

# Psychological Safety of School Administrators: Invisible Barriers to Speaking Out

October 2022



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for supporting the research presented in this report. I would also like to thank the following groups and individuals for their contributions:

- The British Columbia Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA) and the Board of Directors, for working in an advisory capacity throughout the stages of survey design, delivery, and knowledge translation; for facilitating access to the principal population; for getting the word out about the study; and for assisting in disseminating the research results.
- The BCPVPA member principals, Rosa Fazio, Ranjit Bains, Brian Leonard, Read Jorgensen, and Armin Samiei, who provided valuable feedback in the focus group during the survey design phase and in subsequent individual online pilot testing.
- The principals—who generously gave their time participating in the online survey to share their insights on their leadership and psychological safety.
- Darren Danyluk, BCPVPA President; Kevin Reimer, BCPVPA Executive Director; Rochelle Morandini, BCPVPA Director of Member Health & Well-being; and Sharon North, Executive Assistant to the President & Executive Director, for their direction, guidance, and support throughout the course of this study.
- Sandra Murphy, Director of Communications and Erin Hughes, Communications Assistant at the BCPVPA, for their assistance in disseminating information about the survey using social media, the BCPVPA website, and the e-newsletter.
- Negar Khodarahmi (UBC), research assistant, whose patience, attention to detail, and expert research skills helped to bring this study to fruition.
- Leila Baktash, Hannah Nguyen, Wanying Wang, and Sabbir Hossain, for piloting the survey on Qualtrics.
- Anne VanGilst, professional editor, for her editing expertise and eye for details.
- Kelly Bairos, for her skill in graphic design and report formatting.

I thank them for their individual and collective research efforts, which brought this study to fruition.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

School administrators are working in a hierarchical system marked by increasingly complex interpersonal interactions and relationships, compounded by myriad social and political factors that are beyond their control. When and how to “put forward an idea, ask a question, talk about a mistake, or stand out for a position” (Yildirim & Yenipinar, 2017, p. 167) comes with significant implications for themselves and their organizations. How comfortable school administrators feel when navigating such complexities reflects their level of psychological safety at work. This study aims to investigate school administrators' psychological safety amid intensified work conditions during the pandemic and elicits research evidence to help build a psychologically safe work environment for principals and vice-principals in British Columbia (BC). This survey research builds on the principal investigator's previous research on school leadership and *The Art of War*, focusing on the psychological safety issues school administrators face as they work to strategically lead their school communities.

An online survey was used to collect data on school administrator perceptions of their psychological safety and the related factors impacting their work. The survey was based on research results from interviews and focus groups in an earlier stage of the research project in collaboration with the British Columbia Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA). School administrators 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 28.0%. Of the responses, 528 responses were accepted for analysis, including principals and vice-principals (VPs) from 58 different school districts. The respondents had an average of 5.5 years of work experience as school administrators, and most worked in elementary schools (58.0%) and were female (61.0%). Most of the school administrators (60.0%) who responded to the survey worked in larger cities with populations over 100,000.

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, t-tests, and factor analysis. Findings were organized under five main headings: (a) educational environment and how school administrators spend their time, (b) policy implementation and strategic leadership, (c) general and psychological safety, (d) work demands and well-being, and (e) work relationships and organizational management.

## Educational Environment and How School Administrators Spend Their Time

Changes in the social and political climate have pressured school administrators to re-prioritize their work activities and are having a negative impact on productivity and performance. Some factors influencing school administrators' work include the pandemic, health and safety requirements, increasing mental health issues in the school community, increasing demands and changing responsibilities and roles of school administrators, increasing diversity in students' needs, staff turnover, and staff shortages. A high majority of school administrators agreed that they had to keep up-to-date on the changing educational circumstances, especially given that there was more uncertainty and unpredictability at work.

Accordingly, administrators found that many activities were taking precedence over their traditional leadership and administrative tasks. Administrators reported working long hours – 54.6 hours per week on average – but also spending increasing amounts of time on activities such as covering classes with no teachers/TTOC, implementing health measures, covering EA work, covering breaks, and other COVID related activities. School administrators identified a number of actions that they used to help navigate the environment. Most frequently, they used creative problem-solving and thinking outside the box. Administrators also indicated that they would sometimes use more subversive strategies, such as working around the system, avoiding asking permission, and bending rules. Interestingly, principals noted putting themselves into vulnerable positions more often than VPs.

## Policy Implementation and Strategic Leadership

How school administrators implement policies and what reasoning processes they use illustrate their leadership styles and also reflect how safe they feel psychologically at their workplaces. When asked about the implementation of the ministry/district policies, a large majority of school administrators agreed that they implement policies as directed, to the extent possible. Other responses, however, demonstrated that many school administrators, at some point, resisted and did not implement ministry and district policies to the letter, implying that they didn't fully agree with the policies for their schools. However, few principals, and fewer VPs, felt comfortable challenging the status quo with regard to district and ministry policies. Analysis revealed that though still hesitant, principals were more likely than VPs to act autonomously while interpreting and implementing policies. Administrator hesitancy to provide input into the policy making process points to the psychological unsafety that principals and VPs experience in their interactions with policy makers.

Difficult decisions are a part of every school administrator's work. Administrators were asked what they worried about when making difficult decisions in the best interests of their schools. School administrators primarily worried about the negative impacts on their work relationships, not being supported or backed up, parent/guardian complaints, and the negative impacts on their image/reputation. Statements having to do with personal and interpersonal impacts were generally more highly ranked and caused more concern than legal repercussions. Analysis revealed that VPs tended to worry slightly more about their career trajectory than principals.

An analysis of the strategies that administrators used to get work done revealed that both principals and VPs were more inclined to use collegial and respectful interpersonal skills rather than strategies that appear to be more adversarial. Popular strategies ranged from providing clear expectations, being proactive, creating collaborative structures/vision, to introducing ideas to plant a seed.

## General and Psychological Safety

Over the course of a year, school administrators were exposed to multiple threats to their safety as they went about their work. Almost all the school administrators reported having experienced one or more safety issues, ranging from sexual harassment, passive aggressive behaviours, to emotional labour and fatigue. Significantly, principals were more likely to have been exposed to the listed safety concerns than VPs. They experienced these threats, to varying degrees, from a range of stakeholders, including parents/guardians, teachers, students, and superintendents.

While school administrators generally felt safe to express dissenting or critical opinions to other principals/vice-principals, teachers, and support staff, they felt less safe dissenting with union representatives and parents/guardians. In addition, most principals and VPs did not feel safe sharing dissenting opinions with other district board senior management, superintendents, and trustees.

While very few school administrators reported feeling excellent about their overall psychological safety, responses indicated that they generally felt fairly safe or were neutral about it. The survey revealed that administrators had mixed views about their psychological safety at the school, community, and district levels. Responses showed hesitancy to take risks and to bring up issues or ask difficult questions, suggesting a lack of trust between school administrators and their superintendents and district boards. But positively, administrators generally felt valued, respected, and accepted.

## Work Demands and Well-being

School administrators overwhelmingly agreed that their work was intensifying, feeling worn out at the end of school days and feeling that they were spending too much time and energy on their jobs. Emotional exhaustion, feelings of burnout, and negative effects on their mental health were often indicated. Principals were more likely than VPs to express their exhaustion and some expressed that they felt tired of running their schools to the extent that they wished to quit. Although acknowledging a long list of struggles, a large majority of administrators still believed they could cope with most situations in their schools.

School administrators incorporated a number of strategies to deal with their workloads. Analysis revealed five major categories of strategies school administrators used, including deferring, relationship building, the use of power, direct involvement in policy making, and task management. The most often selected strategy was the prioritization of tasks.

Only a small number of administrators felt that work related issues had little impact on their health and well-being, with a strong majority indicating that they felt stressed at work. Workload was identified as the biggest stressor. Many principals and VPs also identified other stressors, such as parent demands/expectations, time pressure/constraints, and staff shortages. Only a few indicated COVID as a stressor.

## Work Relationships and Organizational Management

A significant proportion of school administrators' work involves interactions with people within and beyond schools. Participant perceptions of their relationships with superintendents revealed that a modest majority felt they were treated fairly by their superintendents, but a similar number felt they were rarely or never able to influence the decisions of their superintendents. Moreover, principals were more likely than VPs to feel their suggestions were given consideration and that they had access to the district superintendent when needed. Participant responses about their district school board and trustees were similar. Again, a modest majority felt positively about the board and believed that they shared common values. More negatively, however, most administrators did not feel comfortable challenging the status quo in the district. The other lackluster responses provided may point to a lack of psychological safety with the district board and trustees.

In general, most administrators felt that they knew what was expected of them and felt a sense of belonging. Administrators responded with confidence that they could handle many aspects of the job such as the discipline of students, managing change in their schools, and the paperwork required of the job. Fewer felt they could shape the operational policies and procedures necessary to manage their schools or maintain control of their daily schedules.

In addition, the majority did not feel able to negotiate with the school district for more resources and greater flexibility.

The top two tactics identified to manage change were securing “buy-in” from more influential members of staff before introducing the initiative and using persuasion and encouragement. Next, administrators opted for tactics that sought to avoid confrontation like delaying the initiative until a more favourable occasion for implementation arose, over punitive tactics, such as reminding staff that insubordination/non-compliance will be reflected in evaluations. Seeking mediation was similarly an uncommon tactic.

## Final Comments

The survey allowed for participating school administrators to add their optional comments at the end, and 145 participating principals and vice-principals took the time to add their thoughts. These comments added further insights to the closed-ended survey questions. The majority of the school administrators commented on how the role has changed over time and how difficult and stressful the job was becoming.

## Recommendations

The recommendations put forth in this report call for collective commitment from all education stakeholders. Some recommendations reinforce the ones that were made in the previous report on the well-being of school principals, and other recommendations suggest courses of action needed specifically to promote the psychological safety of school administrators.

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## Introduction

Psychological safety has become a primary concern in education, particularly among school principals and vice-principals (VPs). School administrators, often seen as the middle managers, are working in a hierarchical system that is marked by deeply interpersonal complexities and competing, if not conflicting, interests and policies. Navigating such hierarchies and competing interests without fear of negative consequences to self-image, relationships, or career is paramount to principals' and VPs' leadership, performance, and commitment to their work. For school principals and VPs to positively influence student outcomes and school performance, they must feel psychologically safe in order to carry out their duties and responsibilities. But in recent years, highly demanding and uncertain situations have increasingly constrained or complicated the work of school administrators in their daily operation of schools. The ongoing pandemic has further compounded the complexity of their work and extended their duties and responsibilities beyond their traditional roles. Many principals and vice-principals have to cover educational assistant work, breaks, or classes with no teachers or supply teachers; organize rapid testing; and implement health and safety measures, on top of the multitude of other prescribed work tasks.

The changing nature of their work, coupled with increasing uncertainties, is affecting the psychological safety of school administrators in their workplaces. When school administrators feel unsafe to take interpersonal risks, their ability to think, feel, speak and act is compromised, as is their capacity to deal with the myriad challenges they face daily. With little research on school administrators' psychological safety to date, there is an urgent need to investigate their psychological safety in order to address psychological challenges and create an environment in which principals and VPs have a greater sense of safety and control. As administrators "put forward an idea, ask a question, talk about a mistake, or stand out for a position" (Yildirim & Yenipinar, 2017, p. 167), what are the implications for themselves, their principalship, and their organizations?

## Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate how safe school administrators have felt navigating the complexities of their work during an unsettling time. In collaboration with community partner, the BC Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA), this timely study provides much needed insights into principals' and VPs' psychological safety challenges amid intensified work conditions that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This research (a) seeks practicing principals' and VPs' inputs through an online survey to investigate what psychological issues are within and/or beyond their control, (b) identifies what strategies and mechanisms are utilized to mitigate psychologically unsafe conditions and improve their psychological well-being; and (c) provides evidence for workplace well-being standards and frameworks that integrate individual, collective, and systemic approaches to support school administrators' psychological safety at various levels.

## Background and Rationale for Research

The concept of psychological safety within organisations was initially conceived in the 1960s and gained further popularity in the 1990s with the work of Amy Edmondson (1999), who investigated the concept within the health care sector. Having originated from an organisational behaviour and management perspective, research on psychological safety primarily focuses on interpersonal relationships at the workplace and its impact thereof (Newman et al., 2017). Such research has analysed psychological safety at the individual, organisational, and the group level (Edmondson, 2004, 2019; Edmondson et al., 2016; Edmondson & Lei, 2014) and treated psychological safety in different ways – as antecedent, as outcome, as mediator, and as moderator.

The notion of psychological safety has since been extrapolated to other organisational contexts, such as in the field of education. In recent times, research has focused on psychological safety among teachers and between teachers and students (Baeva & Bordovskaia, 2015; Gerlach & Gockel, 2018; Lyu, 2016). While there is research on the well-being of school administrators in general, an investigation of psychological safety in relation to school administrators has not been explored, other than the impact of their role on

teachers and students (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Dicke et al., 2018; Yildirim & Yenipinar, 2017). Since interpersonal risk taking without fear of negative consequences tends to be tied with and influenced by hierarchies (Lyu, 2016), and the figure of the school administrator is seen as the 'head' within the school as an organisation/organism, school administrator's psychological safety has not been researched elaborately. Such an interrogation is important given the deeply interpersonal nature of the educational environment and its significance in education, whether administrative or pedagogical. In the case of a principal (assuming an equivalence with a manager/administrator), their performance is impacted by both the psychological safety they feel as well as the psychological safety they create. The impact of psychological safety on the performance and commitment, as well as stress and burnout, of principals requires further study.

A great educational system requires effective, committed, and passionate leaders. In recent years, a sharp increase in responsibilities and workload has made principalship unmanageable. The intensity of principals' work is evidenced in long work hours, fast-paced work, fragmented and problem-oriented interactions, and increasing work complexities (ATA, 2017; CAP, 2014; Grissom et al., 2015; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Riley, 2016; Wang et al., 2018b). Such work intensification has significantly impacted principals' and VPs' health and well-being, including their psychological well-being (Chaplain, 2001; Darmody & Smyth, 2016). Causes of poor psychological health and well-being are directly attributable to factors within and beyond the workplace, including the social and political climate, organizational culture and safety, policies and initiatives, leadership and change at the system level, and excessive workload and demands. The existing and lingering impact of the pandemic has further exacerbated principals' and VPs' work and psychological health. Unless these health issues are recognized and discussed openly, school administrators are less likely to get appropriate care and support and are more likely to inappropriately self-medicate (Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health, 2008). Therefore, if we are to meaningfully support school administrators in their current roles, we need to better understand how educational hierarchies and the changing nature of their work has impacted school administrators' psychological well-being during the pandemic.

## Research Framework

Psychological safety promotes goal-orientedness, productivity, and engagement and is a key condition for better performance, a sense of belonging, and job satisfaction (Devos et al., 2007; Baeva & Bordovskaia, 2015; Gerlach & Gockel, 2018; Singh et al., 2013; Yildirim & Yenipinar, 2017). A review of literature shows psychological safety manifests itself in four dimensions: openness and freedom of self-expression, sense of belonging and comfort, self-efficacy and confidence, and positive attitude. This multidimensional framework captures the nuances of principals' work conditions and can provide a comprehensive evaluation of their psychological well-being. This framework reflects the complexity of principals' work and advances current research that primarily focuses on the physical and mental well-being of school administrators.

## Research Methodology

This survey research is part of a larger study on *Subversive Leadership and The Art of War*, supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The SSHRC supported study used a sequential mixed methods design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) that involved data sources from interviews, focus groups, and an online survey, with pandemic related adjustments. The study draws on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research, minimizing the limitations of both approaches, such as knowledge generalization, research credibility, and researcher bias (Creswell, 2014). By comparing different perspectives drawn from quantitative and qualitative data, the study design offers a more complete exploration of the research topic.

### Data Collection and Analysis

#### Interviews

The study involved two rounds of semi-structured interviews with 28 principals and vice-principals in the Metro Vancouver area, with the support of the British Columbia Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA). The first round of interviews focused on school administrators' subversive practices and their impacts. The second round of interviews was a follow-up that examined principals' and VPs' psychological safety experiences within their subversive leadership activities. The interviews explicated school administrators' subversive leadership experiences and explored in detail how principals perceived the psychological safety involved in the process, how psychological safety impacts their work and well-being, and what effective strategies and solutions they used to manage psychological challenges during unsettling times (Bevan, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The findings were used to develop a psychological safety survey—the results of which are presented in this report.

#### Focus group and feedback session

Prior to the launch of the online survey, a focus group and an online feedback session were conducted to ensure the survey concentrated on areas that school administrators felt were essential. Focus groups are useful for gathering feedback and identifying themes and topics for subsequent survey refinement

(Bailey, 2007; Robson, 2002). The online focus group session was organized via Zoom and a shared Google Doc, lasting about two hours. The focus group session involved seven principals and vice-principals with the support of BCPVPA. After integrating the feedback from the focus group into the survey, an asynchronous feedback session was conducted on Google Docs with three different practicing administrators and graduate students to further refine the survey.

