

Psychological Safety of School Administrators in British Columbia:

The Unspoken Truth



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Psychological Safety of School Administrators in British Columbia

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

489 SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

PRINCIPALS

65%

35%

VICE-PRINCIPALS

61%

Ps + VPs identify as female

An overwhelming majority of SAs identified as White.

86%

4.7

average # of years principals spent as a vice-principal

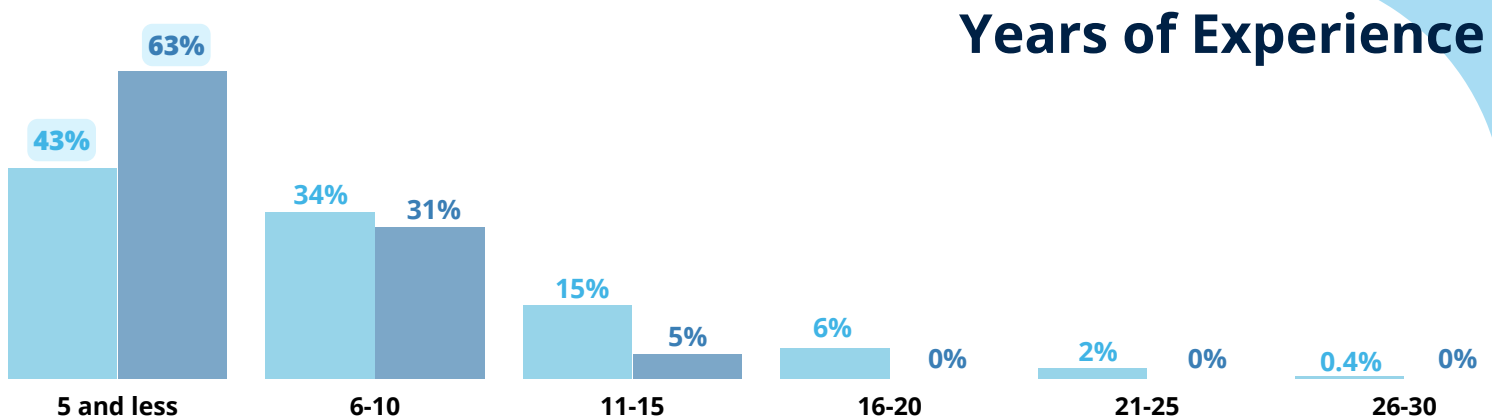
7.5

average # of years principals have been in their current role

4.8

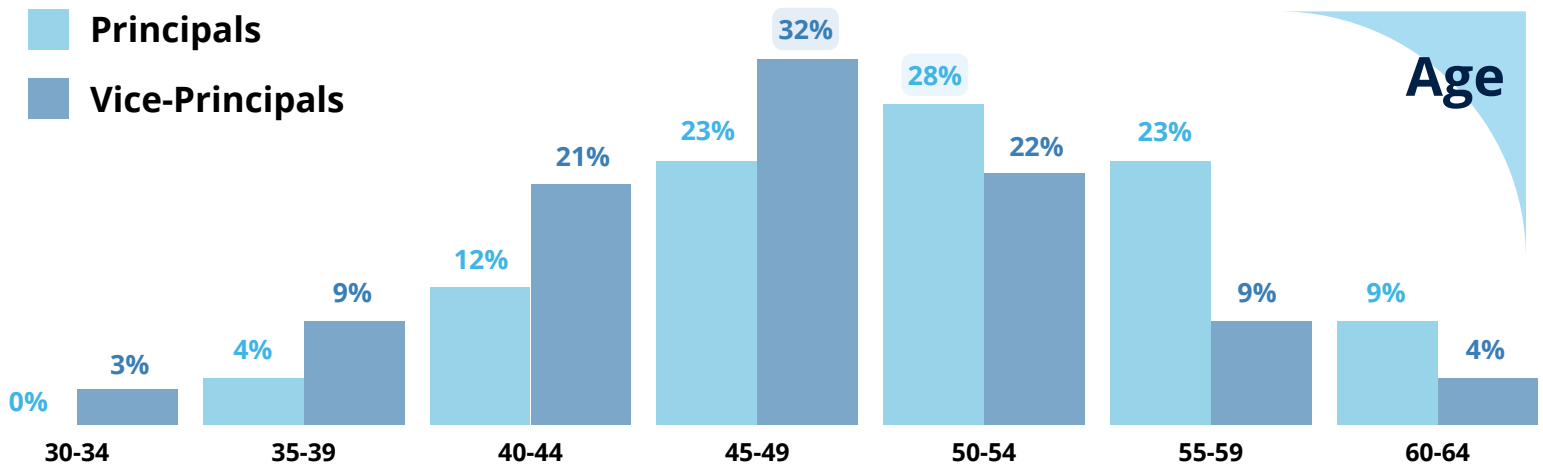
average # of years vice-principals have been in their current role

