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

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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 our previous work and investigate how work intensification influences overall principal well-being in Ontario and British Columbia. In this report, we focus specifically on British Columbia. For more information on the Ontario survey results, please see https://bit.ly/ONprincipals2020.

We used a survey research approach to collect data on principals' work and the factors that contribute to principals' well-being at work. We developed an online survey in collaboration with the British Columbia Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA), and with focus groups involving different stakeholders. Principals in all 60 of British Columbia's publicly funded school districts, both English- and French-language, were invited via email to participate in this study. The response rate was 38.3%. Of the responses, 474 responses were accepted for analysis, including principals from 56 different school districts. The participating principals had an average of 7.1 years of experience as a principal, and most worked in elementary schools (68.9%) and were female (57.6%). 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 average of 56.9 hours per week. The highest number of hours on average were spent on email (9.6 hours), student discipline and attendance (7.4 hours), and internal school management (6.9 hours). Almost 80% of the 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 on their role and their workplace. Almost all felt their job made a difference in the school community (93.0%). Most also agreed that their school was a good place to work (89.3%) and that they knew how to get the job done (90.4%). However, the large majority of participating principals also indicated the job was highly challenging, as 90.8% felt that their work put them in emotionally draining situations and 88.5% felt that they always had to be available or "on call." Most also encountered increased demands from different stakeholders with competing priorities (86.2%), and felt they were unable to take a break during the work day (75.1%) or found it impossible to take a day off or a sick day (69.2%). Principals indicated they can make their own decisions about how they do their work (71.2%), but increased threats of litigation and complaints have influenced the way they do their work (48.0%).

When asked how the political climate surrounding public education has influenced their work as a principal, some of the biggest concerns were the rising number of mental health issues among students, teachers, and parents (87.6%), as well as a general sense of anxiety within the overall education system (81.9%). This was followed by changes in government policies that impact classrooms, such as the Supreme Court ruling on class size and composition (81.2%).

Well-Being

Almost half (47.8%) of the principals described their well-being as good. However, we found distinct differences when closely examining each of the different types of well-being. For example, over two thirds of the principals ranked their social and cognitive well-being at work as either *good* or *excellent*, but less than one third 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 (76.0%) and satisfaction with relationships (67.3%). Principals felt positively about their work relationships with vice-principals, students, and administrative assistants most often. The least positive working relationship was with union representatives. In contrast to social well-being, many principals felt that physical well-being attributes such as healthy eating (44.3%), adequate sleep (50.8%), and physical activity (55.6%) were *considerably* or *extremely* 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*, *taxed*, *weary*, and *burnt-out*. The descriptor *stressed* ranked 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 the 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 (80.8%), gossip and slander (66.2%), and escalated conflicts (57.1%). Other unsafe situations included harassment and threats by different groups such as teachers, union representatives, educational assistants, and superintendents. But most often, parents or guardians were responsible for harassment (60.5%) and threats (52.0%). Unsafe incidents directed at principals from students were also of significant concern. Students were the second highest group to threaten principals (39.8%), and the first highest group to physically assault principals (38.3%). Additionally, principals have also personally experienced discrimination on the basis of their gender (27.5%), age (19.5%), ability (8.2%), race (7.6%), sexual orientation (6.3%), and religion (4.9%).

Thus, it was unsurprising that principals named issues with students as primarily leading to draining situations at work. Many principals found mental health issues among students (68.9%) and a lack of special education supports and resources (63.2%) to be *always* or *often* tiring, as well as dealing with student discipline (41.8%). Also quite draining were situations with parents or guardians, such as dealing with mental health issues (49.1%) or a lack of involvement in their child's education (36.7%). 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 (62.4%). About half of the respondents (55.0%) also watched TV or movies, undertook physical activities or exercise (52.6%), or spent time talking with family and friends (52.4%), or with colleagues (49.5%). 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., BCPVPA) (53.4%), health and well-being benefits (49.0%), mentoring (35.9%), and adequate resource allocation (36.3%). 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, communication skills, the ability to de-escalate situations, time management, and problem-solving.

Final Comments by Principals

The survey allowed for participating principals to add their optional comments at the end, and 195 principals (41.1%) 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 (Allison, 2015; 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; 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, 2016; Pollock & Briscoe, 2019; 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). A smattering of reports and anecdotes have revealed that studies on principals' well-being tend to focus on the symptoms and consequences of ill-being. As such, there is a lack of comprehensive research that probes every aspect of well-being, including the causes, symptoms, consequences, and coping strategies at different levels. This study provides empirical evidence on these key areas and advances the discussion on principals' work and well-being.

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 British Columbia research results reported here were made possible with the support of the BCPVPA. Prior to the launch of the online survey, we conducted focus groups to 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 BC'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 60 of British Columbia's English- and French-language publicly funded school districts were invited to participate in this study. Invitations were sent via email to all current BCPVPA principal members. The survey window to respond was open for 37 days (approximately 5 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 BCPVPA website and tweets were sent from the BCPVPA's official Twitter account to encourage participation. Due to the effectiveness of these strategies, the survey achieved a response rate of 38.3%.

Description of the Sample

A total of 1,239 principals from the BCPVPA were invited to participate in the online survey. Although a total of 524 responses were collected during the five-week period, 50 responses were incomplete and excluded from analysis. As a result, the response rate for the survey was 38.3%, based on a total of 474 responses accepted for analysis (419 completed surveys and an additional 55 partially completed surveys, where respondents completed over two thirds of the questions). The sample included principals from 56 different school districts that responded to the survey, located within a broad range of different school and community contexts. Both elementary and secondary school principals participated in the survey: 68.9% of respondents were elementary school principals, while 18.8% of the sample were secondary school principals. Figure 1 also shows that 8.4% of participating principals worked in schools that included both elementary and secondary students, and 2.9% were middle school principals.
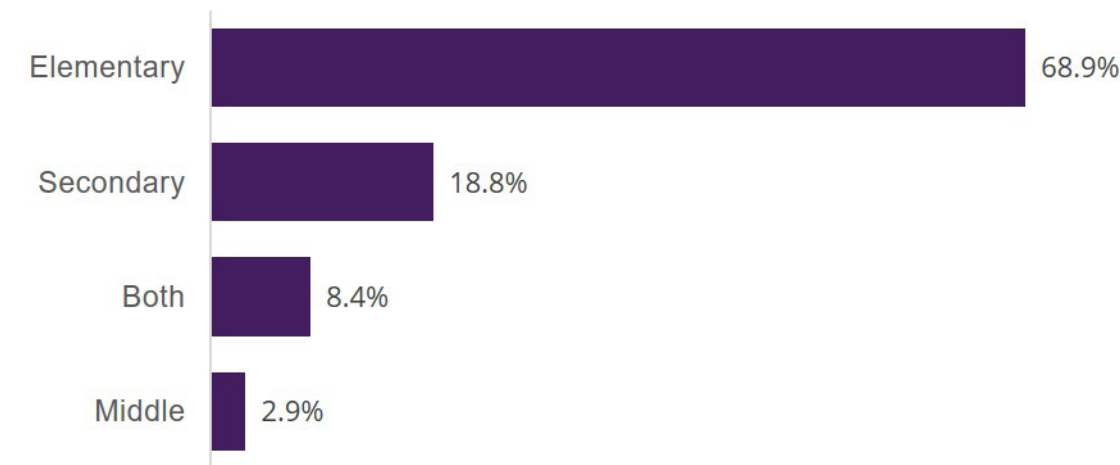
Figure 1. *School Characteristics: Percentage of Participating Principals at Each School Type*

Slightly more than half of the principals who participated in this survey identified as female (57.6%). As also shown in Figure 2, 41.2% of respondents self-identified as male, and 1.2% preferred not to answer. No participants identified as nonbinary.

Figure 2. *Participant Characteristics: Gender*

As displayed in Figure 3, only 1.7% of the participating principals indicated that a bachelor's degree was the highest level of formal education they had completed. The large majority (93.3%) of respondents had obtained a master's degree. Smaller numbers of participating principals had obtained other formal qualifications, such as 1.4% of respondents who indicated they had earned a professional degree (e.g., MD, LLB, JD, etc.), and 2.2% who had obtained a doctorate.

Figure 3. *Participant Characteristics: Highest Level of Education*

Many of the participating principals were still in the early stages of their careers. Almost half of the participants (47.3%) 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 7.1 years of experience across the total sample. As Figure 4 demonstrates, 29.1% of the principals had between 6 and 10 years of experience, 15.0% had between 11 and 15 years, and 6.9%

had between 16 and 20 years of experience. A small percentage of principals (1.7%) 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 45 and 49 (29.3%), followe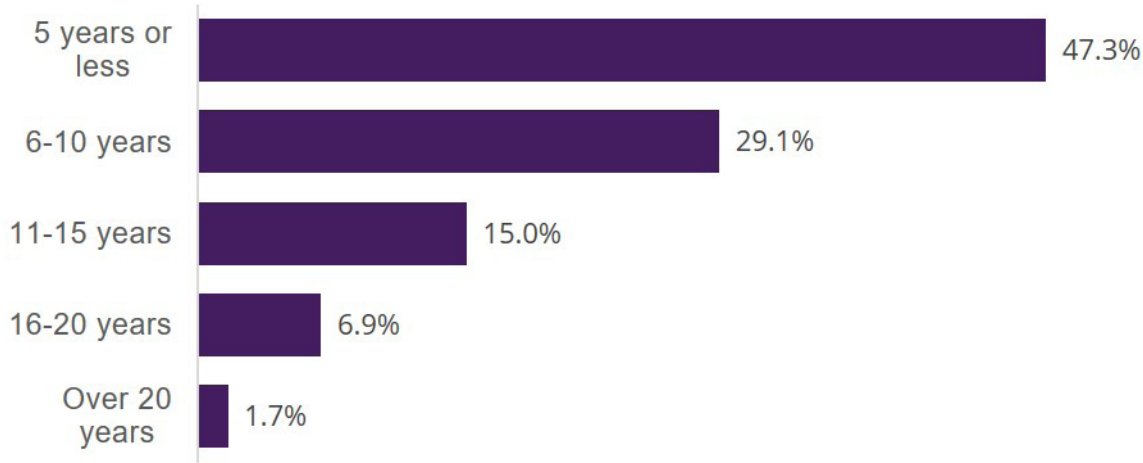d closely by those who were slightly older, between 50 and 54 (27.8%) or between 55 and 59 (20.9%). A total of 11.0% of principals who responded were between 40 and 44 years of age. Very few participating principals were younger than 39 or older than 60 years of age. No principals were younger than 30 years old.
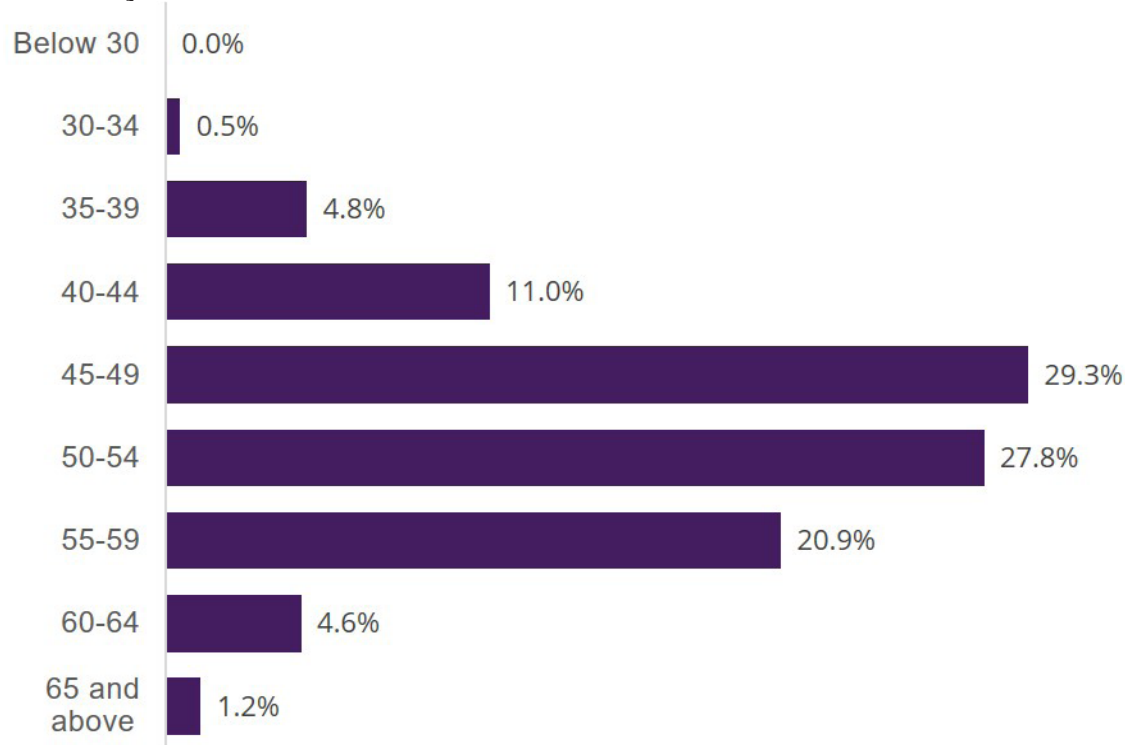
Figure 5. *Participant Characteristics: Age Range of Participating Principals*

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: 89.6% 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 3.2% of the sample self-identified as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI). South Asian principals represented 1.9% of the sample, and an additional 1.5% identified as Chinese. A few identified as Japanese (0.5%), West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, etc.) (0.5%), Black (0.5%), or Korean (0.2%).

