

PRINCIPAL JOB SATISFACTION

A UTAH LEADING THROUGH EFFECTIVE, ACTIONABLE, AND DYNAMIC EDUCATION

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE REPORT



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Utah Leading through Effective, Actionable, and Dynamic (ULEAD) Education was created to find, research, and highlight proven practices in Utah schools for replication statewide. ULEAD partners with practitioners, researchers, and education organizations to develop and curate resources, foster collaboration, and drive systemic change for improved student outcomes. The ULEAD Clearinghouse is a growing repository of innovative, effective, and efficient practice resources and tools to support educators.

The ULEAD Steering Committee, composed of current Utah educators and stakeholders, meets quarterly to inform the focus priorities that ULEAD will research. ULEAD uses data to find positive outliers in each focus area and create reports, such as this one, illuminating the practices and policies that lead to positive outcomes.

This report addresses the policies and practices that principals identify as contributing to their levels of job satisfaction. ULEAD collaborates with Institutes of Higher Education and education practitioners to develop Innovative Practice Reports. This report was developed in partnership with Utah Valley University.

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“Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school”

(Leithwood et al., 2005, 5)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following a survey about principal burnout, five Utah principals participated in qualitative interviews to discuss what impacts their level of job satisfaction and best supports their retention in the role.

From 184 principals who completed the Utah Principal Burnout Survey, 19 met an identified threshold for low Emotional Exhaustion. Thirteen of these principals provided contact information and were contacted for follow-up interviews. Ultimately, we interviewed five principals using a semi-structured interview protocol.

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Solidifying the principal pipeline and retaining administrators have become critical concerns. Following the administration of the Utah Principal Burnout Survey in 2023, qualitative interviews were conducted with Utah principals reporting the lowest levels of emotional exhaustion to determine what practices contributed to their job satisfaction. The qualitative findings of those interviews, along with relevant literature and highlights from the mixed methods Utah Principal Burnout Survey, are included in this report.

Existing literature indicates **principals have a profound and pervasive effect on their schools**, including impacting critical aspects such as teacher retention and student achievement. This study sought to **understand how Utah principals are best supported** across the six areas of worklife, namely workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values.

Analysis of the quantitative survey instruments administered to principals revealed Utah principals tend to be satisfied with their jobs despite having substantial and stressful workloads. Outlier principal interviews revealed four strategies for supporting principals to minimize stressors leading to burnout, including:

- **Communicate Needs**
- **Reduce Workload**
- **Foster Positive Relationships**
- **Provide Support and Resources**

Many factors contribute to increasing principal job satisfaction and reducing burnout, and most rely heavily on adequate support for principals, including **workload reduction and plentiful resources**. Principals offered a range of supportive strategies, such as having veteran principal supervisors; surveying principals and creating spaces for them to openly discuss their needs, concerns, and support mechanisms; and prioritizing and managing workloads. Key elements of principal support included consistent, structured meetings with supervisors and follow-through on offered supports.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Solidifying the principal pipeline and retaining administrators have become critical concerns. Research consistently highlights the prevalence of job-related stress and burnout among school leaders (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Karakose et al, 2016; Skaalvik & Federici, 2014). Between the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years, overall principal turnover increased to 16%, with approximately 11% of public school principals leaving the profession entirely (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Sixteen percent equates to roughly 19,000 school leaders leaving their schools (Dilberti & Schwartz, 2023). Turnover is even higher in schools with greater student needs. Specifically, schools with high concentrations of students experiencing poverty have principal turnover rates roughly 25% higher than other schools (Levin et al., 2020; Dilberti & Schwartz, 2023).

