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School Leadership Burnout and Job Related Stress: Recommendations for District Administrators and Principals

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Principals are critical to improving schools but job-related stress and burnout are factors that can limit principal effectiveness and lead to untimely turnover. Extant literature leadership preparation programs and district policies have largely ignored principal burnout despite the increased complexity of the principalship and increasing rates of turnover. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated principal burnout given the added demands and transitions associated with school closures reopening and social distancing protocols. The purpose of this article is to provide a set of recommendations for district administrators and school leaders in order to reduce burnout. We hope these recommendations provide an initial starting point for taking action to reduce principal burnout.

KEYWORDS

Burnout; principal; school leadership; stress; self-care; administrators; leadership; retention

Principals are critical to improving the organizational conditions that support high-quality teaching and other equity-related outcomes. The principal's formal and informal power and influence within the school community can help leverage efforts to build teacher capacity, implement culturally responsive teaching practices, and work collaboratively with families, communities, district administrators, and other partners (DeMatthews 2018; Hitt and Tucker 2016; Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis 2016). Such efforts can help garner critical resources, manage dilemmas, and inform complex decisions about resource allocations and priorities. An effective principal is essential for continuous school improvement, but stable school leadership is also important because organizational learning and improvement takes time. Therefore, the retention of successful principals is a pressing school improvement challenge, especially given the increasingly high rates of principal turnover nationally, and the even faster pace of turnover in schools serving high percentages of low-income students (Goldring and Taie 2018). Not surprisingly, repeated principal turnover on a campus is likely to have a deleterious effect on student achievement

and school working conditions (Bartanen, Grissom, and Rogers 2019; Snodgrass Rangel 2018).

Numerous individual and organizational factors contribute to principal turnover, such as a principal's years of service and time to retirement, working conditions and pay, autonomy, and regional labor market forces (Snodgrass Rangel 2018). Extant literature focuses far less on principal burnout, but principals are often expected to be selfless and willing to put the needs of others in front of their own. Such norms coupled with complex organizational environments with high demands and limited resources can contribute to stress and burnout. Consequently, burnout is a factor that contributes to principal turnover (Boyce and Bowers 2016; Yan 2020). Burnout is a multidimensional concept that has been defined as a "a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach and Leiter 2016, p. 103). Several studies document principal burnout. Challenging working conditions contribute to burnout. Principals often maintain heavy workloads, work long hours, wrestle with erratic and unpredictable

problems of practice, and lack autonomy from district supervisors (DeMatthews et al. 2019; DeMatthews et al. 2021; Mahfouz 2018; Oplatka 2017; Wells and Klocko 2018; Yan 2020). One study focused on secondary school principals found high levels of burnout (DeMatthews et al. 2021), which is likely due in part to increased workload, time commitments, school hours of operation, school and staff size, and unique challenges of working with adolescent youth.

While some of the factors that contribute to burnout has been identified by researchers, districts and principals have limited guidance on how to reduce burnout and engage in self-care and proactive, healthy coping strategies. Thus, the purpose of this article is to provide a set of practical recommendations for district administrators and school leaders to reduce principal burnout. We believe a focus on principal burnout and self-care is timely, especially amid and proceeding a global pandemic that has drastically impacted schools (DeMatthews et al. 2020). The article begins with a brief overview of the importance of principal leadership and principal turnover. Next, we provide an introduction to the concept of burnout and related factors (e.g., secondary trauma, emotional exhaustion, compassion satisfaction). Then, we provide two sets of evidenced-based recommendations to help address principal burnout. The first set of recommendations focus on how districts might systematically address principal burnout. The second set of recommendations focuses on how principals can proactively and reactively address their own burnout if district supports are not provided, as is often the case. Our recommendations provide an initial starting place for reducing burnout and responding to the work-related stress that often comes with the principalship. We believe these recommendations are a first step to enabling more principals to remain healthy and able to sustain their challenging, but important work.

Background Principal leadership and the impact on turnover

Principals lead human-service institutions, which means their work requires them to manage the multiple dimensions of organizational life.