Ethnic Background	Frequency	%
White	369	89.6%
First Nation, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI)	13	3.2%
Other	9	2.2%
South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)	8	1.9%
Chinese	6	1.5%
Japanese	2	0.5%
West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, etc.)	2	0.5%
Black	2	0.5%
Korean	1	0.2%
Filipino	0	0.0%
Arab	0	0.0%
Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, Laotian, etc.)	0	0.0%
Latin American	0	0.0%

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics: Ethnic Background of Participating Principals*

Half of the principals who responded to the survey worked in larger cities with populations over 100,000 (100,000 to 1,000,000, 38.3%; over 1,000,000, 11.9%). As displayed in Figure 6, 22.3% of principals worked in towns with populations between 15,000 and 100,000, and 16.5% of respondents were employed in schools located in small towns with between 3,000 and 15,000 people. An additional 10.0% of participating principals worked in a village, hamlet, or rural area with less than 3,000 people.
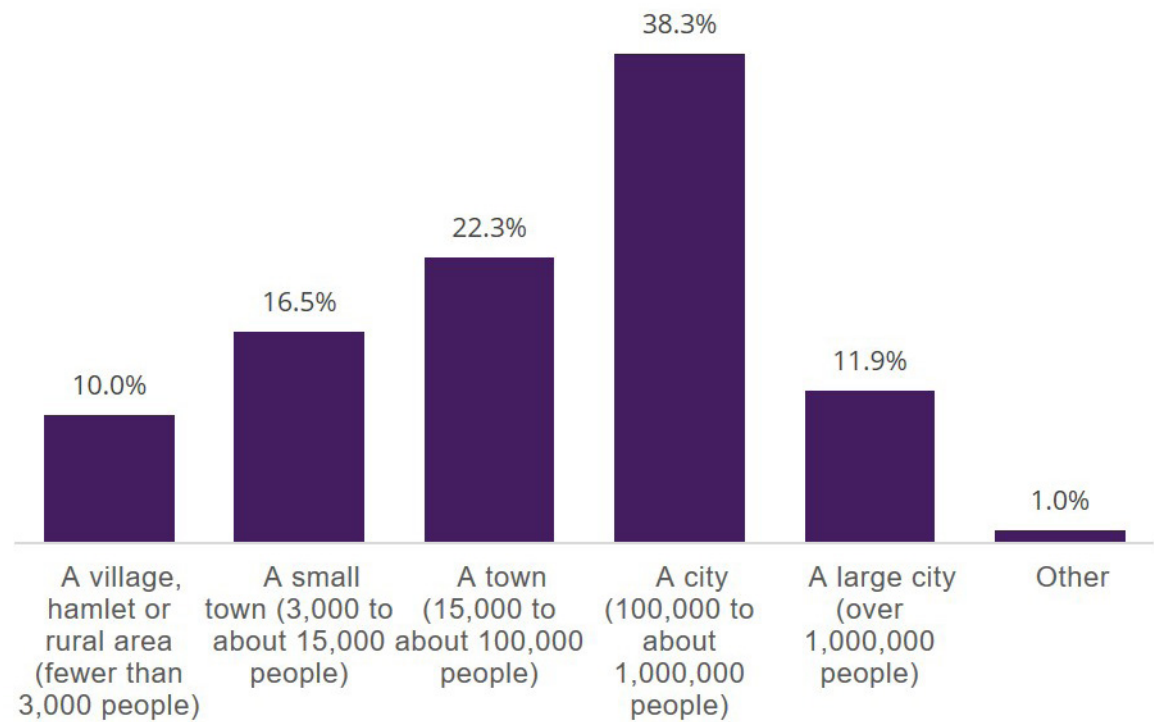
Figure 6. *School Characteristics: Size of Surrounding Communities*

Approximately half of the participating principals (51.2%) 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, 17.2% of principals worked in schools with 21 to 30% of students of lower income families, 9.3% of principals worked at schools with 31 to 40% of lower income families and 8.0% worked at schools with 41 to 50% living in lower income households. A few principals (1.5%) worked at a school with more than 90% of their students living in a lower income family household.
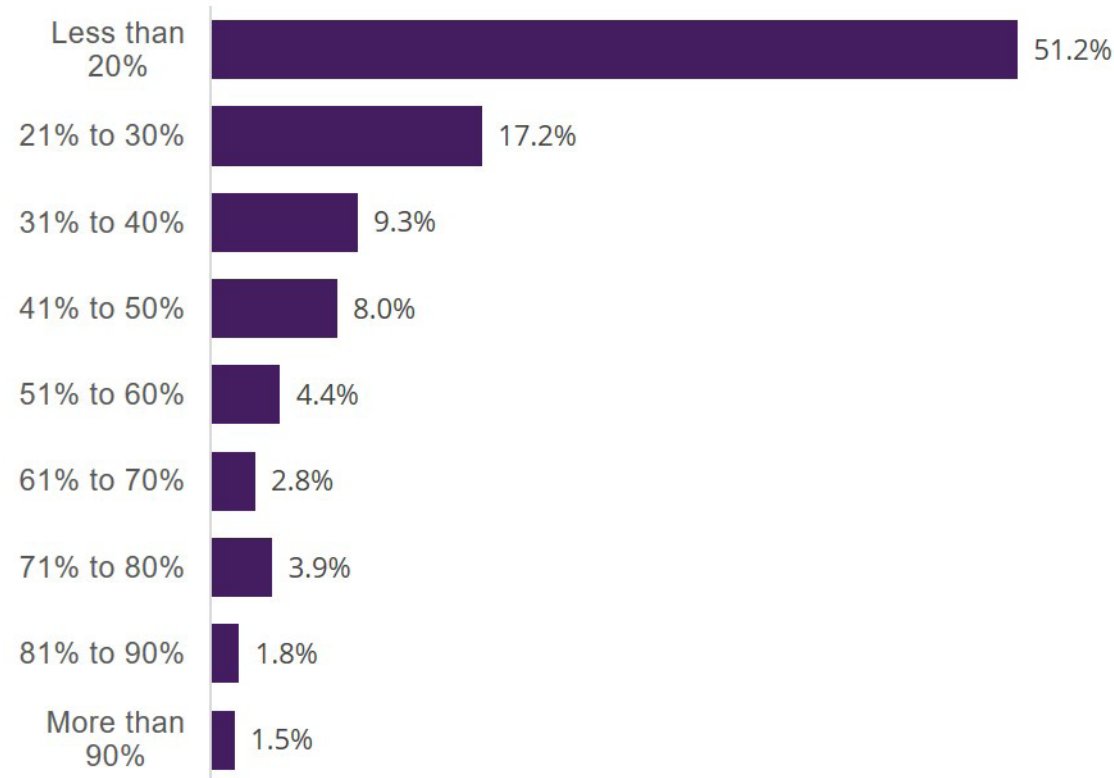
Figure 7. *School Characteristics: Schools and Percentages of Students Who Live in a Lower Income Family Household*

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, almost two thirds of the participating principals (60.5%) selected *good*. As Figure 8 shows, 26.7% felt their ability to manage was *average*, and 7.8% chose *poor*. Only 4.9% chose *outstanding* and no principals chose *very poor*.
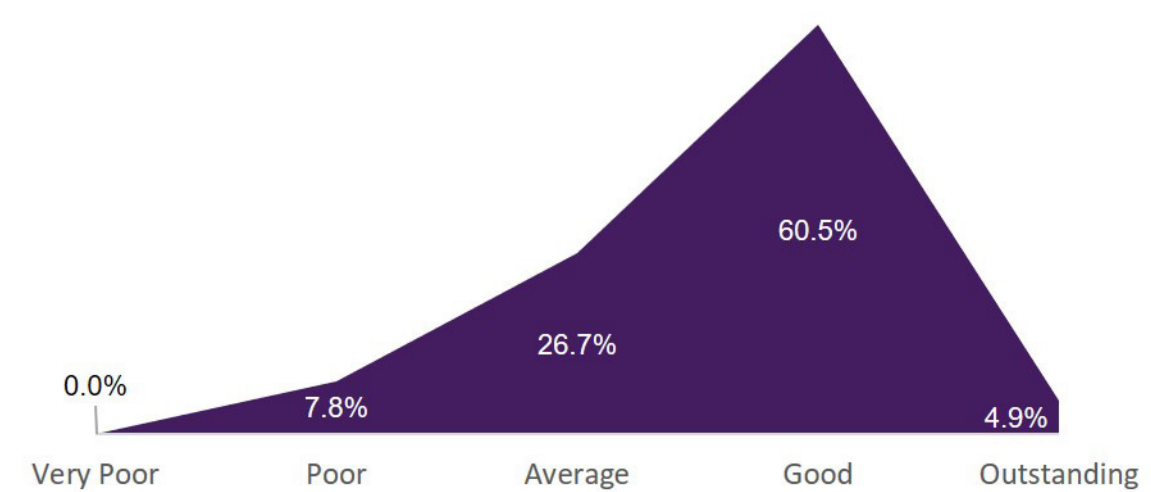
Figure 8. *How Principals Feel About Their Overall Ability to Manage Their Work*

However, some principals who offered additional comments at the end of the survey qualified their response to the above question. For example, one survey respondent stated: "*I am curious that I feel 'good' overall, but have answered that many things could impact me negatively!*" Another participating principal shared:

> *I have been doing this work for over a decade and I still have periods of feeling very overwhelmed by the workload. I never feel that I am doing an excellent job and it often feels like I am either falling behind or just keeping up...never getting ahead.*

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

How Principals Spend Their Time

Previous studies have 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 (Higginbottom, 2019; Leithwood & Azah, 2014; Nitta et al., 2019; Ontario Principals' Council, 2017; Pollock, 2016, 2017; 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 BC—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 56.9 hours. As Figure 9 highlights, almost all participating principals (97.2%) worked more than the normal 40-hour work week and the majority of principals (almost half, 47.2%) worked between 50 and 60 hours per week. In addition, 20.6% worked more than 60 hours per week.
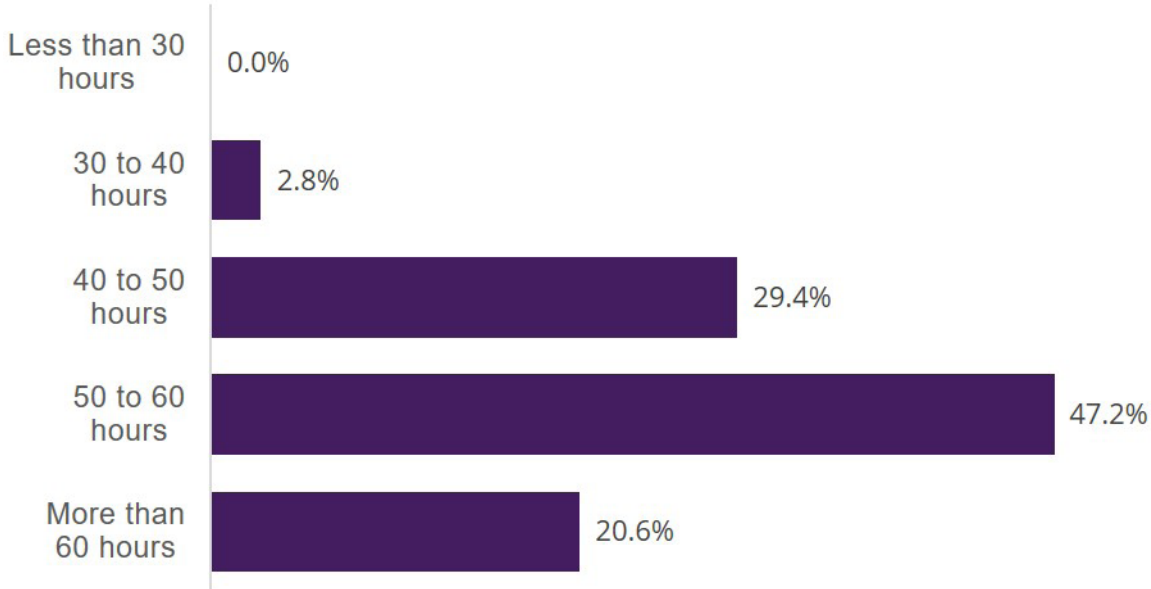
Figure 9. *Average Number of Hours Participating Principals Worked Per Week*

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 7.4 hours. The next highest average weekly hours were internal school management activities that included the calendar, office, memos, the newsletter, the website, and so forth (6.9 hours). Also taking over five hours each week were tasks specifically related to students including special education and student well-being (5.2 hours each).

However, there was a range in hours that principals spent on different tasks, as many principals worked many hours beyond the regular work day. As stated by one principal in the additional comments: "*I have been an administrator for over 12 years and the climate has changed. The expectations and hours needed to do this job properly are not realistic.*" Another added: "*The work is fulfilling and rewarding, but the demands continue to increase and it is impossible to get everything done, even working 12-hour days.*" A number of survey respondents indicated that hours could fluctuate depending on the situation and the issue: "*The survey asked about [the] amount of hours on discipline—varies widely. If there's a 'big issue' involving police/parents/ etc. it can take 10–15 hours. Other weeks perhaps 2–3.*"
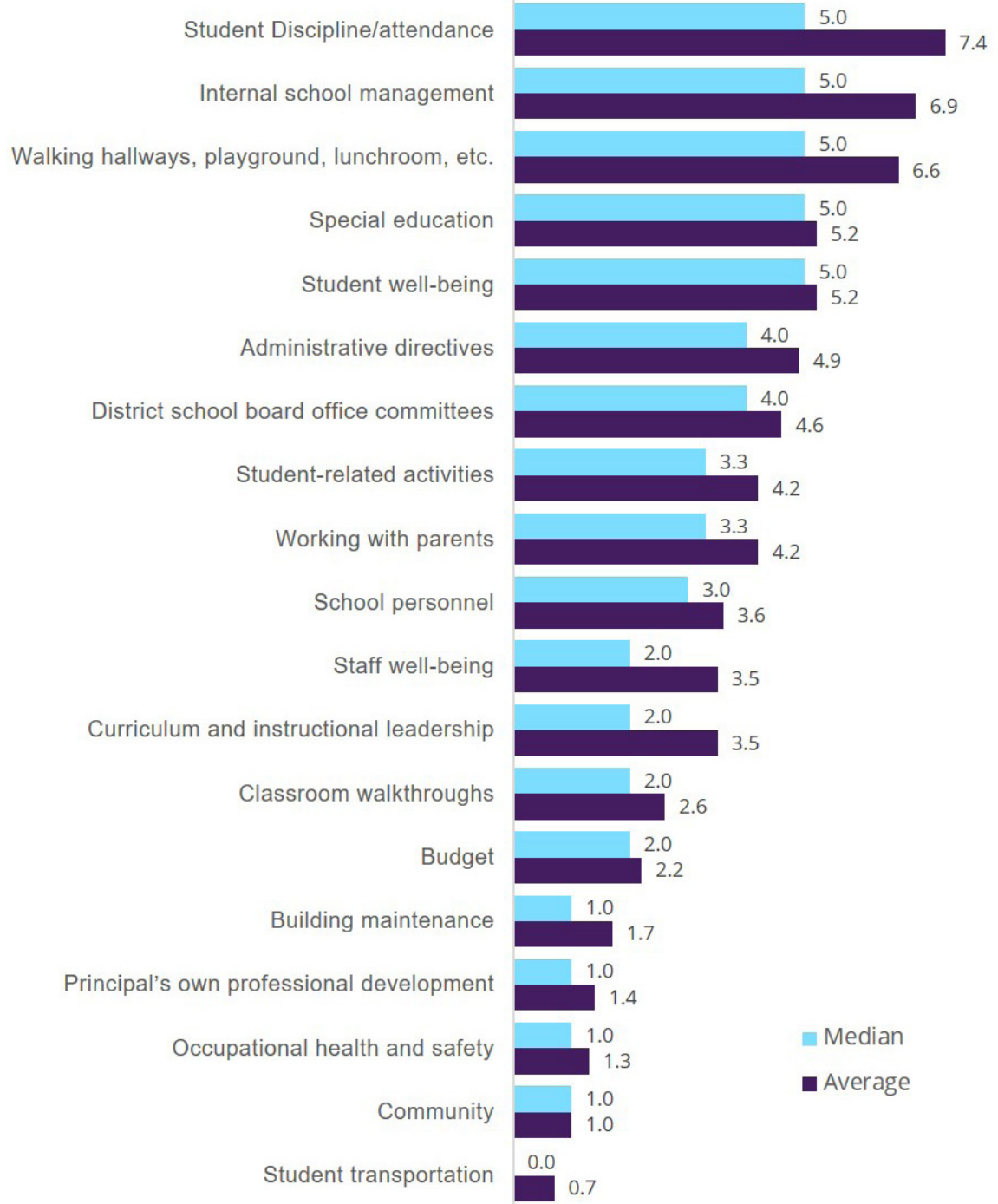
Figure 10. *Average Number of Hours Principals Spent on a Task and Activities in One Week*