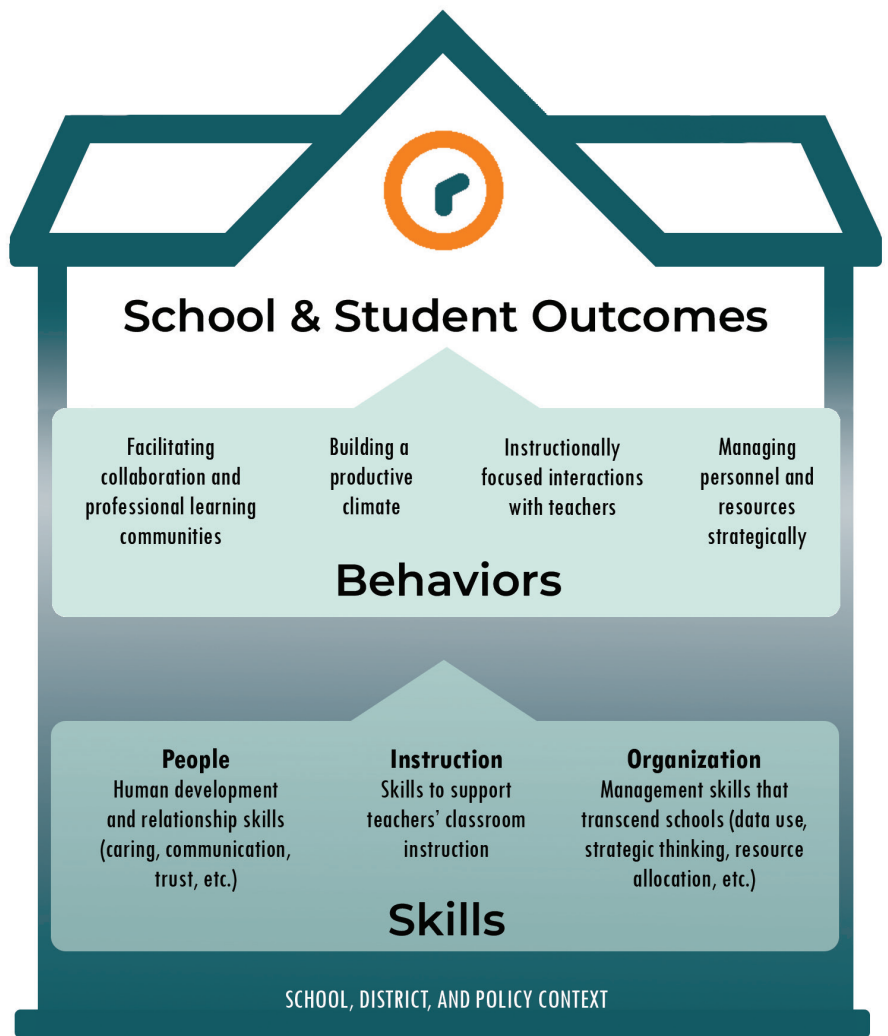
Principal Impact

Retaining effective principals is important to the success of a school. In terms of student achievement, the principal is the second most important school-level factor after the classroom teacher (Levin et al., 2020). In a systematic synthesis of over two decades of research encompassing 22,000 principals, The Wallace Foundation found effective principals benefit student achievement, lead to higher teacher retention, and reduce student absenteeism (Grissom et al., 2021). The landmark study reported principals in the 75th percentile of effective-

ness increased student learning in reading and math by about three months—nearly as much as the four months of increased learning attributable to teachers in the 75th percentile—but across the entire school. Similarly, RAND researchers found schools with supported, effective principals had 6 percentile points higher achievement in reading and 3 percentile points higher achievement in math than schools without supported, effective principalship after only three years (Gates et al., 2019).

Principal turnover can have serious and lasting consequences for a school. Research indicates principal turnover can lead to decreased student achievement, particularly in low-income and already low-achieving schools (Grissom & Bartanen, 2018). Bartanen, Grissom, and Rogers (2019) found principal turnover resulted in a .03 standard deviation decline in both reading and math scores the following year, and this decline can persist for up to two years after the movement. Teacher retention also declines when principals leave

Principal Skills & Behaviors to Improve School Outcomes



(Grissom et al., 2021, p. xvi)

their schools (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2021). Additionally, for the school there is a negative financial impact, which averages between \$50,000 and \$75,000, with some estimates much higher to cover costs of recruiting, hiring, onboarding, and professional learning new principals (Levin et al., 2020; Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Job Satisfaction

Principalship is a demanding role with high levels of responsibility and accountability. The State of the American Principal Survey in 2022 found educators experience roughly twice the levels of job-related stress as other professionals, and principals were particularly at risk of high levels of job-related stress (Steiner et al, 2022). Literature points to the increasing intensity and complexity of principalship as a key stressor. The time and focus spent dealing with growing job demands negatively impacts principals' job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2018). Additionally, increased levels of job-related stress have been

linked to principal absenteeism and turnover (Steiner et al, 2022).

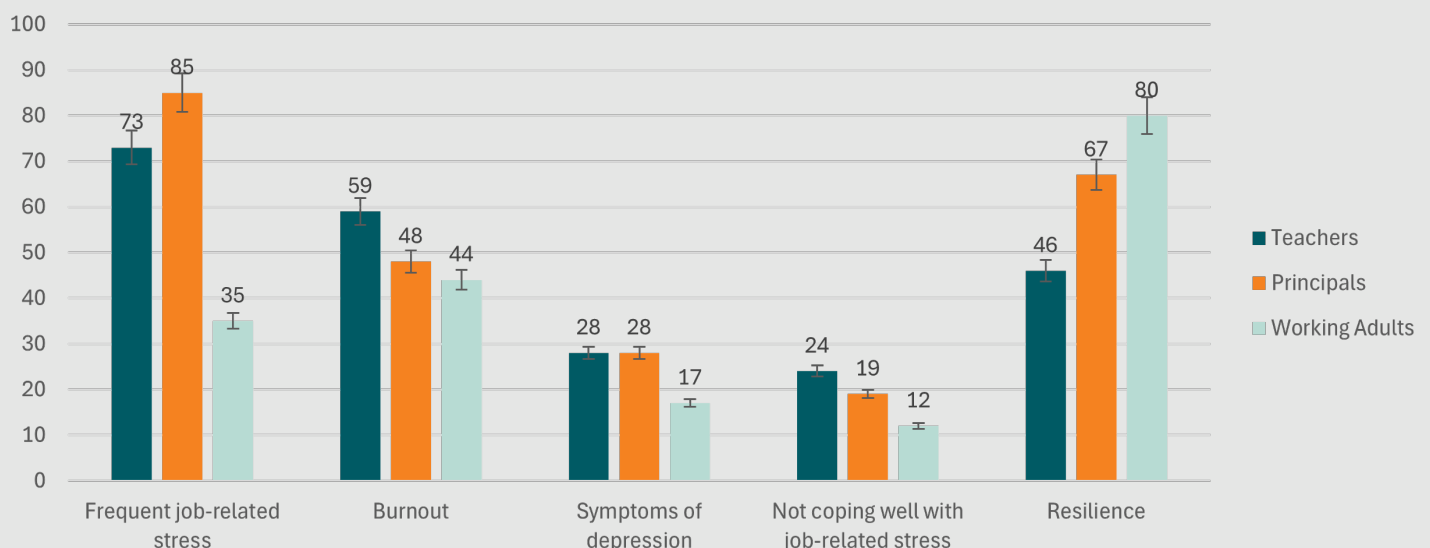
To address the issue of principal turnover, it is essential to understand the contributing factors. Research suggests job-related stress, lack of support, and inadequate resources are some of the leading causes of principal turnover. Multiple studies and surveys indicate job stress among principals rose precipitously during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Steiner, et al., 2022). In one large-scale study, researchers reported those with higher professional satisfaction experienced less impact from stress on their level of satisfaction, while for those already experiencing lower job satisfaction, additional workload stress was “the straw that [broke] the camel’s back” (Ning et al., 2022). This same study also reported workload stress contributed to United States teachers being less willing to take on leadership roles, which negatively impacts the principal pipeline.

