



# **Principals and vice-principals**

The scope of their work in today's schools

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### **Data from the survey**

Specific research data from the survey can be provided for a fee. Elementary school data have been collected since 1997, and secondary school data have been collected since 2000. For more information, please contact [info@peopleforeducation.ca](mailto:info@peopleforeducation.ca).

### **Document citation**

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## Key findings from the 2018 Annual Ontario School Survey:

- Only 9% of elementary and 13% of secondary principals ranked supporting professional learning and improving the instructional program as the task they spend the most time on.
- 21% of elementary schools have at least one full-time vice-principal (VP) and 25% have a part-time VP.
- 85% of secondary schools have at least one full-time VP and 8% have only a part-time VP.
- 50% of elementary schools in urban areas report having a vice-principal, full- or part-time, compared to 39% of those in rural areas.
- 23% of elementary principals without a VP ranked managing facilities as their most time-consuming task, compared to 19% of those with a full-time VP.
- 7% of elementary principals rank managing staff as their most time-consuming task, compared to 27% of secondary principals.

# Principals and vice-principals: The scope of their work in today's schools

*This report is an excerpt from People for Education's Annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools 2018. The report is based on findings from the Annual Ontario School Survey.*

This year's survey results make it clear that it is a challenge for today's principals to find the time to fulfill their role as curriculum leaders, while also managing all of the administrative tasks involving the school building and staff. More than one fifth of elementary school principals report that managing facilities is the most time-consuming part of their job, while only nine percent report that supporting professional learning and the school's instructional program takes the most time.

## Principals a key influence on student learning

There is no question that within the school, teachers have the greatest influence on student success. However, out of all other school-related factors, school principals have the highest impact on students' education (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Principals are expected to lead school improvement and instruction efforts, attend to individual student needs, support implementation of Ministry and school board initiatives, support special education programs and students, supervise staff and human resources, attend to school facilities, and communicate with parents and the community (Pollock, 2017; McCarthy, 2016).

Recent research from Western University found that principals in Ontario work an average of 59 hours per week (Pollock, 2014, p. 15), and vice-principals work an average of 55 hours (Pollock, 2017, p. 11).

Despite the many challenges, the principals responding to this year's survey remain positive, commenting about helpful and collaborative staff, good community relations, and positive school climates.

## Workload challenges

Principals are required to oversee both the quality of education in the school (including professional learning for staff, improving the instructional program, etc.) and the management of the school itself (administrative tasks). According to one elementary principal, “Over the past few years, the school administration role has changed from one of instructional leader, a supporter of students and staff, to a managerial role.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand more about Ontario principals’ work, we asked them to rank the following seven tasks in terms of how much time they take (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2):

- Managing staff (human resources functions and collective agreement implementation)
- Managing individual student issues
- Provincial and board/system initiatives (communications, documentation, meetings related to policy and programs, etc.)
- Supporting professional learning and improving the instructional program
- Community and parent relationships
- Managing facilities
- Completing the School Improvement Plan (SIP)

Only a small proportion of principals (9% of elementary and 13% of secondary schools) report that their most time-consuming task is supporting professional learning and improving the instructional program. This is consistent with recent research showing an overload of administrative work for principals in schools across Canada (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2014; Leithwood & Azah, 2014).

“I love my job. Working with parents is huge—can be rewarding but also the most challenging. I feel if the teachers are happy and receiving the appropriate amount of PD and School Improvement Planning communication, I seem to have to deal with less individual student issues. Having a strong resource team is key.”

Elementary school,  
Ottawa Catholic DSB

“When I am able to focus on professional learning with teaching staff, we see a direct influence on student engagement and achievement.”

Elementary school,  
York Region DSB

“We spend so much time managing significant mental health issues with students, and managing staff and facility issues, that I never feel we can move ahead with the student learning agenda.”