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 (46.2%). Almost 80% of the participating principals would like to spend more time on matters related to instructional leadership, such as their own professional development (79.6%), classroom walkthroughs (79.5%), and

overall curriculum and instructional leadership (79.8%). As shown in Figure 11, the participants also indicated that they would like to spend less time on matters related to managerial matters, such as internal school management (49.0%), administrative directives (40.8%), school board committees (36.0%), and building maintenance (34.4%). As one participant stated:

The job very rarely allows for instructional leadership inside the confines of the school day. Any work in this realm is done prior to or after the instructional day due to intensification of the workplace.
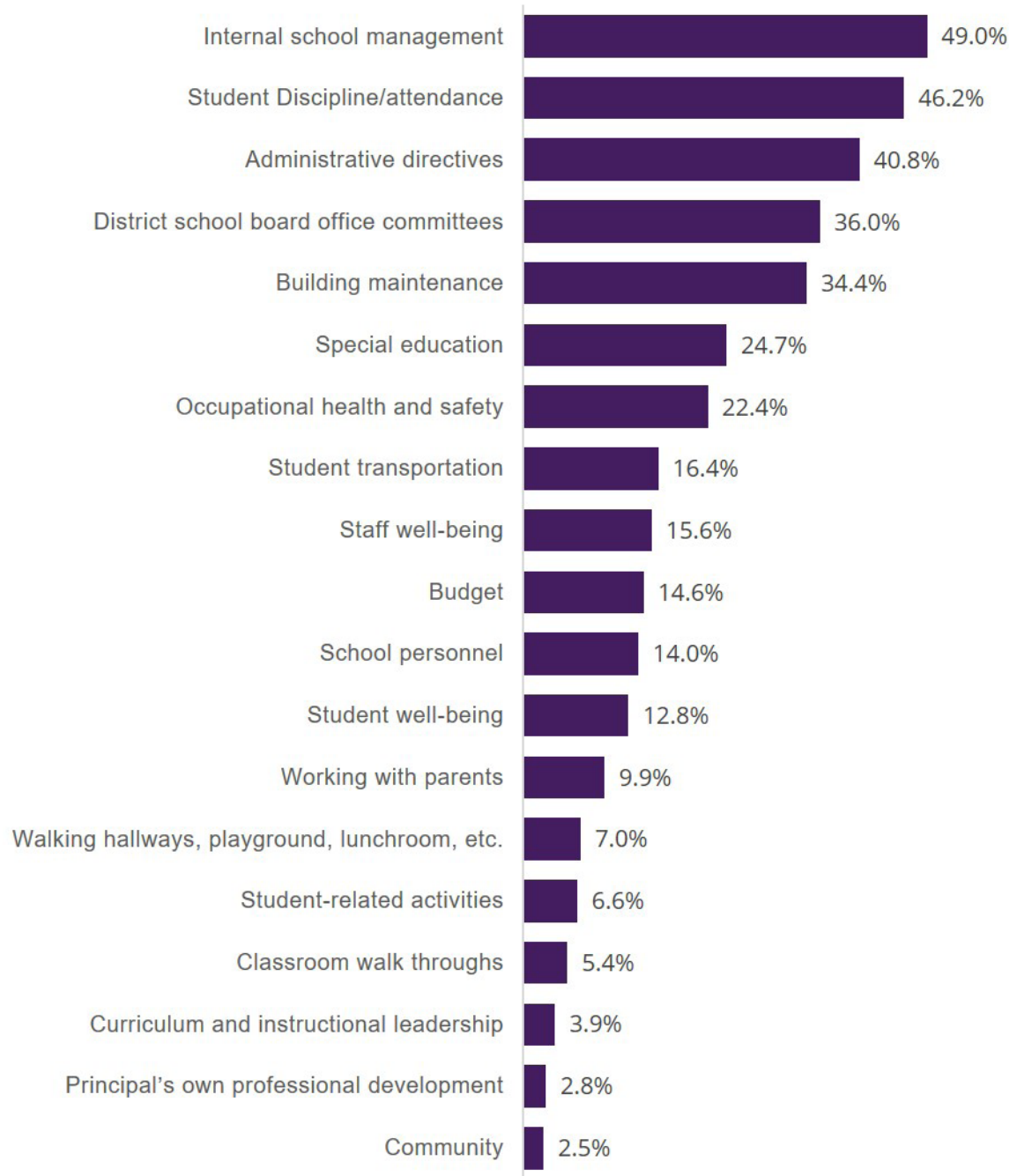
Figure 11. *Principal Perspectives on Various Activities they Feel they Should be Spending Less Time on*

Principals in this study spent many hours each week undertaking communication tasks. Email took up the most time, with an average of 9.6 hours every week, and 82.3% 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 and attendance (as shown previously in Figure 10 at 7.4 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 the next highest number of hours, averaging 6.0 hours a week. This was followed by formal, scheduled meetings (4.7 hours).
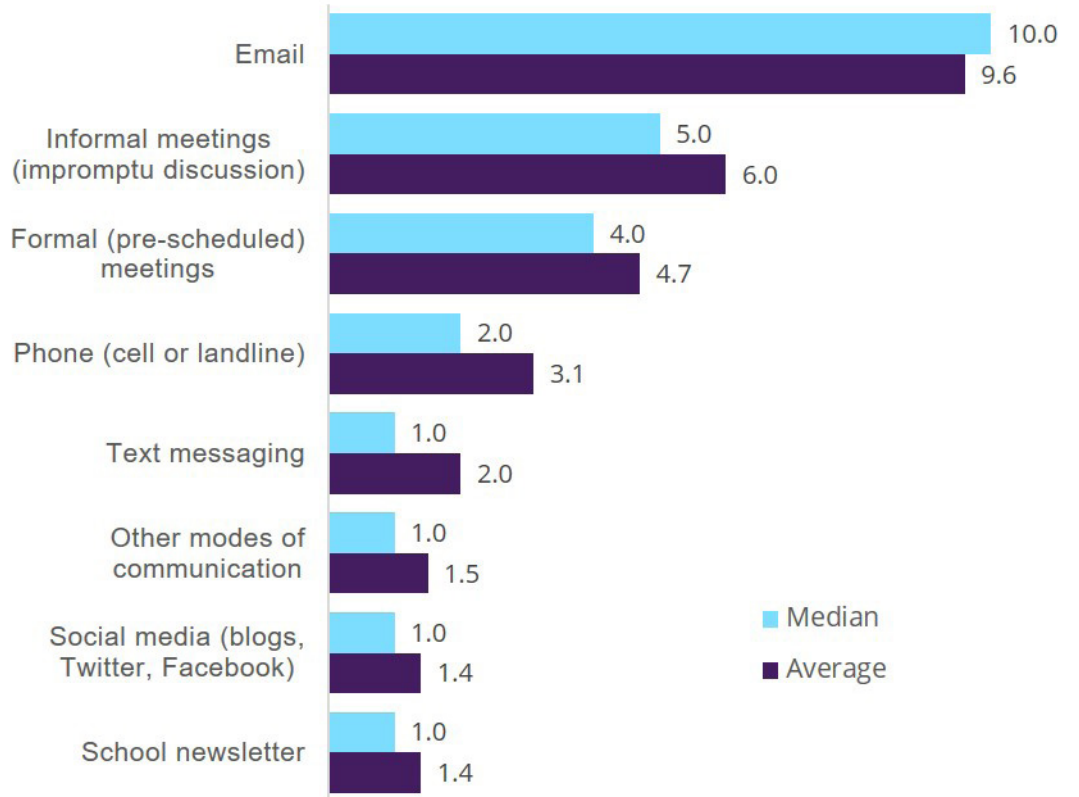
Figure 12. *The Average Number of Hours Principals Spent on Various Communication Tasks, and the Range of Hours that Participating Principals Spent on These Activities in One Week*

In summary, what tasks do principals spend the most time on? Figure 13 recaps the preceding results from both regular and communication tasks and demonstrates that principals spent an average of more than 5 hours a week on each of the top seven tasks: email (9.6 hours); student discipline and attendance (7.4 hours); internal school management (6.9 hours); walking hallways, the playground, and the lunchroom (6.6 hours); informal meetings (impromptu) (6.0 hours); student well-being (5.2 hours); and special education (5.2 hours).
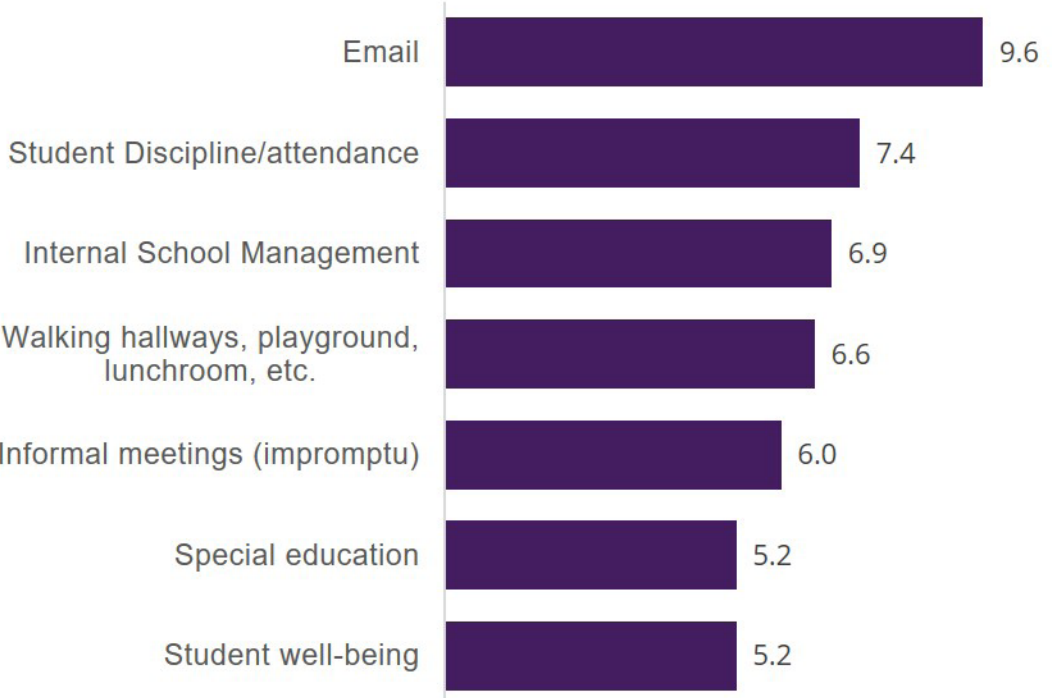
Figure 13. *Principals Spent an Average of More than 5 Hours a Week Doing These Top Seven Tasks*

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 (93.0%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* when asked if they felt their job made a difference in the school community. Most also *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that their school was a good place to work (89.3%) and that they knew how to get the job done (90.4%).

However, the large majority of participating principals also indicated the job was highly challenging, as 90.8% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that their work put them in emotionally draining situations and that they always had to be available or "on call" (88.5%). Most also *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they encountered increased demands from different stakeholders with competing priorities (86.2%), and that they felt unable to take a break during the work day (75.1%). Many also felt pressured to work long hours (71.5%). When asked if they had time to complete all their tasks, 71.4% *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with this statement.

The parental/guardian influence as well as fear of litigation have also impacted principals' work. Almost half of the participating principals *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that increased threats of litigation and complaints have influenced the way they do their work (48.0%). Many felt that increased parental engagement has also influenced how they go about doing their work (63.7%). As one survey respondent explained:

Demands are increasing—from all sides. Litigation is increasing for even the tiniest of issues. Outrage and threats of litigation are becoming increasingly common responses to decisions made by principals.

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

Statement	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	Neither Disagree Nor Agree	Agree/ Strongly Agree
My job makes a difference in the school community	0.9%	6.1%	93.0%
My work puts me in emotionally draining situations	1.8%	7.2%	90.8%
I know how to get my job done	1.6%	8.0%	90.4%
My school is a good place to work	4.0%	6.8%	89.3%
My work requires me to always be available or "on call"	3.2%	8.2%	88.5%
My work requires extensive memory recall	3.3%	9.6%	87.1%
I encounter increased demands from competing priorities from different stakeholders	2.8%	11.0%	86.2%
I am unable to take a break during the work day	14.7%	10.1%	75.1%
I find my work unpredictable	7.5%	17.8%	74.7%
I feel pressured to work long hours	11.7%	16.8%	71.5%
I can make my own decisions about how I do my work	9.4%	19.4%	71.2%
I find it impossible to take a day off or a sick day	13.3%	17.5%	69.2%
Increased parental engagement has influenced how I go about doing my work	8.4%	27.9%	63.7%
I get behind on my work	20.6%	18.3%	61.1%
The pace of my work is too fast	16.2%	30.3%	53.5%
Increased threats of litigation and complaints have influenced the way I do my work	25.6%	26.5%	48.0%
I have the appropriate resources to do my job	35.3%	28.3%	36.5%
I find it impossible to attend professional development events	35.7%	31.8%	32.5%
I often have time to complete all my work tasks	71.4%	15.5%	13.1%

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 (99.0%), almost all also admitted that that the demands of everyday work life had an impact on them (94.8%). Table 3 also shows that over half *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they often felt overwhelmed by their work responsibilities (51.5%).

Yet, despite less than half of the participating principals *agreeing* or s*trongly agreeing* that the role of the principal was what they expected (40.4%), many demonstrated perseverance. Most *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that they had given up trying to make big improvements or changes in their professional life (70.5%), and most *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* that they did not enjoy new situations that required them to change familiar ways of doing things. (78.2%). As one principal expressed in their additional comments:

> *I absolutely love my job! I feel it is rewarding and that I am well-prepared to take on the challenges. I have over 10 years of experience as an administrator and continue to learn and grow every day. However, union politics, underfunding, poor portrayal of educators in the media, and changes at the district level are stressors.*

Statement	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	Neither Disagree Nor Agree	Agree/ Strongly Agree
I have compassion for people at my work	0.2%	0.7%	99.0%
The demands of everyday work life have an impact on me	1.6%	3.6%	94.8%
I often feel overwhelmed by my work responsibilities	17.9%	30.6%	51.5%
My work negatively impacts my relationship with my family and friends	30.7%	23.3%	46.1%
The role of principalship is what I expected	32.7%	26.8%	40.4%
I do not find current professional activities helpful for my work	42.1%	33.0%	25.0%
I have given up trying to make big improvements or changes in my professional life	70.5%	19.7%	9.7%
I do not fit very well with the communities my school serves	78.8%	14.7%	6.4%
I do not enjoy being in a new situation that requires me to change old familiar ways of doing things	78.2%	16.6%	5.3%

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 are *often* or *always* grappling with a lack of replacement staff (69.1%). In addition, concerns involving special education issues related to teachers were also ranked highly, as 68.6% of the participating principals were *often* or *always* affected by a lack of teachers with special education expertise, or found there was a lack of special education support for teachers (67.4%).