Despite evidence of principals’

positive impact on schools and their rising levels of job-stress, there is a worrying “absence of national trend data on the prestige, pipeline, and satisfaction rates of the school principal workforce” (Dilberti & Schwartz, 2023, p. 10). The existing information shows principals’ intentions to leave the profession continues to climb as job satisfaction decreases.

Locke (1969) provided a leading definition of job satisfaction, stating it can be considered **“a function of the perceived relationship between what one wants from one’s job and what one perceives it is offering”** (p. 309). Theories about job satisfaction have long been studied in the workforce. Human Relations Theory, nearly a century old, states higher job satisfaction relates to higher morale, and in turn, higher productivity (Krekel et al., 2019). More recent theories state employees’ emotional states can affect and influence their performances.

Well-Being of Teachers, Principals, and Working Adults



Data is from the RAND Corporation’s American Teacher Panel and American School Leader Panel conducted in January 2022. Teachers n=2,349, principals n=1,532, working adults n=500 (Steiner et al, 2022, p. 5).

Common Principal Roles & Responsibilities

- Create a positive working and learning environment
- Support and mentor instruction
- Ensure regular school-to-home communication and collaboration
- Identify areas for teacher professional growth
- Invest time and resources strategically
- Enhance professional learning and capacity
- Influence hiring practices
- Oversee safety and school facilities
- Oversee extracurricular events such as sports and non-academic activities
- Manage all crisis communication and response

(DeMatthews et al., 2021d, p.655-656)

Generally, among principals and in the workforce at large, higher satisfaction is tied to better job performance, retention, and organizational health, whereas lower satisfaction is tied to absenteeism, attrition, and ultimately, motivation to quit (Dicke et al., 2020; Horwood et al., 2022; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Wang et al., 2018).

Principal job satisfaction is a multifaceted concept reflecting a principal's positive experiences and fulfillment derived from their work. It is a subjective construct influenced by various factors, including the nature of the job itself, the work environment, and the individual's personal characteristics and expectations (Wang et al., 2018). As principals face increasingly complex demands

from teachers, students, and the community, the likelihood of role conflict and stress increases, potentially leading to burnout (Karakose et al., 2016). Paradoxically, school leaders as a group report high levels of burnout, but also high job satisfaction and passion for their work.

School principals are passionate about their jobs, but this passion can be a double-edged sword, leading to positive outcomes like job satisfaction and negative outcomes like burnout (Horwood et al., 2021). When educators report higher levels of job-related stress and unmanaged burnout, they are more likely to indicate they will leave their jobs (Steiner et al., 2022).

While job satisfaction is wide-

ly investigated in organizational structures, research specifically on educator job satisfaction is limited, with most studies in this area focusing on how principals contribute to teacher job satisfaction. Burnout is closely related to job satisfaction, as unmanaged job stress can lead to decreased satisfaction, and, over time, persistent dissatisfaction and stress can result in burnout.

Burnout

The relationship between a lack of job satisfaction and higher levels of burnout is concerning, given a study of over 4,000 principals reported, "As principals experience higher levels of burnout, career satisfaction, and general morale, decline" (Combs et al., 2009, p. 12). In the 2023-2024 Utah Educator Exit Survey, emotional burnout and job-specific stressors were the top factors cited for leaving an education role, with 64% of educators citing burnout as a moderate or major influence for leaving their role (USB, 2024).

An exploration of "life satisfaction" and its relationship with burnout revealed principals are in a high-risk group for workplace burnout (Karakose et al., 2016). Despite this, DeMatthews and colleagues concluded literature, preparation programs, and policies "have largely ignored principal burnout despite the increased complicity of the principalship and increasing rates of turnover" (DeMatthews et al., 2021b, p. 259.)