Secondary school,  
Limestone DSB

1. Comment from an elementary school in Avon Maitland DSB

Figure 1.1

Elementary principals' most time-consuming tasks

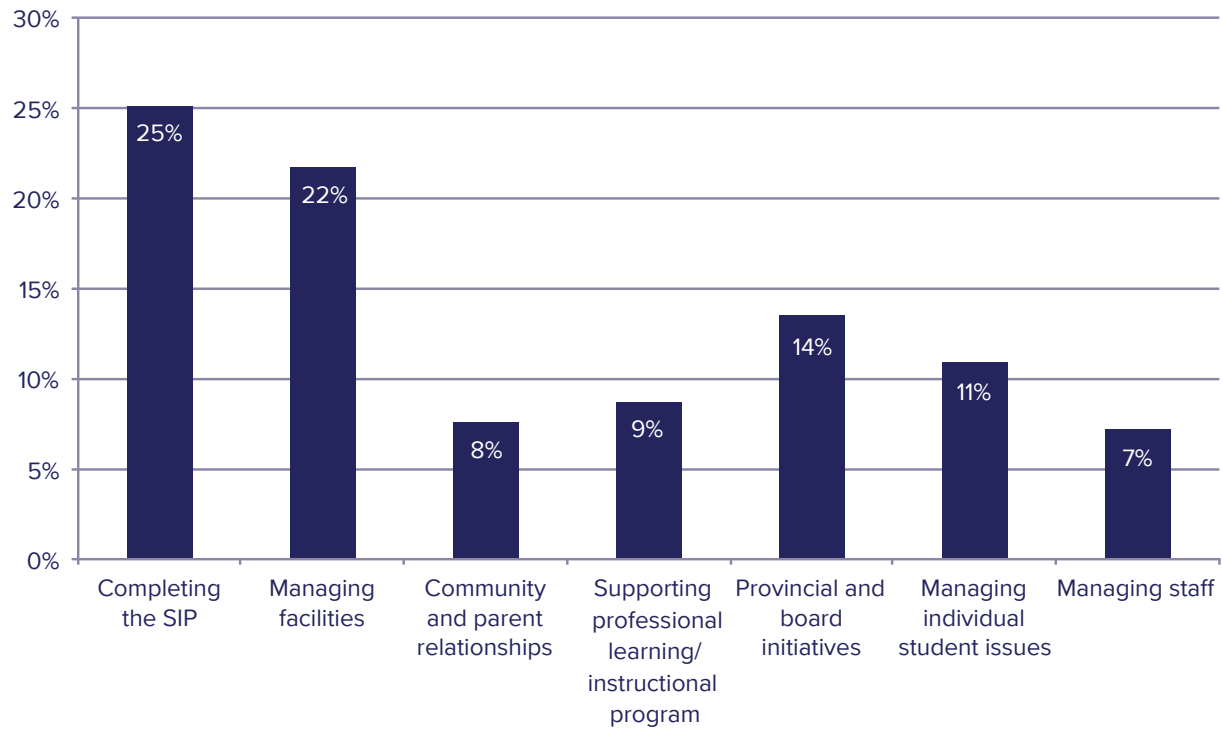
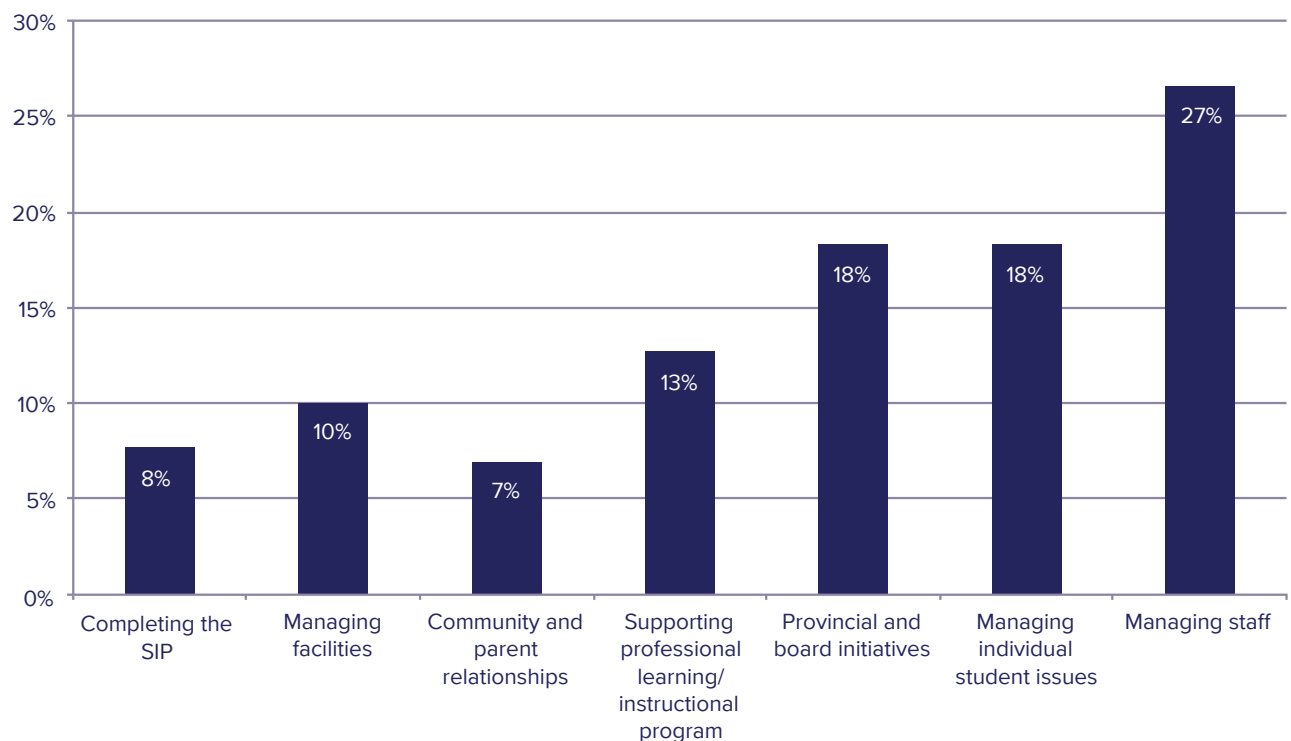