More than half of the participating principals indicated that the teacher performance appraisal process was also a concern, as 59.7% *often* or *always* had difficulty terminating underperforming teachers, and 59.6% found they had a lack of time to evaluate teachers. Principals were not as frequently affected by teacher turnover (30.8%) or lack of trust between teachers and parents/guardians (28.3%).

Situation	Never/ Rarely	Sometimes	Often/ Always
Lack of replacement staff	8.8%	22.1%	69.1%
Lack of teachers with special education expertise	7.8%	23.6%	68.6%
Lack of special education support for teachers	8.8%	23.8%	67.4%
Difficulty terminating under-performing teachers from the school	18.8%	21.5%	59.7%
Lack of time to evaluate teachers	10.5%	29.8%	59.6%
Difficulty recruiting and hiring the right teachers.	7.9%	32.6%	59.5%
Lack of qualified substitute teachers/TTOCs	14.0%	34.8%	51.2%
Teacher and staff apathy and resistance to change	12.3%	38.5%	49.2%
Lack of time for teacher planning and professional development	16.3%	43.9%	39.9%
Principals' 'fail to fills'	29.8%	32.7%	37.5%
Lack of teacher knowledge and skills	14.0%	50.4%	35.6%
Teacher turnover	22.9%	46.3%	30.8%
Lack of trust between teachers and parents/guardians	27.3%	44.4%	28.3%

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

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 (87.6%) and a general sense of anxiety within the education system (81.9%). This was followed by changes in government policies that impact classrooms, such as the Supreme Court ruling on class size and composition (81.2%) and BC curriculum changes (including Indigenous learning and pedagogy) (75.3%). Also ranking highly as influences were finite resources available to meet demands from constituents (65.6%) and advances in information communication technology (61.6%).

Even the two lowest impact factors had many principals indicating they were *very* or *extremely* influenced by them: for example, operational and building management demands (42.6%) and the rapidity and multiplicity of policy enactment (35.6%). For a list how other political climate factors surrounding public education have influenced principals, refer to Table 5.

Factor	Not At All/ Slightly	Somewhat	Very/ Extremely
Growing mental health issues among students, teachers, and parents	1.9%	10.4%	87.6%
A system of anxiety in education	2.4%	15.6%	81.9%
Supreme court ruling on class size and composition	6.9%	11.9%	81.2%
BC curriculum change (including Indigenous learning and pedagogy)	5.7%	19.1%	75.3%
Finite resources available to meet demanding constituents	10.0%	24.4%	65.6%
Other	21.1%	15.8%	63.2%
Advances in information communication technology	11.9%	26.6%	61.6%
Increasingly diverse student populations	12.6%	27.4%	60.0%
Consumer mentality among parents	16.7%	29.4%	53.9%
Impact of the changing government (e.g., reduced resources, recent policy and program changes)	12.0%	36.2%	51.9%
Diversification of student discipline	18.1%	31.6%	50.3%
Diversity of community values	19.8%	35.4%	44.8%
Board level changes, composition and its impact	23.6%	32.5%	44.0%
A culture of complaints and litigation in educational system	29.4%	27.7%	43.0%
Operational & building management demands	16.1%	41.3%	42.6%
Rapidity and multiplicity of policy enactment	25.7%	38.8%	35.6%

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 difficult:

> *Many of the initiatives/changes that have been put in place over the last few years do not come from the people who actually work in schools. They come from policy-makers. Hence, principals are left to try and prioritize how to lead schools and implement policy, which often interferes with change. They have very much become caught in the middle trying to do the impossible.*

A number of principals indicated they were planning to leave the role early, as they could no longer "*try to do the impossible,*" as tasks kept being added to their job description with none being taken away. Some felt the support from the system level was insufficient, as the nature and seriousness of issues were becoming increasingly difficult:

> *The jobs that are needed to be completed have not decreased, usually they end up on the shoulders of administrators. I sometimes feel that district management continues to pile on the jobs, meetings, [and] expectations without any additional supports being offered.*

The top policies that principals indicated as impacting their work *a lot* are shown in Table 6. The two policies over 50% of principals ranked as impacting their work a lot were the New Education Curriculum (67.3%) and the BC Education (Learning Enhancement) Statutes Amendment Act (Bill 33): Class Size and Composition (53.3%).

Additional policies that impacted approximately 25% or less of principals a lot were the Expect Respect and a Safe Education (ERASE) BC (25.6%), First Nations Education Act (24.4%), BC Early Learning Framework (19.9%), UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (14.2%), BC Education Statutes Amendment Act (Bill 11) (13.9%), Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) (10.1%), and the BC Tripartite Education Agreement (BCTEA) (10.0%).

Policy	%
New Education Curriculum	67.3%
BC Education (Learning Enhancement) Statutes Amendment Act (Bill 33): Class Size and Composition	53.3%
Policies related to Truth and Reconciliation	39.3%
Education Improvement Act (Bill 22)	38.9%
Special Education Policy Manual	37.9%
Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (AEEA)	36.4%
Teaching Students with Mental Health Disorders: Resources for Teachers	36.1%
Memorandum of Agreement	33.4%
The BC Safe Schools Initiative	30.8%
Diversity in BC Schools: A Framework	28.5%
SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) Education Initiative	28.0%
Expect Respect and a Safe Education (ERASE) BC	25.6%
First Nations Education Act	24.4%
BC Early Learning Framework	19.9%
UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples	14.2%
BC Education Statutes Amendment Act (Bill 11)	13.9%
Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS)	10.1%
BC Tripartite Education Agreement (BCTEA)	10.0%

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, almost half of the participating principals (47.8%) described their feelings as *good*. As Figure 14 shows, 25.2% chose *neutral*, and 22.8% chose *poor*. Only 2.5% chose *excellent* and even fewer chose *very poor* (1.7%).

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:

> *There has been a dramatic shift in my general feeling of well-being and work satisfaction over the last 2–3 years. I would say that, generally, things in the school are going fairly well and I feel a sense of satisfaction. However, the many pressures and demands have taken a toll and, for the first time in my career...I am actively trying to get my priorities in order for fear of the toll this job is having on my physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.*

Another principal commented:

> *While there are many factors that have diminished my ability to maintain my mental health, managing others' well-being for many years has impacted my own personal well-being.*
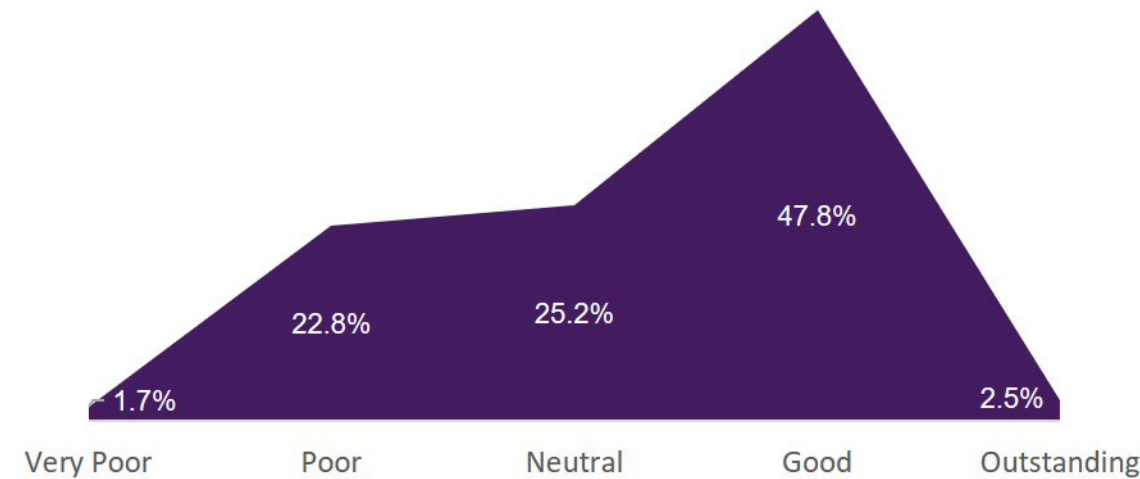

Figure 14. *How Principals Feel About Their Overall Well-Being at Work*

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 shows that the participating principals ranked social well-being most often as either *good* (57.3%) or *excellent* (10.4%), followed by cognitive well-being (*good*, 59.5%; *excellent*, 6.8%). Psychological well-being was also rated fairly high, with more than half the principals choosing either *good* (50.2%) or *excellent* (5.1%).

However, this trend reversed for the remaining three categories of well-being, as many principals rated their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being as *very poor* or *poor*. For example, in the case of the lowest ranked category, 34.8% of the principals ranked their physical well-being as either *very poor* or *poor*. Only 28.3% of the principals felt that, overall, their physical well-being at work was *good*, and very few (1.1%) felt it was *excellent*. Similarly, nearly one in four participating principals felt their overall emotional well-being was *poor* or *very poor*.

Well-Being Type	Very Poor/Poor	Neutral	Good/Excellent
Physical	34.8%	35.7%	29.4%
Emotional	24.3%	32.6%	43.1%
Psychological	13.0%	31.6%	55.3%
Cognitive	10.1%	23.6%	66.3%
Spiritual	8.5%	55.8%	35.6%
Social	7.2%	25.2%	67.7%

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 more

than half of participating principals indicated that their emotional well-being was either *considerably* (44.4%) or *extremely* (10.6%) affected by draining situations. By comparison, the lowest affected well-being category was spiritual, which principals ranked as *considerably* (14.8%) or *extremely* (1.7%) affected.

Well-Being Type	Not At All/ Slightly	Somewhat	Considerably/ Extremely
Emotional	12.9%	32.1%	55.0%
Physical	22.0%	40.0%	38.0%
Psychological	31.5%	32.5%	35.9%
Social	35.2%	32.7%	32.1%
Cognitive	37.0%	37.5%	25.5%
Spiritual	61.8%	21.7%	16.5%

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 (67.7%) 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 (76.0%) *often* or *always* felt respected at work. As Table 9 shows, 67.3% *often* or *always* felt satisfied with relationships at work, and over half (54.6%) felt supported at work. By comparison, 61.1% of principals indicated that they *never* or *rarely* felt socially excluded or left out.

Statement	Never/Rarely	Somewhat	Often/Always
I feel respected at work	2.7%	21.3%	76.0%
I feel satisfied with my work relationships	4.8%	27.8%	67.3%
I feel supported at work	9.7%	35.7%	54.6%
I feel socially excluded or left out at my work	61.1%	28.5%	10.3%

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 (59.2%) and students (44.9%) ranked highest, followed by administrative assistants (42.4%) and support staff including custodial staff, settlement workers, EAs, and so forth (31.6%).

Principals chose *always* less frequently to describe a positive relationship with teachers (22.0%), trustees (20.7%), and parents/guardians (13.7%). However, despite not scoring high in the *always* category, both parents/guardians (71.7%) and teachers (64.7%) were ranked highly in the *often* category. The least positive working relationship was with union representatives (only 8.7% of participating principals chose *always*). Despite some strained relationships, the principals believed having positive working relationships is rewarding. One principal indicated positive relationships can help alleviate work-related stress:

> *Having strong collegial supports and relationships with our PVP colleagues is a huge protective factor in decreasing stress at work. Also, having positive, trusting relationships with senior staff also plays a big part. Creating a healthy and safe culture within your school community for both staff and students also creates a lower stress, more joyful place to be. This also goes a long way to improve daily happiness and overall well-being for everyone.*

Another principal also echoed:

> *I love my job. Despite the challenges, stress and sometimes long hours, I feel well rewarded at work with positive relationships—staff, students, parents.*

Group	Never	Rarely	Somewhat	Often	Always
Vice-principals (if applicable)	0.3%	0.6%	5.1%	34.7%	59.2%
Students	0.0%	0.0%	3.4%	51.7%	44.9%
Administrative Assistants	0.4%	1.5%	8.9%	46.8%	42.4%
School support staff (e.g., custodial staff, settlement workers, EAs)	0.0%	0.8%	9.3%	58.2%	31.6%
Superintendents	2.8%	10.4%	19.7%	37.1%	30.1%
Board office staff	1.1%	5.9%	22.0%	44.0%	27.1%
Community leaders	0.8%	3.8%	13.4%	58.8%	23.1%
Teachers	0.0%	0.4%	12.9%	64.7%	22.0%
Trustees	3.4%	9.6%	25.2%	41.0%	20.7%
Parents/guardians	0.0%	0.6%	13.9%	71.7%	13.7%
Union representatives	3.0%	11.7%	34.4%	42.3%	8.7%

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 the eight positive social descriptors were all ranked highly. Principals indicated in the top five results that they felt *respected* (53.3%), *connected* (46.9%), *accepted* (41.2%), *supported* (41.2%), and *welcomed* (36.6%). Eight of the nine negative social descriptors were ranked the lowest: from feeling *distanced* (24.9%), *unsupported* (21.4%), or *dissatisfied* (19.0%), to the lowest ranked parameter, *silenced* (5.9%).