#### Online survey

The online survey format allowed for extended reach to a large geographical area throughout the province of British Columbia. The survey aimed to understand how school administrators engage in strategic leadership in order to get their work done amid intensified work conditions and what psychological safety issues are at play. Specifically, the survey explored the following areas:

- a) *Principalship and how time is spent* – how school administrators spend their time, working beyond their traditional roles during the pandemic
- b) *Educational environment and climate* – in what social-political and educational context their psychological safety is manifested and being impacted
- c) *Policy implementation and strategic leadership* – how policies are implemented and what strategic leadership is exercised in order to fulfil the mandates
- d) *Psychological safety* – what psychological safety is involved, with whom, and how it is managed
- e) *Safety and well-being* – how safety and well-being is associated with psychological safety
- f) *Work relationships* – how work relationships influence and define the psychological safety of school administrators
- g) *Organizational leadership and management* – how school administrators manage their workload in order to get their work done

- h) *Work demands* – what work demands school administrators experience and how the demands relate to their psychological safety
- i) *Ethical and practical considerations* – what ethical and practical concerns school administrators have about their strategic leadership and how such considerations reflect and impact their psychological safety
- j) *About yourself and your school* – general demographic data

As an option, study participants were asked in the last question of the survey to provide general comments on aspects of their work that they felt affected their psychological safety. They were also asked to provide contact information if they were willing to participate in follow-up interviews on the occurrences affecting their psychological safety.

The survey contained 48 questions in total and took between 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The majority of questions in the survey were closed-ended, with a mix of five-point Likert-scale questions, matrix questions, and multiple choice “choose all that apply” questions. In each closed-ended question, an additional comment space was provided to allow participants to qualify their responses and add contextual information on the topics surrounding the questions. Such design helped add depth and richness to the quantitative survey data and provided more nuanced understandings of school administrators’ psychological safety. Participants’ comments are included throughout the report to support and strengthen the quantitative survey results and shed light on their responses to the close-ended questions.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and participants were told they had the right to not answer individual questions and to withdraw from the study while the survey distribution phase was still open. Participants were also informed 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

Online surveys have the potential to reach a large number of participants and provide a snapshot of the attitudes and behaviours, including thoughts and opinions, of the target population (Cohen et al., 2011). By gaining an adequate representation of principals and VPs, this research allows comparative interpretations by taking into account variables such as the demographic distribution, gender, and work experience of participants, enabling an examination of how such variations affect views and perceptions of their leadership and psychological safety. In general, descriptive statistics and t-tests were used in the data analysis. For example, frequency distributions and cross tabulations were utilized to determine the central tendencies of the variables, including the mean, median, and mode. Some data were charted 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%. Participants’ leadership attitudes and behaviours are also analyzed using exploratory factor analysis to uncover the mental mechanism of school administrators’ leadership and the rationale and conditions for their behaviours. T-tests were used to compare the perceptions of principals and VPs on their psychological safety.

## Sampling

School administrators 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 34 days (approximately 5 weeks). A number of strategies were used to encourage school administrators to share their insights and opinions about their psychological safety 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.

## Description of the Sample

A total of 2654 members from the BCPVPA were invited to participate in the online survey. After cleaning those who had opted out of the survey (173 members) and bounced back invitations (6), a total of 696 responses were collected out of the 2481 invitations during the five-week period. The response rate for the survey was 28.1%, a rate that was better than expected, given the timing of the survey (late April till mid-May, 2022) and the impact of the pandemic. After data cleaning, a total of 528 responses (21.3% response rate) were accepted for analysis. The original sample included principals, vice-principals, part-time or acting principals, and district principals<sup>1</sup> from 58 different school districts that responded to the survey. These respondents were located within a broad range of different school and community contexts. For this report, the results are based on the sample of only principals and vice-principals (492), and the term *school administrators* will be used when referring to both principals and VPs. Where the terms *principals* and *vice-principals* are used, results are reported based on the sub-samples of principals and vice-principals, respectively.

Both elementary and secondary school administrators participated in the survey: 63.0% of respondents were elementary school administrators (74.4% for principals and 41.4% for VPs), while 23.9% of the sample were secondary school administrators (14.2% for principals and 42.0% for VPs). **Figure 1** shows that 6.0% of participating administrators worked in schools that included both elementary and secondary students, 6.8% were middle school administrators, and 0.4% were high school administrators.

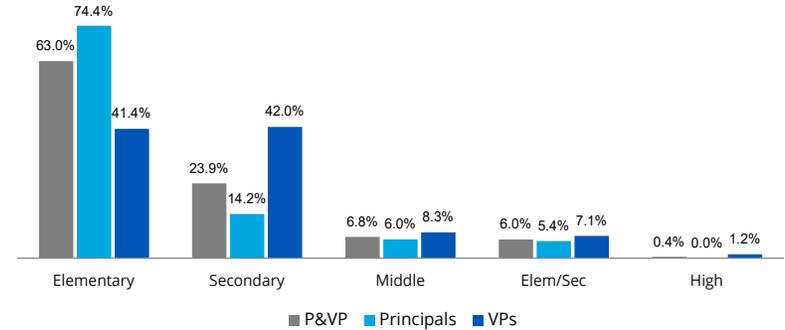


Figure 1. School Characteristics: Participating Administrators by School Type

More than half of the administrators who participated in the survey self-identified as female (61.2%) and 37.3% self-identified as male. Approximately 1.2% of administrators preferred not to answer and 0.2% identified as nonbinary. As shown in **Figure 2**, a similar trend was found among principals and VPs.

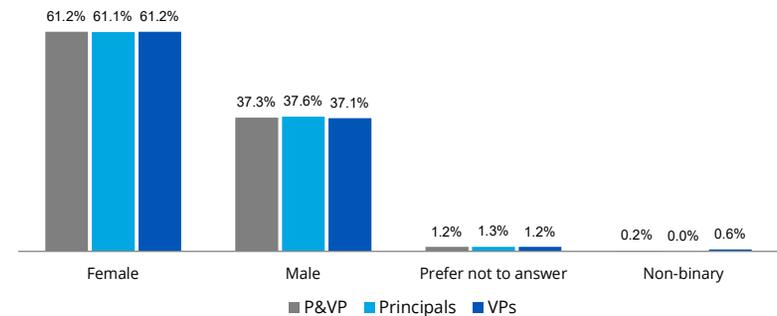


Figure 2. Participant Characteristics: Gender

As displayed in **Figure 3**, a large majority (93.4%) of respondents (93.3% for principals and 93.6% for VPs) had obtained a master's degree. Less than 1% of the respondents (1.0% for principals and none of the participating VPs) indicated that a bachelor's degree was the highest level of formal education that they had completed. Smaller numbers of participating administrators had obtained other

<sup>1</sup> The analysis included only the full-time administrators. Results from part-time, acting, and district principals were not included in the report because of the small number of responses.

formal qualifications: 1.0% of respondents (0.5% for principals and 2.1% for VPs) had indicated that they had earned a university certificate or diploma above the bachelor level, and 3.6% had obtained a doctorate (3.8% for principals and 3.2% for VPs).

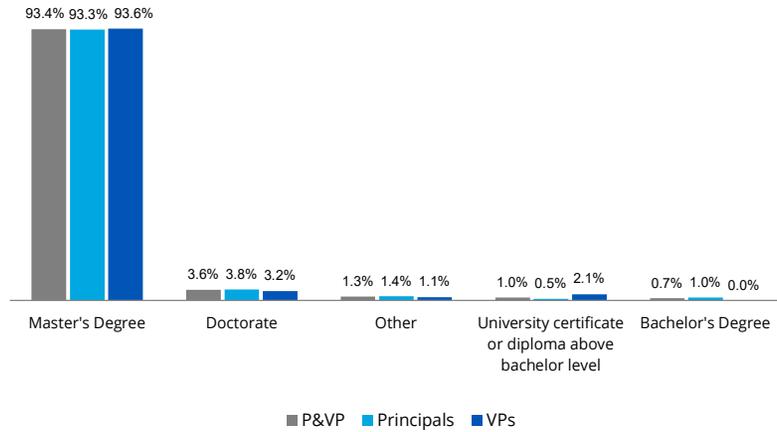


Figure 3. Participant Characteristics: Highest Level of Education

A significant number of the participating administrators were still in the early stages of their careers. Over half of the participants (51.4%) in the survey had five, or less than five years of experience as a principal (not including years of experience as a vice-principal), with an average of 6.4 years of experience across the total sample. Among school principals, the average number of years of experience was 7.5, with approximately 42.7% having had five, or less than five, years of experience as a principal. The VP respondents were found to have less experience, with a total average of 4.8 years of experience as a vice-principal. Among the VPs, 63.4% of them had five, or less than five, years of experience. As Figure 4 shows, 33.5% of the principals had between 6 and 10 years of experience, 15.0% had between 11 and 15 years of experience, and 5.8% had between 16 and 20 years of experience. A small percentage of principals (2.9%) reported having been in the role for more than 20 years. For VPs, 31.2% of them had between 6 and 10 years of experience, and a small percentage of VPs

(5.4%) had between 11 and 15 years of experience. No VPs reported having had over 15 years of experience.

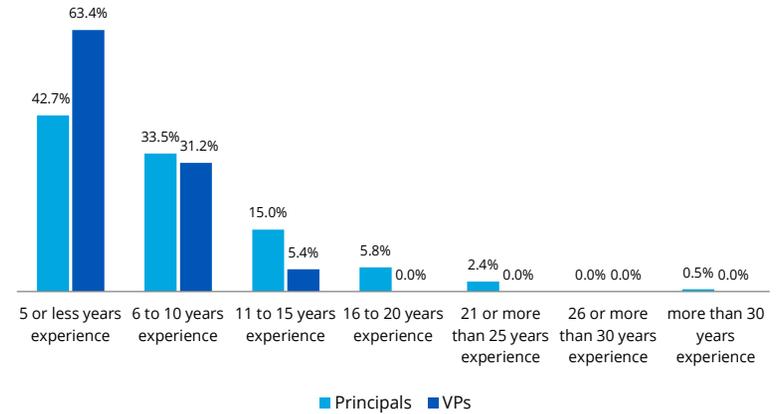


Figure 4. Participant Characteristics: Years of Experience in the Role

Figure 5 shows the ages of the participating administrators grouped by category. Most participants were between the ages of 50 and 54 (26.4%), followed closely by those who were between the ages of 45 and 49 (26.1%) and those between the ages of 55 and 59 (18.5%). A total of 14.9% of the participating administrators were between 40 and 44 years of age. Very few participating administrators were aged 39 or younger (6.6%), nor were they 60 years of age or older (7.6%). No administrators were younger than 30 years old. Among participant principals, most of them were between the ages of 50 and 54 (28.2%), followed by those who were slightly younger, between the ages of 45 and 49 (23.4%). In contrast, most of the VPs were between the ages of 45 and 49 (31.9%), followed by those who were older, between the ages of 50 and 54 (22.3%).

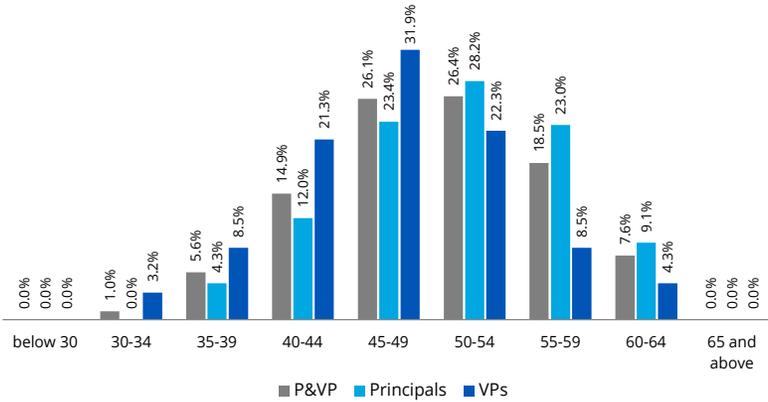


Figure 5. Participant Characteristics: Age Range of Respondents

The survey sample had differences in terms of gender, age, years of experience as a principal or a VP, the level of education brought to the role, and the types of schools in which participants worked. However, as illustrated by **Table 1**, the sample was less diverse in terms of ethnic background: 86.1% of participating administrators (88.0% for principals and 81.9% for VPs) described themselves as white. The categories used for ethnic background in the survey were taken from the Statistics Canada Visible Minority and Population Group Reference Guide (2022). Only 2.0% of the sampled administrators self-identified as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI). South Asian administrators represented 1.7% of the sample, and an additional 2.6% identified as Chinese descendants. A few administrators identified as Black (0.7%), Korean (0.7%), West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan) (0.3%), or Filipino (0.3%).

Table 1. Participant Characteristics: Ethnic Background of Respondents

ETHNIC BACKGROUND	P&VP	PRINCIPALS	VPS
White	86.1%	88.0%	81.9%
Other	5.6%	3.8%	9.6%
Chinese	2.6%	1.9%	4.3%
First Nation, Metis, or Inuit (FNMI)	2.0%	2.4%	1.1%
South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)	1.7%	2.4%	0.0%
Black	0.7%	0.5%	1.1%
Korean	0.7%	0.5%	1.1%
Filipino	0.3%	0.0%	1.1%
West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, etc.)	0.3%	0.5%	0.0%
Latin American	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Arab	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, Laotian, etc.)	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Japanese	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

More than 60.0% of the administrators who responded to the survey worked in larger cities with populations over 100,000. Of the total sample of administrators, 43.2% of the participants reported working in cities with populations between 100,000 to 1,000,000, and 20.5% worked in locations with populations over 1,000,000. Approximately, 18.5% of respondents worked in towns with populations between 15,000 and 100,000, and 10.9% of respondents were employed in schools located in small towns with populations between 3,000 and 15,000 people. An additional 6.3% of participating administrators worked in villages, hamlets, or rural areas with less than 3,000 people. There was a similar pattern found among participating principals and VPs, as displayed in **Figure 6**.

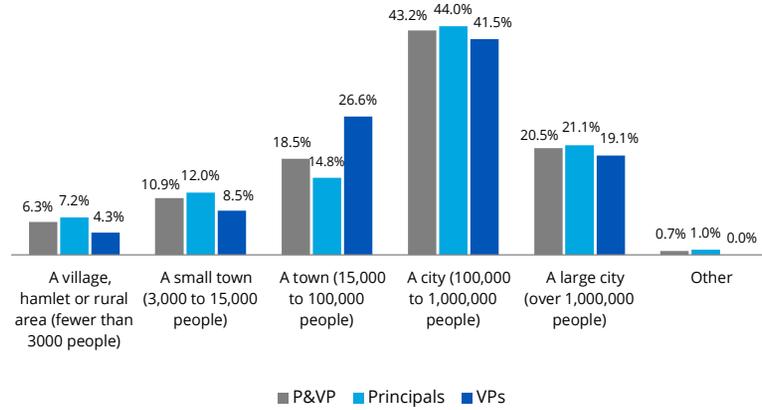


Figure 6. School Characteristics: Size of Surrounding Communities

Figure 7 shows how the majority of the participating administrators worked in schools that had between 101 and 666 students (75.1%). Approximately 12.9% of administrators worked in schools that had between 667 and 1,200 students. A small number of administrators worked in schools with 100 students or less (4.6%), or with over 1,200 students (7.5%).

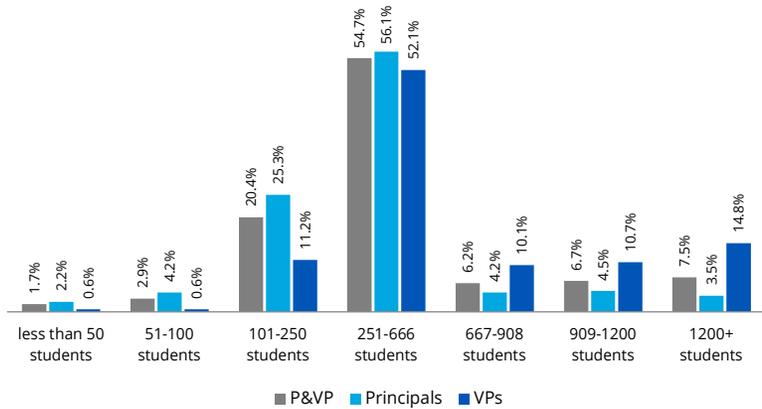


Figure 7. School Characteristics: School Size

As illustrated in Figure 8, 42.9% of the participating school administrators reported that the number of students enrolled in their current schools had increased, 17.5% indicated that their student enrollment had decreased, and 39.6% reported that the number of students in their schools had remained fairly stable.

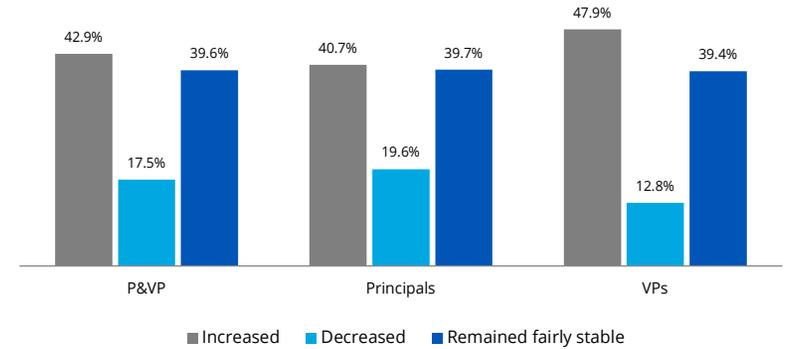


Figure 8. Change of the Student Population over the Years

## Research Findings

This section presents the key findings related to psychological safety at work that emerged from the survey data. The findings are reported across five themes: (a) educational climate and how school administrators spend their time, (b) policy implementation and strategic leadership, (c) general and psychological safety, (d) work demands and well-being, and (e) work relationships and organizational management.

### Theme 1: Educational Environment and How School Administrators Spend Their Time

School administrators' work is constantly being influenced by local and national social and political climates. How school administrators go about doing their work and to what extent they feel psychologically safe is not only shaped by, but also reflective of social and political developments and changes. Theme 1 presents the complexities and uncertainties of the social and political contexts that affect the daily operation of schools and documents additional activities that go beyond school administrators' traditional roles.

