Psychological Safety of School Administrators in British Columbia: 
The Unspoken Truth

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British Columbia, Canada
**Psychological Safety of School Administrators in British Columbia**

### Participant Demographics

- **489 SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS**
  - 61% Ps + VPs identify as female
  - 65% PRINCIPALS
  - 35% VICE-PRINCIPALS

- **86%** An overwhelming majority of SAs identified as White.

### Years of Experience vs. Age

- **Principals**
  - Average # of years principals spent as a vice-principal: 4.7
  - Average # of years principals have been in their current role: 7.5
  - Average # of years vice-principals have been in their current role: 4.8

- **Vice- Principals**

**The data used is from a research survey conducted in 2022 by Dr. Fei Wang, University of British Columbia.**
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Top 3 influential societal, operational, & community factors on work of SAs in the past 2 years

- 97% Pandemic
- 96% Health & safety requirements
- 93% Increasing mental health issues in school community

Top 5 concerns for SAs when faced with difficult decisions

1. The negative impact on their work relationships 76%
2. Not being supported or backed up 69%
3. Complaints from parents/guardians 66%
4. The negative impact on their image/reputation 64%
5. Creating a toxic work environment 58%

Top 5 safety issues SAs have been exposed to

- Passive aggressiveness 55%
- Emotional labour & fatigue 52%
- Complaints behind their back 39%
- Verbal or physical threats 37%
- Microagression 30%

As administrators...

- Over 50% strongly disagree or disagree that they can negotiate with the school district for more resources and greater flexibility
- 38% feel they can maintain control of their own daily schedule
- 30% do not feel they can handle the time demands of the job
- 80% feel they can effectively handle student discipline

Overall, principals encounter a greater # of safety issues than vice-principals

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**PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

*Psychological safety* is a level of comfortability of speaking out without fear of negative consequences.

How school administrators feel about their psychological safety at work:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat low</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat high</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top 5 factors that make school administrators *often or always* feel psychologically unsafe at work:

1. **Hierarchical structure of the organization** (42%)
2. Lack of supportive district leadership (34%)
3. Fear of negative consequences (29%)
4. Lack of trust (25%)
5. Fear of being judged by colleagues (25%)

Vice-principals were more likely than principals to fear being judged by colleagues and feel that a lack of work experience also made them feel psychologically unsafe.

School administrators felt safest expressing dissenting or critical opinions to the following people:

- **Students**: 70%
- **Other principals & vice-principals**: 67%
- **Support staff**: 53%
- **Teachers**: 52%

But school administrators felt less safe dissenting with:

- **Trustees**: 67%
- **Superintendents**: 51%

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**Psychological Safety**

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### Psychological Safety at the School Level

- **82%** of SAs often or always feel respected by teachers and school staff in their school.
- **71%** of principals often or always feel that their skills and talents are valued and utilized, **more than VPs at 61%**.
- **57%** feel that it is rarely or never difficult to ask other members of their school for help.
- **54%** feel that when they make a mistake at school, it is rarely or never held against them.
- **45%** of SAs often or always feel their role is not well understood by others.
- VPs are less likely than principals to:
  - feel safe taking risks in their leadership
  - feel they can speak up without fear of negative consequences
  - bring up problems and tough issues at their school

### Psychological Safety at the Community Level

SAs feel positive when it comes to the community:

- **70%** feel respected by the community.
- **66%** are not afraid to be themselves in the community.
- **40%** can speak up without fear of retaliation in their community.
- **80%** rarely or never feel rejected for being different.

More than half of SAs will rarely or never ignore things in the community just because they don’t agree with them.

More than half are also not concerned about being involved in issues that could have negative consequences for them in the community.

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### Psychological Safety at the District Level

Many responses were neutral regarding district staff and senior management but responses as a whole indicated that neither principals nor VPs felt very psychologically safe within their district.

- **Feel they can speak up without any fear of retaliation in the school district**: 46%
- **Feel comfortable challenging unwritten rules and assumptions**: 42%
- **Feel it is safe to take a risk at their work in the district**: 37%
- **Feel they can count on the district to defend them in any case**: 36%
- **Are able to bring up problems and tough issues to senior management**: 29%
- **Feel comfortable asking difficult questions**: 26%

**SAs rarely or never**:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
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Principals appear to fare better than VPs when it comes to their psychological safety at the district level. They:

- **Receive more positive feedback**
- **Feel they can ask difficult questions and bring up problems and tough issues**
- **Feel more comfortable challenging unwritten rules & assumptions**

<table>
<thead>
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<td>43%</td>
<td>Of school administrators would still often or always recommend their district to friends or colleagues</td>
</tr>
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<td>40%</td>
<td>Of school administrators felt that it was never or rarely difficult to ask members of the district for help</td>
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**TOP WAYS SAs DEAL WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

- 56% Talk with family/friends
- 49% Talk with a confidant
- 43% Consult with colleagues
- 37% Keep silent
- 33% Talk with admin team at school
- 26% Seek solitude
- 21% Contact professional association
- 19% Use alcohol
- 19% Do nothing

Relying on this self-care is inadequate, and systemic and structural changes are needed to better support school administrators' psychological safety.

**RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

- Implement communication programs to flatten extant hierarchies
- Promote tolerance and respect for open questioning by school administrators
- Build respectful, authentic relationships and transparent, supportive work environments
- Incorporate psychological safety into the existing health and safety regulations and strategies
- Provide targeted training to prepare SAs for realities and challenges of their roles
- Build a culture of inclusion and belonging
- Improve representation of and support for BIPOC and culturally diverse school leaders

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