An outlier in this trend was that 34.7% of principals felt *isolated*, which is consistent with previous results presented in Table 9 that showed 38.8% of principals indicated they *somewhat* or *often/always* feel socially excluded or left out. As one respondent stated:

> *It is very difficult to be the lone principal in a building. I thrive on a team. I am part of the team but being the leader of the team can be lonely. At times I feel very isolated.*
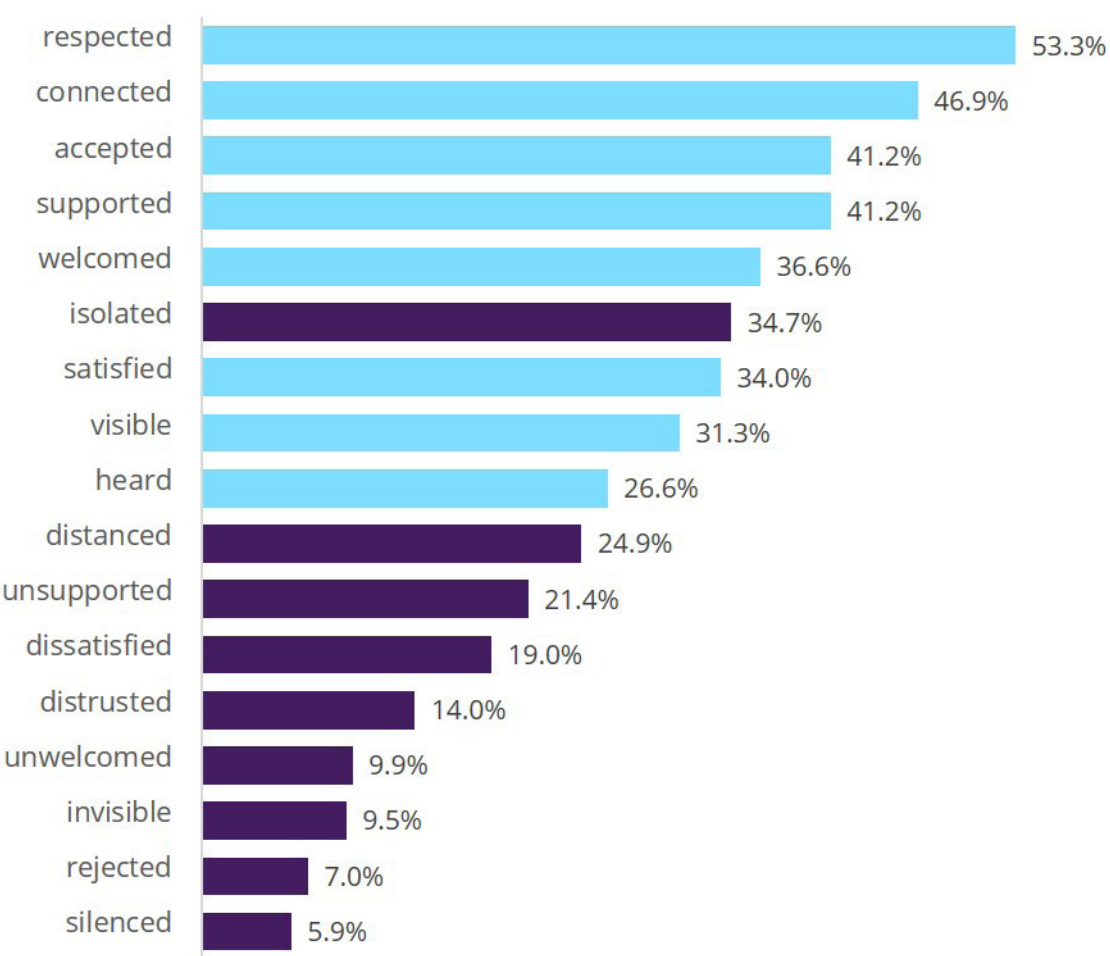
Figure 15. *Social Well-Being: How Participating Principals Felt at Work, as Described by Various Positive (Blue) and Negative (Purple) Descriptors*

Cognitive Well-Being

This category—which involves intellectual activity such as attentiveness, focus, and reasoning—was ranked second highest by most principals: Most principals (66.3%) 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 (89.0%), even under high pressure (86.3%). They were also *often* or *always* able to initiate tasks (85.6%) and engage in higher order thinking (83.3%). Overall, more than half of the participating principals selected *often* or *always* for every cognitive action, including being able to multitask (74.1%) and able to hold attention in a hectic environment (72.5%).

Statement	Never/ Rarely	Somewhat	Often/ Always
I am able to make difficult work-related decisions	0.8%	10.1%	89.0%
I am able to make decisions under high pressure	1.0%	12.7%	86.3%
I am able to initiate tasks	1.7%	12.7%	85.6%
I am able to engage in higher order thinking	2.5%	14.2%	83.3%
I am able to follow complex procedures at work	1.9%	15.0%	83.1%
I am able to connect abstract thought to concrete issues	2.3%	16.7%	81.1%
I am able to think clearly about work-related issues	1.5%	18.6%	79.9%
I am able to make decisions in a fast-paced manner	2.7%	18.6%	78.7%
I am able to self-monitor	3.6%	18.9%	77.4%
I am able to prioritize competing demands	4.6%	19.9%	75.5%
I am able to multi-task	7.0%	19.0%	74.1%
I am able to hold attention in a hectic environment	3.8%	23.6%	72.5%
I find my memory recall is challenged	33.8%	46.8%	19.4%

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

When the survey asked principals to select adjectives to describe how they felt cognitively at work, the top three ranking descriptors were positive traits. However, Figure 16 illustrates that less than half of the participating principals indicated that they felt *focused* (44.0%), *mindful,* (42.1%), or *attentive* (41.2%). Many principals also indicated they had felt *forgetful* (41.0%), *disorganized* (39.3%), or had *delayed memory retrieval* (34.5%). Small numbers indicated they felt *quick* (16.9%), *sharp* (15.9%), or *agile* (13.3%). Very few participating principals indicated they felt *confused* (8.0%) or *acute* (5.5%).

| focused | 44.0% |
mindful	42.1%
attentive	41.2%
forgetful	41.0%
disorganized	39.3%
delayed memory retrieval	34.5%
unfocused	32.4%
active/quick-witted	29.2%
absent-minded	26.0%
indecisive	20.3%
quick	16.9%
sharp	15.9%
agile	13.3%
confused	8.0%
acute	5.5%

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

Participants' open-ended comments revealed that their work is becoming more multifaceted and that they require different skill sets to cope with the cognitive demand. One principal stated:

> *The job is crazy, busy, complex, takes a plethora of different skills, and a flexibility of mind. It is often unappreciated and/or misunderstood by many within and outside of the system.*

Because of the multiple roles and responsibilities, one principal felt the principal role may not be sustainable in the long run:

> *The principal does it all from being an EA, a custodian, a parent, a counsellor, a colleague, a teacher and a mentor. While I think I handle it fairly well day-to-day at the moment, the long-range forecast is not looking good.*

Emotional Well-Being

This category includes the ability to be resilient and manage feelings. Results showed that, even during emotionally draining situations, 75.7% of principals *often* or *always* felt passionate about their work. Over half *often* or *always* felt happy (56.5%) or satisfied (52.0%) with their work. In addition, over half *never* or *rarely* felt a sense of despair (55.4%). But, as also shown in Table 12, only 32.1% *often* or *always* felt excited when thinking about going to work during emotionally draining situations, and 64.9% *often* or *always* worried about work-related issues.

Statement	Never/ Rarely	Somewhat	Often/ Always
I feel passionate about my work	6.1%	18.2%	75.7%
I worry about work-related issues	7.1%	27.9%	64.9%
I feel satisfied about my work	11.4%	36.5%	52.0%
I feel happy about my work	9.9%	33.5%	56.5%
I feel excited when thinking about going to work	26.8%	41.0%	32.1%
I feel a sense of despair about my work	55.4%	31.8%	12.8%

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, two negative emotions were selected most often. Many principals indicated that they felt *frustrated* (63.2%) and *stressed* (62.6%). Although over half felt they were *compassionate* (54.8%) and *empathetic* (52.4%), Figure 17 shows that almost half also felt *worried* (49.7%), *exhausted* (49.7%), *drained* (48.4%), and *anxious* (45.4%). Approximately one third of participating principals felt *happy* (34.5%), *resilient* (33.6%), or *fulfilled* (32.3%). While few felt *depressed* (12.9%) or felt *despair* (9.1%), very few felt *exuberant* about their work (4.7%).
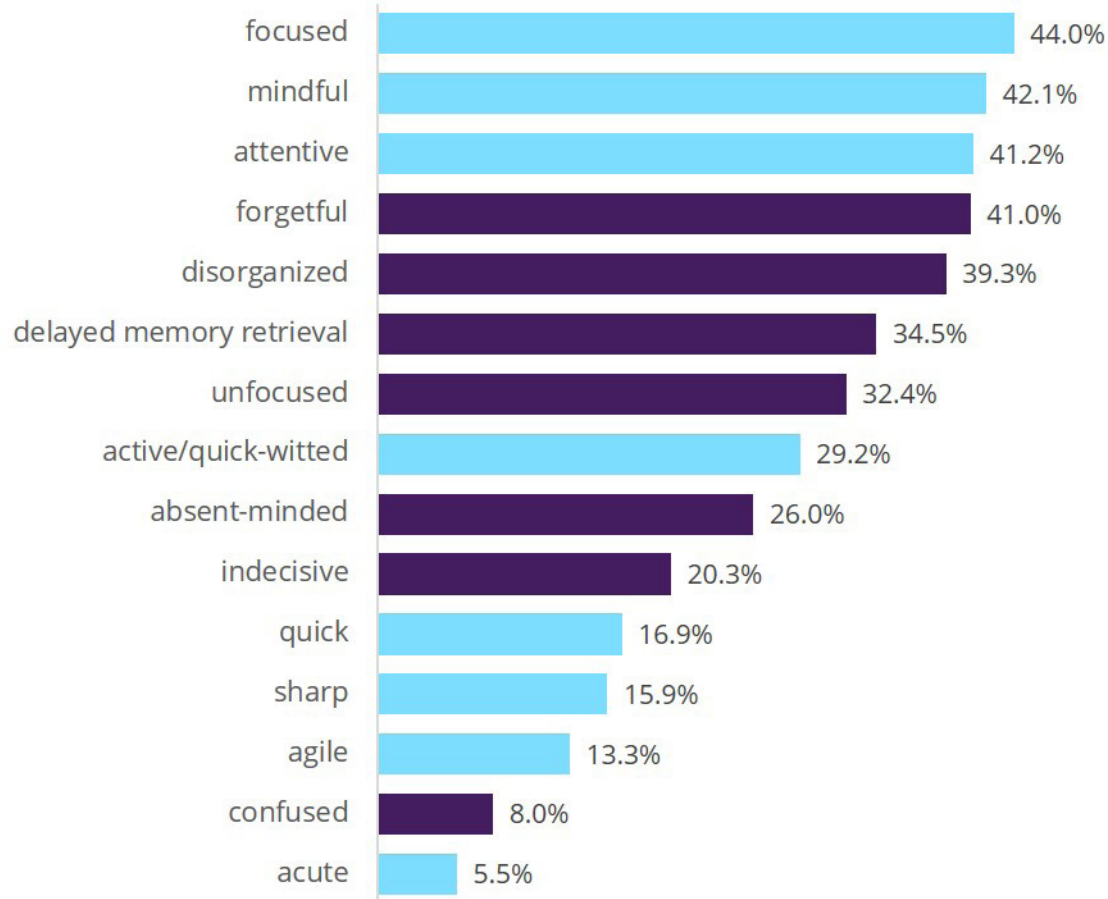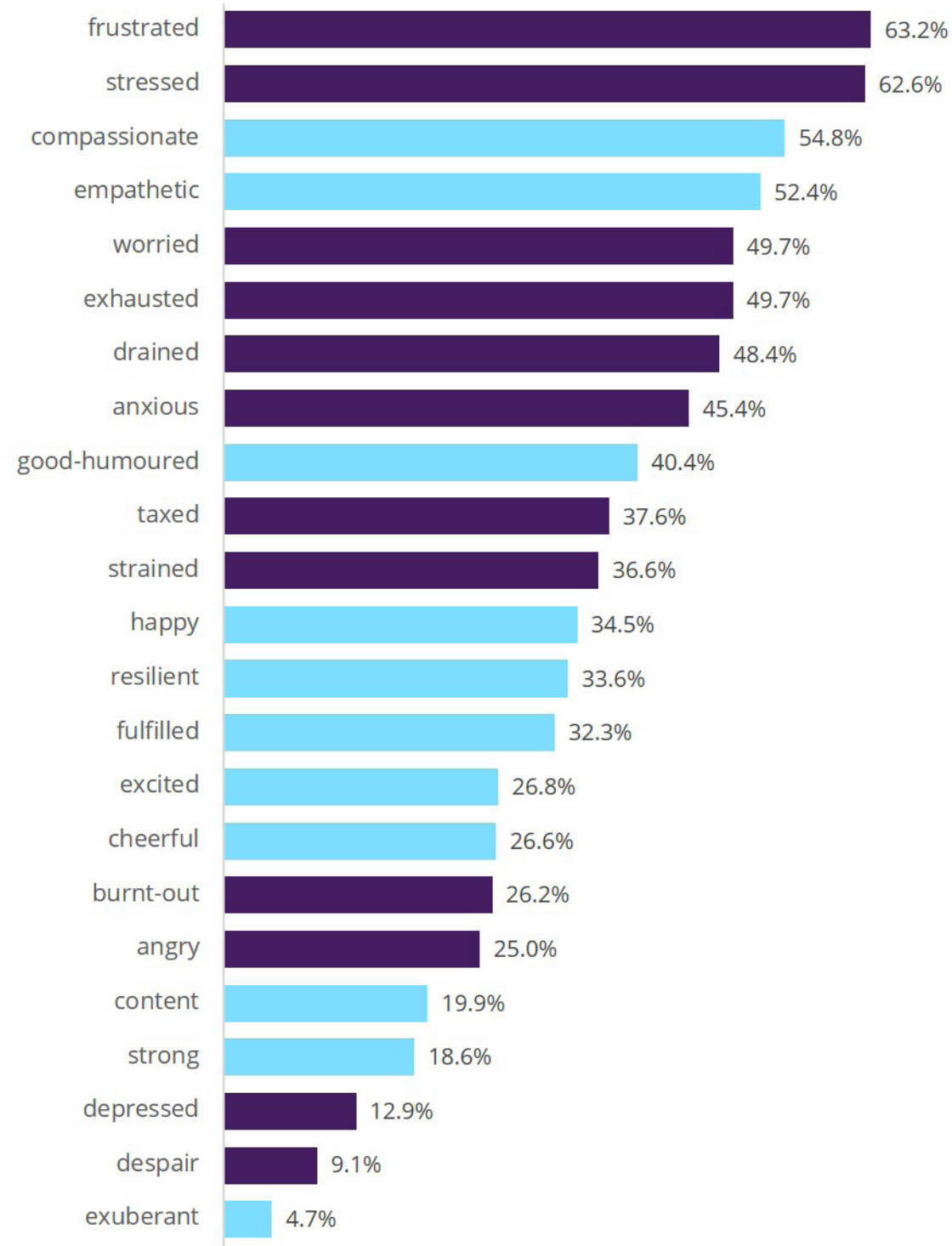

Figure 17. *Emotional Well-Being: How Participating Principals Felt at Work, as Described by Various Positive (Blue) and Negative (Purple) Descriptors*

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 they had developed a lot since they began the role (89.0%). Most principals *often* or *always* felt that their colleagues knew that they could trust them (88.4%). Many *often* or *always* felt confident and positive as a principal (78.1%), and enjoyed being in new situations that required them to change their old familiar ways of doing things (75.4%). Fewer principals felt they wanted to challenge policies or procedures, as less than half felt comfortable challenging the implicit "rules of the game" (44.9%) and only one third felt comfortable asking for forgiveness rather than permission (33.2%). A full list of survey responses to the 15 psychological well-being statements can be found in Table 13.