#### Educational environment and climate

Over the years, many social and political changes have redefined the role of school administrators, and have led to a broader range of responsibilities. These changes have pressured school administrators to re-prioritize their work activities and are having a negative impact on their productivity and performance. This section captures some of the social and political changes and their impacts on school administrators' work.

When asked over the past two years to what extent specific societal, operational, and community factors have influenced their work as a school administrator, a majority of the participating administrators reported that *the pandemic* (96.6%); *health and safety requirements* (96.2%); and *increasing mental health issues among students, teachers, support workers, and parents/guardians* (93.3%) have influenced their work considerably or extremely. Many of them also reported that the *increasing demands and changing responsibilities and roles of school administrators* (89.3%); *increasing diversity in students' needs* (81.4%); and *staff turnover, attendance, shortage, and dysfunction at district level* (81.6%)

attendance, shortage, and dysfunction at district level (81.6%) have influenced their work considerably or extremely. Nearly half the respondents found *increasing emphasis on instructional and transformational leadership* (49.8%), *policies and practices that have the opposite of the desired effect* (48.5%), and the *increasing level of online teaching/learning* (39.7%) are considerably or extremely affecting their work. Around one third of the participating administrators acknowledged that *racism* (34.5%), *provincial accountability for Framework for Enhancing Students Learning (FESL)* (32.6%), and *lack of updated guidelines and protocols on the use of internet and social media* (29.8%) considerably or extremely influenced their work. As displayed in **Table 2**, participating principals and VPs had similar responses.

Table 2. Societal, Operational, and Community Influence on School Administrators' Work

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Not at all + Slightly	Some-what	Consider-ably + Extremely	Not at all + Slightly	Some-what	Consider-ably + Extremely	Not at all + Slightly	Some-what	Consider-ably + Extremely
<b>Pandemic</b>	1.1%	2.2%	96.6%	1.0%	2.4%	96.7%	1.3%	2.0%	96.6%
<b>Health and safety requirements</b>	1.1%	2.7%	96.2%	1.0%	2.7%	96.3%	1.3%	2.7%	95.9%
<b>Increasing mental health issues among students, teachers, support workers, and parents/guardians</b>	0.7%	6.1%	93.3%	0.7%	6.1%	93.3%	0.7%	6.0%	93.3%
<b>Increasing demands and changing responsibilities and roles of school administrators</b>	0.4%	10.3%	89.3%	0.0%	9.8%	90.2%	1.4%	11.5%	87.2%
<b>Staff turnover, attendance, shortage, and dysfunction at district level</b>	5.1%	13.2%	81.6%	4.8%	12.8%	82.4%	6.0%	14.1%	79.9%
<b>Increasing diversity in students' needs</b>	3.8%	14.8%	81.4%	2.7%	14.2%	83.1%	6.0%	15.4%	78.5%
<b>Other</b>	38.9%	4.4%	56.7%	34.0%	5.6%	60.4%	50.8%	1.7%	47.4%
<b>Increasing emphasis on instructional and transformational leadership</b>	17.7%	32.5%	49.8%	17.2%	34.5%	48.3%	18.7%	28.2%	53.0%

Table 2. Societal, Operational, and Community Influence on School Administrators' Work (cont'd)

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Not at all + Slightly	Some-what	Consider-ably + Extremely	Not at all + Slightly	Some-what	Consider-ably + Extremely	Not at all + Slightly	Some-what	Consider-ably + Extremely
<b>Policies and practices that have the opposite of the desired effect</b>	21.2%	30.2%	48.5%	20.4%	27.6%	52.0%	22.9%	35.8%	41.0%
<b>Increasing level of online teaching/ learning</b>	27.4%	33.0%	39.7%	29.8%	33.4%	36.8%	22.8%	32.2%	45.0%
<b>Racism</b>	26.1%	39.5%	34.5%	29.0%	39.2%	31.8%	20.1%	39.6%	40.2%
<b>Provincial accountability for FESL</b>	30.8%	36.7%	32.6%	31.2%	34.9%	33.9%	30.2%	40.4%	29.4%
<b>Lack of updated guidelines and protocols on the use of internet and social media</b>	38.4%	31.8%	29.8%	41.6%	30.1%	28.4%	32.2%	35.6%	32.3%

School administrators were asked *how the changing educational environment has influenced their work* and given statements to rate using a 5-point Likert scale (see **Table 3**). Participating principals and VPs had fairly similar perceptions. A high majority (94.6%) of school administrators *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they had to *keep up to date on the changing circumstances*, and 88.8% found that *there is more uncertainty and unpredictability at work*. In addition, 84.9% of administrators *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the need to be *well informed about the micro- and macro-politics within and beyond [their] schools*. School administrators agreed that they should *learn to turn unpredictability to [their] advantage at work* (74.3%). However, they differed by approximately 10.0% [ $t(267.4) = 2.5, p = .013$ ] over whether *they have to assess the environment and learn what rules to bend*: principals at 72.6% ( $M = 3.9, SD = 0.9$ ) were more likely than VPs at 61.2% ( $M = 3.7, SD = 1.0$ ) to *agree* and *strongly agree* to consider bending rules. They also slightly differed in their responses to the statement, *often things happen in my school district that I do not agree with* (principals, 54.8%; VPs, 46.3%). Neither group of administrators felt as strongly about resorting to *unorthodox practices to get [their] work done* (40.1%), though a slight majority (55.6%) agreed that their work was *influenced by pressure groups*.

Table 3. School Administrators' Perceptions of Educational Climate

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree
<b>I have to keep myself up to date on the changing circumstances within and beyond my school.</b>	0.9%	4.6%	94.6%	1.0%	3.8%	95.2%	0.7%	6.1%	93.2%
<b>I find there is more uncertainty and unpredictability at work.</b>	1.9%	9.3%	88.8%	2.0%	7.6%	90.4%	1.4%	12.9%	85.8%
<b>I have to be well-informed about the micro- and macro-politics within and beyond my school.</b>	3.5%	11.6%	84.9%	3.0%	12.7%	84.2%	4.1%	9.6%	86.3%
<b>I have to learn to turn unpredictability to my advantage at work.</b>	4.3%	21.4%	74.3%	4.8%	21.6%	73.6%	3.4%	21.1%	75.5%
<b>I have to assess the environment and learn what rules to bend.</b>	9.6%	21.6%	68.9%	7.9%	19.5%	72.6%	13.0%	25.9%	61.2%
<b>My work is influenced by pressure groups.</b>	18.7%	25.7%	55.6%	17.4%	25.7%	56.9%	21.2%	26.0%	52.8%
<b>Often things happen in my school district that I do not agree with.</b>	22.1%	26.1%	51.8%	20.5%	24.7%	54.8%	25.2%	28.6%	46.3%
<b>I have to resort to unorthodox practices to get my work done.</b>	29.6%	30.3%	40.1%	29.1%	29.8%	41.1%	30.8%	30.8%	38.4%
<b>Other</b>	25.0%	39.2%	35.8%	26.5%	37.3%	36.3%	21.7%	43.5%	34.8%

School administrators were asked, *In the daily operation of your school, have you taken any of these actions in order to get your work done?* School administrators identified as having used a number of actions to varying degrees (see **Table 4**). Respondents selected *often* and *always* for *creative problem-solving*, and *think[ing] outside the box*, with principals at 92.0% and 91.8% respectively, and VPs at 93.1% and 91.7%. Previous research showed that when principals were faced with work

constraints and complexities, they would find creative ways to make things happen (Wang, 2016). Some principals even deemed creative problem-solving as being subversive; however, many others did not feel comfortable to use the term ‘subversive’ given its negative connotations. Administrators (30.7%) admitted to *sometimes* putting themselves *in a vulnerable position*. However, principals (57.8%,  $M = 3.6, SD = 1.0$ ) reported putting themselves into such positions *often* or *always*, 13.7.% more often than VPs (44.1%,  $M = 3.3, SD = 1.1$ ), and a t-test further confirmed this finding:  $t(247.7) = 3.5, p < .001$ . When asked if they *work around the system, avoid asking permission, and bend rules*, administrators were more likely to select *sometimes* (38.2%, 42.9%, and 41.5%, respectively) over *often* or *always*. For the same 3 statements, however, VPs selected *never* or *rarely* more than their principal counterparts (VPs, 42.1%, 47.9%, 51.1%; principals, 28.9%, 27.9%, 37.9%). It is likely that the hierarchical system, and the nature of their work allowed VPs less professional autonomy and freedom to resort to “creative ways” in their work. In the general comments, many school administrators indicated they had to “*work through breaks, lunch, and late hours*”, “*unrealistic hours*” or “*ridiculous hours at the expense of their health and well-being*” in order to get their work done.

### How school administrators spend their time

Research on school administrators’ work intensification shows principals and VPs are working long hours on a multitude of work-related activities (Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2017; Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018a; Wells & Klocko, 2018). Little research, however, explores how principals and VPs spend their time beyond their traditional roles. The continued impact of the pandemic, as identified in the previous section, attests to the fact that school administrators’ duties and responsibilities have gone beyond their job description. Many activities are taking precedence over their traditional leadership and administrative tasks.

The results from this study revealed that school administrators were not only working long hours – 54.6 hours per week on average, but they were also spending ample time on activities that were beyond their traditional job duties and responsibilities, such as covering classes with no teachers/TTOC (3.2 hours/week on average), implementing health measures (3.1 hours/week), covering EA work (2.6 hours/week), covering breaks (2.5 hours/week), organizing COVID rapid tests (0.4 hours/week), and hosting flu clinics (0.1 hours/week). **Table 5** shows a similar trend among principals and VPs. However, principals ( $M = 3.1$  hours/week,  $SD = 6.1$ ) tended to spend more time covering EA work compared to VPs ( $M = 1.6$  hours/week,  $SD = 2.4$ ),  $t(399.0) = 3.5, p < .001$ . In addition, many participants shared in the “Other” option that they spent a great deal of time on supervision, including supervising aide shortages, bathrooms, recess, and playgrounds. Although some activities may not take place in an average week, as one principal commented, “*there have been weeks when things like flu clinics and COVID test distribution have taken up much of the time.*”

Table 4. School Administrators’ Subversive Actions

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
Use creative problem-solving	0.7%	6.9%	92.5%	0.3%	7.6%	92.0%	1.4%	5.5%	93.1%
Think outside the box	0.2%	8.0%	91.7%	0.0%	8.2%	91.8%	0.7%	7.6%	91.7%
Put myself in a vulnerable position	16.0%	30.7%	53.3%	11.7%	30.6%	57.8%	24.8%	31.0%	44.1%
Work around the system	33.5%	38.2%	28.4%	28.9%	39.9%	31.3%	42.1%	35.2%	22.7%
Other	58.2%	15.7%	26.2%	55.2%	17.7%	27.1%	65.8%	10.5%	23.7%
Avoid asking permission	34.4%	42.9%	22.7%	27.9%	46.4%	25.7%	47.9%	35.4%	16.7%

Table 5. Number of Hours Spent on Non-Traditional Job Activities by School Administrators

NON-TRADITIONAL JOB ACTIVITIES	P&VP	PRINCIPALS	VPS
Other	5.2	4.9	6.0
Covering classes with no teachers/TTOC	3.2	3.2	3.0
Implementing health measures	3.1	3.4	2.6
Covering EA work	2.6	3.1	1.6
Covering breaks	2.5	2.5	2.2
Organizing COVID rapid tests	0.4	0.4	0.4
Hosting Flu clinics	0.1	0.1	0.2

## Theme 2: Policy Implementation and Strategic Leadership

School administrators are at the forefront of implementing policies and mandates. How they implement policies and what reasoning processes they use not only illustrate their leadership styles but also reflect how safe they feel psychologically at their workplaces. Theme 2 reveals strategies and tactics that school administrators use in policy implementation, the reasoning processes they have in carrying out such strategies, and the psychological concerns they have.

### Policy implementation

Research has revealed that school administrators have to constantly adopt new policies and initiatives and have been asked to do more with less school resources and personnel (Wang, Pollock & Hauseman, 2018a). The increasing number of policy initiatives and standards imposed on schools have been constraining the work of principals and VPs, limiting their ability to take action and incite change in schools (Wang, 2016, 2018). In order to manage external pressures and initiatives arriving from the top, school administrators are becoming more creative in deciding what to endorse, what to block, and what to ignore in schools as they carry out their own educational agendas (CAP, 2014; Wang, 2016, 2018). This section documents the various reactions to policy implementation from school administrators, and reveals the reasoning processes underlying their practices. How school administrators implement policies also reflects how psychologically safe they feel in pushing their limits and allowing themselves more control at work.

When asked about the implementation of the ministry/district policies, a large majority of school administrators (92.6%) *agreed or strongly agreed* that they *implement policies as directed, to the extent possible*, and 76.4% agreed that they would *seek the support of other school administrators* when providing input on a policy. Administrators also *agreed and strongly agreed* (47.3%) that they would *adjust the policies to align with the needs of [their] school*.

The rest of the statements as detailed in **Table 6** received more mixed responses. When asked if they *implemented policies to the letter*, only a modest

number of administrators agreed with this statement (40.1%), and 39.3% of school administrators *agreed or strongly agreed* that *they resist policies that [they] felt were counterproductive* and 31.5% *agreed* that they *would implement policies selectively in order to meet the needs of [their] school*. These responses demonstrate that many school administrators, at some point, resisted and did not implement ministry and district policies to the letter, implying that they did not fully agree with the policies for their schools. However, only 37.1% of principals and 17.5% of VPs felt *comfortable challenging the status quo with regard to district and ministry policies*. Indeed, 45.2% of principals and 50.4% of VPs *disagreed or strongly disagreed* with that statement. T-tests confirmed that principals ( $M = 2.8, SD = 1.2$ ) felt more comfortable than VPs ( $M = 2.5, SD = 1.0$ ) challenging the status quo regarding district and ministry policies:  $t(322.0) = 3.0, p < 0.003$ . T-tests also revealed that principals were more likely than VPs to feel that they knew *what to endorse, what to block, and what to ignore when implementing policies* [principals 51.4% ( $M = 3.4, SD = 0.9$ ), VPs 35.0% ( $M = 3.1, SD = 0.8$ ),  $t(287.4) = 3.4, p < .001$ ] and to *interpret policies in a manner that may not be exactly what the policy-maker had in mind, but is in the best interests of [their] school* [principals 55.7% ( $M = 3.4, SD = 1.0$ ), VPs 43.0% ( $M = 3.2, SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(417) = 2.7, p = .007$ ]. Very few school administrators *ignored policies that they felt were counterproductive* (11.7%), nor were they likely to *sometimes bend the rules and try to give the impression that the policy is being fully implemented* (19.1%).

Many principals shared other important concerns on policies and their implementation:

My district's policies are outdated and have not been updated to reflect the current conditions in my school. (Principal)

It is more likely that I can't keep up with the number of policies and updated policies from the Ministry or district. Not that I don't want to implement/apply them or am resisting them. (Principal)

It is challenging to implement new policies when staff are stressed out. (Principal)

I am continuing to discover, access and understand the policies of my district - they are difficult to uncover and interpret. (Principal)

Sometimes, lack of clarity (when a district does not take a firm stance on an issue) is also a big problem as it divides the schools. (VP)

I feel I have no voice in any input the district asks of us for the fear of punishment. (VP)

These comments and concerns reveal not only some critical issues concerning policies and their implementation, including the outdatedness, volume, clarity, interpretation, and negative consequences of policies, but they also demonstrate the psychological unsafety that principals and VPs experience when considering whether to provide input into the policy making process.

### Strategic leadership and its challenges

One effective way for school administrators to manage their workload is to adopt creative leadership practices. Research has shown school administrators are more likely to experiment with new leadership practices and take risks at their work when they are under extreme pressure to get their work done (Wang, 2016; 2018). This section documents the strategic leadership practices that school administrators use and reveals the challenges and risks that they face when they are trying to find ways to work around substantial social and legal constraints and obstacles. Such understandings will help school principals and VPs be adequately prepared for risk management and avoid legal action, while moving in productive directions for students.

The top strategies that school administrators identified as helping them to get work done, included *providing clear expectations* (93.5%); *being proactive* (91.2%); *creating collaborative structures/vision* (85.1%); and *introducing ideas to plant a seed* (83.1%). More moderately utilized strategies included *securing allies with teachers and other stakeholders* (65.0%); *forming coalitions with other school administrators* (45.9%); *taking control of programs and agendas to promote work priorities* (42.0%); and *using outside experts* (41.5%). Respondents *sometimes* (48.2%) sought *forgiveness rather than asking for permission*, and similarly 44.8% of respondents *sometimes* used *incentives*. In sharp contrast, the remaining strategy options, were *never* or *rarely* used by the respondents: *reinforcing control through symbols, objects, ideas, actions* (53.2%); *inducing institutionalized patterns of behaviours in school* (56.3%); *co-opting opponents* (54.8%); *using an intermediary to secure compliance by others* (66.3%); *letting problems run their course in order to regain control* (68.4%); and *using ambiguity to keep communication unclear* (83.0%). **Table 7** reveals that the rating of these strategies is fairly consistent between principals and VPs and both principals and VPs are more inclined to use collegial and mutually respectful interpersonal skills instead of the strategies that appear to be more adversarial.