The World Health Organization (2019/2021) classifies burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from "chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three

dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job, and reduced professional efficacy." Burnout is a distinct construct from job stress and depression.

Burnout can lead to more serious consequences than simply being unhappy with work. Studies have demonstrated burnout can lead to somatic symptoms, such as physical pain, headaches, and sleeplessness (Hammarström et al., 2023; Maslach et al., 1996-2018). Other studies have demonstrated burnout can lead to changes in brain anatomy, which can impair the ability to regulate negative emotions, negatively impact fine motor skills, and alter blood-oxygen level signals (Golkar et al., 2014; Savic, 2015; Durning et al., 2013). Burnout can also affect those around the individual experiencing it. In addition to increased absenteeism and decreased job performance, those experiencing burnout can become irritable or impatient, which can negatively impact relationships.

The findings of a two-year study of educator fatigue and burnout concluded, "Significant and concerning evidence of mental and emotional distress, specifically burnout and compassion fatigue, is present across the field of education, with the highest levels reported by teachers and school-based leaders" (Kendrick, 2022, p. 37), underscoring the need to understand and address principal burnout.

Core Aspects of Burnout

The three core aspects of burnout, as introduced by Maslach and colleagues (1996-2018), are Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment. Depersonalization and Emotional Exhaustion have a negative correlation with general job satisfaction, while Personal Accomplishment has a positive correlation (Maslach et al., 1996-2018). This means although lack of burnout does not automatically imply higher job satisfaction, the three scales used to determine level of burnout correlate with job satisfaction.

Emotional Exhaustion is the impact of long-term stress, characterized by feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted by one's work. Educators experiencing this may exhibit increased irritability, difficulty concentrating, and reduced motivation. Maslach and colleagues (1996-2018) explained emotional exhaustion as "the tired and fatigued feeling that develops as emotional energies are drained," (p. 31) leading to feeling overextended and exhausted.

Time pressure and demanding parents are two factors capable of leading to emotional exhaustion for school principals (Skaalvik, 2020). Other common contributors include teacher behavior and deficit perspectives, conflicting directives, working with parents (especially in instances of abuse or external challenges), and the pressure to be in constant communication (DeMatthews et al., 2021a). In a mixed-methods study of over 200 principals, only 5% of novice principals reported no part of their job was emotionally exhausting. The study reported, "The very nature of the princi-

palship requires the effective management of emotions, and success in the role demands it” (Houseman, 2020).

Depersonalization is characterized by detachment from work and an unfeeling, impersonal response to it. For educators, this is measured as negative or indifferent feelings towards students, colleagues, and the work environment. It can manifest as emotional numbness, reduced empathy, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. Sometimes, depersonalization leads to physical withdrawal, such as sitting behind a desk or increased absenteeism (Maslach et al., 1996-2018). Higher levels of engagement with the school community and students are associated with organizational commitment (Skaalvik, 2020). The academic and social climate created by engagement with—or depersonalization from—their work has a critical impact on principals’ attitudes towards the profession, from deep attachment to deep resentment of the workplace (Yan, 2020).

Personal Accomplishment is the sense of achievement and competence arising from a job well done. A decline in this domain can lead to feelings of inadequacy and a lack of motivation. Whereas the previous two constructs contribute to burnout, personal accomplishment reduces burnout. For principals, this satisfaction is derived from helping others learn and grow. Unlike other careers where accomplishment may be rewarded monetarily, personal accomplishment for administrators is grounded in “contributing to students’ development” (Maslach et al., 1996-2018, p. 31). Maslach and associates further state diminished personal accomplishment can lead to a burnout crisis for educators (Maslach et al., 1996-2018, p. 31). A study of life satisfaction and its relationship to burnout found a significant positive relationship between life satisfaction and personal accomplishment (Karakose et al., 2016).

The Utah Principal Burnout Survey was administered in late 2023 and early 2024. Results showed two of the core aspects of burnout were particularly evidenced among Utah principals. Emotional Exhaustion is high, with nearly two-thirds of principals feeling emotionally drained multiple days per week. However, a similar percentage of principals report high levels of Personal Accomplishment. Further description of the MBI/ES-AWI survey administered in Utah can be found in Appendix A.



OUTLIER IDENTIFICATION

Given the strong link between Emotional Exhaustion and the intention to leave the profession, we sought to identify and learn from outlier principals with exceptionally low levels of Emotional Exhaustion. From 184 principals who completed the MBI-ES/AWS, we identified outliers as those scoring in the 90th percentile or higher on the Emotional Exhaustion (EE) subscale of the MBI-ES. This resulted in 19 principals with an EE score of 1.60 or lower on the seven-point scale.

Thirteen of these principals provided contact information, and we attempted to contact them for follow-up interviews to understand their experiences. Ultimately, we interviewed five principals using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A). These interviews explored the factors contributing to their resilience and well-being with the demanding role of school leadership.