YEARS OF EXPERIENCE vs. AGE



Years of Experience

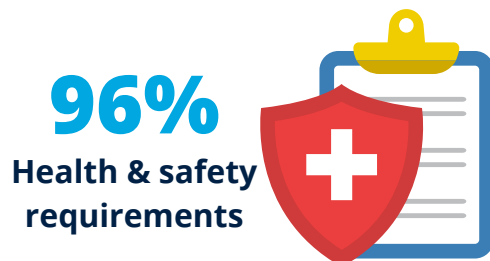
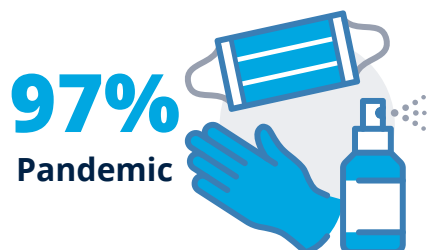
Principals
Vice-Principals



Age

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Top 3 influential societal, operational, & community factors on work of SAs in the past 2 years



Top 5 concerns for SAs when faced with difficult decisions



Vice-principals were more worried about the effect on their career trajectory than principals.

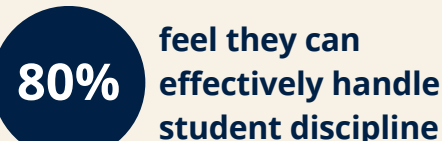
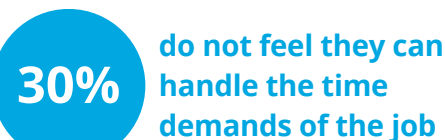
Top 5 safety issues SAs have been exposed to



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

As administrators...

Over 50% strongly disagree or disagree that they can negotiate with the school district for more resources and greater flexibility

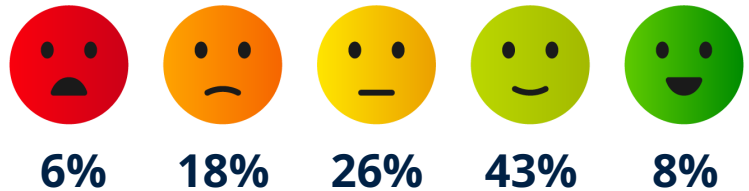


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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

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:



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

42%

Hierarchical structure of the organization

34%

Lack of supportive district leadership

29%

Fear of negative consequences

25%

Lack of trust

25%

Fear of being judged by colleagues

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

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

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

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

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.

SAs rarely or never:

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%

Principals appear to fare better than VPs when it comes to their psychological safety at the district level. They:

Receive more positive feedback

43%

of school administrators would still *often* or *always* recommend their district to friends or colleagues

Feel they can ask difficult questions and bring up problems and tough issues

40%

of school administrators felt that it was *never* or *rarely* difficult to ask members of the district for help


Feel more comfortable challenging unwritten rules & assumptions

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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

Principals used
more coping
strategies than
VPs.



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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For the full research report, visit:

<https://bit.ly/PS-SA-BC>

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