Table 6. How School Administrators Implement Policies

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree
I implement policies as directed, to the extent possible.	0.9%	4.6%	94.6%	1.0%	3.8%	95.2%	0.7%	6.1%	93.2%
I seek the support of other school administrators when I want to provide input on a policy.	1.9%	9.3%	88.8%	2.0%	7.6%	90.4%	1.4%	12.9%	85.8%
I interpret policies in a manner that may not be exactly what the policy-maker had in mind, but is in the best interests of my school.	3.5%	11.6%	84.9%	3.0%	12.7%	84.2%	4.1%	9.6%	86.3%
I adjust the policies to align with the needs of my school.	4.3%	21.4%	74.3%	4.8%	21.6%	73.6%	3.4%	21.1%	75.5%
I know what to endorse, what to block and what to ignore when implementing policies.	9.6%	21.6%	68.9%	7.9%	19.5%	72.6%	13.0%	25.9%	61.2%
I implement policies to the letter.	29.6%	30.3%	40.1%	29.1%	29.8%	41.1%	30.8%	30.8%	38.4%
I resist policies that I feel are counterproductive.	25.0%	39.2%	35.8%	26.5%	37.3%	36.3%	21.7%	43.5%	34.8%

Table 7. Strategies School Administrators Use to Get Their Work Done

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
Providing clear expectations	0.5%	6.1%	93.5%	0.4%	5.2%	94.4%	0.8%	7.8%	91.4%
Being proactive	0.8%	8.1%	91.2%	1.1%	6.0%	92.9%	0.0%	12.6%	87.4%
Creating collaborative structures/vision	1.6%	13.4%	85.1%	1.9%	12.7%	85.5%	0.8%	14.8%	84.4%
Introducing ideas to plant a seed	1.6%	15.4%	83.1%	0.4%	14.6%	85.1%	3.9%	17.2%	79.0%
Securing allies with teachers and other stakeholders	9.4%	25.6%	65.0%	10.5%	26.2%	63.3%	7.0%	24.4%	68.5%
Forming coalitions with other school administrators	21.3%	32.7%	45.9%	21.3%	33.0%	45.7%	21.3%	32.3%	46.5%
Taking control of programs and agendas to promote work priorities	14.0%	43.9%	42.0%	10.6%	43.9%	45.5%	21.1%	43.8%	35.1%
Using outside experts	17.5%	41.0%	41.5%	16.8%	39.3%	43.8%	18.7%	44.5%	36.7%
Placing allies in strategic positions or isolating potential opponents	41.6%	32.7%	25.8%	41.1%	32.5%	26.4%	42.5%	33.1%	24.4%
Negotiating trade-offs with others to secure desired results	44.3%	35.9%	19.8%	41.7%	35.7%	22.6%	49.6%	36.2%	14.2%
Seeking forgiveness rather than asking for permission	32.6%	48.2%	19.2%	29.1%	47.0%	23.9%	39.9%	50.8%	9.4%
Using incentives	36.8%	44.8%	18.4%	36.1%	44.5%	19.4%	38.3%	45.3%	16.4%
Reinforcing control through symbols, objects, ideas, actions	53.2%	32.4%	14.4%	52.5%	32.8%	14.7%	54.9%	31.5%	13.7%
Other	62.8%	23.4%	13.8%	64.6%	21.5%	13.8%	58.6%	27.6%	13.8%
Inducing institutionalized patterns of behaviours in school	56.3%	31.5%	12.1%	54.0%	31.6%	14.5%	61.4%	31.1%	7.4%

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted with the 18 strategies. Seven of the strategies did not fit with the emerging themes<sup>2</sup>, but 11 were discovered to have underlying patterns and 4 factors were identified (see **Table 8**). These factors involve visionary leadership (component 1), influence tactics (component 2), multilateral tactics (component 3), and hard tactics (component 4). The factors in total accounted for 51.1% of the variance in explaining the overall strategies school administrators have used to help them get their work done. For the factor visionary leadership, being proactive has the highest loading (0.76) which indicates the importance of being proactive in visionary leadership. Additionally, school administrators resort to various power tactics, including influence tactics, rational tactics, and hard tactics in order to get their work done. Influence tactics appear to be indirect, using intermediaries to influence others. Multilateral tactics are used to engage others through collaboration and negotiation; for example, securing allies among teachers and other stakeholders appears to be highly correlated with the multilateral tactics (loading = 0.73). Sometimes, school administrators may also use hard tactics in order to take control<sup>3</sup>. Such tactics tend to be direct and intrepid: seeking forgiveness rather than asking for permission (loading = 0.70) is a good example.

Table 8. Factors Underlying Leadership Strategies

ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX	COMPONENT			
	1	2	3	4
Being proactive	.761			
Providing clear expectations	.719			
Creating collaborative structures/vision	.703			
Using an intermediary to secure compliance by others		.696		
Reinforcing control through symbols, objects, ideas, actions		.692		
Inducing institutionalized patterns of behaviours in school		.643		
Securing allies with teachers and other stakeholders			.729	
Forming coalitions with other school administrators			.622	
Co-opting opponents			.602	
Seeking forgiveness rather than asking for permission				.699
Taking control of programs and agendas to promote work priorities				.639

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.  
 a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

<sup>2</sup> These items failed to meet a minimum criteria of having a primary factor loading of 0.6 or above.

<sup>3</sup> Please see details on power tactics in Wang, F. (2018). Subversive leadership and power tactics. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 56(4), 1-25.

Difficult decisions are a part of every school administrator’s work. Administrators were asked what they *worried about* when making difficult decisions in the best interests of their schools. As shown in **Table 9**, principals and VPs primarily worried about the *negative impact on [their] work relationships* (72.9%, 80.9%, respectively); *not being supported or backed up* (67.8%, 71.9%); *parents/guardians complaints* (64.5%, 69.2%); and *the negative impact on [their] image/reputation* (59.6%, 71.9%). To a slightly lesser degree, they worried about *creating a toxic work environment* (56.4%, 61.9%); *the effect on [their] career trajectory* (48.0%, 66.1%); *the possibility that [they] might be exposed to litigation* (44.7%, 51.2%); *being labelled as a troublemaker* (40.4%, 49.6%); *the risk of going through an investigation* (39.4%, 49.6%); *the risk of being marginalized* (37.5%, 45.5%); and *the risk of being disciplined/fired* (33.1%, 42.2%). Neither principals nor VPs worried as much about *the risk of violating the law or regulations* (25.5%, 31.6%) or *being transferred to another school against [their] will* (19.1%, 28.1%). Statements having to do with personal and interpersonal impacts were generally more highly ranked and caused more concern than legal repercussions. Analysis through a t-test [ $t(369) = -2.4, p = .017$ ] revealed that VPs ( $M = 3.5, SD = 1.3$ ) tended to worry more about their *career trajectory* than principals ( $M = 3.2, SD = 1.4$ ).

Table 9. Concerns When Making Difficult Decisions

	PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree
<b>The negative impact on my work relationships.</b>	15.2%	12.0%	72.9%	11.6%	7.4%	80.9%
<b>Not being supported or backed up.</b>	14.4%	17.9%	67.8%	15.7%	12.4%	71.9%
<b>Parents/guardians complaints.</b>	19.9%	15.5%	64.5%	16.6%	14.2%	69.2%
<b>The negative impact on my image/reputation.</b>	26.4%	14.0%	59.6%	18.2%	9.9%	71.9%
<b>Creating a toxic work environment.</b>	30.8%	12.8%	56.4%	24.0%	14.0%	61.9%
<b>The effect on my career trajectory.</b>	36.8%	15.2%	48.0%	24.8%	9.1%	66.1%
<b>The possibility that I might be exposed to litigation.</b>	38.7%	16.7%	44.7%	33.8%	14.9%	51.2%
<b>Being labelled as a troublemaker.</b>	45.2%	14.4%	40.4%	35.5%	14.9%	49.6%

Table 9. Concerns When Making Difficult Decisions (cont'd)

	PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree
<b>The risk of going through an investigation.</b>	45.4%	15.1%	39.4%	30.5%	19.8%	49.6%
<b>The risk of being marginalized.</b>	44.2%	18.3%	37.5%	38.8%	15.7%	45.5%
<b>The risk of being disciplined/fired.</b>	49.8%	17.1%	33.1%	39.6%	18.2%	42.2%
<b>Other</b>	36.8%	32.4%	30.9%	37.0%	37.0%	25.9%
<b>The risk of violating the law or regulations.</b>	59.0%	15.5%	25.5%	46.7%	21.7%	31.6%
<b>Being transferred to another school against my will.</b>	64.5%	16.3%	19.1%	57.9%	14.0%	28.1%

In the general comments, both principals and VPs pointed out the complexities in decision making and expressed their frustration that their work is not being well understood:

*It is so difficult for others, even those who work in the building, to appreciate the complexity of factors in any decision. I might try to explain, but few would have the patience to listen. (VP)*

*Decision makers not understanding the complexities in our building. (Principal)*

Many principals also commented on their psychological safety concerns, worrying about their decisions not being supported or backed up:

*I am at a point in my career that I am comfortable with making decisions that are best for learners, staff and the building, but worry about not being backed up by senior admin or the push back from parents. For example, I would like to have all learners take EFP 10 at my school, senior admin and some staff feel there will be push back from parents and students. I want to have the conversation in order to move forward with equity and exposure to indigenous worldviews and literature. Now the Ministry has announced changes to the grad*

program and the conversation will happen as a result of that level, not because we were courageous to take a direction and offer EFP to all learners in a specified grade, instead, we hybridize the course (run EFP and ELA concurrently) which is a disservice to learners and more work for teachers. (Principal)

By the system having an elected board and contracts being personal service contracts it takes a long time to become secure in your decisions. For me I had to accept that I make decisions that are good for kids. If I get fired or moved I'll need to deal with it. Until elected officials are removed as our employer, this culture will not change. (Principal)

The complexities and concerns in decision making as revealed by these comments require “the energy you have to support your decisions, and the energy you need to defend it” (Principal). As one principal summarized, “We practice in a more unhealthy supervision environment today than before” (Principal).

School administrators were asked to relay frequency, according to the way they were most likely to act as school leaders (see **Table 10**). A large majority of administrators *often or always* feel comfortable to acknowledge mistakes and take responsibility for them (93.7%); are able to keep actions consistent with stated values (85.1%); and feel the best decision will be the one with a strong concern for ethical and moral values (83.1%). Although most of the rankings were quite consistent between principals and VPs, the statement, *I have a clear idea of who I am and where I stand at my work* was ranked highly by principals (87.0%), but not as highly by VPs (74.2%), a difference of 12.8%. The difference between principals ( $M = 4.3, SD = 0.8$ ) and VPs ( $M = 4.0, SD = 1.0$ ) has also been confirmed by a *t*-test:  $t(298) = 2.8, p = .005$ .

Principals also, *often or always*, allow [their] beliefs to drive [their] decisions (74.0%); stay out of the way of others as they do their work (66.8%); feel they have a choice in deciding how [they] do [their] job (52.4%); and refuse to back down when [they are] truly passionate about something at work (48.6%). VPs were generally in agreement with their principal colleagues (69.9%, 66.7%, 58.1%, and 42.0%, respectively).

In the following group of statements, *sometimes* was most often selected by both principals and VPs. They *sometimes ask no more of others than what is absolutely essential* (45.8%); *feel the best decision will be the one with the largest consensus* (62.7%); *try to delegate as many tasks as possible* (46.5%); and *avoid taking risks at work* (49.5%).

Table 10. Ethical & Practical Considerations

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
I am comfortable to acknowledge mistakes and take responsibility for them.	0.3%	6.0%	93.7%	0.0%	5.8%	94.3%	1.1%	6.5%	92.5%
I am able to keep actions consistent with stated values (“walk the talk”) all the time.	2.0%	13.0%	85.1%	1.4%	12.5%	86.1%	3.2%	14.0%	82.8%
The best decision will be the one with a strong concern for ethical and moral values.	0.7%	16.3%	83.1%	0.5%	15.9%	83.6%	1.1%	17.2%	81.8%
I have a clear idea who I am and where I stand at my work.	6.0%	11.0%	83.0%	5.3%	7.7%	87.0%	7.6%	18.3%	74.2%
I allow my beliefs to drive my decision.	1.3%	25.9%	72.7%	0.0%	26.0%	74.0%	4.3%	25.8%	69.9%
I stay out of the way of others as they do their work.	4.6%	28.6%	66.8%	3.9%	29.3%	66.8%	6.5%	26.9%	66.7%
I have a choice in deciding how I do my job.	10.6%	35.2%	54.1%	8.2%	39.4%	52.4%	16.2%	25.8%	58.1%
I refuse to back down when I am truly passionate about something at work.	16.3%	37.2%	46.5%	13.5%	38.0%	48.6%	22.6%	35.5%	42.0%
I ask no more of others than what is absolutely essential.	21.4%	45.8%	32.8%	19.3%	46.4%	34.3%	26.0%	44.6%	29.3%

Table 10. Ethical &amp; Practical Considerations (cont'd)

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
<b>The best decision will be the one with the largest consensus.</b>	8.6%	62.7%	28.7%	8.7%	61.8%	29.5%	8.6%	64.5%	26.9%
<b>I try to delegate as many tasks as possible.</b>	30.3%	46.5%	23.3%	27.9%	47.1%	25.0%	35.5%	45.2%	19.4%
<b>Other</b>	61.1%	24.2%	14.8%	59.5%	26.2%	14.3%	66.7%	16.7%	16.6%
<b>I avoid taking risks at work.</b>	44.5%	49.5%	6.0%	44.7%	51.4%	3.9%	44.1%	45.2%	10.8%

### Theme 3: General and Psychological Safety

This section presents general safety issues to which school administrators have been exposed and details their perceptions of psychological safety in their workplace. Specifically, Theme 3 sheds light on how safe school administrators feel psychologically, to what extent and with whom they feel psychologically safe, the contributing factors to psychologically unsafe situations, and what strategies they employ to cope with psychologically unsafe situations. School administrators are middle managers working in a hierarchical system that involves stakeholders at various levels. This section also explores how school administrators' psychological safety is manifested at the school, district, and community levels.

#### Safety in the workplace

Workplace safety is the most serious issue in schools not only for students and teachers but also for school administrators. How safe principals and VPs feel in their workplaces can impact their work productivity, physical and psychological health, well-being (Powell, Powell, & Petrosko, 2015), and their job satisfaction and commitment (Bayer, 2016; Liu & Bellibas, 2018). When principals and VPs feel safe in their workplaces, they are more likely to remain in their administrative positions. Principal and VP retention has been an ongoing

concern for many schools in North America and around the world (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Liu & Bellibas, 2018; Nitta et al., 2019; Nthebe, Barkhuizen, & Schutte, 2016; Pollock, 2016). Schools must remain safe for all.

In the survey, participants were asked to identify the safety issues they experienced at their workplaces over the past 12 months. **Table 11** shows the prevalence of each issue from the most often selected to the least often selected. School administrators most often selected *passive aggressive behaviours* (54.5%) and *emotional labour & fatigue* (52.0%). The rest of the selections ranged from 2.4% (VP selected *sexual harassment*) to 41.4% (principal selected *complaints behind my back*). Significantly, principals ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = 3.6$ ) were more likely to have been exposed to the listed safety concerns than VPs ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 3.3$ ):  $t(487) = 2.5$ ,  $p = .013$ . A higher percentage of VPs selected harassment and racism, which may be accounted for because more VP respondents identified as members of a minority group. Almost all the school administrators reported being exposed to one or more of the safety issues, with only 1.9% of principals and 2.9% of VPs reporting that they had not experienced any of these. Sadly, over the course of a year, school administrators are exposed to multiple threats to their safety as they go about their work.

Table 11. Workplace Safety of School Administrator

IDENTIFIED SAFETY ISSUES	P&VP	PRINCIPALS	VPS
<b>Passive aggressiveness</b>	54.5%	58.0%	48.8%
<b>Emotional labour &amp; fatigue</b>	52.0%	55.2%	47.1%
<b>Complaints behind my back</b>	39.2%	41.4%	35.9%
<b>Verbal or physical threats</b>	36.8%	40.8%	30.0%
<b>Microaggression</b>	30.1%	32.9%	25.3%
<b>False accusations</b>	22.4%	23.5%	20.6%
<b>Physical violence at work</b>	21.1%	24.5%	15.3%
<b>Cyberbullying (e.g. via social media, texting, emails, etc.)</b>	16.7%	21.6%	7.6%
<b>Trauma or secondary trauma</b>	16.7%	18.8%	12.9%
<b>Abuse of authority</b>	16.3%	17.9%	13.5%
<b>Lack of work accommodation/flexibility</b>	14.2%	16.0%	11.2%

Table 11. Workplace Safety of School Administrator (cont'd)

IDENTIFIED SAFETY ISSUES	P&VP	PRINCIPALS	VPS
Other harassment (e.g., intimidating, offensive jokes/innuendos, displaying/circulating offensive pictures/materials)	12.8%	12.5%	13.5%
Bullying (not cyberbullying)	10.4%	11.0%	9.4%
Discrimination	9.6%	9.7%	9.4%
Racism	5.9%	5.0%	7.6%
Other	4.7%	5.6%	2.9%
Sexual harassment	3.0%	3.4%	2.4%
None	2.2%	1.9%	2.9%

Figure 9 shows the number of safety exposures school administrators have experienced at work. Over half of school administrators (51.6%) reported that they had 3 or less than 3 safety exposures at their workplaces during the past 12 months. Another 27.2% indicated that they had 4 to 6 safety exposures, and 16.5% indicated that they had 7 to 10 safety exposures. Only 4.7% shared that they had experienced more than 10 safety exposures.