Of the 19 outlier participants in this study, most worked in suburban schools (63.2%), mirroring the overall sample distribution. There was a near-even split between males and females (47.4% each). Interestingly, the age of outliers skewed older, with the most common age range being 55-64 (47.4%), followed by 35-44 (31.6%). This contrasts with the overall sample, where the most common age range was 45-54. Approximately 40% of outliers had 0-5 years of experience. Most outliers identified as White (94.7%). Outlier principal demographics are similar to the overall survey respondent profile, with slightly more older and less experienced educators.

Profile of Outlier Principals

School Level



Elementary
52.6%



Jr. High/Middle
21.1%



High School
5.3%



Other
5.3%

School Locale



Rural
15.8%



Suburban
63.2%



Urban
21.1%

Gender

She/her
47.4%

He/him
47.4%

Prefer not to Say
5.3%

Age

20-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	<65
0.0%	31.6%	21.1%	47.4%	0.0%

Years of Experience as a Principal

<1-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	>20 years
42.1%	26.3%	15.8%	5.3%	10.5%

Race & Ethnicity

Asian	Hispanic or Latino	Two or More Races	White
0.0%	0.0%	5.3%	94.7%

Profile of Outlier Principals' Schools



Grades & Enrollment



Title I Status



Locale



% Racial Minority



% Low Income



% Limited English



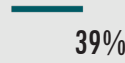
% Students with Disabilities

Bonneville Elementary
Alpine School District

511 students
PreK-6



City



16%



Monticello Academy

689 students
K-8



Suburban



28%



American Fork Jr. High
Alpine School District

1,864 students
PreK-6



Suburban



5%

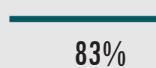


Backmon Elementary
Salt Lake City School District

336 students
PreK-6



City



42%



Aspen Elementary
Jordan School District

813 students
PreK-6



Suburban



19%



PRACTICE IN ACTION



Workload

Workload is an imbalance between the work needing to be done and the resources available to do it. While workload has historically been understood as the amount of work done over a given period, work intensification refers to the added complexity and demands associated with the core responsibilities of a job (Creagh et al., 2023). Workload, then, can encompass the number of tasks or the time it takes to accomplish them, as well as the intensity of the tasks and an individual's capacity to handle them. Excessive workload contributes to Emotional Exhaustion and diminishes job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2018). The Job Demands-Resources Model suggests burnout stems from this workload imbalance between capacity and resources (Skaalvik, 2020).

In a study of over 8,000 principals, Taie and Lewis (2023) found among

the 58% who spent 60 or more hours per week on school-related activities, 11% left the principalship the following year. Just 5% of public-school principals surveyed reported they worked fewer than 45 hours per week. Another large-scale study by Taie and Lewis (2022) examined over 9,000 traditional and public charter school principals and found they spent an average of 58.3 hours per week, including weekends, on school-related activities. This time was allocated as follows: approximately 30% on administrative tasks, 29% on curriculum or teaching-related tasks, 24% on student interactions, and 15% on parent interactions.

The advancement of technology exacerbates the time principals dedicate to their workload. Studies have reported more than one-quarter of principals are "available" 24 hours a day via digital connections. While these principals prioritize

time with teachers and students during the school day, this often results in administrative tasks being completed outside of traditional work hours (Creagh et al., 2023). A study of award-winning principals found time is a precious commodity for principals, and a scarcity of time presents barriers to well-being (Kutsyuruba et al., 2024). This "time poverty," which refers to the relationship between the amount and intensity of work over a given period, is a critical component of principal workload. Principal job satisfaction is negatively affected by feeling behind on work and experiencing Emotional Exhaustion (Wang et al., 2018).

In our survey analysis, most Utah principals (74%) agreed or strongly agreed they do not have enough time to complete necessary work, and 78% of principals agreed or strongly agreed their workload detracts from their personal inter-

ests. It is not surprising, then, most Utah principals (64%) also reported feeling emotionally drained from their work at least a few times a week, and 23% of principals reported feeling emotionally drained every day.

Interviews with our outlier principals revealed workload management was a critical factor in their well-being. While acknowledging the demanding nature of their jobs, they highlighted effective practices helping to manage their workload.

Delegation, prioritization, and leveraging support systems were key strategies these principals used to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Assistant principals were frequently mentioned as valuable partners in running the school. One principal noted, “Assistant principals absolutely take a lot off my load,” and credited the district with providing more staff as student enrollment increased. Another principal emphasized work does not have to fall solely on administrators. By building the capacity of others to take on certain tasks, this principal was able to delegate and reduce their own workload. Specifically, they mentioned working with a lead secretary and developing capacity around school finances, which allows another administrator to manage those tasks. Another principal shared having instructional coaches “alleviates the need to be on point

with being an instructional leader all the time.” Principals noted other highly supportive staff, including full time counselors, school psychologists, and bilingual staff.

Having clearly defined roles for each administrator and staff member also helped alleviate workload. For example, one principal described delegating all behavior management and positive reinforcement to another administrator. “I definitely help,” they said, “but, by doing that, it’s given me time to spend on the teachers and doing observations, being really thoughtful in the classrooms and being around the building in a different way.” Principals indicated the clarity of deciding who was primarily responsible for each task made their workloads feel more manageable. “I feel so sad for principals that don’t have that [clarity],” one principal remarked about the importance of divided responsibilities.