Overall, participating principals felt confident and positive at work, but they were equally concerned with their increased workload. As one principal remarked:

> *I very much enjoy the work that I do—it is challenging and fulfilling, and I feel good about the work I do. The biggest issue I have is that there is TOO MUCH of it that NEEDS to be done well.*

Statement	Never/ Rarely	Somewhat	Often/ Always
I have the sense that I have developed a lot as a principal since I began the role	1.1%	9.9%	89.0%
My colleagues know they can trust me	0.4%	11.3%	88.4%
In general, I feel confident and positive about myself as a principal	3.6%	18.2%	78.1%
I enjoy being in new situations that require me to change my old familiar ways of doing things	3.6%	21.0%	75.4%
I judge myself by what I think is important to get the job done, not by what others think is important	4.7%	24.5%	70.8%
In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I work	4.7%	25.3%	69.9%
I feel a sense of fulfillment	7.7%	26.5%	65.8%
I know that I can trust my colleagues	6.4%	29.9%	63.7%
I enjoy making work plans for the future	12.9%	27.1%	60.0%
I am not afraid to voice my work opinions, even when they are in opposition to the opinions of stakeholders	13.1%	31.8%	55.1%
I have been able to build a work environment and a work-style for myself that is much to my liking	10.6%	34.6%	54.8%
I feel comfortable challenging the implicit "rules of the game"	20.1%	35.0%	44.9%
I feel comfortable asking for forgiveness rather than permission	27.4%	39.3%	33.2%
I feel lonely because I have few close colleagues with whom to share my concerns	49.3%	25.5%	25.3%
I live, work one day at a time and don't really think about the future	74.9%	17.2%	8.2%

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. Less than a third of the principals (29.4%) described their physical well-being as *good* or *excellent* (refer back to Table 7). This is illustrated further in Table 14, which shows that 55.6% of the participating principals shared that their physical activity level was *considerably* or *extremely* affected. Half of the participants (50.8%) indicated their sleep was also *considerably* or *extremely* affected, as was their eating (44.3%). A number of participating principals had uncomfortable feelings in their stomach (20.4%) or headaches (19.2%). As one participant explained:

> *Though I love my work and feel it is a privilege to serve my school and community in this vital way, the hours and stress mean I don't have time to exercise, eat well, sleep enough, or spend nearly enough time with my family.*

Aspect	Not at All/ Slightly	Somewhat	Considerably/ Extremely
Doing physical activities	14.8%	29.6%	55.6%
Sleeping	20.4%	28.7%	50.8%
Eating	21.8%	34.0%	44.3%
Having uncomfortable feelings in your stomach	56.3%	23.2%	20.4%
Having headaches	58.7%	22.2%	19.2%

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 65.5% of principals chose *considerably* or *extremely* in this category. More than half of the principals stated that fitness levels (57.5%) and sleep (55.4%) were *considerably* or *extremely* impacted by draining situations. Moderately affected were diet (48.7%) and weight (39.5%). Less than half selected *considerably* or *extremely* for physical health (35.8%) and stress-related illness (25.6%).

Aspect	Not At All/ Slightly	Somewhat	Considerably/ Extremely
Energy level	8.4%	26.1%	65.5%
Fitness level	14.0%	28.5%	57.5%
Sleep	20.7%	23.9%	55.4%
Diet	18.4%	33.0%	48.7%
Weight	30.5%	30.0%	39.5%
Physical health	29.8%	34.5%	35.8%
Stress-related illness	46.7%	27.7%	25.6%

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 and cognitive well-being, where the most selected descriptors were all positive, the top seven physical adjectives principals selected most frequently were all negative: *stressed* (62.0%), *fatigued* (60.0%), *drained* (51.4%), *exhausted* (48.0%), *taxed* (41.2%), *weary* (36.1%), and *burnt-out* (27.7%). Only one negative descriptor was not selected as frequently (*weak*, 12.3%). Very few principals felt *lively* (10.6%), *vibrant* (10.4%), or *tireless* (5.1%).
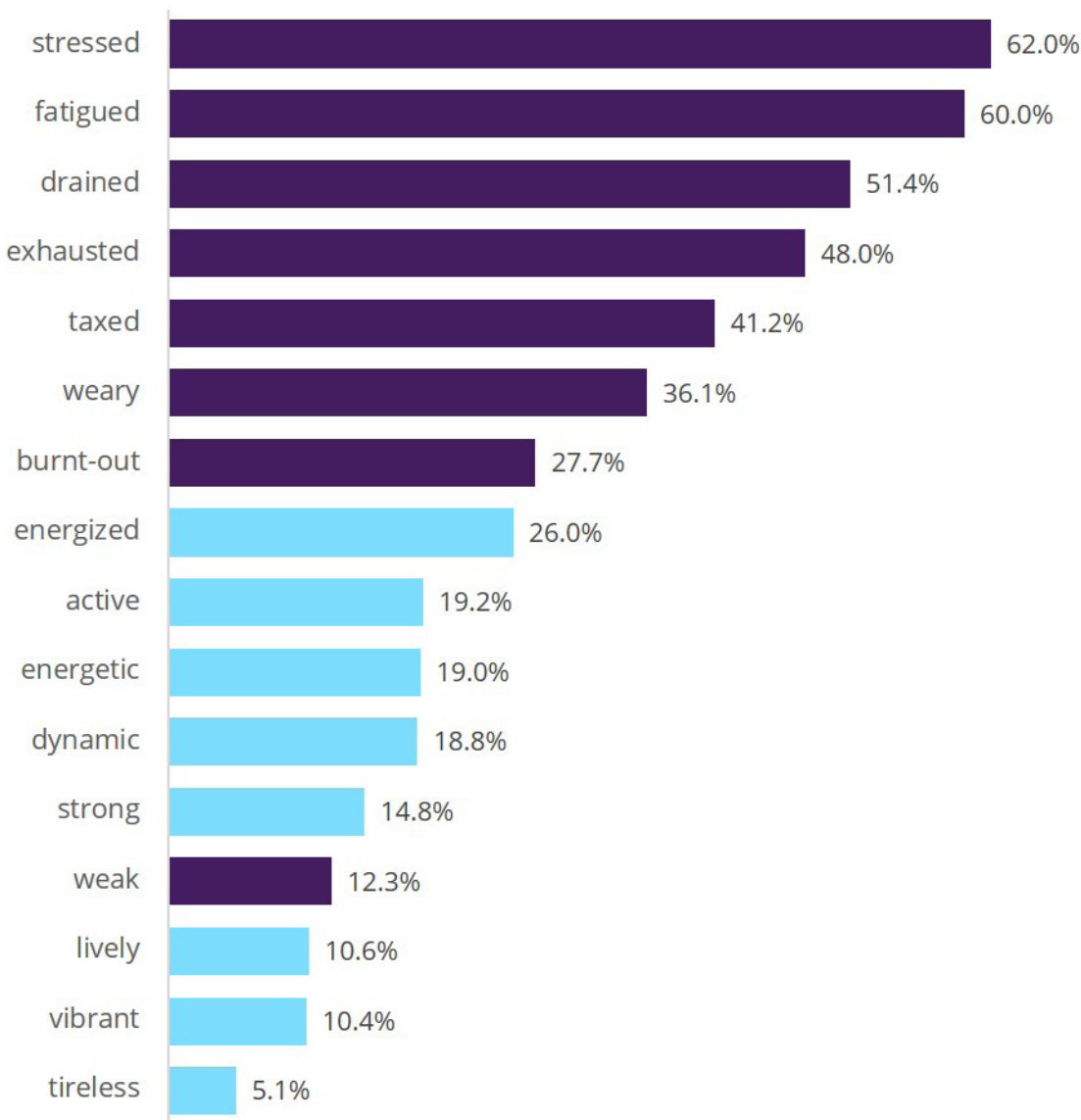
Figure 18. *Physical Well-Being: How Participating Principals Felt at Work, as Described by Various Positive (Blue) and Negative (Purple) Descriptors*

Responses to the open-ended questions were very concerning. For example, one participant expressed:

Although I am working hard and from the outside appear to be doing a decent job it has affected my physical and mental health considerably. I have gained more than 50 pounds in the last 4 1/2 years, have been diagnosed with fibromyalgia, and significant arthritis in my joints and spine. I have difficulty moving, sleeping, and exercising. I used to be an active healthy district teacher...

Another principal also indicated the work might have exacerbated their health conditions:

During the time that I have been a principal I have developed chronic migraines and fibromyalgia. Maybe this would have happened anyway if I had never been a principal but I don't know. There is a lot that I love and find meaningful in my work but it has taken a toll on my physical self and many days I feel taxed and drained.

Spiritual Well-Being

Participating principals 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 shows, only 15.1% of the participating principals *often* or *always* used religious beliefs to sustain them at work and only 10.1% attended religious services to provide them with a sense of direction and purpose. A small portion of participants attended religious services to give them strength to deal with work-related issues (9.8%). A few more principals indicated spiritual practice grounds them at work (20.7%), provides them with a sense of direction and purpose at work (21.2%), or gives them strength to deal with work-related issues (18.6%), although the numbers were still relatively low.

Statement	Never/ Rarely	Somewhat	Often/ Always
My spiritual practice provides me with a sense of direction and purpose at work	62.0%	16.8%	21.2%
My spiritual practice grounds me at work	62.3%	17.0%	20.7%
I often resort to spiritual practice(s) to give me strength to deal with work-related issues	67.0%	14.5%	18.6%
My religious beliefs sustain me at work	73.7%	11.2%	15.1%
Attending religious services provides me with a sense of direction and purpose at work	83.1%	6.8%	10.1%
I often attend religious services to give me strength to deal with work-related issues	84.3%	5.9%	9.8%

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 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 workload, as 70.1% of principals found the volume of emails they received to be *always* or *often* draining. The next most draining situations concerned student issues, as many principals found mental health issues among students (68.9%) and lack of special education supports and resources (63.2%) to be *always* or *often* draining. Student discipline (excluding bullying) was also *always* or *often* draining for 41.8% of principals.

Approximately half of the principals were *always* or *often* fatigued by teachers' resistance to change (53.0%), mental health issues among teachers (50.5%), and the high levels of support needed by teachers (45.6%).

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 administrative assistants (74.7%), support staff (67.3%), and vice-principals (75.6%) to be draining.

Issue	Never/ Rarely	Somewhat	Often/ Always
Volume of daily emails	8.9%	21.0%	70.1%
Mental health issues among students	5.6%	25.5%	68.9%
Lack of special education support/resources	13.4%	23.4%	63.2%
Teacher resistance to change	12.1%	34.8%	53.0%
Mental health issues among teachers	13.2%	36.2%	50.5%
High levels of support needed by teachers	19.2%	35.1%	45.6%
Student discipline (excluding bullying)	16.1%	42.2%	41.8%
Lack of recognition for principals throughout the system	34.6%	25.1%	40.3%
Union issues	24.0%	36.6%	39.4%
Dealing with concerns about teacher performance	16.3%	44.5%	39.3%
Adding information to online systems	39.9%	27.9%	32.2%
Pressure from your superintendent and school board	40.4%	29.3%	30.4%
Inconsistencies of policies and practices	35.6%	35.0%	29.4%
Mentoring of new teachers	42.9%	32.5%	24.7%
Cyber-bullying among students	51.6%	29.9%	18.4%
Relationship with administrative assistants	74.7%	14.6%	10.7%
Relationship with support staff	67.3%	22.6%	10.2%
Relationship with the vice-principal (if applicable)	75.6%	15.3%	9.1%

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 reported *often* or *always* led to draining situations was a lack of special education resources and services in the community (53.6%). This was followed by three issues concerning parents/guardians. The principals found mental health issues among parents/guardians were *often* or *always* draining (49.1%), as well as parents/guardians not being involved in their child(ren)'s education (36.7%), and meetings with parents/guardians (31.6%).

In contrast, draining situations were *never* or *rarely* caused by racial or ethnic tensions (72.4%) or by lack of support from the school community (62.9%)

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:

> *There are so many challenges that I feel I must attend to with my whole heart and soul, but which absolutely drain me. Especially when there are so many parents/guardians who are disrespectful in person or on social media.*

Another stated:

> *The increased complexity in the work has changed since I first joined admin as a VP. The 24 hours 7 days per week expectations of digital communication and the onslaught of negative personal attacks on a principal on social media by parents has become a major source of stress and unhappiness. It greatly affects how I do my work and how I make my decisions.*

One principal indicated how social media attacks are compromising their well-being:

> *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	17.4%	29.0%	53.6%
Mental health issues among parents/guardians	14.2%	36.7%	49.1%
Parents/guardians not involved in their child(ren)'s education	26.7%	36.5%	36.7%
Meeting with parents/guardians	22.2%	46.3%	31.6%
Social issues in the school community (poverty, gangs, drugs, etc.)	42.6%	27.2%	30.2%
Lack of support from the school's community	62.9%	24.6%	12.5%
Racial or ethnic tensions in the school community	72.4%	20.0%	7.6%

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 (98.3%) had experienced unsafe situations at their workplace. Figure 19 demonstrates that these types of negative interactions most often included passive aggressive behaviours (80.8%), and gossip and slander (66.2%). Principals had also been involved in escalated conflicts and quarrels (57.1%) or faced false accusations (49.1%). Also common were harassment (that includes intimidation, offensive jokes, or innuendos; displaying or circulating offensive pictures or materials; or offensive or intimidating phone calls) (44.2%), threats of violence (43.8%), and cyberbullying via social media, texting, emails, Facebook, and/or Twitter (42.5%). Some principals experienced bullying (32.1%) or physical assault (29.6%). Physical assault occurs when a principal has experienced physical harm in an interaction with someone else.