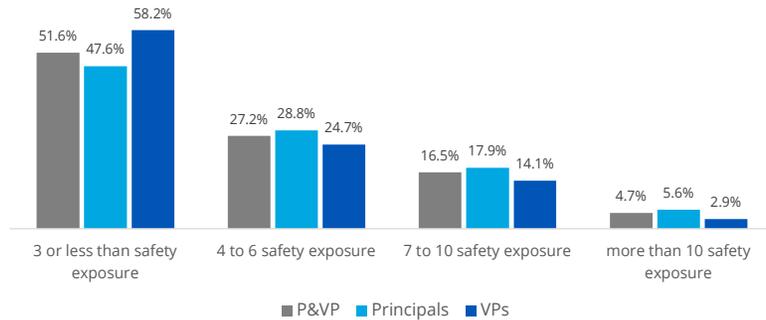


Figure 9. The Number of Safety Exposure of School Administrators

The general comments revealed other safety concerns, such as female administrators experiencing sexism and administrators receiving reprimands and unrealistic workloads imposed by senior administration. For example, administrators commented,

*Psychological Safety of School Administrators: Invisible Barriers to Speaking Out*

Reprimands by supervisor (assistant superintendent) because he didn't like my "tone" when I came to him with a staffing/support concern directly related to my work (twice since Christmas). (Principal)

Being reprimanded for asking a question at a meeting. (VP)

Always an underlying theme of looking over shoulder as Senior Management continues to push an unrealistic workload. (Principal)

The school administrators were then requested to select any of the groups from whom they experienced these threats to their safety. Table 12 shows, in descending order, the groups identified. Principals and VPs most often identified parents/guardians (55.2%, 36.5%, respectively) followed by teachers, (40.1%, 36.5%) and then students (37.0%, 32.4%). Administrators less frequently selected other staff members (25.2%), other district officials (16.9%), community members (12.4%), union representatives (12.0%), protesters (7.3%), unions (6.7%), superintendent (6.9%), and trustees (3.9%). VPs selected *other administrators in my school* (15.9%) more often than principals (1.6%).

Table 12. With Whom School Administrators Experiencing Workplace Safety Issues

IDENTIFIED GROUPS	P&VP	PRINCIPALS	VPS
Parents/guardians	48.4%	55.2%	36.5%
Teachers	38.6%	40.1%	36.5%
Students	35.2%	37.0%	32.4%
Other school staff members	25.2%	25.7%	24.7%
Other district officials	16.9%	18.5%	14.1%
Community members	12.4%	14.1%	9.4%
Union representatives	12.0%	11.9%	12.4%
Protesters	7.3%	7.8%	6.5%
The superintendent	6.9%	7.8%	5.3%
Unions	6.7%	6.9%	6.5%
Other administrators in my school	6.5%	1.6%	15.9%
Other	5.1%	5.3%	4.7%
Trustees	3.9%	5.0%	1.8%

*Psychological Safety of School Administrators: Invisible Barriers to Speaking Out*

### Psychological safety

Edmondson et al. (2016) pointed out that psychological safety becomes a particularly important concern in domains such as education, which are marked by high stakes accountability mechanisms, professional and regulatory requirements, and a myriad of duties and responsibilities in highly demanding and uncertain situations. Having the ability and safety to think, speak up and out, and to act is critical in boosting school administrators' job satisfaction, engagement, and productivity. It can also enhance the overall well-being of school administrators and their retention and recruitment. This section records psychological safety, its various components, and identifies risk factors for poor psychological safety among school administrators.

School administrators were asked to rate how they felt about their psychological safety at work. As evident in Figure 10, very few school administrators (7.8%) reported feeling *excellent* about their psychological safety, though 42.8% felt that their safety was *good*, and about 25.6% were *neutral*. Slightly more principals ranked their safety as *poor* (20.3%) compared to the VPs' ranking (11.6%). A small percentage of administrators (6.3%), felt that their psychological safety was *very poor*. However, a *t*-test shows that in general, there is no statistically significant difference between principals ( $M = 3.3, SD = 1.0$ ) and VPs ( $M = 3.3, SD = 1.1$ ):  $t(346) = .06, p > .05$  and they share similar feelings on their psychological safety at work.

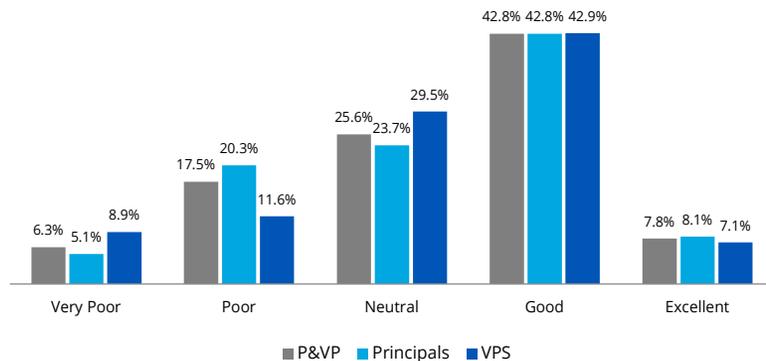


Figure 10. Overall Psychological Safety of School Administrators

School administrators were provided a list of people (see Table 13) with whom they would commonly interact and asked whether they feel generally *safe to express dissenting or critical opinions* with the people on the list. Principals and VPs indicated that they feel the most comfortable (*often* and *always*) sharing such opinions with other *principals/vice-principals or colleagues* (69.6%, 61.6%, respectively); *students* (66.7%, 67.5%); *teachers* (52.3%, 50.8%); and *support staff* (54.3%, 48.7%). Principals and VPs also shared that they feel less safe dissenting with *union representatives* (38.9%, 36.7%) and *parents/guardians* (40.1%, 34.2%). The data also clearly shows that most principals and VPs *rarely* or *never* feel safe sharing dissenting opinions with *other district board senior management* (41.9%, 50.4%); *superintendents* (50.8%, 51.3%); and *trustees* (65.9%, 67.8%).

Table 13. With Whom School Administrators Feel Psychologically Safe

	PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
Principals/ vice-principals or colleagues	8.1%	22.3%	69.6%	10.8%	27.5%	61.6%
Students	19.9%	13.4%	66.7%	17.5%	15.0%	67.5%
Support staff	13.7%	32.0%	54.3%	19.4%	31.9%	48.7%
Teachers	16.6%	31.2%	52.3%	12.5%	36.7%	50.8%
Union representatives	26.3%	34.8%	38.9%	32.5%	30.8%	36.7%
Parents/guardians	24.3%	35.6%	40.1%	20.0%	45.8%	34.2%
Other district board senior management	41.9%	33.3%	24.8%	50.4%	27.7%	21.8%
Superintendent	50.8%	26.0%	23.2%	51.3%	27.7%	21.0%
Other	68.4%	17.5%	14.0%	72.0%	8.0%	20.0%
Trustees	65.9%	22.2%	11.9%	67.8%	19.5%	12.7%

Psychological safety can be analysed at the individual, group, and organisational level (Gerlach & Gockel, 2018). The following section explores psychological safety at the organizational and community levels.

School administrators were provided statements about their schools (see [Table 14](#)). Both principals (83.3%) and VPs (79.0%) *often* or *always feel respected by teachers and school staff in [their] school*. In addition, 71.1 % of principals selected *often* or *always* for *my skills and talents are valued and utilized*, slightly more than VPs at 61.4%. T-tests revealed that VPs are less likely than principals to *feel safe to take risks in [their] leadership* [principals ( $M = 3.6, SD = 0.9$ ), VPs ( $M = 3.4, SD = 0.9$ ),  $t(362) = 2.3, p = .021$ ]; to feel they *can speak up without any fear of negative consequences at school* [principals ( $M = 3.4, SD = 1.0$ ), VPs ( $M = 3.1, SD = 1.1$ ),  $t(362) = 2.4, p = .018$ ]; and to *bring up problems and tough issues in this school* [principals ( $M = 3.8, SD = 0.9$ ), VPs ( $M = 3.5, SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(362) = 3.0, p = .003$ ]. VPs also seemed less confident than principals that *no one in their school would deliberately act in a way that undermines their efforts* [principals ( $M = 3.2, SD = 1.1$ ), VPs ( $M = 2.9, SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(361) = 2.3, p = .023$ ].

While a number of administrators *often* or *always* felt that their *role is not well understood by others* (45.1%), they *rarely* or *never* felt *rejected for being different* (85.2%). Principals felt they *never* or *rarely* (42.9%) *have to be careful not to make mistakes around [their] staff*, but VPs were more likely to select *sometimes* (33.9%) or *often/always* (36.4%). The majority of administrators selected *never* or *rarely* for most of the remaining statements: *I feel when I make a mistake at this school, it is often held against me* (54.0%); and *it is difficult to ask other members of this school for help* (56.6%). For the last group of these statements, only a slim majority said *rarely* or *never*, with many selecting *sometimes, often* or *always*. This indicates that, to some degree, a fair number of administrators did feel psychologically unsafe, feeling that their mistakes would be held against them and finding it difficult to ask other members of the school for help (see [Table 14](#)). One principal respondent shared that it was difficult to ask for help because “*everyone’s plates are overflowing*”. And finally, while the majority of administrators did not feel that they would go, given the opportunity, to another school because of *psychological unsafety*, principals selected *rarely* or *never* more than VPs (81.6%, 69.8%).

Table 14. School Administrators’ Psychological Safety at the School Level

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always
I feel respected by teachers and school staff in this school.	4.6%	13.5%	81.9%	4.1%	12.7%	83.3%	5.9%	15.1%	79.0%
Working with members of this school, my skills and talents are valued and utilized.	9.3%	22.8%	67.9%	8.6%	20.4%	71.1%	10.9%	27.7%	61.4%
I am able to bring up problems and tough issues in this school.	9.8%	28.8%	61.2%	8.9%	23.7%	67.4%	11.8%	39.5%	48.8%
I feel safe to take risks in my leadership at this school.	8.5%	38.5%	53.0%	8.5%	33.5%	58.0%	8.4%	48.7%	42.8%
I can speak up without any fear of negative consequences at this school.	19.8%	34.3%	45.9%	16.3%	34.3%	49.4%	26.9%	34.5%	38.7%
My role is not well understood by others.	23.9%	31.0%	45.1%	20.0%	34.7%	45.3%	32.0%	23.5%	44.6%
No one in this school would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.	28.4%	35.3%	36.4%	26.1%	33.1%	40.8%	33.0%	39.8%	27.1%
I feel I have to be careful not to make mistakes around my staff.	38.6%	28.9%	32.5%	42.9%	26.5%	30.6%	29.6%	33.9%	36.4%
I feel when I make a mistake at this school, it is often held against me.	54.0%	25.1%	20.9%	55.9%	25.3%	18.8%	50.0%	24.6%	25.4%
Other	65.9%	17.6%	16.5%	60.6%	21.2%	18.1%	80.0%	8.0%	12.0%
It is difficult to ask other members of this school for help.	56.6%	30.2%	13.2%	59.2%	28.6%	12.2%	51.2%	33.6%	15.1%
If I have an opportunity, I want to go to another school because of psychological unsafety.	77.8%	13.5%	8.8%	81.6%	11.8%	6.6%	69.8%	16.8%	13.5%
I feel rejected for being different at this school.	85.2%	9.6%	5.2%	86.9%	9.0%	4.0%	81.5%	10.9%	7.6%

School administrators provided no strong responses to the statements about district staff and senior management (see **Table 15**). The strongest response came from principals (50.7%) and VPs (58.6%) who felt that *rarely* or *never* did district officials talk with them about *how well they carried out their work*, with 33.0% only *sometimes* receiving *positive feedback*. T-tests show that district officials are perceived to provide such feedback more to principals than to VPs [principals ( $M = 2.5, SD = 0.9$ ), VP ( $M = 2.3, SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(349) = 2.3, p = .021$ ].

Nevertheless, a number of administrators *sometimes* (38.4%) and *often* or *always* (26.4%), felt that *[their] unique skills and talents are valued and utilized* when working with the district. They also more or less felt *accepted for being different in the district* with 31.6% of administrators selecting *often* or *always*, and 36.5% selecting *sometimes*. A modest 43.0% of school administrators selected *often* or *always* for *recommending the district to their friends or colleagues*.

**Table 15** shows that relatively few administrators were comfortable initiating more difficult conversations with district staff and senior management. Only 42.1% of school administrators indicated that they *often* or *always, feel free to discuss issues with the district staff*, and only 22.5% feel they *can speak up without any fear of retaliation in the school district*.

While most of the respondent's comfort levels were fairly low, principals generally felt safer than VPs in their interactions with the district and senior management. Principals also felt safer than VPs *asking difficult questions* [principals 40.7% ( $M = 3.2, SD = 1.0$ ), VPs 25.8% ( $M = 2.8, SD = 1.1$ ),  $t(350) = 3.1, p = .002$ ]; *bringing up problems and tough issues to senior management* [principals 39.9% ( $M = 3.2, SD = 1.0$ ), VPs 25.0% ( $M = 2.8, SD = 1.1$ ),  $t(350) = 3.0, p = .003$ ]; and *challenging unwritten rules and assumptions* [principals 25.8% ( $M = 2.8, SD = 1.0$ ), VPs 13.7% ( $M = 2.5, SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(350) = 2.9, p = .005$ ].

Although 40.4% of administrators *rarely* or *never* felt that it was difficult to ask members of the district for help, they felt that *sometimes* (42.3%) when they did *submit a problem to the district*, the district failed to respond. Some administrators also shared that though they *want to talk about some matters, [they] stay silent because of its possible negative consequences (often or always, 31.6%; sometimes, 35.3%)*. Lack of trust in the district is also demonstrated by

only 27.5% of administrators indicating that they *often* or *always* feel that they *can count on the district to defend [them]*.

The responses as a whole reveal that neither group felt very psychologically safe within their district, with 36.2% of respondents indicating that they *sometimes* felt *safe to take a risk at their work in the district* and 36.8% selecting *never* or *rarely*.

Table 15. School Administrators' Psychological Safety at the District Level

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always
I am likely to recommend the district to my friends or colleagues.	26.2%	30.8%	43.0%	25.1%	32.3%	42.5%	28.5%	27.6%	44.0%
I feel free to discuss issues with the district staff.	21.0%	36.9%	42.1%	18.3%	37.3%	44.5%	26.7%	36.2%	37.0%
I feel comfortable asking difficult questions.	26.1%	38.1%	35.8%	21.6%	37.7%	40.7%	35.3%	38.8%	25.8%
I am able to bring up problems and tough issues to senior management.	28.7%	36.4%	34.9%	23.7%	36.4%	39.9%	38.8%	36.2%	25.0%
I feel accepted for being different in the district.	31.9%	36.5%	31.6%	30.8%	37.4%	31.7%	33.9%	34.8%	31.3%
I want to talk about some matters but I stay silent because of its possible negative consequences.	33.0%	35.3%	31.6%	33.9%	37.3%	28.9%	31.3%	31.3%	37.4%
I can count on the district to defend me in any case.	35.5%	37.0%	27.5%	34.7%	37.3%	27.9%	37.1%	36.2%	26.7%
It is safe to take a risk at my work in the district.	36.8%	36.2%	27.1%	34.9%	38.7%	26.4%	40.5%	31.0%	28.4%
Working with members of this district, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.	35.2%	38.4%	26.4%	35.2%	38.6%	26.2%	35.3%	37.9%	26.7%

Table 15. School Administrators' Psychological Safety at the District Level (cont'd)

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
It is difficult to ask members of the district for help.	40.4%	35.2%	24.4%	39.8%	37.7%	22.4%	41.4%	30.2%	28.4%
I can speak up without any fear of retaliation in the school district.	45.6%	31.9%	22.5%	43.7%	31.8%	24.5%	49.6%	32.2%	18.3%
I feel comfortable challenging unwritten rules and assumptions.	41.8%	36.4%	21.9%	37.7%	36.4%	25.8%	50.0%	36.2%	13.7%
Other	60.3%	18.2%	21.5%	61.3%	19.4%	19.4%	57.7%	15.4%	26.9%
When I submit a problem to the district, they remain irrelevant.	39.3%	42.3%	18.3%	37.5%	44.1%	18.5%	43.2%	38.7%	18.0%
The district officials talk with me about how well I carry out my work.	53.2%	33.0%	13.7%	50.7%	34.9%	14.5%	58.6%	29.3%	12.1%

Overall, as **Table 16** shows, principals *often* or *always* felt respected by the community (73.5%), with VPs feeling slightly less respected (63.4%). Both groups generally felt *fulfilled working in the community* (61.1%, 53.5%, respectively). Accordingly, 79.8% of school administrators selected *rarely* or *never* for feeling *rejected for being different in [their] communities*, and 66.3% selected *often* or *always* for *I am not afraid to be myself in this community*. T-tests indicated that principals were less likely than VPs to *ignore things in this community that [they] don't agree with* [principals ( $M = 2.4, SD = 0.9$ ), VPs ( $M = 2.6, SD = 1.1$ ),  $t(342) = -2.1, p = .04$ ] and they were less likely to *back down in situations that contradict [them]* [principals ( $M = 2.7, SD = 0.7$ ), VPs ( $M = 3.0, SD = 0.9$ ),  $t(340) = -3.5, p < .001$ ]. In addition, more principals (44.5%) than VPs (28.8%) felt they could *speak up without any fear of retaliation* in their communities, but neither group felt particularly concerned with *being involved in issues that could have negative consequences for [them] in the community*, with 53.6% selecting *rarely* or *never*.

