextual factors will nuance and shape how the policy is enacted. Context matters: "One-size-fits-all" policies will not accommodate all public schools. We recommend that future and revised board policies make allowances for or grant principals more localized discretion and decision-making.

Create Online, Provincially Standardized Templates, Sample Documents, and Interactive Portal

In an effort to reduce the volume of paperwork, we recommend that the Ontario provincial government create an online interactive portal that includes provincially standardized templates and sample documents.

Lieu Days and Discretionary Leave

On average, principals work at least 15 more hours per week than other education occupational leaders and general middle managers. We recommend that school boards implement accumulated discretionary leave or lieu days to recognize the additional work that school principals engage in. As one principal stated, "This could be considered 'wellness time.'" Principals will only take advantage of these lieu days and discretionary leave if the culture and environment supports such practices. We recommend such a culture change in section 3 of these recommendations.

Section 2: School Principals' Well-Being

Continue to Build on the 2016 Ontario Well-Being Strategy for Education, and Ensure That The Well-Being Strategy Extends to Principal Well-Being

The status of Ontario's 2016 Well-Being Strategy for Education is presently unclear. We recommend that the current provincial government continue to build off of this initial well-being initiative that included a diversified and expanded notion of well-being (i.e., emotional, psychological, social, cognitive, and spiritual). Specifically, we recommend the current government ensure that the notion of wellness is comprehensive in its definition in any future iterations. Moreover, the current strategy prioritizes students and children, and as such we also recommend this strategy be expanded to all those in schools including teachers, educational assistants, support staff, and school leaders.

Create or Expand Mental Health and Wellness Teams

We recommend creating or expanding current mental health and wellness teams, composed of trained staff, to specifically help principals manage situations involving urgent mental health situations with students, staff, or parents/guardians. This would release principals from responsibilities more appropriately handled by professionals and experts (e.g., psychologist, counsellors, youth workers, mental health support workers, etc.). The size of these teams will vary according to board size, and may be formal or ad hoc.

Set Up or Expand Existing Well-Being and Safety Positions

We recommend that the Ministry of Education expand well-being lead positions at the district school board level to not only support a comprehensive well-being program for schools but also to expand healthy schools initiatives to include the well-being of all staff including school principals.

Continue to Expand Existing Services and Explore Effective Approaches to Support Principals’ Well-Being

We recommend that professional associations mobilize and align existing resources and programs from the districts, health and community organizations, and provincial and municipal governments to improve school system well-being, and explore or expand the existing third party partnerships that focus on wellness in public schools (e.g., Starling Minds, IWBI, etc.)

Create a Wellness Fund Beyond Current Health and Well-Being Benefits

Many higher education institutions are responding to employee well-being issues by establishing funds that support wellness beyond the benefits found in the majority of traditional health and well-being benefit packages. These sorts of funds can cover items such as fitness equipment, sporting equipment, a personal trainer, nutritional counselling, weight loss programs, smoking cessation programs, and green home initiatives.

Create More Opportunities for Minoritized Principals to Succeed

Our data analysis indicated that improvement in principal diversity is still needed, as the current principal population is 87.7% White. We recommend that the education community actively support and mentor aspiring principals from visibly minoritized groups to pursue official school leadership positions, especially from Black and/or First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI) communities; in our data, these groups only represented 3.3% and 0.7%, respectively.

Section 3: Safety

Implement the Existing Healthy and Safe Ontario Workplaces Strategies

Although public education is the responsibility of the Ontario Ministry of Education, the work sites and employees are also influenced by other provincial government ministries, such as the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Health. We recommend the Ministry of Education continue to strengthen its relationship with the Ministry of Labour to collaboratively implement the existing *Healthy and Safe Ontario Workplaces Strategies* into the Ontario public education system and identify and address any gaps in health and well-being support.

Use Additional Public Sector Organizations to Support Employee Wellness

Ensuring the health and safety of public education workers is complex. We recommend district school boards build stronger working relationships with other public sector organizations, such as the Public Services Health and Safety Association (PSHSA), to support employee wellness through access to resources such as mental health supports.