Figure 1.2

Secondary principals' most time-consuming tasks



## Individual student issues demand principals' attention

One of the most urgent issues raised by principals is students' increasing mental health needs. It is unclear whether this is a result of increased awareness of mental illness (e.g. Bell Canada, 2015), increased incidence (e.g. Cribb, Ovid, Lao, & Bigham, 2017), reduced stigma (e.g. Chai & Nicolas, 2017), other factors, or a combination of these. Many principals also comment that student behavioural issues require a great deal of their time.

Schools are addressing these issues on a daily basis, adding complexity to the role of educators in our communities. Principals report that existing mental health resources such as social workers, psychologists, and guidance counsellors, are insufficient to meet students' needs, and that mental health issues are taking up an increasing amount of their time and resources.

In 2018, the province announced funding for mental health workers in secondary schools. These workers will be introduced into schools gradually over the next two years (Office of the Premier, 2018).

“ [It is] very challenging to balance the principal role. The needs of our students are becoming increasingly complex. Mental health issues have been more prominent in our day-to-day dealings, with minimal support and limited expertise in the building.”

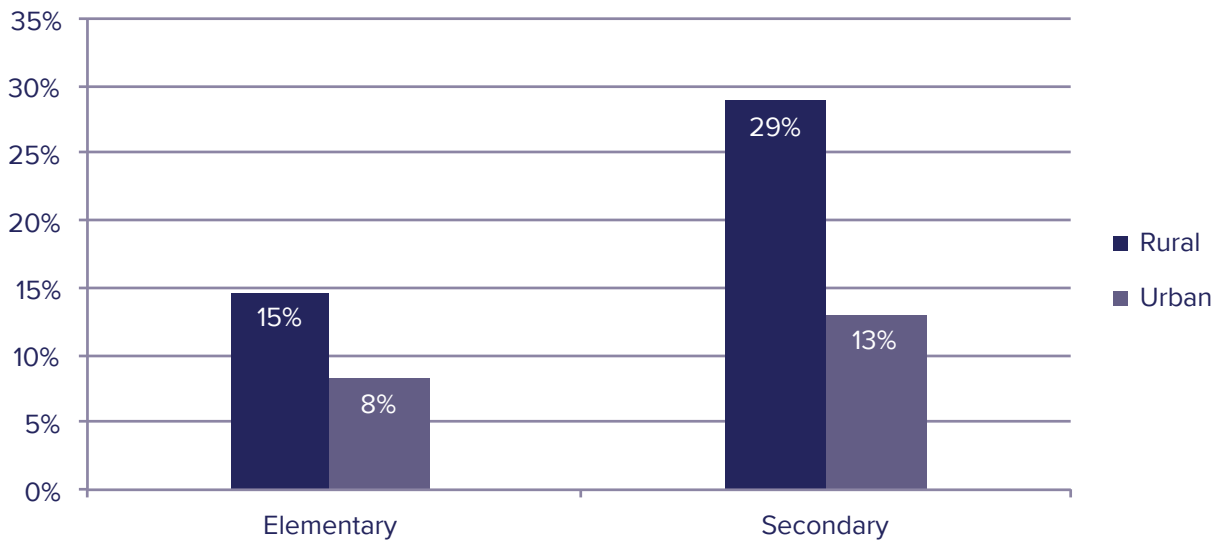
Elementary school,  
Durham DSB

“ Managing daily student behaviour issues...and making related necessary parent contacts, consumes so much of the principal's working day that curriculum leadership and leading the improvement of instructional programming and other board/Ministry initiatives is severely compromised.”

Elementary school,  
Avon Maitland DSB

Figure 1.3

