

# Going Beyond Rhetoric

By Annie Kidder

***“The whole school environment, including its individuals and their relationships, the physical and social environment and ethos, community connections and partnerships, and policies, are important areas for action if a school is to promote health.”***

Broader measures of success: Physical and mental health in schools, 2014

How can we ask school leaders to do even more than they’re already doing?

For years – decades even – many of us have talked about and longed for action on schools as community hubs. There has been research, there have been multiple pilots, and a former premier even appointed a Community Hubs Framework Advisory Group to develop an action plan to make community schools a reality. But, despite the years of advocacy and the evidence that school-community connections make a difference to the quality and degree of student outcomes and well-being, and despite rhetoric in government documents that points to the importance of connecting with communities and community resources, there is still little funding to ensure the staff support necessary to build and maintain strong connections between schools and their communities.

In People for Education’s 2017/18 Annual Ontario School Survey (AOSS), we asked school principals if they had staff, other than the principal or vice-principal, who were responsible for acting as liaisons with the community. Only 18 per cent said yes (and even that was a steep decline from previous years), but the vast majority (77 per cent) reported there were zero hours allotted to the position, meaning this work is done off the side of desks, or, in the end, by over-stretched principals and vice-principals.

Ontario does currently provide funding for things like community workers, community-based organizations that provide tutoring for students, and community mental health services, etc. But there is virtually no funding for staff inside schools to build connections with these community resources. There is one fund –

the Well-Being and Positive School Climates Allocation – that is described as funding to meet “local needs and priorities that promote well-being and inclusive education, including strengthening positive school climates.” But it has a total of \$3.2 million allocated for the whole province, which works out to just over \$600 per school.

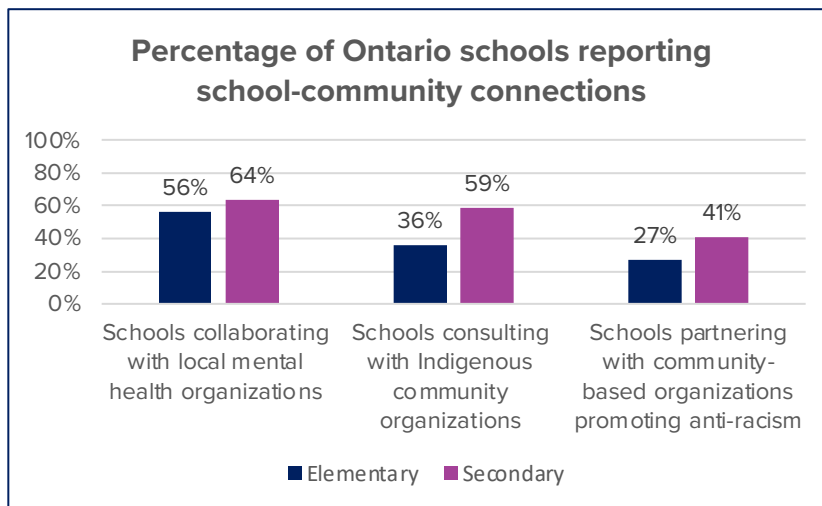
## Principals under pressure

***“There’s just so much; it can be overwhelming. Parents and families are looking to the school to support them as well, and this is difficult to resource.”***

