



# Ontario Principals' Challenges and Well-being

## Annual Ontario School Survey 2021



# New findings show principals under pressure

The initial findings of People for Education’s 2020/21 Annual Ontario School Survey (AOSS) show that principals are dealing with an exceptional set of challenges related to running schools during a pandemic.

In their responses, principals said that to serve their students and staff more effectively, they need more consistent and clearer communication, increased resources, and more time. They also say that there is a general lack of recognition and understanding about the complexity and challenge of their roles in a pandemic.

The survey results include responses from 1173 schools from across Ontario, including 906 in-person, 226 hybrid<sup>1</sup>, and 41 virtual schools.

**“As an administrator, the demands are truly not manageable for one person. There are many additional tasks that we have been asked to complete pertaining to PPE distribution, pivoting when cleaning processes change, re-timetabling the school (3 times to date) when numbers shift due to model changes, and filling vacancies.”**

**Principal, in-person elementary school, GTA**

<sup>1</sup> Hybrid was defined as a split between the two modes of delivery; the principals defined their school types based on their own perceptions.

## Being a principal in a pandemic

The role of principal has always been challenging, but COVID-19 has added a wide range of new responsibilities. Principals are now responsible for ensuring that new provincial COVID screening and reporting requirements are followed each day, acting as liaisons with local public health units, and implementing new policies connected to COVID-19 including maintaining staff and student cohorts and physical distancing. In many cases they are the contact tracers, the COVID screeners, and the translators of rapidly changing provincial and local policies.

In February 2021, principals took on the added responsibility of daily validation of COVID self-screening for every staff member and every secondary student in in-person or hybrid schools.<sup>2</sup> By February 22, 2021, asymptomatic screening of students and staff will be required in 5% of schools, and, according to a Ministry memo from February 16, 2021, “schools will also be asked to report back weekly on testing activity.”<sup>3</sup> Requirements such as these also become the responsibility of principals.

According to the principals who responded to the AOSS, as these new COVID-related responsibilities were added, there was no move to postpone or eliminate existing tasks such as School Improvement Planning, EQAO testing, or implementing new curriculum.

“I need more time to get everything done. I am working until midnight every night.”

Principal, virtual elementary school, Northern Ontario

## Principal well-being

We asked principals to respond to the statement “my recent levels of stress at work feel manageable.” Approximately one-third of principals responsible for in-person schools agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, but principals in virtual schools – which range from 24 to 40,000 students – were much less likely to agree. (See Figure 1)

<sup>2</sup> February 3, 2021, Memorandum from Ontario’s Minister and Deputy Minister of Education

<sup>3</sup> February 16, 2021, Memorandum from Ontario’s Minister and Deputy Minister of Education

## Managing stress

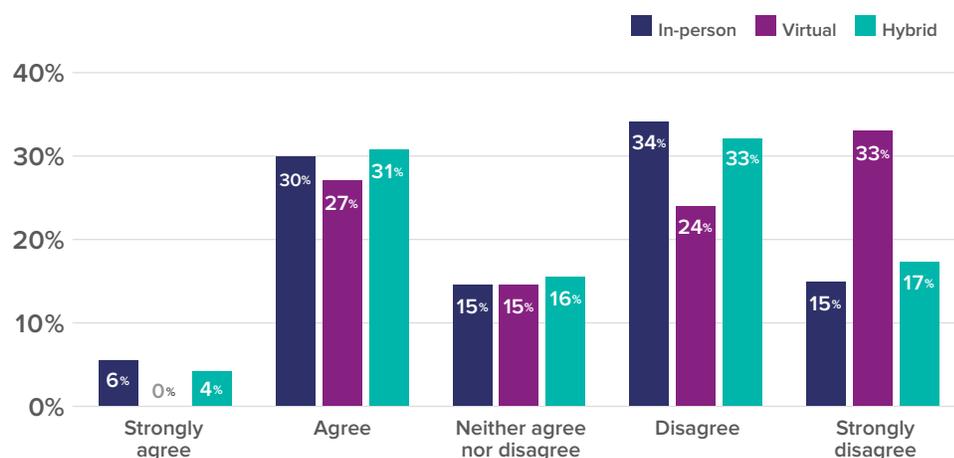
- 36% of principals of in-person schools *agreed or strongly agreed* that their levels of stress were manageable, compared to 27% of principals of virtual schools.
- 57% of principals of virtual schools *disagreed or strongly disagreed* that their levels of stress felt manageable, compared to 50% of principals of in-person and hybrid schools.