Schools consist of staff, teachers, and students, but are also nested in educational bureaucracies within a unique community or group of communities. The position of the principal as the school's formal leader requires ongoing engagement with many individuals within their school, district, and community, who may have different priorities and interests. The work that occurs in schools is also moral work that families, teachers, students, and constituents take seriously. In sum, the work of principals occurs across multiple highly social and dynamic environments that can be uncertain due to shifting policies, expectations, and individuals at the local, state, and federal levels. Within this educational context, principals do not have broad authority or control. Rather, they act as middle managers or mediating agents given that their positions exist between school districts and classrooms. Principals maintain at least some autonomy to make school-based decisions despite having to deal with the constraints of district policies and their formal authority over teachers and staff (Flessa 2012; Reid 2020; Shaked and Schechter 2017; Spillane et al. 2002). Thus, the principal occupies an important, but potentially contentious space that can be stress-inducing.

Principals are expected to increase student achievement and ensure the school enacts equitable policies that benefit all students, including those who have been historically marginalized. To do so, principals are expected to draw upon a broad array of leadership skills to increase teacher capacity, facilitate a school vision, monitor the instructional program, and redesign the organization in ways that promote greater equity and efficiency (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020; Hitt and Tucker 2016). Each school has its own unique histories, cultures, assets, and areas of growth that principals must understand and respond to effectively (DeMatthews 2018; Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis 2016). In schools that are historically low-performing, improving school performance can be stressful, laborious, and time intensive given that change is often difficult and prompts resistance. During the pandemic, principals have dealt with increased uncertainty and workload demands that likely contribute to increased stress (Stone-Johnson and Weiner 2020). When schools fully reopen, principals will

likely be under even greater stress as one study already projected that “students are expected to begin the fall 2020 school year with approximately 63 to 68% of the learning gains in reading and 37 to 50% of learning gains in mathematics relative to a typical school year” (Kuhfeld et al. 2020, p. 549). Given these challenges, many principals will experience acute and chronic forms of work-related stress that can contribute to burnout and turnover.

High rates of principal turnover limit the impact of principal leadership and can threaten school stability. Among all U.S. public school principals in 2015-16, approximately 82% remained at the same school the next year, 6% moved to a different campus, and 10% left the principalship (Goldring and Taie 2018). Leadership turnover is 40% greater in high-poverty schools, where 21% of principals in schools with more than 75% of students qualifying for free and reduced meals left their campus the following year compared to 15% of principals who left schools serving more affluent students (Goldring and Taie 2018). While many factors explain why principals leave schools, the fact that schools serving high proportions of low-income students are at greater risk of turnover is concerning, especially considering many of these schools already have less experienced principals (Loeb, Kalogrides, and Horng 2010). Given the importance of principal turnover and the challenges that come with principal churn, we believe all factors that contribute to turnover need to be understood. We turn to research focused on burnout and working conditions to better understand how principals experience stress.

Principal burnout

Burnout is often used to describe job-related stress and can be considered an occupational hazard that may impact an individual's personal and professional well-being. Burnout has been described as a job stress phenomenon and a form of mental distress that can be accompanied by physical health issues (Baldwin et al. 2011). Burnout has also been described as a psychological phenomenon in which “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and

reduced personal accomplishment can occur among individuals who do ‘people work ...’ (Maslach and Jackson 1981, p. 1). More recently, Maslach and Leiter (2016) described the multi-dimensional nature of burnout, which includes (a) emotional exhaustion: wearing out, feeling emotionally depleted and drained; and experiencing a loss of energy (b) depersonalization: cynical or detached attitudes toward people, irritability, and a loss of idealism; and (c) personal accomplishment: feelings of competence and a tendency to evaluate oneself positively concerning one's work.