Another tool for managing principal workload was having the experience to anticipate needs. One principal noted, after a year or two in the role, they knew what to expect during busier and slower times of the year and could plan accordingly. “My workload in June is not nearly what it is in May... so I can kind of plan for that,” they explained. Experience seems to be beneficial in many ways. Most principals reported feeling overwhelmed when they started the job but gradually adapted over time. “If you were to ask me this question seven years ago, my first couple years as a principal, I think I would’ve told you I was totally overwhelmed,” one principal shared.

Finally, principals emphasized the importance of prioritizing tasks and responsibilities. Some mentioned being in classrooms as a high priority, so they set aside time for this every day. Others made a point of connecting with students in other ways, such as greeting them each morning as part of their routine. Creating a schedule was important to all the principals. As one explained, “If it’s not on the schedule, it’s not going to happen... because something will fill your time. I think [the workload] is manageable, it’s just figuring out how to manage it.”

Among principals who were successfully managing their Emotional Exhaustion, key strategies included delegation, prioritization, and leveraging support systems to maintain a healthy work-life balance. These principals acknowledged the demanding nature of their jobs but highlighted the importance of effective workload management.

Control

Control is the perceived capacity to influence decisions affecting work, and it encompasses personal autonomy, flexibility, and access to resources needed to be effective (Leiter & Maslach, 2011). Psychological autonomy is the sense of alignment with one’s interests and values, while job autonomy is the extent to which individuals control how, when, and where they perform their work (Horwood et al., 2022).

Kim and Wagner (2022) proposed a three-dimensional view of autonomy in the workplace, including professional autonomy, institutional autonomy, and individual autonomy. Their research, as part of a larger study on accountability, found principals extend their work hours

to increase their individual autonomy within the existing system. This pursuit of control, through longer work hours, can lead to increased exhaustion.

Ambiguity and competing demands may exacerbate exhaustion related to a lack of control. However, contrary to what workload and intensification may suggest, principals often report greater satisfaction when their work involves difficult decisions, as long as they have the personal autonomy and resources to handle those situations (Wang et al., 2018; Skaalvik, 2020). Professional autonomy in key areas such as budgeting, hiring, evaluation, and discipline contributes to principal retention (Levin et al., 2020). A study of nearly 2,000 principals found a positive relationship between principal self-efficacy (their belief in the ability to do their job) and autonomy. This study also showed both self-efficacy and perceived autonomy were positively correlated with principal job satisfaction (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012).

When asked, Utah principals cited a lack of support and resources as reasons for potentially leaving their jobs. Specifically, they desired support allowing them to focus on building relationships among staff and students, rather than being bogged down by administrative tasks. They expressed a significant need for staffing and resources enabling them to reduce administrative burdens, address student behavior issues, and dedicate more time to cultivating relationships and learning. Thus, while Utah principals may generally feel a sense of autonomy, they still require resources allowing them to effectively problem-solve within their schools.

The outlier principals we interviewed valued having a sense of autonomy and control over their work. Statements like, “I have one hundred percent autonomy,” and anecdotes of supervisors saying, “You decide, that’s your decision,” reflect the high level of autonomy these principals felt in their roles.

One principal aptly described this level of autonomy as a “loose-tight paradigm,” stating, “There’s deadlines everybody has. You have to have your land trust in by a certain date. You have to have your FTE allocation in by certain dates... but as far as how to summit? There’s the mountain, find it by this date and get there.” This sentiment—certain paperwork and deadlines are non-negotiable, but the path to meeting them is left to the principals’ discretion—was echoed by other administrators.

This autonomy, however, exists within a clear framework. All principals mentioned having a defined plan from their district or local education agency (LEA) outlining the direction of the entire system and the principals’ required responsibilities. This provided “a framework that we can focus on and have a little bit of accountability, but we are allowed a lot of flexibility and autonomy within that framework,” as one principal explained. Other principals noted mandates on certain goals, such as raising student achievement, but emphasized how they achieve those goals is up to them.

Echoing the “loose-tight paradigm,” another principal shared, “We’ve been asked to make a student group goal, and so we have been able to look at our needs here at

our school, which may be different than other schools, and really home in on what practices would help a specific student group.” Principals found these frameworks and broad goals to be supportive, allowing for both autonomy and choice within them.

Several factors contributed to principals’ sense of control, including direct communication from supervisors, the ability to delegate when necessary, and having a clear understanding of why certain tasks were required.

One principal highlighted the importance of knowing the reason behind directives, saying, “I can see how that would be so frustrating if I didn’t know why I was doing all the things. We strongly believe in having clear rationale.” Another principal, reflecting on a previous position in a different state, remarked, “People just don’t understand how much more rigid it could possibly be... more dictatorial.” The opportunity to understand the “why” behind decisions and maintain a sense of control was highly valued by the principals interviewed.

One principal noted it can take time to develop the sense of trust leading to autonomy. They explained the proven leadership they had demonstrated over the last few

years afforded them additional support for independent decision making. “I’ve proved myself to a certain degree,” they said. “The fact that I was able to [address a challenging situation] with a certain measure of proficiency gave me some capital.” Overall, principals appreciated the freedom to make decisions and implement strategies best meeting the unique needs of their schools.