Expand Safety Teams

We recommend that district school boards create or expand current safety teams to examine physical assaults and other unsafe behaviours, including those from high-needs students, and create a new model for responding to these critical incidents; this model would upload these incidents to the system level, which would enable principals to continue attending to the essential day-to-day needs of their school.

Create a Comprehensive and Supportive Protocol

If not already established, we recommend that district schools boards create comprehensive and supportive protocols to support principals who are dealing with threatening parents/guardians and inappropriate social media harassment.

Continue to Build a Safe and Healthy Work Culture

Ontario school boards and schools are directed by the Safe Schools Act to create a safe and healthy work (and learning) culture. We recommend that district school boards continue to work toward these goals and implement campaigns and programs that encourage safe and respectful behaviours and cultures within schools and communities.

Expand and Diversify Member Support Services

We recommend that professional associations expand and diversify their member support services and early intervention programs. Specifically, we recommend professional associations direct more attention and resources to principals’ health and safety; expand legal and policy consultation services for school leaders on safety issues with students, parents, and teachers; and build working relationships with other organizations and institutions such as the PSHSA and the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, and university researchers to provide evidence-informed services.

Section 4: Coping Strategies for Principals and How to Support Them

Increase Supports and Services for Principals

We recommend that district school boards poll their school leaders on what other additional supports could be specifically targeted to them. These might include support phone lines, online platforms, early intervention programs, counselling services, and health assessment tools.

We recommend that professional principal associations continue to expand their delivery of professional learning opportunities focused on coping strategies, and partner with outside agencies that have expertise in managing workplace stress, such as such the [Canadian Psychological Association](#), the [Workplace Mental Health](#) division of the Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, and Starling Minds (a program currently offered by OPC).

Take Inventory of Your Work Stressors and How You React to Them, Then Seek Out and Build a Repertoire of Healthy Coping Strategies

Our research demonstrates that principals' work involves a number of stressors. However, what might be a stressor for one principal in one school might not be a stressor for another principal in another school. We also know that new work contexts, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, can present new consequences and stressors. We recommend that participating principals take inventory of their current work stressors and, in response to those stressors, build a repertoire of healthy coping strategies that can promote their own overall well-being.

Principals Must Know Their Rights

We recommend principals know their rights and the processes in place that support them when there are safety issues at work.

Reduce Isolation and Build Supportive Networks

We recommend principals build healthy and positive support networks with family members, friends, colleagues, and others. In addition, principals may reduce feelings of isolation by making time to be with trusted individuals who can offer mental and emotional support, practical help/guidance, and alternative points of view.

Manage Email Volume by Setting Boundaries

In terms of professional work, one of the most prevalent issues that principals deal with is the overload of emails. In this study, principals reported spending 10.5 hours per week on emails. Managing emails is not as simple as merely ignoring them or hoping this mode of communication will eventually go away; nor is trying to simply do them faster an efficient way to deal with email overload. How to manage your emails is a very individual endeavour, which means that it is extremely difficult to implement universal support across an entire school system. For this reason, we recommend that principals actively seek out strategies that work for you but, most importantly, set boundaries around when and for how long you will read and write emails. There is only a finite amount of time per week that can be spent on email communication.

CONCLUSION

A great education system needs healthy and committed school leaders. When principals are burnt out and stressed, the overall education system is negatively impacted. Our study examined the changing nature of principals' work in Ontario's English-language, non-Catholic, publicly funded school system and how this work is influencing their well-being. Using data from an online survey, we have presented a more comprehensive picture of the well-being issues principals are facing as they lead their schools. The research findings we have presented in this report are intended to sound the alarm about the worrying reality of principals' work and well-being in Ontario schools: Continued and unmitigated work intensification will subsequently affect the overall well-being of schools and ultimately the entire education system. To create and sustain healthy schools, we need healthy principals; this requires a concerted effort involving stakeholders who represent all education institutions and communities. By working collaboratively, we can create a healthy and safe work environment in which everyone flourishes, including principals.

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