Burnout can also be related to both individual and school and district factors (e.g., school size, parent trust/mistrust, principal role clarity, mentoring and support) (Authors, forthcoming; Gmelch and Gates 1998; Ozer 2013). Principal experience and socialization into the profession are also factors related to burnout (DeMatthews et al. 2019; Combs et al. 2009). Principals may also experience burnout as a result of negative experiences on the job, such as teacher resistance or having a student affected by family or community violence (DeMatthews et al. 2019). Principals who find high-levels of incongruity between their own job expectations and their district administrators, teachers, or families' expectations are also more likely to report burnout (Gmelch and Torelli 1994). Similarly, burnout relates to personal and professional experiences and values specific to individual principals (Tomic and Tomic 2008).

Another factor that can contribute to burnout is secondary traumatic stress, which has been defined as “the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the first-hand trauma experiences of another” (National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) 2018, p. 1). Similar constructs have been presented in the literature such as compassion fatigue or “stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person” (Figley 1995, p. 7) or as “reduced empathetic capacity ... manifested through behavior and emotional reactions to traumatizing experiences of others (Cieslak et al. 2014, p. 76). Conversely, principals can also find helping those in need rewarding which in turn may reduce burnout. Compassion

satisfaction can be a balancing construct to burnout and is understood as “the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well” (Stamm 2010, p. 12).

Lastly, burnout relates to organizational conditions that impact principals job-related stress. Leiter and Maslach (2003) identified six domains that are organizational correlates of burnout: (a) workload: too much work in too little time; (b) control: perceptions of one's ability to influence decisions that impact their work; (c) reward: monetary, social, and intrinsic rewards that provide recognition from colleagues, supervisors, and other groups; (d) community: social support at work; (e) fairness: the extent to which decisions are perceived by an individual as fair, including how workload, pay, promotions, and other rewards are distributed; and (f) values: the alignment between an individual's values and organizational values.

Recommendations to reduce principal burnout

Burnout and stress are normal happenings that principals will face in their everyday work life given the nature of their jobs. How principals cope with stress is critical. Resilience is a strong determinant in the level of stress a principal will experience from a given phenomenon. Resilience has been described as personal traits that allow an individual to successfully adapt to a challenge or disruptive life event (Connor and Davidson 2003; Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000). In a review of empirical research, Lee et al. (2013) found that healthy coping strategies can increase resilience and the ability to self-regulate emotions during stressful situations, and that these abilities can be improved by increasing protective factors such as self-efficacy, positive affect, and self-esteem. Healthy coping includes an ability to interpret accurately real and perceived threats, which can lead to more effective responses to stress (Deits-Lebehn et al. 2020).

In what follows, we provide recommendations for reducing principal burnout based on a review of literature focused on coping and self-care as well as our understandings of what is commonly available in districts and schools. The first set of recommendations are focused on systemic policy

and practice improvements that can be taken at the district level. In our own research in several large urban districts and review of literature focused on principal burnout (DeMatthews et al. 2019; DeMatthews et al. 2021), we found almost no instances of district-initiated efforts to reduce burnout among all principals. Thus, drawing on literature in counseling supervision and across other fields, we developed two research-based recommendations for districts. The second set of recommendations are for current principals, who may or may not have district support. These recommendations can be used to supplement district initiatives or used by principals who are not currently supported by their districts. We again drew upon research from other fields to develop our recommendations. Both set of recommendations are not comprehensive, but rather reflect an initial starting point to address burnout.

Recommendations for districts and principal supervisors

Self Care supervision

Over the past decade, state and districts leaders have exerted a significant amount of effort on improving principal evaluation and principal supervision (Mitani 2018). Principal supervisors are being asked to provide more robust and actionable feedback on principal practice, develop professional and campus-based improvement goals with principals, and engage in ongoing coaching and assessment with principals (Honig and Rainey 2019; Huff, Preston, and Goldring 2013). However, most principal supervision and coaching reform efforts have not included a focus on burnout and self-care. Districts and principal supervisors can apply basic practices from the counseling field to provide support to principals.