Reward

Reward is the alignment of monetary, social, and intrinsic recognition with expectations (Leiter & Maslach, 2011). It encompasses the recognition and appreciation educators receive for their work, including fair compensation, opportunities for advancement, and positive feedback. Because monetary rewards like work bonuses are uncommon in education, principals are primarily rewarded intrinsically, such as through pride in their work, and socially, such as through acknowledgment of improved student outcomes. The importance of expectations in relationship to reward is crucial. Principals often receive less recognition than they anticipate when taking on the role; a full standard

deviation between the expected and received levels of recognition has been reported (Wang et al., 2021). In one study, more than 50% of surveyed principals disclosed a lack of recognition, and 41% disclosed their district school board fails to acknowledge extra effort (Wang et al., 2018).

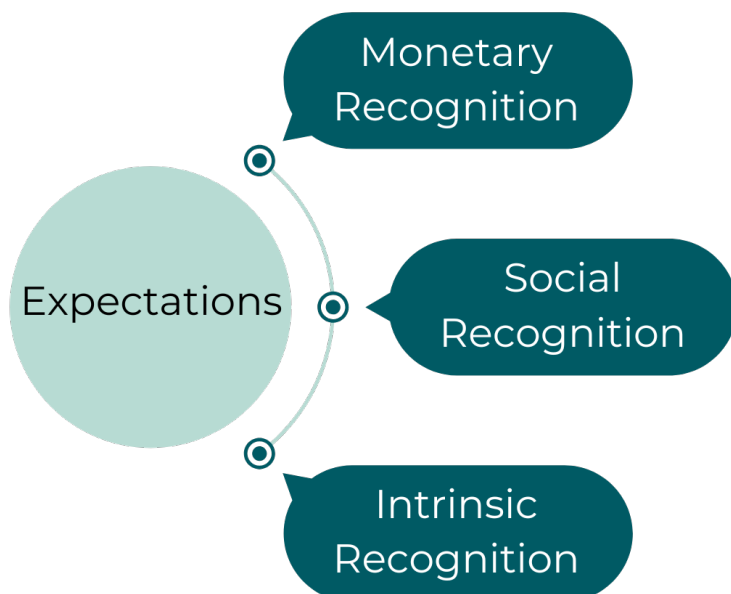
Herzberg (et al., 1959) theorized employee satisfaction is a function of factors increasing satisfaction (motivators) and those decreasing satisfaction (demotivators). In his theory, intrinsic factors such as achievement and recognition can lead to greater satisfaction, while extrinsic factors, such as policies or salary, can lead to dissatisfaction. A study with 3,000 participants across various sectors explored Herzberg’s theory and found external rewards, such as managerial recognition, were less motivating than previously thought, while intrinsic drivers outweighed all other forms of reward (Bassett-Jones & Lloyd, 2005).

Similar findings suggest recognition and motivation have “a better impact on employee success than compensation or incentives” (Ali & Anwar, 2021, p. 28). In a series

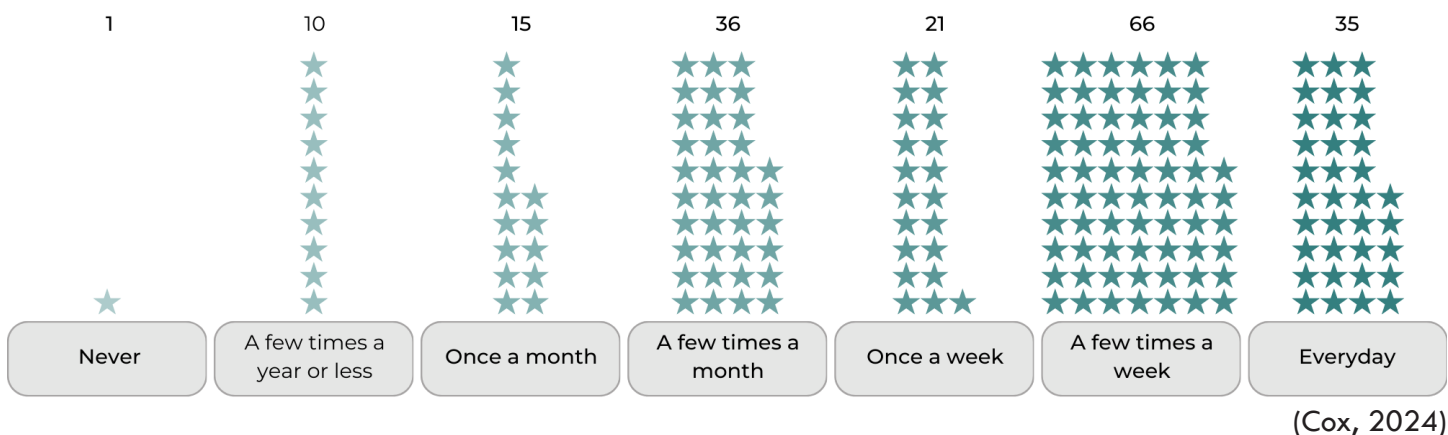
of three studies, Kuvass et al. (2017) found intrinsic rewards were linked to positive work performance and commitment and reduced turnover intentions, burnout, and work-family conflict. They also found extrinsic motivation, such as salary, to be demotivating and to increase burnout, conflict, and intention to leave a current role. This emphasis on intrinsic rewards aligns with research indicating principals who lead schools with higher test scores and are rated as more effective by supervisors and peers are significantly less likely to leave their schools (Grissom & Bartanen, 2018).