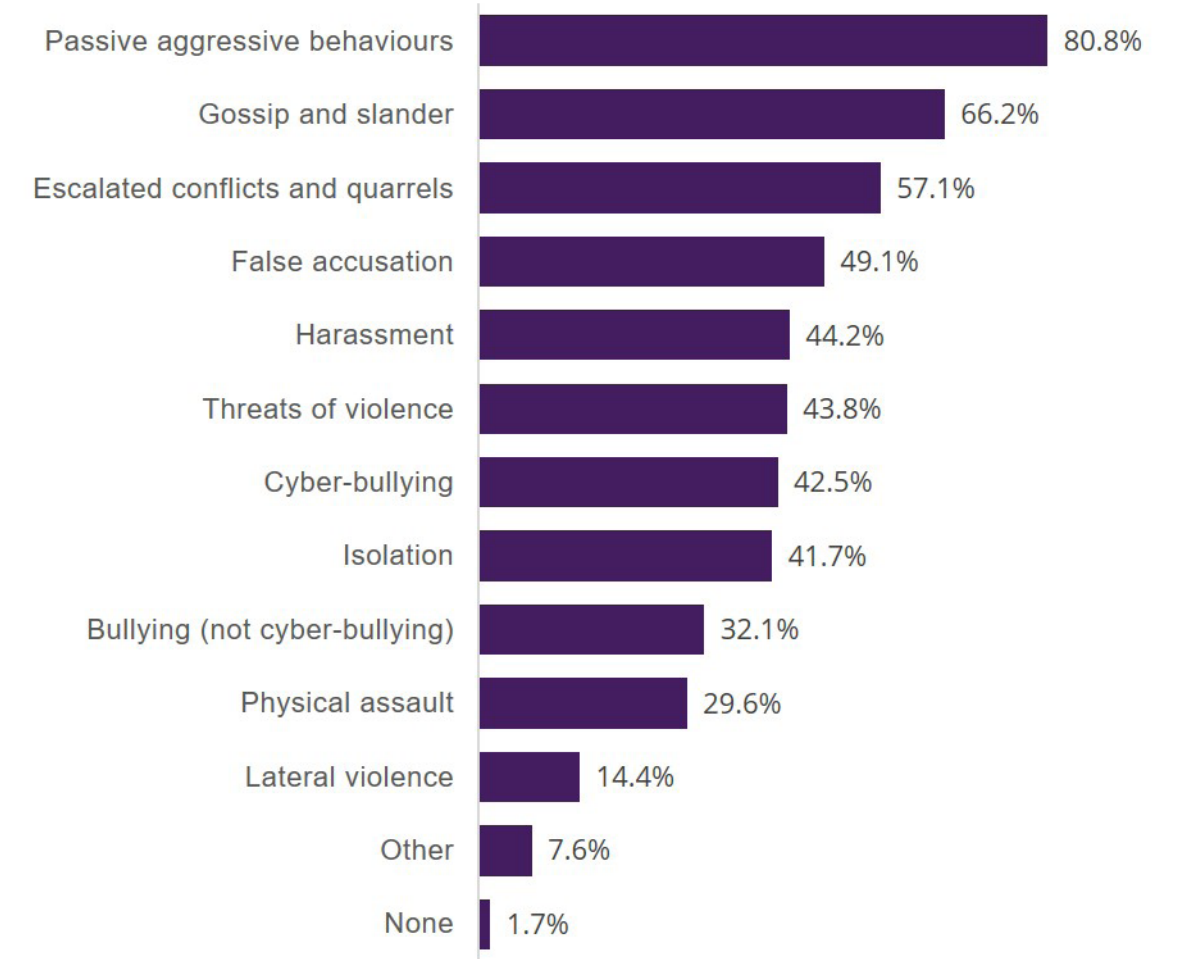|	
Passive aggressive behaviours	80.8%
Gossip and slander	66.2%
Escalated conflicts and quarrels	57.1%
False accusation	49.1%
Harassment	44.2%
Threats of violence	43.8%
Cyber-bullying	42.5%
Isolation	41.7%
Bullying (not cyber-bullying)	32.1%
Physical assault	29.6%
Lateral violence	14.4%
Other	7.6%
None	1.7%

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 (60.5%) and threats (52.0%) most often came from parents, guardians, or family members of students. This was followed, to a lesser degree, by teachers who harassed (28.5%) and threatened (11.8%) principals, and union representatives also harassed (19.4%) and threatened (6.6%) them. Some principals indicated that they had also been physically assaulted by parents, guardians or family members (2.5%).

Unsafe incidents directed at principals from students were also of significant concern. Of the 44.2% of principals who were harassed,17.8% of this harassment came from students. Of the 43.8% of principals who were threatened, 39.8% of these threats came from students. In addition, of the 29.6% who experienced physical assault, 38.3% of those assaults came from students.

The groups who rarely (less than 5%) harassed, physically assaulted, or threatened principals included other principals, facility services (e.g., daycare staff, rental agreement holders), trustees, and substitute teachers. Only 16.7% of principals had never been harassed and 20.3% had never been threatened; 45.4% of principals had not been physically assaulted.

Yet, as one principal indicated in an open-ended response, they believe the violence in school is increasing:

> *I am hearing a lot that there is an increase in the levels and intensity of violence in schools that is negatively impacting P/VPs. I am seeing violence and anger as the default for kids and often parents. Some colleagues are facing daily intense violence, to the point where they cannot be the educational leaders they want to be, instead they are busy doing triage for violent behaviour.*

Perpetrator	Harassed	Physically Assaulted	Threatened	# of Responses
Parent(s)/Guardian(s)/family member(s)	60.5%	2.5%	52.0%	606
Teacher(s)	28.5%	0.2%	11.8%	213
Union representative(s)	19.4%	0.0%	6.6%	137
Student(s)	17.8%	38.3%	39.8%	506
None	16.7%	45.4%	20.3%	434
Educational assistant(s)	10.8%	0.0%	3.4%	75
Superintendent(s)	8.2%	0.0%	3.2%	60
Other school staff member(s)	5.5%	0.2%	1.3%	37
Other principal(s)	4.9%	0.0%	1.1%	32
Facility services	3.2%	0.0%	0.2%	18
Trustee(s)	3.2%	0.0%	1.1%	23
Substitute teacher(s)/TTOC	3.0%	0.0%	0.6%	19
Other	2.7%	0.6%	2.3%	29
Vice-principal(s)	1.7%	0.0%	0.4%	11

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

After an incident involving being harassed, physically assaulted, or threatened only half of participating principals spoke about the incident with others in their district school board. For example, some reported to senior management, the director, or to HR (53.9%), and some consulted with other colleagues in their board (50.7%). Half of the principals also talked with family members or friends (50.9%). Depending on the situation, a lesser number of principals followed specific protocol (27.9%), reported it to the police (22.0%), or requested that support be brought to their school site (13.3%).

Others also consulted with people outside of their district school board, such as their professional organizations (22.8%) or colleagues outside of their board (11.6%). Very few principals sought permission to take time off (2.3%). The complete list of actions principals took can be found in Table 20.

Some principals voiced frustration at the general response to threats or harassment: "*Greater support of administrative decisions in the face of parent threats or press/litigation would be incredibly helpful in supporting administrators.*"

Another stated, *"We have to manage being harassed online and in person, with little to no recourse unless the harassment turns to threats of physical harm."*

Action	%	# of Respondents
Report to senior management/director/HR	53.9%	284
Talk with family members/friends	50.9%	268
Consult with other colleagues within my district school board	50.7%	267
Follow specific protocol	27.9%	147
Contact my professional association	22.8%	120
Report to the police	22.0%	116
Request support be brought in school site	13.3%	70
Consult with other colleagues outside my district school board	11.6%	61
Seek medical/health attention (e.g., physician, counsellor)	10.6%	56
Not applicable	10.6%	56
Do nothing	9.9%	52
File a WCB (Workers' Compensation Board) /WSIB (Workplace Safety and Insurance Board) claim	9.3%	49
Consult a lawyer about legal action	4.4%	23
Seek permission to take time off	2.3%	12

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, 43.1% of principals had not experienced any. As Figure 20 shows, other participating principals had been subjected to gender-based (27.5%) or age-based bias (19.5%). Less than 10% of surveyed principals had experienced other types of discrimination, such as discrimination based on ability (8.2%), race (7.6%), sexual orientation (6.3%), or religion (4.9%). 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 (89.6%). In addition, a previous study on principals found that most identified heterosexual (91.4%) and spoke English at home (97.1%) (Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2014).
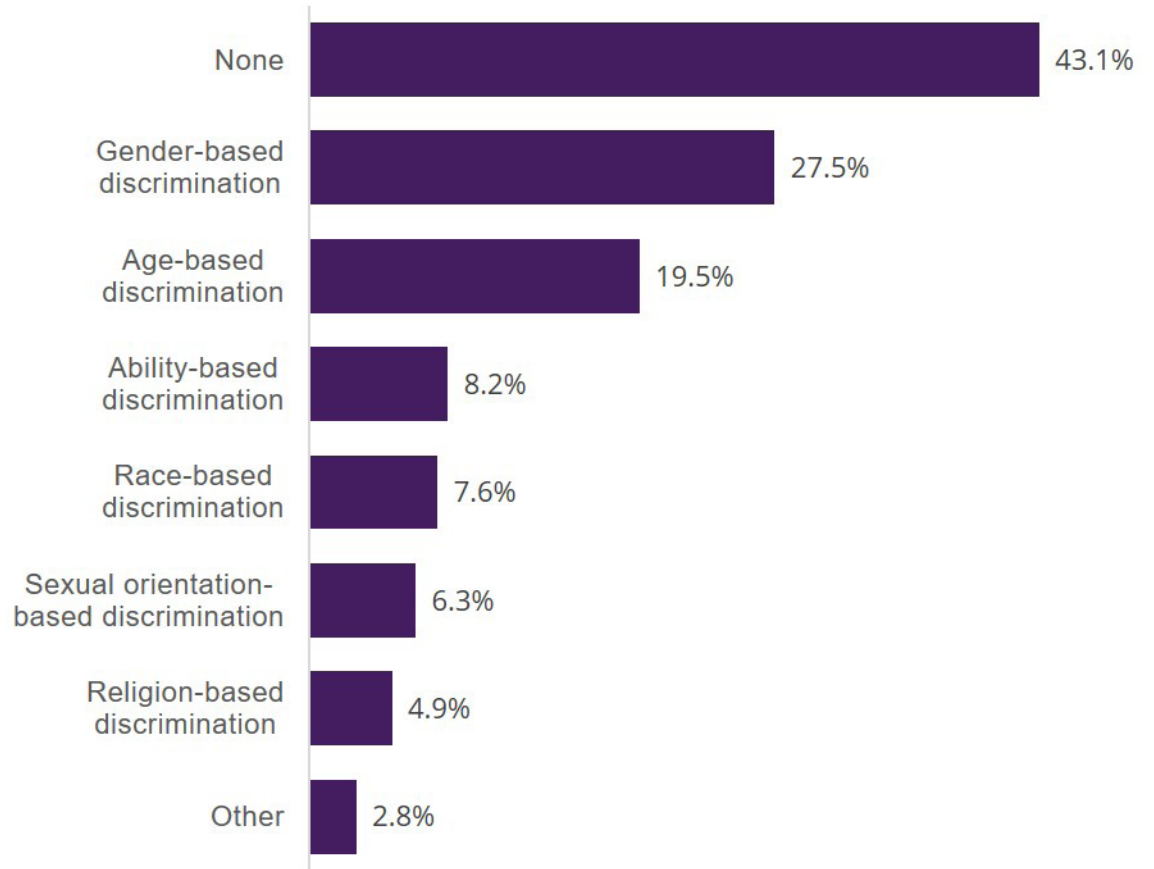
Figure 20. *The Types of Discrimination Principals Have Personally Faced in the Workplace*

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 (3.9%) or their stress (5.9%). As Figure 21 also shows, more principals felt they were *good* at coping with work-related stress (52.9%) than they were at managing their well-being (41.6%). Although very few felt they were *very poor* at managing their well-being (4.4%), nearly one in four participating principals described their ability to manage their well-being as *poor* or *very poor* (24.2%). Approximately one third felt *neutral* (30.3%).
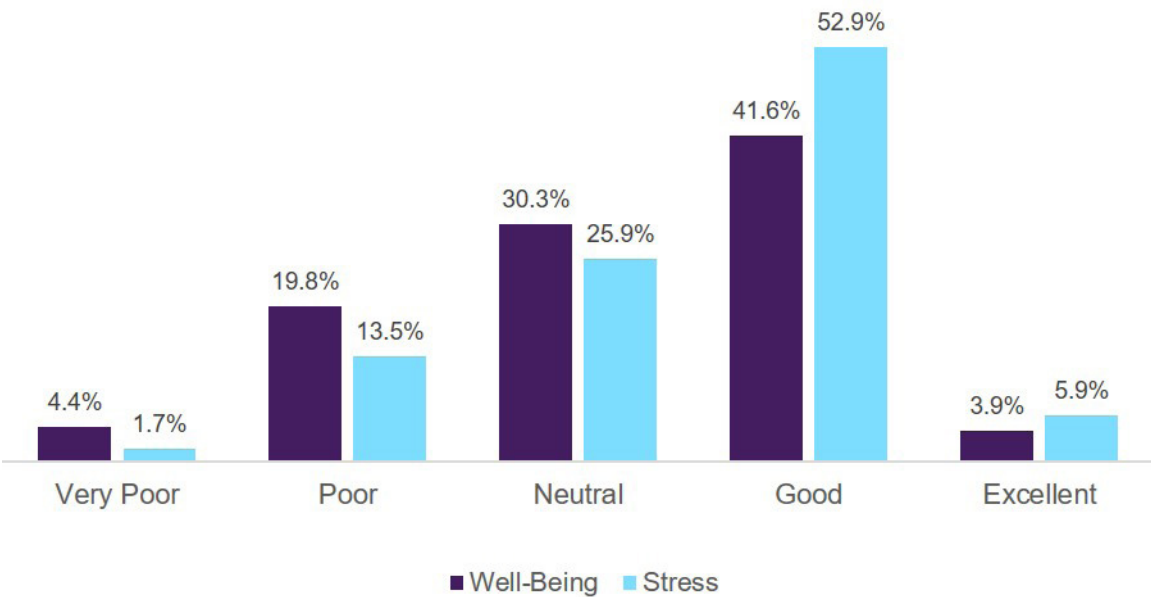

Figure 21. *How Well Principals Felt They are Managing their Well-Being and Coping with Work-Related Stress*

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, 62.4% spent time with their family, friends, or pets. About half of the respondents also watched TV or movies (55.0%), engaged in physical activity or exercise (52.6%), or spent time talking with other people, such as family or friends (52.4%) or with colleagues (49.5%). Principals also engaged in positive self-care strategies such as undertaking hobbies (32.8%), reading (31.5%), listening to music (26.4%), or mediating/yoga (18.0%). A small number participated in professional counselling (10.2%).