Counseling is a similar helping profession to school leadership. Within the counseling field, a more experienced counselor provides clinical supervision or a formal process of professional support to less experienced counselors that is recognized as an integral component of the profession (Bernard and Goodyear 2014; Shulman 2005; Wheeler and Richards 2007). One element of this supervision is to support the less

experienced counselor in reflection and self-awareness with the goal promoting self-care, preventing counselor burnout and impairment, and ensuring professional and responsible practice (American Counseling Association 2014). As Wallbank and Hatton (2011) noted, clinical supervision can promote “self-assessment, analytical and reflexive skill building. It can also support individual practitioners to develop knowledge and competence, assuming responsibility for their own practice and enhancing ... safety in complex situations” (p. 31). Supervisors can thwart or reduce burnout by discussing overcommitment, emotional exhaustion, and the degree of emotional investment that comes with the job (Thompson, Frick, and Trice-Black 2012). Specifically, effective supervisors prompt an awareness of protective factors that can reduce burnout and discuss the importance of life-work balance and professional boundaries. They might also direct conversations about self-care and assessing the degree to which individuals are taking care of themselves or having difficulty. Thompson, Frick, and Trice-Black (2012) also found that some supervisors model self-care with their supervisees, by demonstrating personal and professional boundaries, practicing meditation, and exercising.

Principal supervisors and other district administrators that may have supervisory authority over principals may not be trained to identify burnout and facilitate conversations about self-care. They may also lack the time to creatively work with principals to improve self-care through certain leadership and planning activities. Consequently, districts and principal supervisors should consider the following:

Investing in training for both principals and principal supervisors on topics related to burnout and self-care as well basic strategies or approaches for having conversations about burnout.

Revising principal supervisor expectations related to promoting self-care and reducing burnout. For example, principal supervisors might begin their supervisory meetings with one-on-one check-ins and ask prompts about principal well-being.

Redeveloping principal workload expectations in alignment to principal evaluation and district expectations.

Adopting a policy whereby principals can receive release time to consult with a health professional.

Co-creating a campus plan where leadership responsibilities can be delegated on certain days/times to enable a principal to maintain a healthy life-work balance.

Establishing opportunities to enhance compassion satisfaction through events or activities that celebrate principal successes and the impact of their work on students, teachers, and families.

Peer support

Research focused on principal burnout and coping has revealed that many principals rely on their personal and professional networks to engage in self-care (DeMatthews et al. 2019; DeMatthews et al. 2021). Principals have reported calling on their colleagues during difficult situations or meeting up after work to exercise, drink alcohol or coffee, or eat dinner to blow off steam. However, districts are rarely responsible for creating these networks with the intention of offering healthy, proactive support. As a result, the effectiveness of principal peer support is limited and sporadic. Yet, scholarship supports the use of peer consultation as a means to prevent and alleviate burnout in other fields (Kundra and Salzer 2019; Nielsen and Davidsen 2017).

In the field of medicine, one-on-one peer support has been used to help physicians dealing with emotionally stressful events, such as caring for victims of a mass trauma. Like principals, doctors can experience difficult working conditions that include long hours, resource shortages, and significant amounts of paperwork in addition to the emotional exhaustion that can come with caring for others. Shapiro and Galowitz (2016) investigated a peer support model at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Participating members were recruited and trained prior to the start of the program. Next, a peer support referral process was created so that individuals could reach out for support as needed. The hospital used the referral process to also proactively reach out to

all physicians. The program took effort to match trained peer supporters based on specialty area and experience in recognition of the importance of personality style and the need for a supporter to be understanding and empathetic. A peer support conversation protocol was established, which included several steps: outreach call, invitation/opening, listening, reflecting, reframing, sense-making, coping, closing, and resources and referral. The researchers noted that this was typically a one-time intervention with a follow up phone call or email one week later.

The program at Brigham and Women's Hospital is one potential example that districts can take to create peer support groups for principals. Many districts organize principals by neighborhood feeder patterns or grade levels. Others develop principal professional learning communities led by a principal supervisor. These groupings might be useful as districts consider creating a peer-support process for principals. Districts and principal supervisors might also consider the following:

Providing training on key topics related to burnout, peer support, and health and proactive coping strategies.

Creating a conversational protocol for peer principals to use to facilitate discussions with a particular focus on burnout, difficulty maintaining life-work balance, and stressful work events.