Percentage of principals reporting that they spend the most time managing student issues



“Being alone in management, meeting with parents and students is a task that requires a lot of time and energy. The integration of students with special education needs into regular classes requires management of human resources on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup>”

Elementary school,  
Conseil des écoles catholique  
du Centre-Est

“Hiring is a big issue in our board – and when you aren’t doing the hiring yourself, you are asked to support others with large hiring needs, and are even asked to hire on weekends. Applies to teaching and support staff like secretarial staff.”

Secondary school,  
Peel DSB

## The demands of paperwork and HR

A common concern raised by principals is that demands from the board/Ministry, and the accompanying paperwork and emails, take up a large portion of their time. Some principals feel that, in order to keep up, they either have to work extremely long hours or lose opportunities to be instructional leaders.

Hiring staff—including teaching, administrative, and support staff—is also a significant challenge for principals. Several principals report being understaffed and short of resources to complete the various administration tasks that keep schools running.

## Vice-principals provide support

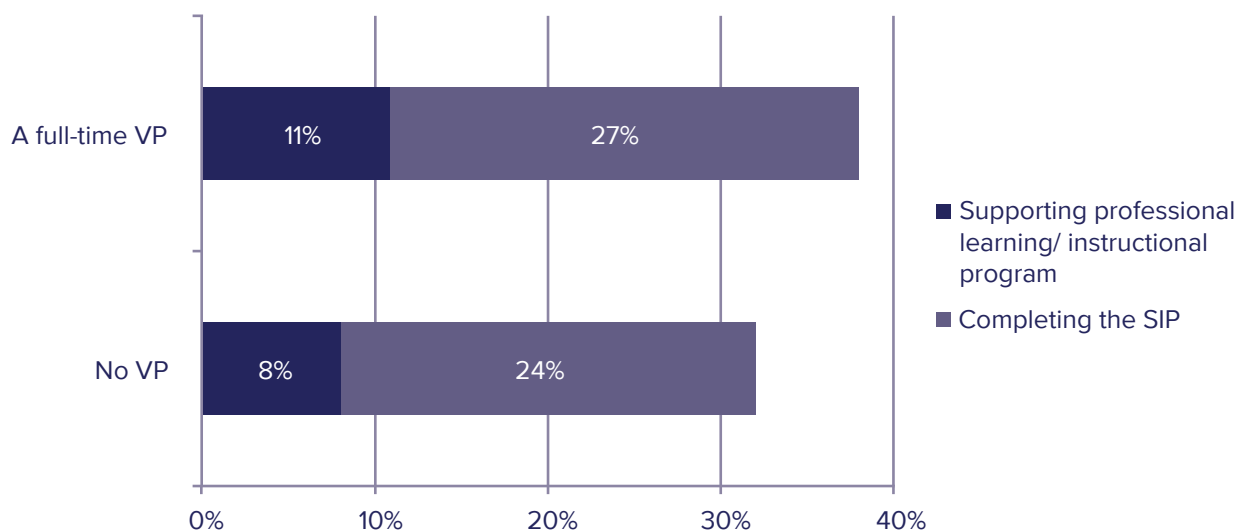
Vice-principals are a central part of the school’s leadership team. Under the Education Act, the role is vaguely defined as duties and responsibilities assigned by the principal to the vice-principal (Education Act, RRO, 1990). The vice-principal works with the school principal in all aspects of leading and managing the school, and is often responsible for managing student discipline issues and special education.