Some principals also undertook activities such as sleeping (48.6%), eating (40.2%), and seeking solitude (34.5%), which, depending on the context, could be considered either a positive or negative action. Although 33.4% indicated they used alcohol, very few used other substances such as prescription drugs (4.9%), marijuana (3.4%), and tobacco (1.7%); no principals indicated they had used illegal drugs. It is possible that these numbers may be higher than what was reported in the survey due to social desirability bias, which can lead some participants to under-report negative thoughts, behaviours, or emotions on surveys.
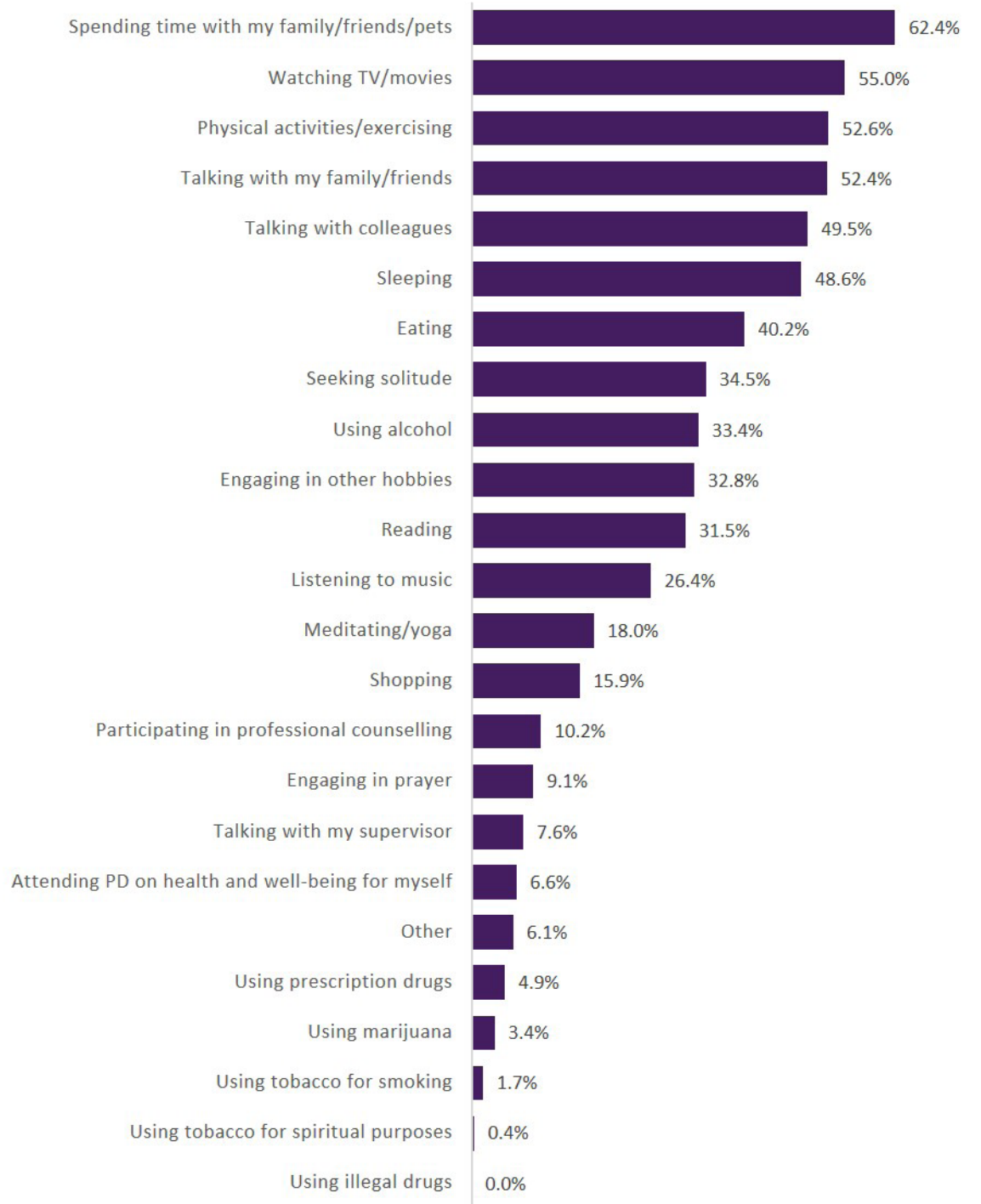

Figure 22. *The Self-Care Activities Principals Use to Cope with a Draining Day at Work*

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 (90.3%) and felt self-efficacy (76.9%) and resiliency (73.8%) helped them manage their work. In addition, 66.3% of participating principals *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they were able to turn adversity into achievement. Slightly more than half of respondents (55.2%) 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	2.8%	7.0%	90.3%
Self-efficacy helps me manage my work	4.6%	18.5%	76.9%
I feel resilient at work	8.3%	17.9%	73.8%
I am able to turn adversity into achievement	4.5%	29.1%	66.3%
I engage in mindful practices to manage my work	17.4%	27.4%	55.2%

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: information sharing for members of professional associations (e.g., BCPVPA) (53.4%), health and well-being benefits (49.0%), district resource people (41.0%), continued professional learning in different modes (e.g., self-paced, online, independent focused, needs-targeted) (40.8%), and adequate resource allocation (36.3%).

Although 35.9% of participating principals found additional time for administrative work to be *effective* or *very effective*, 39.4% found this support to be unavailable. Other unavailable services included a support phone line (48.6%) and the development and use of health assessment tools to support school principals (42.6%), but these were also cited as being the least effective (8.2% and 12.0% *effective* or *very effective* respectively).

Support	Very Ineffective/ Ineffective	Neutral	Effective/ Very Effective	Not Available
Information sharing for members of professional associations (e.g., BCPVPA)	11.0%	34.8%	53.4%	0.7%
Health and well-being benefits	15.1%	29.6%	49.0%	6.4%
District resource people	20.1%	30.2%	41.0%	8.8%
Continued professional learning in different modes	13.5%	39.0%	40.8%	6.8%
Adequate resource allocations	22.9%	25.9%	36.3%	14.9%
Additional time for administrative work	10.2%	14.6%	35.9%	39.4%
Mentoring for school principals	14.8%	27.6%	35.9%	21.0%
Leadership preparation programs	13.2%	37.4%	35.4%	14.1%
Streamlined work processes	20.7%	25.3%	35.2%	19.0%
Use of evidence and research to advocate for change or support	12.5%	40.0%	33.3%	17.3%
Collaborative relationships with teacher unions	20.0%	31.3%	32.4%	16.3%
Professional learning focused on well-being	19.6%	36.1%	31.7%	12.5%
Opportunities for skill development in technology use	17.0%	34.2%	30.7%	18.1%
Other	13.0%	13.0%	30.4%	17.4%
Coaching for school principals	12.8%	31.1%	30.0%	26.1%
Redefine the principal's role	15.5%	31.7%	22.5%	30.3%
Modification to teacher hiring practice	18.2%	31.8%	22.2%	27.8%
Early Intervention Program (EIP)	12.1%	43.6%	21.2%	23.1%
Work with policy makers to clarify policies and their intent	20.2%	38.7%	14.6%	26.5%
Development and use of health-assessment tools to support school principals	15.5%	30.0%	12.0%	42.6%
Support phone line	15.3%	27.9%	8.2%	48.6%

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, all of the 12 suggested proficiencies in the survey were highly ranked with no score lower than 63.2%. The ability to manage difficult situations and effectively communicate with others were selected most frequently, as 81.4% selected conflict resolution skills, 79.3% selected communication skills, 78.9% selected the ability to de-escalate situations, and 77.8% selected problem-solving.

Other skills that principals felt were important in managing situations at work were different intelligences—emotional (75.9%) and social intelligence (73.4%). Having a good knowledge base of different aspects of work were also deemed important, such as instructional knowledge (74.0%), legal/procedural knowledge (70.6%), and skills and knowledge to engage Indigenous practices (67.2%). Many also felt that the use of technology and social media were also important (63.2%). Refer to Figure 23 for the results of all 12 essential skills.
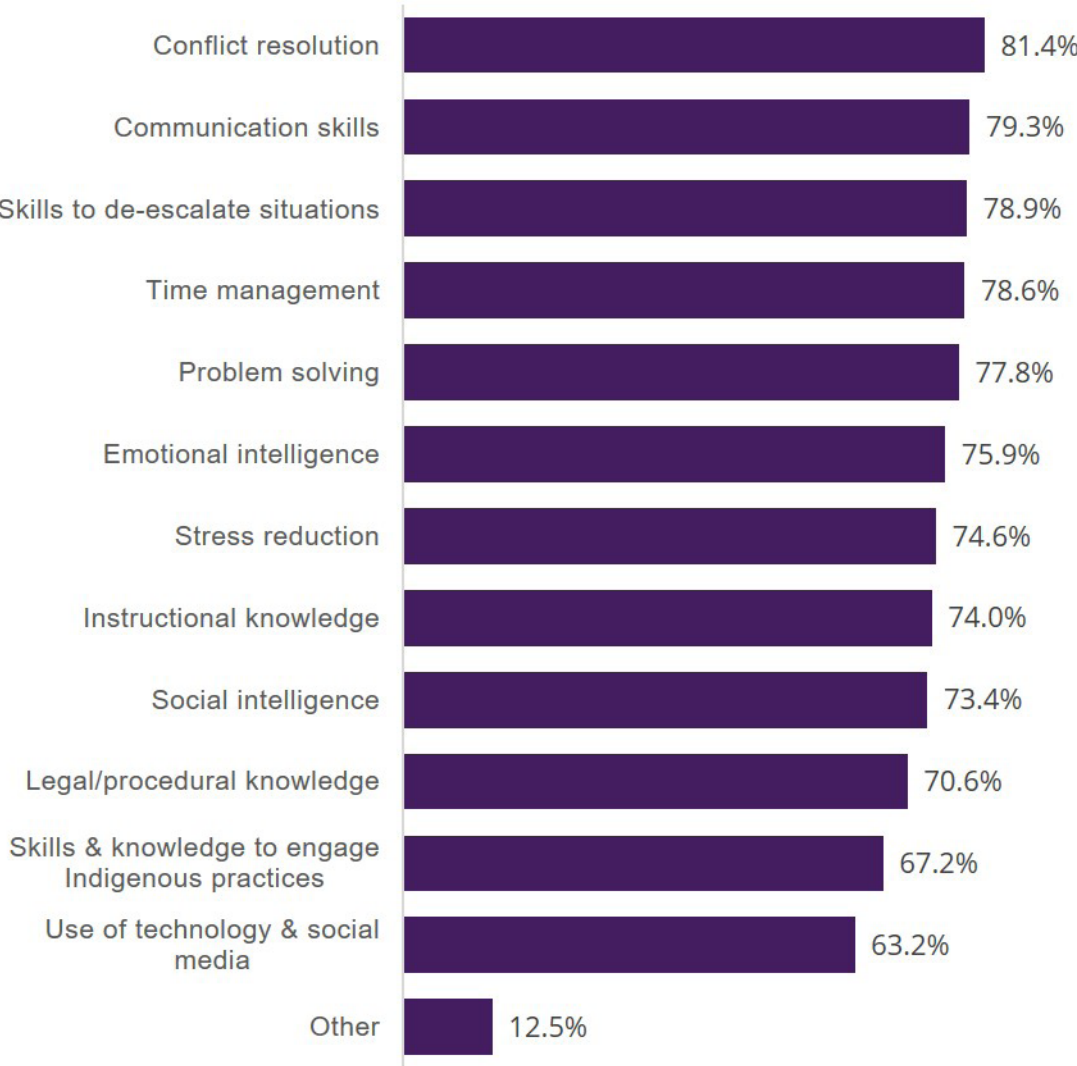

Figure 23. *Skills Principals Felt Were Necessary to Effectively Manage Their Work*

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:

As a long-serving, experienced principal I am concerned at the mental health struggles that others appear to experience. I have worked hard during my career to develop resiliency and hone my emotional intelligence skills and abilities. I believe that a significant issue is the vulnerability of principals in terms of job security and liability. It disturbs me to consider the number of friends and colleagues who have been terminated, been forced to quit or retire prematurely, due not being supported at the district level when conflicts emerge.

Unfortunately, some other principals felt they are not coping with the demands of the job:

As an administrator, there are so many demands and to do the job I want to do requires everything I have. At the end of the day, I don't feel that I have anything left in the tank. It is why I will retire this year. Not because I don't still love what I do, but because I know that it is taking a toll on my health and I am not able to achieve work–life balance without compromising my own expectations for my role.

One participating principal summed up how they saw the overall situation:

I have seen a huge shift in the last 3 years as a principal. The kids are more and more complex with much more violent behaviours in school. Parent anxiety is at an all-time high. I would say I take great pride in my work and am very committed and skilled. I dedicate at least 60 hours / week and yet there are always things that truly deserve more of my time. I try my best to manage with self-care, but the admin ratios make our job nearly impossible. The demands are increasing significantly, but the support is not. I am working longer hours than ever before, and finding I have less time for the activities that bring me joy, like connecting with kids or being an instructional leader. My life is consumed by anxious parent meetings, email, district meetings and reports, and incredibly complex family situations. I feel I do the job of two to three full-time jobs. I love my principal colleagues, but I can see the emotional drain on principals as a collective. So many of my colleagues are burning out, getting sick, or losing their joy. Something needs to be done to support principals. We are the last to take time off, and we continually try to work harder in an increasingly complex situation. Thank you for drawing attention to this.

What was very apparent in many of the comments was how thankful principals were that a survey on their well-being was being conducted, and how appreciative they were that their voices were going to be heard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we make recommendations in response to the key findings that emerged from our analysis of the survey data. We have grouped the proposed recommendations thematically under the four categories: work intensification, well-being, safety, and coping strategies. The recommendations in each theme are specific to various levels: the Ministry of Education, boards of education, the professional associations, and the practitioners in British Columbia. This does not suggest a discrete effort from each level, however, but rather a collective commitment.

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., governments, professional associations) that will explore how best to update and align the School 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 to 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 British Columbia 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 school principals in small rural schools find themselves also with 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 Workload Study

We recommend that the Ministry of Education create a memorandum of agreement to conduct a system-wide workload study 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 that the BC 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 BC provincial government create or expand 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. Well-Being of School Principals

Create or Expand Existing Well-Being Strategies/Initiatives to Include all Components of Well-Being, and Ensure that These Strategies Extend to Principal Well-Being

We recommend creating or expanding the existing well-being initiatives to include 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. Although there are existing well-being initiatives that prioritize students and children (e.g., Healthy Schools BC, Well-being BC), we recommend they be expanded to include everyone in schools, including teachers, educational assistants, support staff, and school leaders. We also recommend creating a task force to scale-up the existing well-being initiatives to the provincial system level.

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 89.6% 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 0.5% and 1.5%, respectively.

Section 3. Safety

Implement the Existing Occupational Health and Safety Regulation and Strategies

Although public education is the responsibility of the BC 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, Ministry of Health, and WorkSafeBC to collaboratively implement the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation and Strategies into the BC 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 WorkSafeBC and the BCFED Health & Safety Centre to support employee wellness and safety.

Create or Expand District Safe School Teams

We recommend that district school boards create or expand current district safe school teams to specifically examine physical assaults and other unsafe behaviours, including those from high-needs students, and to 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 district school boards create comprehensive and supportive protocols to support principals who are dealing with threatening parents/guardians and with inappropriate social media harassment.

Continue to Build a Safe and Healthy Work Culture

British Columba school boards and schools are directed by the Safe and Caring School Communities policy to create safe and inclusive learning environments. 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, teachers; and build working relationships with other organizations and institutions such as WorkSafeBC, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, and university researchers to provide evidence-informed services.

Better Protect Principals

We recommend that professional associations seek—and the government give—more voice and power to provide better protection to their members, including work-related benefits and rights, contract negotiations, professional support and services, and other legal and policy protections.

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 principals. 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 the Canadian Psychological Association, WorkSafeBC, the Dedicated Action for School Health (DASH), the First Nations Health Authority (FNHA), and Humanworks (a consulting group already in collaboration with BCPVPA).

Create a Mechanism for Principals to Have a Greater Sense of Control Over Their Work Environment

We recommend a mechanism be created to allow principals to have a greater sense of control over their work environment and to address issues surrounding their work, well-being, and safety.

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 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 health and safety issues at work.

Reduce Isolation and Build Supportive Networks

We recommend principals build healthy and positive support networks with family members, friends, colleagues, or 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.

Create or Update the Quick and Handy Reference List for Principals

We recommend district school boards create or update the quick and handy list for principals on any available policies, procedures, and contact information they might need for easy reference, especially those on school safety, crisis management, and emergency situations.

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 on average 9.6 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 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 British Columbia's English- and French-language publicly funded school districts 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 BC 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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