

Principal Health and Well-being

TIME TO MOVE BEYOND SELF-CARE

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Much research has shed light on Principals' intensified work and its impact on their health and well-being. The pandemic has undoubtedly further exacerbated the situation. Many Principals are relying on self-care to improve their health and well-being, but the existing and lingering effects of the pandemic can make their individualized self-care endeavour even more difficult. This raises a timely question about how to better support health and well-being of school Principals in the days to come.

In the article [Principal Stress and Burnout: Why You Should Care](#) for the EdCan network, we detailed the research on Principal stress and burnout and why everyone involved in K-12 education should care about this. This article and others highlight the importance of the well-being of our leaders to the health, happiness and success of our school communities as a whole. Research shows us that there are many areas of Principals' work that contribute to their well-being and work satisfaction, such as information sharing, health and well-being benefits, continued professional learning and adequate resource allocation. There are also areas that are contributing to stress and burnout of Principals, particularly work intensification, including long work hours, increased volume and complexity of work, multiple responsibilities, and conflicting



“... despite the fact that we’re increasingly more aware of the importance of social emotional skills like self-awareness and the need to practice self-care, many school leaders have not been taught these essential skills. More importantly, leaders often assume that they can’t possibly worry about themselves since they’re tasked with taking care of everyone else. However, it’s good to be reminded of the simple truth that we’ve learned from air travel, which is that it’s not only important – but essential – to put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.”

***- Principal Stress and Burnout:
Why You Should Care***

demands. The outbreak of the global pandemic has created more disruption and uncertainty in education and added extra pressure on Principals’ work. It has also created an opportunity for education to re-create itself as a system.

So, if we are having to re-think education in light of this pandemic, then perhaps now is the time to create a system that embeds well-being at its core. How do we move towards well-being in a practical way, without adding yet another layer of work to an already overwhelmed system? What if we started by looking at ways to address the very real and impactful issue of work intensification?

One of the things that may help us with this is the understanding that workplace well-being has three interconnected parts that work together to either enhance or undermine well-being.



Individual Actions

What we often do here to focus on the individual to take care of their own well-being, and of course that is important as we all have responsibility for our own health. What is very hopeful and encouraging in this area is the shift towards a more holistic understanding of self-care. Self-care includes the more traditional focus on nutrition, exercise and other physical and mental health initiatives, but we are also now including social and emotional skills and practices like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship development. These

types of leadership skills and practices enable Principals to respond effectively to stakeholders' demands and develop a sense of control amid intensified work conditions. Principals would like to focus more on these practices, but often find that other work gets in the way. It is also important to note that we must be careful not to get stuck in the individual responsibility part of this triad, because individual self-care – although necessary for workplace health – is not sufficient.

Collaborative Actions

The same could be said for the collaborative actions of groups of educators and school teams. Principals are keenly aware of the impact of relationships on both their health and well-being, and that of their school communities. There are some promising and creative practices that promote and support these important success factors of connection and belonging in school teams. Unfortunately, work intensification is a factor in the success of these types of initiatives as well, and so many of these important connection activities and practices are competing with more urgent demands that are part of the every-day work of school leaders.

Collective Actions / Systems Change

That leads us to the collective action or systemic piece, and the specific issue of work intensification that is getting in the way of some of the most important and rewarding parts of the role of school leader. We have to address and consider all three inter-connected parts, but it is often tempting to avoid this one as it seems like too large of a task or something that we don't have the power to impact. The risk of ignoring the larger system and how it impacts well-being is that we run the risk of treating only the symptoms and missing some of the causes of problems.

“There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river.

We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in.”

- Desmond Tutu

How can we use this re-structuring of education as a positive disruption point to address the work intensification of school leaders, and find ways to free them up to do the

instructional leadership and to build the relationships and communities that will support the health and success of all learners? The good news is that we have the research-based evidence to support us here. Workplace well-being research is clear about the impact that staff well-being has on health, productivity and student success. We also have research on Principal well-being that shows us that this is an important topic worth tackling, and health, productivity and success are jeopardized if we don't try to restructure. One of the things that can get in the way of looking at systems change is the lack of a sense of efficacy to bring about this change, but remember that systems are systems of people, and that we are those people. As we re-develop our systems going forward, let's re-consider the role of school Principal and Vice-Principal. What could we change, re-distribute or let go of in the role?

It will take courage and creativity to look at our systems in a different way, and it is important to name that this shouldn't be seen as a criticism towards – or the responsibility of – any one person or group of people, but rather a responsibility and opportunity for everyone. As we are making decisions and developing new ways of working and learning, we have the opportunity to do so through a well-being lens. Well-being is both an individual endeavour and a collective commitment, and as we move through this necessary re-set in education, we will definitely need both. So, let's start with our leaders, and move beyond self-care of school Principals to look at ways that our collective practice can support them to do the important and impactful work of school leadership. Now is our opportunity!

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