“Tired of the constant changes coming from central folks. Everything is so convoluted. They do not understand the sheer pressure of working on the front line trying to keep staff and students safe every day.”

Principal, hybrid secondary school, GTA

FIGURE 1

### “My recent levels of stress at work feel manageable”



“The physical running of the school (staggered recess/lunch times etc.) has been quite successful despite the current circumstances. However, the staff (myself included) are absolutely exhausted. It feels as though we are expected to function as always with an enormous amount of new (COVID-19) expectations to follow.”

Principal, in-person elementary school, Northern Ontario

## Finding support and connecting with the community

Communicating with parents and families and keeping the school community up to date on policy changes are among the challenges that have been amplified by the pandemic.

“Overall, I have to say that both my staff and students have been amazing at adjusting to the new routines required for COVID. The school setting is very different, and the instructional practice has changed considerably. Together we are working through the new expectations piece by piece.”

Principal, in-person elementary school, Eastern Ontario

THERE ARE MEANINGFUL WAYS FOR MY SCHOOL COMMUNITY TO STAY CONNECTED			
	In-person	Hybrid	Virtual
Strongly agree/agree	66%	61%	48%
Neither agree nor disagree	21%	20%	21%
Strongly disagree/disagree	13%	19%	30%

While a majority of principals in all three types of schools agreed that they knew where to raise concerns about their own or a colleague’s well-being, there was a greater difference among schools in terms of connecting with the community. Many principals raised concerns about communicating and connecting with families and being able to address families’ concerns about COVID policies and school safety in a timely manner.

“The constant changes are very difficult to manage and explain to staff, parents and students. Having information earlier and having it be more widely shared with parents and staff would be helpful. Consistency between Boards would help.”

Principal, in-person elementary school, GTA

I KNOW WHERE TO RAISE CONCERNS ABOUT MY OWN OR A COLLEAGUE'S WELL-BEING			
	In-person	Hybrid	Virtual
Strongly agree/agree	80%	79%	67%
Neither agree nor disagree	9%	8%	12%
Strongly disagree/disagree	10%	13%	21%

## Ranking the issues: managing schools during a pandemic

To help understand the unique challenges in schools this year, the 2020/21 AOSS asked principals to rank COVID-19-related issues – from most, to least challenging. There were marked differences depending on the type of school. (See Figure 2)