Table 16. School Administrators' Psychological Safety at the Community Level

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
I feel respected by the community.	7.8%	22.0%	70.3%	7.7%	18.8%	73.5%	8.1%	28.6%	63.4%
I am not afraid to be myself in this community.	13.0%	20.6%	66.3%	13.2%	19.2%	67.6%	12.6%	23.4%	63.9%
I feel fulfilled working in this school community.	12.7%	28.6%	58.7%	12.4%	26.5%	61.1%	13.4%	33.0%	53.5%
I can speak up without any fear of retaliation in this community.	26.9%	33.6%	39.5%	27.4%	28.2%	44.5%	26.1%	45.0%	28.8%
Other	61.3%	17.3%	21.3%	63.4%	15.4%	21.1%	56.5%	21.7%	21.7%
I am concerned with being involved in issues that could have negative consequences for me in this community.	53.6%	30.0%	16.4%	54.9%	28.1%	17.0%	50.9%	33.9%	15.2%
I increasingly tend to ignore things in this community that I don't agree with.	54.9%	31.7%	13.4%	57.7%	31.6%	10.7%	49.1%	31.8%	19.1%
In situations that contradict me, I will back down.	35.4%	52.9%	11.7%	38.9%	53.7%	7.3%	27.9%	51.4%	20.7%
I feel rejected for being different in this community.	79.8%	15.0%	5.2%	82.0%	13.7%	4.3%	75.0%	17.9%	7.2%

Of the survey items provided, school administrators felt that the *hierarchical structure of the organization contributed most to [their] feeling psychologically unsafe* (41.7%). Next, albeit more moderately, they felt contributing factors included *lack of supportive district leadership* (34.3%); *fear of negative consequences* (28.6%); *lack of trust* (25.2%); *lack of support for risk taking* (24.1%); *fear of being judged by colleagues* (24.6%); and *lack of professional autonomy* (19.8%).

By selecting *never* or *rarely* (see **Table 17**), most school administrators demonstrated that they did not consider *lack of respect* (51.8%); *having no sense of belonging* (58.2%); *lack of recognition for diversity and difference by the*

district/community (66.3%); discomfort or lack of knowledge of racial issues (55.8%); nor lack of work experience (67.8%), as contributing factors.

The t-tests revealed that VPs expressed *fear of being judged by colleagues* to a greater extent than principals [principals, 21.8% ( $M = 2.8, SD = 1.0$ ); VPs, 30.5% ( $M = 3.0, SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(331) = -2.1, p = .037$ ]. Likewise, VPs were more likely to feel that a *lack of work experience* was a contributing factor to feeling psychologically unsafe [principals, 4.9% ( $M = 2.0, SD = 0.9$ ); VPs 17.6% ( $M = 2.5, SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(181.0) = -4.3, p < .001$ ].

Table 17. Contributing Factors to Psychologically Unsafe Situations at Work

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
Hierarchical structure of the organization	27.3%	30.9%	41.7%	28.0%	30.2%	41.7%	25.9%	32.4%	41.7%
Lack of supportive district leadership	32.8%	32.8%	34.3%	32.2%	32.1%	35.7%	34.3%	34.3%	31.5%
Other	53.1%	17.3%	29.6%	53.4%	17.2%	29.3%	52.2%	17.4%	30.4%
Fear of negative consequences	32.5%	38.9%	28.6%	34.2%	38.7%	27.1%	29.0%	39.3%	31.8%
Lack of trust	39.3%	35.4%	25.2%	37.8%	37.8%	24.4%	42.6%	30.6%	26.9%
Fear of being judged by colleagues	37.8%	37.5%	24.6%	41.3%	36.9%	21.8%	30.5%	38.9%	30.5%
Lack of support for risk taking	40.0%	35.8%	24.1%	37.7%	38.2%	24.0%	44.8%	30.8%	24.3%
Lack of professional autonomy	42.9%	37.2%	19.8%	39.6%	40.9%	19.6%	50.0%	29.6%	20.4%
Lack of respect	51.8%	29.8%	18.3%	52.0%	28.9%	19.1%	51.4%	31.8%	16.8%
Having no sense of belonging	58.2%	26.4%	15.3%	60.9%	23.6%	15.5%	52.8%	32.4%	14.8%
Lack of recognition for diversity and difference by the district/community	66.3%	21.3%	12.3%	66.2%	20.9%	12.9%	66.6%	22.2%	11.1%
Discomfort or lack of knowledge of racial issues	55.8%	34.0%	10.2%	57.1%	33.0%	9.8%	52.7%	36.1%	11.1%
Your lack of work experience	67.8%	23.1%	9.0%	73.8%	21.3%	4.9%	55.5%	26.9%	17.6%

School administrators were asked what they do when they feel psychologically unsafe. The coping strategies used ranged widely, as evident from **Table 18**. Although 18.7% of school administrators indicated that they *do nothing*, and 37.2% selected that they *keep silent* when they feel psychologically unsafe, most of the principals and VPs selected strategies that were relational and informal in nature: *talk with family and friends* (60.2%, 47.6%, respectively); *talk with a confidant* (51.4%, 45.9%); *consult with other colleagues within district/school board* (48.0%, 33.5%), *talk with my administrative team within the school* (31.7%, 35.9%), and *consult with other colleagues outside my district/school board* (20.4%, 12.9%).

Another category that emerged was seeking help through more professional avenues. Some principals and VPs would *contact [their] professional association* (23.2%, 17.6%); *report to senior management/director/HR* (16.0%, 7.6%); *seek professional counselling (private services)* (13.5%, 12.4%); *seek medical/health attention* (8.5%, 5.3%); *follow specific protocol* (4.7%, 7.1%); or *file a WSIB (Workplace Safety and Insurance Board) claim* (0.6%, 1.8%).

Some indicated that they *seek solitude* (29.8%, 20.6%). A smaller number of principals and VPs also disclosed using substances such as *alcohol* (19.1%, 18.8%); *marijuana* (4.1%, 2.4%); *prescription drugs* (1.9%, 1.8%), and *tobacco for smoking* (1.0%, 2.4%). Overall, principals tended to resort to a greater number of coping strategies than VPs [principals ( $M = 4.0, SD = 3.1$ ), VPs ( $M = 3.3, SD = 3.0$ ),  $t(487) = 2.4, p = .017$ ].

Table 18. Psychological Safety Coping Strategies

COPING STRATEGIES	P&VP	PRINCIPALS	VPS
Talk with my family/friends	55.5%	60.2%	47.6%
Talk with a confidant	49.2%	51.4%	45.9%
Consult with other colleagues within my district/school board	42.7%	48.0%	33.5%
Keep silent	37.2%	39.5%	33.5%
Talk with my administrative team within the school	32.9%	31.7%	35.9%
Seek solitude	26.4%	29.8%	20.6%
Contact my professional association	21.1%	23.2%	17.6%
Use alcohol	18.9%	19.1%	18.8%
Do nothing	18.7%	19.7%	17.1%

Table 18. Psychological Safety Coping Strategies (cont'd)

COPING STRATEGIES	P&VP	PRINCIPALS	VPS
Consult with other colleagues outside my district/school board	17.7%	20.4%	12.9%
Report to senior management/director/HR	13.0%	16.0%	7.6%
Seek professional counselling (private services)	13.0%	13.5%	12.4%
Other	8.1%	7.8%	8.8%
Seek medical/health attention	7.3%	8.5%	5.3%
Follow specific protocol	5.5%	4.7%	7.1%
Use marijuana	3.5%	4.1%	2.4%
Consult a lawyer about legal action	2.4%	2.8%	1.8%
Use prescription drugs	1.8%	1.9%	1.8%
Use tobacco for smoking	1.4%	0.9%	2.4%
File a WSIB claim	1.0%	0.6%	1.8%

## Theme 4: Work Demands and Well-being

School administrators working today are experiencing increasing job demands. They are facing increased workloads, with more responsibilities and tasks than time and resources (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; De Jung, Grundmeyer, & Yankey, 2017; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Nthebe, Barkhuizen, & Schutte, 2016). As a consequence, the entire school suffers, with principals being at risk for physical and emotional exhaustion and burnout, reduced job satisfaction and commitment, as well as negative physical and psychological health outcomes (Beausaert et al., 2016; Hu, Cui, & He, 2016; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Nauman et al., 2019; Nthebe, Barkhuizen, & Schutte, 2016).

### Work demands

School administrators are facing workloads that are steadily increasing each year, but with decreased job resources, this calls into question how sustainable the role and current education system are. This section reveals school administrators' perceptions of their work demands and the strategies that they use in managing their workload.

When asked how they felt about their work in general (see **Table 19**), administrators overwhelmingly *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they felt their work was *intensifying* (92.9%); felt *worn out at the end of the school day* (85.6%); and felt they were *spending too much time and energy on [their] jobs* (81.4%). They also *agreed* or *strongly agreed* to feeling *emotionally exhausted* (71.7%); *burned out by work as a school administrator* (68.3%); they *did not have the time to relax or enjoy [themselves]* (67.8%); *[their] mental health has been negatively affected by the pressures of being a school administrator* (67.4%); and *frustrated in [their] current position as a school administrator* (60.4%). To a lesser degree, school administrators *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they felt *difficulty keeping up with the need to find solutions to problems* (49.0%); *intensified work conditions [were] working against [their] social justice goals in school* (48.2%); they *have no control over [their] work* (34.5%); and *socially excluded or left out* (28.9%).

Of the items listed in **Table 19**, t-tests revealed that 4 were statistically significant. Principals were more likely than VPs to feel that they *would like to take a break from the problems that were brought to [them]* [principals, 75.4% ( $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ); VPs, 60.0% ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ),  $t(158.8) = 2.3$ ,  $p = .020$ .]; *exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work* [principals, 61.6% ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ); VPs, 42.5% ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ),  $t(303) = 3.1$ ,  $p = .002$ ]; that their *strategic goals have been set aside* [principals, 45.7% ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ); VPs, 32.7% ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ),  $t(303) = 2.5$ ,  $p = .015$ ]; and *tired of running the school, to the extent that [they] wished to quit* [principals, 45.5% ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ); VPs, 28.4% ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ),  $t(304) = 3.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ].

Despite these frustrations and challenges for their emotional well-being, a large majority of school administrators (84.0%), nevertheless, believed they *could cope with most situations in school*.

Table 19. School Administrators' Perceptions of Work Demands

	PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree
I felt my work was intensifying.	2.0%	5.2%	92.9%	1.4%	4.7%	93.9%
I felt worn out at the end of the school day.	5.9%	8.5%	85.6%	5.2%	6.2%	88.6%
I believed I could cope with most situations in school.	6.9%	9.2%	84.0%	7.1%	9.0%	83.9%
I felt I was spending too much time and energy on my job.	6.6%	12.1%	81.4%	6.2%	10.4%	83.4%
I felt emotionally exhausted.	13.5%	14.8%	71.7%	12.0%	11.5%	76.6%
I felt that I would like to take a break from the problems that were brought to me.	12.1%	17.3%	70.6%	9.5%	15.2%	75.4%
I felt burned out by my work as a school administrator.	14.7%	17.0%	68.3%	13.2%	15.6%	71.1%
I did not have the time to relax or enjoy myself.	16.7%	15.4%	67.8%	17.2%	13.3%	69.5%
My mental health has been negatively affected by the pressures of being a school administrator.	16.4%	16.1%	67.4%	14.2%	16.1%	69.7%
I felt frustrated in my current position as a school administrator.	21.3%	18.4%	60.4%	21.0%	19.0%	60.0%
I felt exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work.	26.9%	17.4%	55.7%	22.2%	16.1%	61.6%
I felt I had difficulty keeping up with the need to find solutions to problems.	23.2%	27.8%	49.0%	22.7%	26.1%	51.2%
I felt intensified work conditions were/are working against my social justice goals in my school.	24.5%	27.2%	48.2%	21.8%	29.9%	48.4%
I felt strategic goals have been set aside.	32.5%	25.9%	41.7%	28.1%	26.2%	45.7%
I felt tired of running the school, to the extent that I wished to quit.	42.2%	17.6%	40.2%	35.0%	19.4%	45.5%
Other	36.8%	27.9%	35.3%	34.6%	30.8%	34.6%
I felt I have no control over my work.	34.7%	30.8%	34.5%	35.3%	31.9%	32.4%
I felt socially excluded or left out.	48.5%	22.6%	28.9%	49.7%	24.2%	26.1%

School administrators incorporated a number of strategies to deal with their workloads. The majority of school administrators (92.5%) reported that they *often* or *always* prioritize tasks. Next, 54.9% of school administrators indicated that they

connect with other principals/vice-principals. The selection of other strategies was much more varied (see Table 20).

Table 20. Workload Managing Strategies of School Administrators

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
Prioritize tasks	0.0%	7.5%	92.5%	0.0%	5.2%	94.8%	0.0%	12.8%	87.2%
Connect with other principals/vice-principals	7.3%	37.8%	54.9%	7.7%	31.0%	61.4%	6.4%	53.2%	40.5%
Maintain amicable relationships with influential people including ministry/district officials	27.6%	34.9%	37.5%	25.6%	34.6%	39.8%	32.3%	35.5%	32.3%
Defer paperwork requirements that I do not perceive as high priority.	22.3%	41.6%	36.0%	18.0%	43.1%	38.9%	31.9%	38.3%	29.8%
Delegate tasks to others	7.8%	63.0%	29.1%	7.1%	60.7%	32.2%	9.6%	68.1%	22.3%
Defer ministry/district assigned tasks that I do not perceive as high priority.	28.6%	44.3%	27.2%	21.8%	49.8%	28.5%	43.6%	31.9%	24.5%
Provide incentives to teachers and staff	36.3%	38.9%	24.8%	33.0%	39.2%	27.8%	43.6%	38.3%	18.1%
Defer policies (or parts of policies) that I do not perceive as high priority.	34.2%	41.8%	24.0%	27.2%	46.7%	26.2%	50.0%	30.9%	19.2%
Be firm or unwavering in delegating responsibilities or tasks	35.3%	48.5%	16.2%	35.0%	48.8%	16.2%	36.2%	47.9%	16.0%
Other	64.2%	24.5%	11.3%	61.0%	24.4%	14.7%	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%
Directly involve in policy making to influence the policy agenda	60.7%	29.0%	10.3%	57.1%	32.4%	10.4%	68.9%	21.1%	10.0%
Use my power as an administrator to make decisions, regardless of whether others agree with them	56.0%	34.4%	9.6%	54.5%	34.6%	10.9%	59.6%	34.0%	6.4%
Isolate those who resist change	87.9%	9.9%	2.3%	87.7%	11.4%	1.0%	88.2%	6.5%	5.4%

To make sense of the wide range of strategies used, an exploratory factor analysis identified five underlying factors for 10 out of 12 items after eliminating 2 items with a primary factor loading below 0.6. The factors (see [Table 21](#)) revealed five major categories of strategies that school administrators used to manage their workload, including deferring (component 1), relationship building (component 2), the use of power (component 3), direct involvement in policy making (component 4), and task management (component 5). These five strategies have cumulatively accounted for 68.0% of the variance in strategies that school administrators tend to use, of which the deferring strategy accounted for 21.2% of the variance. The results indicate that faced with increasing workload, school administrators have to adapt to this harsh reality by adjusting their leadership practices accordingly. They either defer policies and paperwork that are deemed less important or are directly involved in policy making to influence the agenda. Sometimes, they learn to use their power to get their work done or build social capital to gain support for their work.

Table 21. Strategy Factors in Dealing with Workload

ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX	COMPONENT				
	1	2	3	4	5
Defer policies (or parts of policies) that I do not perceive as high priority.	.927				
Defer ministry/district assigned tasks that I do not perceive as high priority.	.908				
Defer paperwork requirements that I do not perceive as high priority.	.859				
Connect with other principals/vice-principals		.782			
Maintain amicable relationships with influential people including ministry/district officials		.712			
Be firm or unwavering in delegating responsibilities or tasks			.802		
Use my power as an administrator to make decisions, regardless of whether others agree with them			.757		
Directly involve in policy making to influence the policy agenda				.857	
Prioritize tasks.					.806
Delegate tasks to others					.711

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.  
 a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

### Well-being

The role of school principal has become more stressful than ever, with the education sector steadily increasing job demands, while diminishing resources (Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

As shown in [Figure 11](#), most school administrators indicated that to some degree, they felt that work-related issues had negatively impacted their health and well-being: 33.8% selected *somewhat*, 30.6% selected *quite a bit*, and 21.7% selected a *great deal*. Only a minority felt that work related issues had *very little* impact (11.9%), and even fewer felt it had no impact (2.1%). Principals' and VPs' responses were fairly similar and there were no statistically significant differences found between the principals' and VPs' responses.

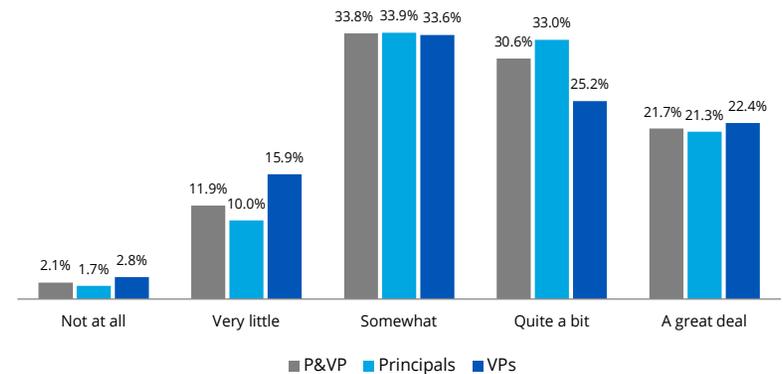


Figure 11. Impact of Work-Related Issues on School Administrators' Health and Well-being

When school administrators were asked whether they felt stressed at work, 77.3% answered *yes*, 8.4% were *unsure*, and 14.3% said *no*. There were only slight variations between principals' and vice principals' responses (see [Figure 12](#)). Their perceptions of stress had no statistically significant difference, indicating that most principals and VPs felt stressed at work.

