

Why Don't We Care More About the Humans Who Work in Schools?

By Annie Kidder

Principals in Ontario schools are dealing with increasingly unmanageable levels of stress, and it's not readily apparent that the public, politicians or policymakers care.

In their responses to People for Education's 2023-24 Annual Ontario School Survey,¹ 61 per cent of Ontario principals disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "My recent levels of stress at work feel manageable." A further 58 per cent disagreed that their school had the resources necessary to support the mental health and well-being of school staff. These results have been worsening every year since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Ontario numbers correspond with findings from across Canada and internationally. For example, a report from 2022, based on a survey conducted by the Rand Corporation², found 85 per cent of principals in the United States were experiencing job-related stress, compared to 35 per cent of working adults in other professions. There are equally worrying reports from Ireland³, Australia⁴ and Poland⁵ all pointing to high levels of burnout and stress among school principals.

The perfect storm of stress

A number of factors have combined to create a perfect storm in our schools: fallout from the pandemic, staff shortages, increasing mental health needs among students and staff, and the demands created by a barrage of new policies that must be implemented by principals.

The impact of the pandemic continues to be felt in schools, where students are not only experiencing learning loss, but also increased behavioural and mental health issues⁶, and only a quarter of Ontario principals agree their school has the resources necessary to support the mental health and well-being of its students.

Principals also describe being faced with a continual stream of new policies they are expected to implement

without consultation, within short timelines and with insufficient professional development for staff.

All these factors have left principals feeling overlooked, overworked and undervalued.

Where is the public outcry and policy support?

During the pandemic, there was a sudden universal recognition of the importance of schools and the humans in them.

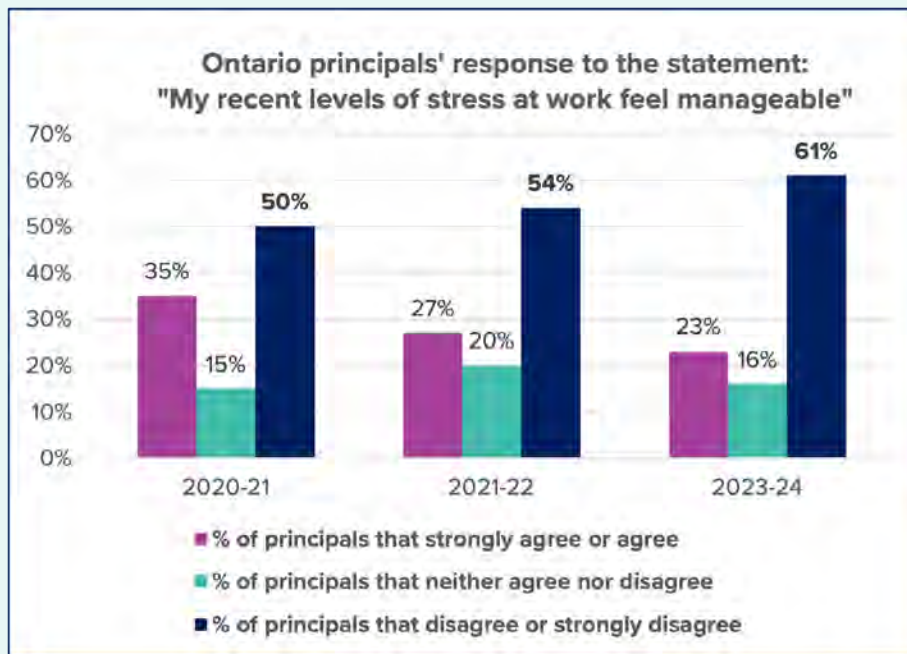
Schools were in the headlines every day, and school closures reminded everyone in-person human relationships and interactions form an essential component of all learning. This sudden public recognition is backed up by years of research⁷ showing the deepest learning happens through communication, collaboration, continual feedback and support.

Real learning depends on people, and it depends on people who are supported to do their essential jobs.

But with the pandemic over, it's as if as suddenly as we recognized the importance of schools, we have equally suddenly developed collective amnesia. We've forgotten the essential role our publicly funded schools can play, and we've forgotten why the humans in those schools are so important.

In Ontario, the province continues to announce – and expect school staff to implement – new policies for things like financial literacy, apprenticeships, de-streaming Grade 9, new math curriculum, technology courses, hands-on skills classes, etc. But there has been little acknowledgement and no new policy to ensure school staff have all the support they need to do their vital jobs.

There have been numerous reports from across the country and around the world that point to a human crisis in our schools. But somehow none of the reports and none of the evidence has created a public push for change.



Time to connect the dots

These days, we are faced with headlines about climate change, polarization, failing democracies, labour market gaps, declining productivity, homelessness, the spread of misinformation and the growing gap between rich and poor. But the headlines and public dialogue consistently miss one possible answer to our social, economic and sustainability challenges: stronger, more effective public education.

Strong public education benefits both individuals and society, and it could provide upstream solutions to many of our societal challenges.

Individually, people with higher levels of education are more likely to live longer and healthier lives, earn more, navigate changing jobs, participate in civic life by voting and volunteering, and less likely to participate in the spread of misinformation.

Socially, more highly educated countries have higher GDPs, are more equitable, have greater levels of civic participation, pay higher taxes, have lower costs for social services and have the potential for higher levels of productivity, innovation and global competitiveness.

Public education could play a key role in our collective futures. However, it can only play that role effectively if we recognize – and back up with effective policy and support – that the humans working in our schools matter to all of us. [CP](#)

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¹People for Education. (2024). "Staff shortages a daily issue for many Ontario schools." accessed June 14, 2024. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/our-work/staff-shortages-a-daily-issue-for-many-ontario-schools/>

²Sullivan, Emily Tate. (2022). "Principals Are on the Brink of a Breakdown." EdSurge. Accessed June 18, 2024.

³Tobin, Louise. 2023. "Stress, burnout, initiative overload. Who would be a school principal?" Irish Times. Accessed June 2024. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2023/12/05/stress-burnout-initiative-overload-who-would-be-a-school-principal/>

⁴Marsh, H. W., Dicke, T., Riley, P., Parker, P. D., Guo, J., Basarkod, G., & Martin, A. J. (2023). "School principals' mental health and well-being under threat: A longitudinal analysis of workplace demands, resources, burnout, and well-being". *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 15(3), 999–1027. <https://iaap-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/aphw.12423>

⁵Leksy, Karina, Mirosław Wójciak, Grzegorz Gawron, Rafał Muster, Kevin Dadaczynski, and Orkan Okan. (2023). "Work-Related Stress of Polish School Principals during the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Risk Factor for Burnout." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 1: 805. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20010805>

⁶Vaillancourt, Tracy & Szatmari, Peter & Georgiades, Katholiki & Krygman, Amanda. (2021). "The impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of Canadian children and youth". *FACETS*. 6. 1628-1648. 10.1139/facets-2021-0078. Accessed June 16, 2024. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354923550_The_impact_of_COVID-19_on_the_mental_health_of_Canadian_children_and_youth

⁷Bascia, N. (2014). *The School Context Model: How School Environments Shape Students' Opportunities to Learn*. In *Measuring What Matters, People for Education*. Toronto: November 8, 2014. Accessed June 18, 2024. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MWM-Quality-Learning-Environments.pdf>