### In-person schools

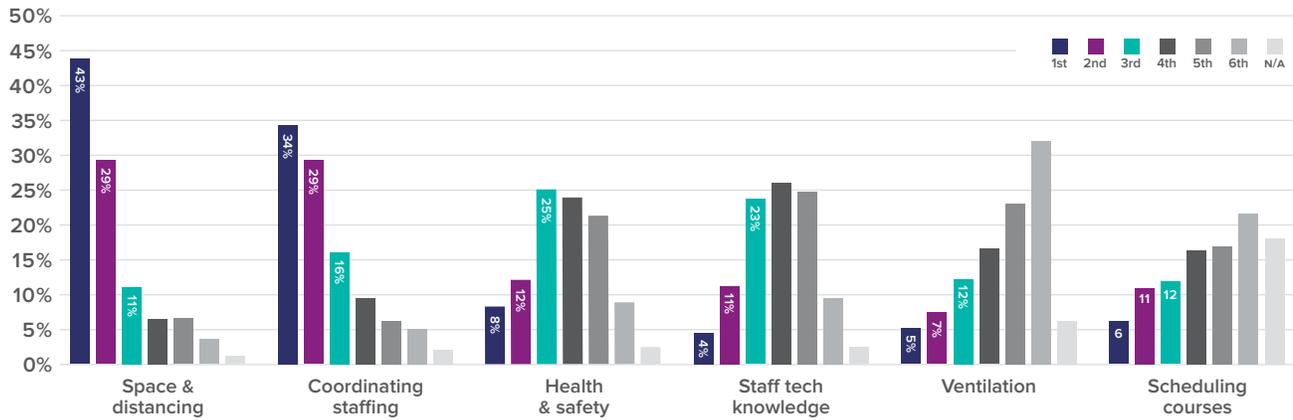
- Space and distancing was ranked in the top 2 issues by 72% of principals
- Coordinating staffing was ranked in the top 2 issues by 63% of principals
- Health and safety was ranked in the top 2 by 20% of principals
- There were also differences between in-person elementary and secondary schools. Scheduling courses was most likely to be ranked as the #1 issue for in-person secondary schools, where space and distancing was most likely to be ranked #1 in elementary schools.

“Smaller class sizes. It is impossible to keep students socially distanced. I am constantly the COVID police. They are fairly good at keeping their masks on during instructional times but it seems pointless when they take their masks off to eat for 20 minutes each day right beside each other. I have classes sizes of 24-27 students and can't possibly space them out to eat.”

Principal, in-person elementary school, Northern Ontario

FIGURE 2

## Rank of issues with running in-person schools during the COVID-19 pandemic

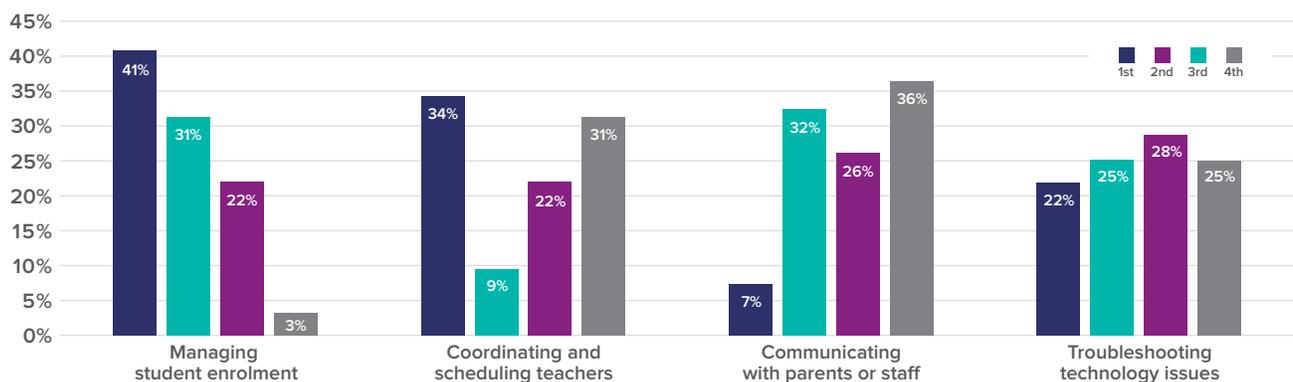


### Virtual schools (See Figure 3)

- Managing student enrolment outranked the other issues as most challenging for principals of virtual schools. 72% of principals ranked this 1st or 2nd.
- Coordinating and scheduling teachers, along with communicating with parents and staff, were ranked 1st or 2nd by approximately 40% of principals.