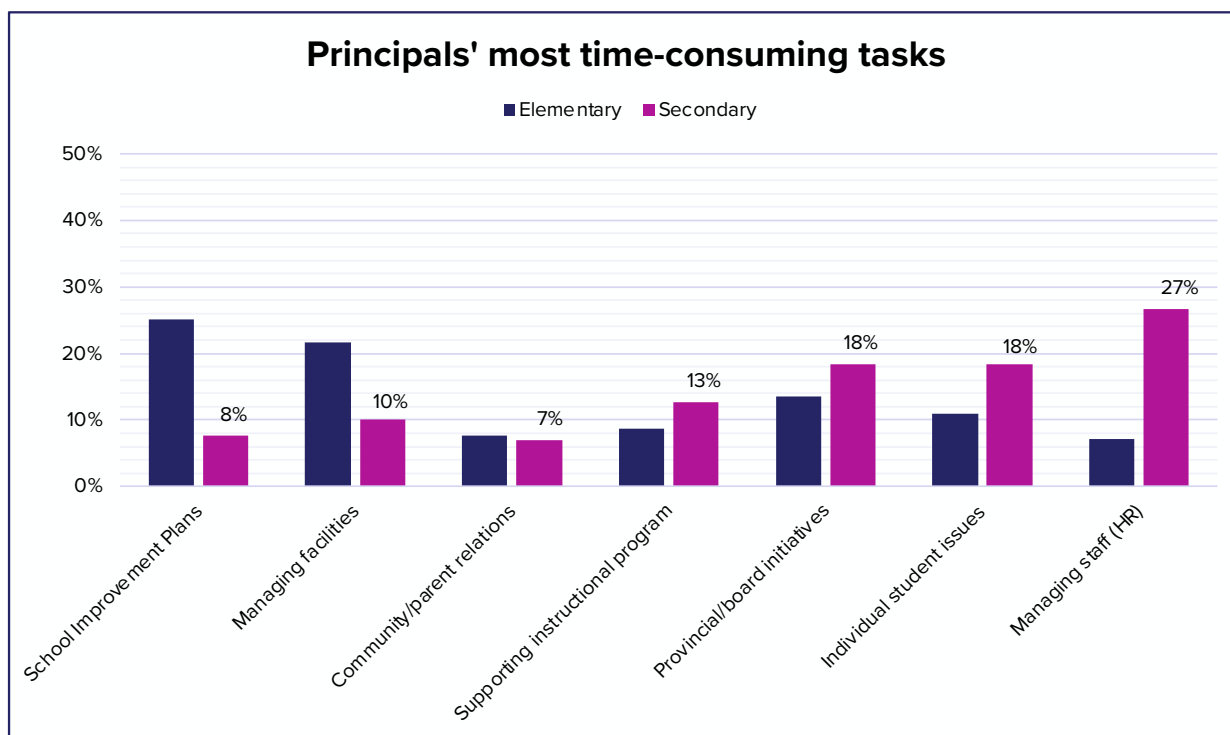
Elementary school principal, Central Ontario

Over the last few years, the Annual Ontario School Survey has painted a picture of school leaders under incredible strain – trying to deal with fallout from the pandemic, implement new curriculum and policy, and find ways to support an ongoing crisis in student (and staff) mental health, all at the same time and all without substantial increases in support. In addition to all that, there is an assumption that school leaders will coordinate vital connections to their communities.

In our 2022/23 Annual Ontario School Survey, we asked principals about connecting with community to support Indigenous education, mental health and anti-racism.



Source: 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey



In all cases, school leaders articulated a desire to make those connections, but at the same time reported on challenges. Schools were most likely to report collaborating with local mental health organizations, but even there, the proportion reporting connections is under 65 per cent. And principals are not only trying to connect with services in their communities; many are also trying to find basic supports like food and clothing for their families.

***“Over the COVID period, we have given a significant amount of support for food and groceries. There is a huge need in our community. Now that our breakfast programs and snack programs are up and running, we cannot sustain that support and I am worried about our families. This is a huge thing that support needs to be given to families. We cannot sustainably meet this demand.”***

Elementary school principal, GTA

### Funding and policy needed to recognize the impact of the whole learning environment

Ontario’s Education Act provides an extraordinary list to describe the “Duties of Principals.” The list includes everything from attending every school council meeting to a responsibility for supervising the instruction and discipline of all pupils in the school. While the list of duties in the act for the most part focuses on teaching and learning, that is not necessarily true on the ground.

When we asked principals in 2018, what took up most of their time, nearly one quarter pointed to managing the school facilities, compared to less than 10 per cent who said they could spend most of their time supporting

professional learning and improving the instructional program; only eight per cent said community and parent relationships topped the list of where they spent their time.

There is extensive research pointing to the importance of quality learning environments – which include the classroom, the learning community, the whole school and the school community. While teachers in the classroom have the most direct impact on student success, the research suggests that the whole school context, led by principals, has a far-reaching effect on students’ lives – in school and beyond.

We can see in their responses to our surveys that principals are super aware of the importance of the whole school context and understand how school-community connections can have a positive impact on student success. But we can’t really see that importance reflected in Ontario’s policy and funding.

Supporting schools to be hubs of their communities and providing school leaders with the support they need to make those hubs a reality will require real change. We need to fund staff inside schools to act as community liaisons for everything from mental health to family supports, conduct a close examination of what is currently taking up school leaders’ time and address the conflicts, and we need overall policy change that sufficiently recognizes the role of school leaders within their community contexts. [CP](#)

**Annie Kidder**, Executive Director, People for Education