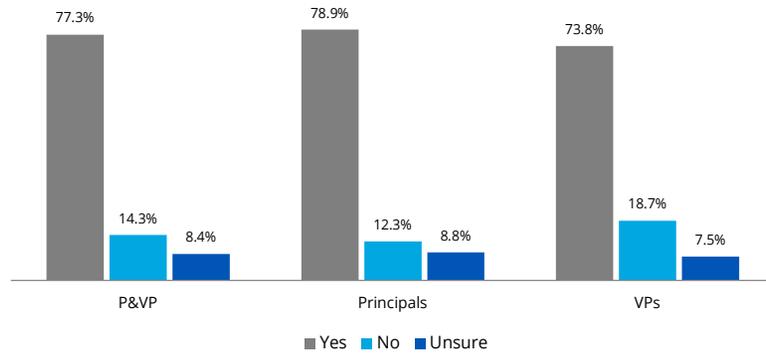


Figure 12. School Administrators' Perceptions of Stress

Participants were also asked to identify three stressors at work. Workload has been identified as the biggest stressor. Many principals and VPs also identified other stressors, such as parents' demands/expectations, time pressure/constraints, and staff shortages. Only a few indicated COVID-19 as a stressor. In order to cope with work-related stress, many principals and VPs indicated that they exercise (e.g., walking, yoga, other physical activities), meditate, and spend time talking with family, friends, and colleagues.

## Theme 5: Work Relationships and Organizational Management

Principalship is people- and relationship-oriented. School administrators are expected to work efficiently with, through, and for a wide spectrum of stakeholders and interest groups, and to be adept at managing complex work relationships (Wang, 2019). Building a supportive social system within and beyond their schools is crucial in allowing school administrators to effectively manage their workload in the context of increasing work intensification. Nevertheless, little research has explored the practices and strategies that administrators employ to meet their job expectations and demands, and how they adapt to the increasingly uncertain and complex school reality (Wang, 2019). This section records school administrators' perceptions of their relationships with the key stakeholders (e.g., superintendents, trustees) and documents the

strategies and reasoning processes they use to manage organizational expectations and change.

### Navigating the complexities of work relationships

A significant proportion of school administrators' work involves interactions with people within and beyond schools. While having a positive relationship with the various interest groups is an asset that enables administrators to influence others to accomplish goals and promote educational agendas, navigating the complexities of the various work relationships can be psychologically demanding for school administrators. How safe they feel psychologically in the process can affect principals and VPs' ability in organizational management. This section documents school administrators' perceptions of their relationships with key stakeholders, such as superintendents, district school boards, and trustees, and it reveals the extent that school administrators feel a sense of control at work.

Participants were asked to select statements that characterized their relationships with their school superintendents. There seemed to be no overwhelmingly strong responses. A modest majority *often* or *always* felt they were *treated fairly by [their] superintendent* (57.5%) and that they are *able to work well with the superintendent* (55.9%). They also felt fairly clear about expectations at work, with 62.7% selecting *never* or *rarely* for feeling *unclear about what is expected of me at work*. At the same time, however, 54.4% felt they were *rarely* or *never* able to influence the decisions of [their] superintendent. Accordingly, and perhaps revealingly, **Table 22** shows that many of the statements about recognition, keeping informed, support, encouragement, superintendent availability, elicited no strong respondent consensus. However, t-tests revealed some statistically significant differences, where principals were found to be more likely than VPs to feel their *suggestions are given serious consideration by [their] superintendent* [principals ( $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ), VPs ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ),  $t(306) = 2.2$ ,  $p = .030$ ]; *they are able to influence the decisions of [their] superintendent* [principals ( $M = 2.4$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ), VPs ( $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(305) = 3.9$ ,  $p < .001$ ], *they get to see the district superintendent when needed* [principals ( $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ), VPs ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ),  $t(306) = 2.2$ ,  $p = .028$ ]; and *feel they get help and support from [their] superintendent* [principals ( $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ), VPs ( $M = 2.5$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ),  $t(309) = 2.7$ ,  $p = .006$ ].

Table 22. Relationship with the School Superintendent

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always
I am treated fairly by my superintendent.	16.2%	26.3%	57.5%	14.5%	25.7%	59.8%	20.2%	27.7%	52.2%
I am able to work well with the superintendent.	23.3%	20.8%	55.9%	21.6%	18.9%	59.4%	27.1%	25.0%	47.9%
My superintendent is willing to listen to my work-related problems.	30.8%	27.9%	41.2%	29.4%	24.8%	45.8%	34.0%	35.1%	30.9%
I get to see the district superintendent when needed.	38.7%	24.4%	37.0%	34.3%	23.5%	42.3%	48.4%	26.3%	25.2%
There is a lack of recognition from my superintendent.	41.3%	23.2%	35.5%	43.6%	23.6%	32.9%	36.2%	22.3%	41.5%
Other	47.3%	18.3%	34.4%	47.2%	18.1%	34.8%	47.6%	19.0%	33.4%
My suggestions are given serious consideration by my superintendent.	35.0%	31.2%	33.7%	34.1%	27.6%	38.3%	37.2%	39.4%	23.4%
I get help and support from my superintendent.	38.6%	29.9%	31.5%	33.0%	31.2%	35.8%	51.1%	27.1%	21.8%
My superintendent keeps me informed well in advance concerning decisions, changes, or plans.	33.0%	36.5%	30.4%	34.1%	35.9%	30.0%	30.5%	37.9%	31.6%
My superintendent often encourages me to take on new tasks or to learn how to do things I have never done before.	47.8%	24.6%	27.5%	46.5%	24.7%	28.8%	51.0%	24.5%	24.4%
There are few opportunities for me to grow professionally within this district.	47.3%	25.7%	27.0%	46.6%	27.0%	26.5%	48.9%	22.9%	28.1%
I am unclear about what is expected of me at work.	62.7%	24.1%	13.2%	63.4%	23.6%	13.0%	61.0%	25.3%	13.7%
I am able to influence the decisions of my superintendent.	54.4%	37.1%	8.5%	47.9%	41.8%	10.4%	69.2%	26.6%	4.2%

Administrators were similarly provided statements about their district school board and trustees. Again, a modest majority selected *often* and *always* indicating that they *understand how [their] work contributes to the education plan of the district school board* (52.5%); *share the values of the district school board* (51.6%); and that *the district school board is a good organization to work for* (50.0%). A number of administrators also selected *sometimes* (32.0%) and *often* and *always* (44.3%) feeling that *there are good relations between school-level leadership and district leadership at the district school board*. Administrators, for the most part, also seemed comfortable with the vision for the future set by the board, with 54.3% selecting *rarely* or *never* for the item, *the district school board lacks a clear vision*. Administrators' overall perceptions of the board and their role with the board and trustees appear mostly positive.

More negatively, however, administrators selected *never* or *rarely* for *I feel comfortable to challenge the status quo in the district* (57.6%) (see [Table 23](#)). Responses for the remaining statements (*I feel comfortable seeking clarity on changes implemented by the district school board*; *I am consulted about changes in my school that affect me*; and *when changes are implemented by the district school board, I am unclear how they will affect me*; *the district school board stands up to politically motivated parental pressures*) reveal no strong consensus with an average of 33.3%, across the frequencies of these statements. The variety of responses may point to the uniqueness of each context and different administrator-district board relationships. However, the lower *often* or *always* selections for this group of statements could also point to a lack of psychological safety with the district board. Principal and VP responses are fairly consistent across statements, revealing no large differences in their perceptions of the district school board and trustees.

Table 23. Relationship with District School Boards & Trustees

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
I understand how my work contributes to the education plan of the district school board.	13.2%	34.4%	52.5%	12.6%	33.5%	53.8%	14.1%	36.4%	49.5%
I share the values of the district school board.	10.3%	38.1%	51.6%	8.6%	38.5%	53.0%	14.2%	37.4%	48.5%
The district school board is a good organization to work for.	15.2%	34.8%	50.0%	14.1%	37.3%	48.7%	17.7%	29.2%	53.1%
There are good relations between school-level leadership and district leadership at the district school board.	23.7%	32.0%	44.3%	24.1%	32.3%	43.6%	23.0%	31.3%	45.8%
The district school board fails to acknowledge my extra effort.	30.5%	32.2%	37.3%	29.7%	33.3%	37.0%	32.6%	29.5%	37.9%
I feel comfortable seeking clarity on changes implemented by the district school board.	29.2%	34.2%	36.7%	29.0%	34.4%	36.6%	29.6%	33.7%	36.8%
I am consulted about changes in my school that affect me.	39.3%	32.7%	28.0%	37.9%	32.0%	30.1%	42.5%	34.3%	23.3%
The district school board stands up to politically motivated parental pressures.	40.9%	33.3%	25.7%	40.8%	36.2%	22.9%	41.2%	26.8%	32.0%
When changes are implemented by the district school board, I am unclear how they will affect me.	31.6%	47.6%	20.7%	30.8%	48.0%	21.3%	33.7%	46.9%	19.4%
The district school board lacks a clear vision for the future.	54.3%	26.2%	19.5%	52.7%	27.3%	20.0%	57.7%	23.7%	18.6%
Other	66.2%	16.2%	17.6%	69.4%	14.3%	16.3%	57.9%	21.1%	21.1%
I feel comfortable to challenge the status quo in the district.	57.6%	30.2%	12.3%	54.8%	32.1%	13.1%	63.9%	25.8%	10.3%

### Organizational management

Despite intensified work conditions, school administrators seemingly have no other option than to adapt to the changing situations, attempt to facilitate the accomplishment of goals, and to promote an educational agenda. This section sheds light on how school administrators respond effectively to stakeholders' demands and what strategies they use to develop a sense of control amid work intensification.

As shown in **Table 24**, administrators responded with confidence that in their current roles they *can handle effectively the discipline of students* (80.0%); *manage change in this school* (72.9%), and *prioritize among competing demands of the job* (70.5%). To a lesser extent, a small majority felt *they could handle the time demands of the job* (58.2%), *handle the paperwork required of the job* (55.6%), and *buffer the school from external influences* (50.5%). Slightly less than half felt they *could shape the operational policies and procedures that are necessary to manage this school* (48.8%), *cope with the stress of the job* (48.3%), and *maintain control of [their] daily schedule* (44.3%). The majority (51.0%) *rarely or never*, felt able to *negotiate with the school district for more resources and greater flexibility*. Principal and VP responses were similar.

Table 24. Organizational Management

	PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree
Handle effectively the discipline of students in this school	7.6%	12.3%	80.0%	6.8%	12.6%	80.7%
Manage change in this school	14.5%	12.6%	72.9%	13.6%	11.8%	74.7%
Prioritize among competing demands of the job	14.2%	15.4%	70.5%	14.9%	13.1%	72.1%
Handle the time demands of the job	29.9%	12.0%	58.2%	29.4%	12.2%	58.3%
Handle the paperwork required of the job	26.7%	17.8%	55.6%	26.6%	18.5%	54.9%
Buffer the school from external influences	20.9%	28.6%	50.5%	20.3%	27.5%	52.3%
Shape the operational policies and procedures that are necessary to manage this school	28.1%	23.1%	48.8%	28.0%	21.6%	50.4%

Table 24. Organizational Management (cont'd)

	PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree
<b>Cope with the stress of the job</b>	25.9%	25.8%	48.3%	26.6%	27.5%	46.0%
<b>Maintain control of my own daily schedule</b>	38.1%	17.5%	44.3%	38.0%	16.7%	45.3%
<b>Negotiate with the school district for more resources, and greater flexibility, etc.</b>	51.0%	24.6%	24.3%	51.1%	21.7%	27.1%
<b>Other</b>	57.6%	30.3%	12.1%	54.9%	29.4%	15.7%

School administrators were provided a list of tactics and asked to what extent they used these tactics to manage change (see **Table 25**). The top two tactics selected were *secure “buy-in” from more influential members of staff before introducing the initiative to other members of staff* (55.8%) and *the use of persuasion and encouragement to secure buy-in* (53.3%). Next, administrators *sometimes* opted for tactics that sought to avoid confrontation like *delaying the initiative until a more favourable occasion for implementation arises* (46.6%); *making firm, unambiguous, and non-negotiable statements about the implementation of the initiative* (41.6%), or *making it seem as though you agree with and are very enthusiastic about a new initiative - even if you are not* (47.2%), over punitive tactics. Administrators *rarely or never* choose to *indicate to staff the consequences for non-compliance with directives* (78.6%), nor did they *remind staff (in a subtle or direct manner) that insubordination/non-compliance will be reflected in the evaluations of individual teachers* (94.5%). Seeking mediation was similarly an unpopular tactic. Administrators *rarely or never* elicited the *assistance of an external mediator (e.g., consultant or district official or union member)* (78.2%); *the assistance of the school district office* (61.5%); nor the *assistance of an internal mediator (e.g., vice-principal, Head of Department or other influential member of staff)* (54.4%). However, t-tests showed that VPs were more likely to seek the assistance of an internal mediator [principals ( $M = 2.3, SD = 1.1$ ), VPs ( $M = 2.6, SD = 1.1$ ),  $t(305) = -2.1, p = .035$ ]. It was also not very common to *make ambiguous statements so as to avoid excessive resistance from staff (rarely or never, 60.8%)*, nor was *implementing the initiative regardless of how the staff feels (rarely or never, 56.3%)*.

Table 25. Change Management

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Sometimes	Often + Always
<b>Secure “buy-in” from more influential members of staff before introducing the initiative to other members of staff.</b>	8.4%	35.7%	55.8%	7.1%	39.3%	53.5%	11.3%	27.8%	60.9%
<b>Use persuasion and encouragement to secure buy-in.</b>	6.8%	39.9%	53.3%	6.1%	39.6%	54.2%	8.3%	40.6%	51.0%
<b>Other</b>	53.7%	20.9%	25.3%	50.0%	22.2%	27.8%	69.2%	15.4%	15.4%
<b>Make firm, unambiguous and non-negotiable statements about the implementation of the initiative.</b>	36.4%	41.6%	22.1%	35.6%	42.7%	21.8%	38.1%	39.2%	22.7%
<b>Make it seem as though you agree with and are very enthusiastic about a new initiative - even if you are not.</b>	31.7%	47.2%	21.0%	30.7%	47.6%	21.7%	34.0%	46.4%	19.6%
<b>Elicit the assistance of an internal mediator (e.g., vice-principal, Head of Department, or other influential member of staff).</b>	54.4%	28.0%	17.6%	57.9%	26.5%	15.7%	46.9%	31.3%	21.9%
<b>Delaying the initiative until a more favourable occasion for implementation arises.</b>	36.2%	46.6%	17.2%	35.8%	46.2%	17.9%	37.1%	47.4%	15.5%
<b>Make ambiguous statements so as to avoid excessive resistance from staff.</b>	60.8%	31.1%	8.1%	63.2%	29.7%	7.1%	55.6%	34.0%	10.3%
<b>Elicit the assistance of the school district office.</b>	61.5%	30.4%	8.0%	65.1%	27.8%	7.1%	53.6%	36.1%	10.3%
<b>Implementing the initiative regardless of how the staff feels.</b>	56.3%	37.5%	6.1%	56.6%	36.3%	7.1%	55.7%	40.2%	4.1%
<b>Indicate to staff the consequences for non-compliance with directives.</b>	78.6%	15.9%	5.5%	76.3%	18.0%	5.6%	83.5%	11.3%	5.1%

Table 25. Change Management (cont'd)

	P&VP			PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always	Never + Rarely	Some-times	Often + Always
Position initiatives to make them appear as though they are tied to ministry directives (even when this may not be the case).	81.2%	13.3%	5.5%	79.7%	14.6%	5.7%	84.5%	10.3%	5.2%
Remind staff (in a subtle or direct manner) that insubordination/non-compliance will be reflected in the evaluations of individual teachers.	94.5%	3.2%	2.2%	93.4%	4.2%	2.4%	96.9%	1.0%	2.1%
Elicit the assistance of an external mediator (e.g., consultant, district official, or Union member).	78.2%	19.5%	2.2%	78.3%	20.3%	1.4%	78.1%	17.7%	4.1%

When asked to select statements describing their role as administrators at their schools, 62.5% of administrators *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that *I know exactly what is expected of me* (see Table 26). T-tests further revealed that principal respondents were more confident of expectations than the VPs [principals, 66.2%, ( $M = 3.6, SD = 0.8$ ); VPs, 54.8% ( $M = 3.3, SD = 1.0$ );  $t(174.6) = 2.5, p = .014$ ]. Positively, very few administrators (17.1%) did *not feel a strong sense of "belonging" to [their] school*. Despite an overall sense of belonging, only 38.4% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that *they would be very happy to spend the rest of [their] career[s] in this school*, and 50.8% of administrators admitted that *if I had not already put so much of myself into this school/district, I might consider working elsewhere*. Such responses point to the issue of retention that school boards are facing.

In addition, although very few administrators agreed that they would *ignore a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment* (18.3%), principals were more likely than VPs to do so [principals ( $M = 2.8, SD = 0.9$ ), VPs ( $M = 2.5, SD = 0.9$ ),  $t(320) = 3.0, p = .003$ ].