FIGURE 3

## Rank of issues with running virtual schools during the COVID-19 pandemic

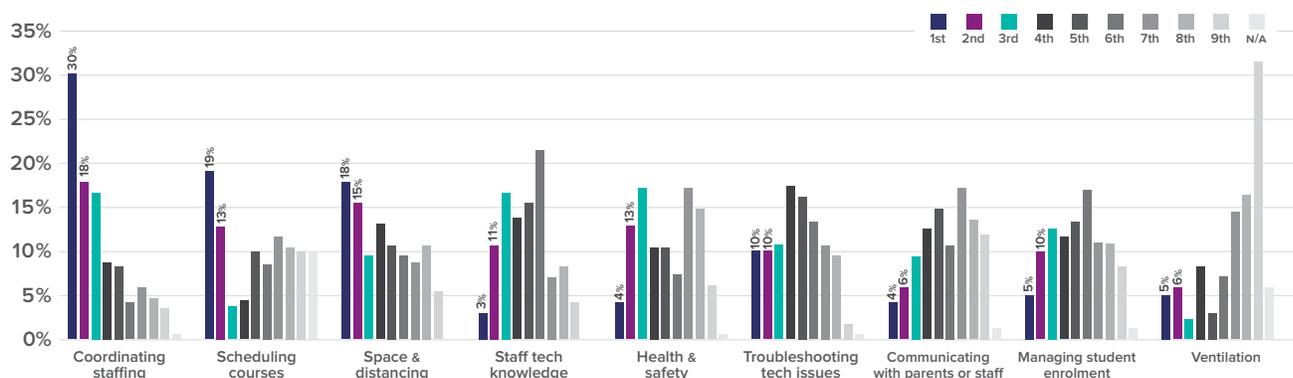


## Hybrid Schools (see Figure 4)

- Coordinating staffing and scheduling courses were the top concerns for hybrid school principals, followed by space and distancing.
- Coordinating staffing ranked #1 in concerns for **30%** of principals of hybrid schools and #2 for **18%**
- Scheduling courses ranked #1 in concerns for **19%** of principals of hybrid schools and #2 for **13%**
- Space and distancing ranked #1 for 18% of principals of hybrid schools and #2 for **15%**

FIGURE 4

### Rank of issues with running hybrid schools during the COVID-19 pandemic from most (1) to least (6)



## Principals' recommendations for change

We asked principals to tell us the one thing that could better support their well-being during this time. They wrote many pages of responses outlining the challenges of their jobs. Many said they loved the role, but that the added responsibility of executing COVID policy in schools was pushing them to the edge.

Their recommendations can be divided into four overarching categories: resources, time, communication, and recognition.

## Human Resources (“resources”)

- More readily available administrative support (Vice-Principals, Office Administrators/Assistants, administrative support to cover a principal’s day off/sick day)
- More available teachers (French, Special Education, Supply, Occasional)
- More school staff (Educational Assistants, Designated Early Childhood Educators, office staff, supervision staff)

“Additional Educational Assistants are needed to support students with significant behavioural needs. When an administrator is needed to monitor the isolation room and there is a behavioural or urgent disciplinary issue (which happens every day) we are stretched very thin. Administrators are constantly called upon to support students in a way that an Educational Assistant could capably do in a ‘normal’ year; during COVID, managing the lack of EA support and trying to keep all of the protocols in place is exhausting.”

Principal, in-person elementary school, Eastern Ontario

## Workload reductions (“workload” and “time”)

- No more new initiatives (e.g., for the District School Board (DSB) and/or the Ministry of Education (MoE) to stop adding new curriculum pieces/changes)
- Cancel non-essential work (focus on health & safety only; remove all non-essential paperwork; reduce the number of emails)
- More time (more Professional Activity (PA) days; uninterrupted holidays; extended breaks for mental health & for planning; shorter school day to allow time for planning; more lieu days with “supply principals” to fill in rather than relying on principals from other schools)

“The principal workload demands are unreasonable & unsustainable. There is not enough time in the day to manage schools effectively. [I need] Additional administrative supports to help share my work.”