Setting aside time during the workday and after work hours for principals to engage in peer support.

Advertising peer support opportunities with all principals as well as sharing available resources for support provided by the district and within the community.

Recommendations for principals

Principals cannot necessarily count on districts to intervene or offer burnout supports. Burnout and self-care have not been topics historically prioritized or even discussed in principal preparation programs, leadership standards, or in-service professional development. Thus, principals should be prepared to find ways to address burnout on

their own and among their peers, especially if the district has not prioritized such supports.

Self Educate

Resources that can allow individuals to learn about job-related burnout are freely available online and also available within public libraries. Principals would benefit from learning more about burnout, stress, and healthy coping strategies. They might consider reading one or more of the following:

The American Psychiatric Association's (2020) *Well-Being Resources* which includes TED Talks on burnout, tools to guard against burnout, and assessment tools and well-being resources.

Mayo Clinic's (2020) *Healthy Lifestyle* webpage which provides basic information on how to spot job burnout and how to take action.

Stanford Medicine's (2020) *Stress Burnout* webpage, which provides basic assessments, definitions, and information on how to access stress resources.

These freely available resources and others can help principals recognize, assess, and respond to burnout. In addition, as principals learn more about how burnout impacts their work, they may become more likely to recognize the importance of setting boundaries between their personal and professional lives and engaging in other healthy coping strategies.

Specific interventions for self-care described below are in line with standards and competencies for practice with Counselors, Nurses and Social Workers (American Counseling Association 2014; (American Nurses Association [ANA] 2015; National Association of Social Workers 2017). These organizations have specifically established ethical obligations for practitioners to engage in self-care and well-being as it has direct implications for practice.

Leadership delegation plan and calendar

Principals can also work with their staff and/or immediate supervisor to create a leadership delegation plan and calendar. This plan and calendar

can include times where the principal can either focus on addressing burnout and job-related stress during work hours or limit non-business hours interruptions on certain dates and times. The plan may have 45 minutes per week where the principal engages in a check-in with a mentor principal or will have alternative points of contact for an emergency. For example, the principal will not be interrupted on Tuesday evenings during a scheduled exercise or family activity. As the use of peer and supervisory support are aligned with self-care (Barnett et al. 2007; Barnett and Cooper 2009), principals might also find opportunities to build relationships with teachers and staff, model healthy life-work balance, and create bonds. While these are relatively small investments of time, they can pay dividends for principals managing stress and life-work balance.

Annual planning

Principals should also engage in annual planning for life-work balance and proactive coping strategies. Annual vacationing can diminish perceived job-related stress (Etzion 2003) and vacationing or a respite during the work year can decrease job-related stress for multiple weeks (Westman and Etzion 2001). These findings suggest that principals should plan an annual vacation, but also additional respite time throughout the year. In other words, family and vacation time should not all be packed into one week of the year, but rather broadly dispersed so burnout is kept under control. The annual plan might also include scheduled time for peer support with other principals or even social events with other principals to build a healthy support group that is bonded together over time.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to provide recommendations to address principal burnout. The district and principal recommendations presented here extends upon current practices that support principal well-being. The recommendations are not a comprehensive set of actions, but rather an initial starting point for principals, principal supervisors, and districts to consider, modify, and

adopt as they see appropriate. We hope that our recommendations can initiate new conversations within districts and among principals and even help stakeholders raise new questions about how to improve all district employees well-being. The pandemic and its impact on schools, teachers, students, and families necessitates a shift toward thinking about burnout among principals and all school staff. Principals and other educators will likely be under increased stress as schools reopen and the pandemic subsides. With greater attention focused on principal burnout and self-care, we believe that districts can improve principal retention that will likely translate into improved and healthier schools for teachers and students. In sum, healthy principals that prioritize their well-being can sustain efforts to improve schools, and support teachers, interrogate inequitable policies and practices that marginalize students, and build trusting relationships with families. Since these efforts take time and must be sustained for students to succeed, issues related to principal burnout and retention must be raised and prioritized within districts and schools.

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