Table 8. Belonging

	PRINCIPALS			VPS		
	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree + Disagree	Agree nor Disagree	Agree + Strongly Agree
I know exactly what is expected of me.	15.8%	21.7%	62.5%	12.4%	21.5%	66.2%
If I had not already put so much of myself into this school/district, I might consider working elsewhere.	35.6%	13.6%	50.8%	33.8%	11.0%	55.3%
I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in this school.	38.4%	23.2%	38.4%	36.1%	21.9%	42.1%
Other	43.1%	33.3%	23.6%	38.9%	37.0%	24.1%
I often have to ignore a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment.	44.4%	37.3%	18.3%	40.2%	38.4%	21.4%
I do not feel a strong sense of "belonging" to this school.	66.8%	16.1%	17.1%	68.8%	15.1%	16.1%

## Additional School Administrator Comments

Participants were given the opportunity to share more of their insights on their work. Approximately 145 participants shared their final comments at the end of the survey. These comments in general presented a bleak reality of school administrators' work: demanding, stressful, exhausting, unrewarding, and undervalued. A very small number of them indicated that they love their job, but this was often coupled with a comment on how principalship has changed over time and about how demanding and stressful the job was becoming. The following quotes, though specific to individuals, capture the overall sentiments of school administrators about their work and psychological safety:

Work has changed so much in the past 5 years. Colleagues of mine who retired even as late as 2017 do not understand the demands of the job currently. (Principal)

I love my job as an administrator and ability to support teaching and learning. I find that has become hardest when there is poor system's communication and poor consistency with system structures. Aside from the constant changes brought on from COVID, we have faced on-going poor communication and inconsistent process and procedures in our district and hurtful and damaging budgeting processes that have caused great mistrust, dividing partner groups and the feelings of gaslighting. (VP)

School districts/trustees need to listen to administrators' input before making policies and decisions as we are in the space where learning happens. The stressors of an administrator's job require us to access health benefits such as RMT, physiotherapist, counsellors, etc. to counter balance the negative impacts. Hence, administrators' extended health benefits should be the same or better than teachers due to the nature of the role. (VP)

Sometimes it feels like the executive and board members don't remember/know what it's like in schools and the expectations are high, but then I have to remember that perhaps my teachers feel the same way about me, having been out of the classroom for a while. I

try to get into classes to experience what they do, to keep myself grounded in what their reality is so I can be supportive and understanding. (Principal)

The politics of COVID, LGBTQ, First Peoples and Ukraine have taken over school agendas to the point that many other issues are not getting the attention needed. I feel that we are losing our ability to discuss, debate, dissect, and disagree in a respectful manner. (Principal)

I am retiring as early as possible because this job has become less about people and more about accountability. (Principal)

## Recommendations

Today, much attention and effort in research and practice supports the well-being of school administrators. Yet, psychological safety, which is closely related, receives little attention. While a psychologically safe work environment supports interpersonal trust, open communication, creative leadership, and psychological well-being, lack or low levels of psychological safety may result in less risk taking, lack of trust, and disengagement. This study evidences the criticality of psychological safety and reveals the alarming reality of school administrators: a little over one quarter of principals (25.4%) and 20.5% of VPs in British Columbia felt their psychological safety is poor or very poor at work. Therefore, if we are to meaningfully support school administrators in their current roles, we need to create a work environment in which school administrators feel psychologically safe to carry out their duties and responsibilities. This section makes recommendations in response to key findings that uncover the complexities of psychological safety at the social, organizational and system levels. The proposed recommendations are grouped thematically under five categories to reflect such complexity: (i) educational climate and how school administrators spent their time, (ii) policy implementation and strategic leadership, (iii) general and psychological safety, (iv) work demands and well-being, and (v) work relationships and organizational management. Some recommendations reinforce the ones made in the previous research report [School Principals' Work and Well-being in British Columbia: What They Say and Why It Matters](#) that aimed to promote the well-being of school principals. These recommendations still hold true in this report as they not only address the well-being of school administrators but also their psychological safety. Yet other recommendations suggest what courses of action need to be taken specifically to promote the psychological safety of school administrators, which in turn can positively contribute to their overall well-being.

## Section I. Educational Climate and How School Administrators Spend Their Time

### Reexamine school administrators' role and responsibilities

*Over the years, the nature of school administrators' roles and responsibilities have changed significantly. They have to engage in activities that go beyond their traditional roles or their job description. The pandemic has resulted in extra demands, such as long hours and additional duties (e.g., covering for other staff, COVID protocols, safety measures) for principals. There is a need to involve multiple stakeholders (e.g., governments, school districts, and professional associations) to reexamine school administrators' roles and responsibilities, and update the legislatively mandated duties and responsibilities of school administrators to better reflect their work realities and expectations.*

### Focus on workload reduction and management besides developing resilience

*Workload has been identified as one of the biggest stressors to school administrators. Addressing workload issues has never been so urgent. While developing resilience among school administrators is important, a resilience-focused intervention tends to neglect systemic problems, and shifts the burden to individuals. Some tangible solutions need to be considered to help reduce the workload of school administrators:*

- *increase the number of VPs in schools*
- *increase the number of support staff to solve the problem of staff shortages*
- *limit teaching duties of school administrators*
- *create new roles to alleviate school administrators' duties so that they can focus on instructional leadership in schools*
- *provide more personnel to assist principals and VPs*

### **Develop effective crisis/emergency management practices & future planning**

The pandemic further compounded the intensifying work of school administrators by adding another layer of complexity to their roles. While the existing and lingering impact of the pandemic suggests there is still a need for the school system to concentrate on “the here and now,” it is equally important to think about crisis response in the future. The key stakeholders (e.g., governments, school districts, and professional associations) need to learn from the pandemic and work on the best crisis management practices and planning for schools. Such practices and planning should also be incorporated into leadership preparation and professional learning.

### **Provide training opportunities for crisis/emergency management & planning**

In contemporary times, the work of school administrators is filled with uncertainties and unpredictabilities. There is a strong need to provide training opportunities so that school administrators are well prepared for uncertain and unpredictable situations and can effectively cope with or manage crises/emergencies at work.

### **Create or expand mental health programs, services, and teams**

Increasing mental health issues among students, teachers, support workers, and parents/guardians have been continuously identified as one of the impactful factors on school administrators' work and health. The pandemic further exacerbated the mental health situation in the school system. Creating or expanding mental health and wellness programs, services, and teams has become ever more critical in helping school administrators manage workloads in challenging times. Besides formal services and teams that can provide consistent support to school administrators, ad hoc programs are equally needed to proactively target specific areas.

### **Foster time management skills**

Time constraints or lack of time has been identified as one of the hindrances to school administrators' work. Professional learning needs to consider incorporating the training and development of time management skills among school administrators.

### **Build or expand support systems for better use of time**

School administrators are increasingly carrying out duties and responsibilities that go beyond their job expectations and traditional roles. There needs to be a support system that can help distribute tasks and responsibilities to professionals who have the relevant expertise and knowledge so that school administrators can better use their time focusing on student achievements and school performance.

## **Section II. Policy Implementation and Strategic Leadership**

### **Solicit school administrators' voices and input in policy making and implementation**

School administrators are at the forefront of policy implementation, but many respondents found there is either a disconnect between the intention of policies and their work realities, or inconsistencies between policies. Policy makers at different levels should intentionally engage school administrators and solicit their voices and input in policy making so that policies better reflect their realities and expectations. Expanding existing communication channels and mechanisms, or creating new ones, will help foster the reciprocal exchange of ideas and achieve intended policy goals.

### **Foster distributed or shared leadership**

Increasing mandates and policies have made school administrators' work unmanageable. Principalship is no longer a one-person job. In order to get work done, school administrators need to practice distributed or shared leadership to empower teachers and staff to work collaboratively towards

school goals. Deliberate thought and explicit communication of expectations would contribute to the success of role distributions, fostering clarity of new roles.

### **Rethink the role of the education system's bureaucratic structure**

Hierarchy and bureaucracy have been identified as one of the biggest hindrances to the psychological safety of school administrators. School districts, large or small, need to create an enabling system/mechanism to better engage and support school administrators by, for example, limiting the number of policies and mandates, reducing paperwork, creating clear communication, and providing opportunities to have input and feedback from school administrators.

### **Create focus groups/talking circles to have school administrators' voices heard**

School districts need to foster a respectful and inclusive organizational culture in which school administrators feel a greater sense of belonging and feel their voices are heard. For example, focus groups/listening circles with school administration (perhaps including recently retired administrators) alongside superintendents and district board members could be formed to discuss some of the psychological safety issues that prevent administrators from questioning, discussing, and challenging policy. Such interaction could also foster understanding and build trust. Groups could explore, in safety, questions such as the following: What is hindering psychological safety? What can be done about it? How can we foster a culture of receptiveness and responsiveness?

### **Provide better legal, professional, and health and safety protection for school administrators**

School administrators feel psychologically unsafe if they fear negative consequences when they speak up and out, express dissent, or ask difficult questions. Professional associations need to advocate for their members and work collaboratively with other parties to provide and expand legal, professional, and health and safety protections for school administrators.

### **Grant greater professional autonomy and discretion to school administrators**

School administrators are often seen as leaders or middle managers, but their leadership is significantly constrained by policies and mandates. There is a strong need to revise and update policies and mandates to allow more localized discretion and autonomy in their decision-making.

### **Create enabling systems/culture to allow for creative leadership**

Many school administrators expressed their fear or concerns of negative consequences in creative policy implementation and in making difficult decisions. The school districts and the Ministry of Education need to create an enabling system/culture in which school administrators feel comfortable taking risks and being creative, while feeling supported by their supervisors. This could involve a hotline/a go-to person or a support system with which school administrators can consult when making difficult decisions or seeking legal/professional advice.

## **Section III. General and Psychological Safety**

### **Update and implement the existing occupational health and safety regulations and strategies**

The Ministry of Education needs to continue to strengthen its relationships with the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health, and WorkSafeBC to update and implement the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation and Strategies in the BC public education system. There is also a need to identify and address emerging gaps in health and well-being support in response to social and political changes and the pandemic.

### **Prepare leaders for potential trauma exposure**

Many school administrators have indicated they have been exposed to potential or secondary trauma that is significantly impacting their psychological and mental well-being. There is a strong need to prepare leaders

for potential trauma exposure and, more importantly, to provide needed support for school administrators.

### **Improve representation of and support for BIPOC and culturally diverse school leaders**

The analysis results continue to indicate that improvement in school administrator diversity is much needed, as the survey respondents are 86.1% white (88.0% for school principals, 81.9% for VPs). Education communities need to actively support and mentor aspiring principals and VPs 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 0.7% and 2.0%, respectively. Research shows BIPOC school administrators are experiencing general and psychological safety differently from their white peers. Greater efforts from all key stakeholders are needed in the recruitment and retention of BIPOC school administrators. Supports specific to BIPOC and culturally diverse school leaders are needed. Professional associations should work alongside school districts to assist culturally diverse school administrators in setting up networking and culturally sensitive mentoring programs.

### **Provide targeted training**

Professional learning programs do not always adequately prepare school administrators to face the realities and challenges of their leadership roles. It is recommended that professional training and learning programs do more to support future school leaders by offering multiple and varied learner-centred experiences that can help school administrators to update their skills and knowledge (e.g., stress management, culturally responsive leadership, emotional competence) to keep pace with daily challenges.

### **Build respectful relationships and work environments**

Organizational culture and relationships play a significant role in school administrators' psychological safety. Building respectful relationships and work environments are key to improving the psychological safety of school administrators. Creating or authentically implementing safe and respectful

work protocols and building healthy relationships should be prioritized in the districts and schools. Having formal or informal check-ins (virtual or over coffee), accepting and celebrating differences, effective listening, developing empathy, learning to give or take feedback, or school visits from the superintendents would help create a supportive environment for school administrators.

### **Build a culture of inclusion and belonging**

A culture of inclusion and belonging can help foster a sense of ownership of their work, and enhance job satisfaction for school administrators in general, and for minoritized school administrators in particular. There is a strong need to build a culture of inclusion and belonging not only for students and teachers, but also for school administrators. This includes creating programs that address equity and racism, cultivating a growth mindset in the districts, creating conditions for people to have a voice, and engaging school administrators to create or update diversity strategies.

### **Create opportunities for peer pairing**

Networking with fellow colleagues is a way school principals are able to receive informal and work-related support from their peers. Professional associations and school districts need to create opportunities for school administrators to seek formal and informal social support from their peers.

## **Section IV. Work Demands and Well-being**

### **Set up or expand existing well-being support for school administrators**

The following recommendations not only reinforce the ones made in the previous [research report](#), but also speak to the urgency of well-being support for school administrators.

- Professional associations and school districts need to continue to set up and expand existing services, and explore effective practices

and approaches to better support school administrators' well-being. This includes mobilizing and aligning existing resources and programs from the districts, health and community organizations (e.g., Starling Minds, IWBI, etc.), and municipal and provincial governments to improve the well-being and psychological health of school administrators.

- School administrators are wearing too many hats which makes their work unrealistic. Many duties and responsibilities should be handled by professionals and experts, such as social workers, psychologists, youth workers, counsellors, health support workers, and SE educators. Having more readily accessible professionals and experts helps release school administrators from responsibilities that are beyond their professional training so that they can better focus on instructional leadership.
- Professional associations and school districts should provide or expand opportunities such as workshops, networking events, and additional training to better support school administrators' well-being and psychological safety.
- Professional associations can provide opportunities for school administrators to network with one another and build up a social support network made up of fellow administrators and school leaders, as well as professionals and experts in particular fields.

### **Foster emotional competence**

To cope with the increasing emotional and psychological stress school administrators are facing in their roles, it is recommended that they develop emotional and psychological competency as a skill to help them cope in their emotionally draining jobs. This includes the ability to recognize, interpret, and respond positively or constructively to emotions in self and others through self-awareness, social awareness, self-direction, and relationship development (Wang, 2020). Research also has shown school administrators' mental and emotional health tends to be impacted the most by the intensified work

conditions. Professional associations should continue to mobilize and align existing or new resources and programs to improve school administrators' mental and emotional health and well-being, in collaboration with districts, community health organizations, and provincial and municipal governments.

### **Eat healthy and exercise**

When school administrators feel their best, they are able to lead their schools more effectively. Intentionally organizing their schedule to include times where they can eat lunch or snacks and engage in physical exercise is crucial to maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

## **Section V. Work Relationships and Organizational Management**

### **Recognize school administrators' work**

Many school administrators felt that school districts failed to recognize or acknowledge their extra efforts. The school districts should establish a mechanism to publicly recognize and celebrate school administrators' achievements, be available when needed, and be willing to listen to concerns and questions from school administrators.

### **Develop or update guidelines on student discipline**

Handling student discipline appeared to be an important component of school administrators' work. In order to help school administrators manage their workload related to student discipline, the district school boards need to develop or update guidelines about by whom and how student misbehaviours should be handled. The development of such guidelines should involve school administrators as well as teachers, students, and the broader community, ensuring they all have input into the guidelines.

### **Provide opportunities for networking & experience sharing**

*Talking to their colleagues and peers has been identified by school administrators as one of the coping strategies they utilize to manage their work expectations. Besides mentorship and coaching, professional associations should create or expand networking and experience sharing opportunities so that school administrators can learn effective leadership practices from their peers.*

### **Provide research informed resources to better support principals – time management, risk management, well-being support – in collaboration with districts, and 3rd parties**

*Besides professional learning opportunities, professional associations, in collaboration with school districts and community health organizations, should create or expand their resource database or inventory on effective practices on time management, stress management, risk management, and health and well-being support for school administrators.*

### **Foster positive relationships with superintendents**

*Having a positive and purposeful work environment can help school administrators better navigate the changing times and gain support when needed. School administrators should take initiative to foster relationships with superintendents and the district school boards by calling to introduce themselves and soliciting their advice.*

### **Seek out peer support**

*Besides formal mentoring and coaching, school administrators should seek out and maintain a strong professional network of other administrators. This will help reduce isolation and build a supportive network.*

## **Conclusion**

A psychologically safe environment allows school administrators to feel confident about taking risks, communicating ideas, asking difficult questions, and engaging in creative decision-making, all of which foster innovation, creativity, and enhance job performance and engagement. A psychologically unsafe workplace may promote insecurity among school administrators and deter healthy relationship building: The willingness to share knowledge, collaborate, and initiate change is compromised under such conditions. Moreover, a psychologically unsafe environment may create stress and anxiety and lead to burnout among principals and VPs.

This report provides much needed evidence on the complexities and nuances of the psychological safety of school administrators. It reveals that school administrators strategically “mediate” the policy agenda, while simultaneously retaining their personal principles and values that guide their work in a challenging work environment. What is evident is that psychological safety is not a stand-alone phenomenon; rather, it needs to be addressed in relation to many other factors at the individual, organizational, and system levels. These factors, whether they are at the micro, mesa, or macro levels, not only reflect the organizational culture, leadership, and the policy contexts, but also the organizational behaviours and relationships that school administrators are experiencing on a daily basis. These interrelated factors create an accumulative or compounded effect on the psychological safety of school administrators. Subsequently, school administrators’ psychological safety can have a ripple effect on their ability to foster a psychologically safe environment for teachers and students within their school community. There is an urgent need to cultivate a climate of psychological safety that invites open communication, risk taking, and creative decision-making among school leaders – a climate in which school leaders feel psychologically safe to say “the emperor has no clothes.”

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**To cite this report:**

Wang, F. (2022). *Psychological safety of school administrators: Invisible barriers to speaking out*. A report from the research project "Subversive Leadership and The Art of War", University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
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