Having a vice-principal has an impact on how principals spend their time. Elementary schools with at least one full-time VP are more likely to report that the principal spends the most time improving the instructional program and completing the School Improvement Plan (SIP) (see Figure 1.4).

Principals from elementary schools with at least one full-time VP are also less likely to spend the most time on management of staff, individual student issues, or facilities (see Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.4

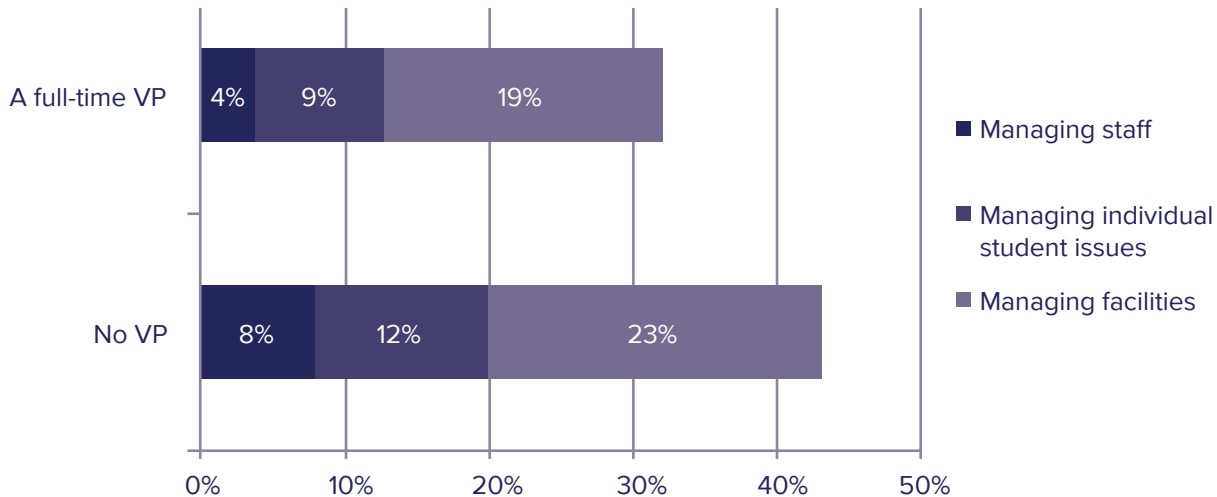
### Impact of VPs on principals’ time leading the instructional program



2. Translated from French. Original comment: “Étant seule à la direction, l’accueil des parents et des élèves est une tâche qui demande beaucoup de temps et d’énergie. L’intégration des élèves en difficulté dans les classes régulières demande une gestion des ressources humaines sur une base quotidienne.”

Figure 1.5

### Impact of VPs on principals' time managing the school



## Recommendation

People for Education recommends that the province:

- Work with the Ontario Principals' Council, the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario, and the Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles francophones, to identify where more supports are required and how demands on administration time can be alleviated, so that principals can focus more of their time on student learning and staff development.

“Too much time dedicated to paperwork that could be better dedicated to pedagogy.”<sup>3</sup>

Elementary school,  
Conseil scolaire catholique  
MonAvenir

“We have a significant staff shortage for casual and support staff positions. I spend a lot of time finding supply coverage, assigning on-calls, and in some cases, being an admin assistant or EA when we are that short.”

Secondary school,  
Keewatin-Patricia DSB

3. Translated from French. Original comment: “Beaucoup trop de temps dédié à la paperasse qui pourrait être mieux dédié à la pédagogie.”



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