Principal, hybrid elementary school, GTA

## Communication

- To receive information of changes/decisions from DSB and MoE before they're announce publicly
- To receive information of changes/decisions from DSB and MoE with enough time to implement the changes
- Specific, actionable, consistent information from DSB, MoE, and Public Health
- To consistently be informed of changes with detail and with advance warning

**“Admin and staff need to be better informed about changes – should not come from media releases.”**

**Principal, in-person secondary school, Southwestern Ontario**

## Recognition/Understanding (“Recognition”)

- For leadership outside of the school to be aware of specific issues within each school before making decisions that affect the school
- For leadership outside of the school to visit the schools they lead
- For leadership outside of the school to acknowledge that principals are under a lot of pressure/stress
- For principals to be included in decision making about what happens at their schools

**“One thing that would help is acknowledgment by the Ministry and School Boards that the day-to-day managing of a school is drastically different than most years and the priorities of school leaders must be on safety and well-being rather than data collecting and improvement planning.”**

**Principal, in-person elementary/secondary school, Eastern Ontario**

# People for Education's recommendation

People for Education believes that our schools are the key to providing all children and young people with an equitable chance for success, and we agree that in-person instruction is the ideal model to support students' learning. However, the preliminary results from the 2020/21 Annual Ontario School Survey show a system under stress and illustrate the need for increased supports and more coherent implementation of policy.

- We recommend that the provincial government convene an Education Advisory Task Force with all key stakeholders from education and health represented. By bringing together an advisory table that meets regularly, and that informs policy *before* it is implemented, the government, policymakers, and education stakeholders will be able to hear multiple viewpoints with unique expertise, build an understanding of each other's perspectives, and ensure that the province is getting the best possible advice.<sup>4</sup>
- As school boards are already in the process of developing plans and budgets for the coming school year, we also recommend that the Education Advisory Task Force be consulted on the 2021/22 Grants for Student Needs to ensure that there are sufficient resources, programs, and staff in schools to respond effectively to a range of impacts resulting from COVID-19, including mental health issues, learning loss, and increased inequities.

<sup>4</sup> February 23, 2021; Public letter to the Minister of Education and the Deputy Minister  
[www.peopleforeducation.ca](http://www.peopleforeducation.ca)

“These are challenging and interesting times to lead. I am honoured to be leading in such times. I feel it is important work we are doing keeping schools open. I do wonder how many of us will be able to maintain this pace, long-term.

I think it would be helpful for Senior Staff to visit schools and see in-person the great work people are doing to keep staff and students safe and keep all juggling balls in the air. Staff might feel validated and valued to see central staff in their schools and hear praise for work well done while they put themselves on the line daily (their opinion) to support the betterment of students and their families.

I also think push communication (email) is very hard to follow on a daily basis to the frequency and depth of detail it comes. It is hard to track who sent it, what the most recent version of any directive is, since they change in response to changing context, and there are so many “priority-one” priorities hourly that admin always feel anxious that they have missed a critical announcement, often in the late afternoon after decisions have been finalized.

None of this is fault finding. Phenomenal things have been accomplished in the past few months and some great things have evolved from the invention and innovation.

Just sharing some of the pressures we juggle in the field. I personally am managing, am happy and feel fortunate to have work and to work for such a forward-thinking board.

Thanks for asking! ”

**Principal, hybrid secondary school, GTA**

## People for Education’s data

Every year, People for Education surveys Ontario’s publicly funded elementary and secondary schools. This report is based on data from the 1,173 schools that participated in the 2020/21 Annual Ontario School Survey. Unless cited from other sources, the statistics and quoted material in this report originate from People for Education’s Annual Ontario School Survey, the 23rd annual survey of elementary schools and 20th annual survey of secondary schools in Ontario. The surveys were sent to schools in the fall of 2020, and could be completed online via SurveyMonkey, in both English and French.

This year, we received 1,173 responses from elementary and secondary schools representing 24% of the province’s publicly funded schools. Survey responses are also disaggregated to examine survey representation across provincial regions, which corresponds relatively well with the regional distribution of Ontario’s schools.

Geographical distribution (%)	% of schools in sample	% of schools in province
Northern	11%	11%
Central (Excluding GTA)	12%	17%
Eastern	18%	18%
Southwest	24%	20%
GTA	36%	34%



**Public education. Public good.**

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