When asked about the factors contributing to their job satisfaction, Utah principals identified personal fulfillment and external support. In their responses to our open-ended survey items, intrinsic factors related to personal fulfillment and extrinsic factors, such as support, recognition, and school environment, were cited as contributing to respondents’ feelings of satisfaction. The most frequently cited factors were directly interacting with students, supporting students and teachers, and building positive relationships within the school community. A majority of Utah principals (54.9%) reported feeling they had accomplished many worthwhile things at least a few times a week. Compared to a school-teacher norm group, there were significant differences and large effect sizes in our sample of Utah principals’ sense of Personal Accomplishment.

All of the outlier principals felt rewarded for the work they do, but many noted the rewards were pri-



Utah Principal Survey Responses to “I accomplish many worthwhile things in my role”



marily intrinsic or small personal things rather than widespread recognition. One principal shared, “A lot of it has to do with intrinsic value. And when you feel like you’re going to a job that matters that you have an impact on other people, I think that’s where the greatest value comes from.” Another principal stated they “definitely do” feel valued for their work, and yet, “I never get thanked or anything, but it’s not why I do this job.”

All of the principals acknowledged there have been times when their work has gone unnoticed. While some accepted this as the nature of the job, others expressed frustration at feeling as though their school-wide changes had not been formally acknowledged. For example, one principal described leading a school’s transformation from one of the lowest-achieving schools to a school consistently ranked among the highest achieving, but this accomplishment went unmentioned. “Would I have appreciated somebody acknowledging that at a district level? One hundred percent,” they concluded. Another principal mentioned it is not always clear “who gets valued... who gets visibility in front of the group.”

Despite few formal recognitions, principals said they feel accomplished and valued for the work they are doing in their schools. Specific items contributing to principals’ sense of reward and accomplishment included:

- Seeing increasing test scores
- Observing student artwork
- Witnessing students excel in athletics
- Defending teachers’ choices and autonomy
- Knowing they make a positive impact when things are going well
- Earning teachers’ trust via vulnerable conversations
- Building relationships with community businesses

Some of the specific informal acknowledgments outlier principals mentioned included:

- Having positive interactions with students
- Hearing supervisors say “good job”
- Seeing students and adults smile or hearing them say hello in the hallways
- Having students and families say hello when out in the community
- Engaging in positive conversations with parents
- Receiving small notes or treats from teachers and students

Community

Community examines the quality of social interactions and relationships in the workplace, including supportive colleagues and a sense of belonging. Community has some overlap with other work-life areas, as a sense of community often overlaps with a shared sense of values, and many principals reported community interactions contributing to their sense of reward. Whereas supervisor support (or lack thereof) is typically linked to emotional exhaustion, coworker support is typically linked to a high sense of efficacy (Leiter & Maslach, 2011). One study, which overlaid the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) alongside communal orientation and perception of equity, found a strong sense of community can help overcome feelings of inequity in the workplace (Truchot & Deregard, 2001).

One way to understand the importance of community is to examine the impact of its absence. In a study of a large-scale US district, 70% of administrative stressors stemmed from the behavior of others, including teachers and staff. When experiencing this stress, principals began to speak in ways suggesting a disconnect from the community, using terms such as “apathy of others” and “those that feel entitled” (Fosco et al., 2023). Surveys from a larger, three-year longitudinal data set explored the role of isolation in new principals. Researchers found while social support was structural, isolation was emotional, and isolation led to reduced job satisfaction (Bauer & Brazer, 2013).

Research on teachers and other education professionals highlights the importance of informal social networks in reducing stress and provid-

ing support. In their study of school principals and relationships, Conley et al. (2007) found “attachment to coworkers” was a significant predictor of job satisfaction, even when controlling for other predictors.

In the MBI-ES/AWS survey of Utah principals, participants indicated relationships and community connections were among the greatest contributors to their job satisfaction. Principals reported a desire to stay in their current role when they felt connected to the school community and engaged in positive relationships with students, colleagues, and families. While acknowledging potential community challenges, principals emphasized their ability to collaborate with others to solve these challenges contributed to their sense of community. One principal wrote, “I love working with people and solving complex personnel problems. I believe the work I am doing is making a difference.”

In follow-up interviews, outlier principals highlighted the importance of building strong relationships with the broader school community, including parents and community members. They discussed strategies such as being present and making themselves available, utilizing parent organizations, and conducting home visits to foster these relationships. Notably, several principals lived in the communities they served, which helped foster a sense of community outside of the workplace. One principal explained, “Every time I go to an activity, there’s other students that are there and parent that at there and they are very gracious and kind and happy to say good things, but they’re also happy to say, ‘Hey, I had a question about this, a ques-

tion about that.’”

These community relationships are also built through intentional home visits. One principal described how a large grant supported teacher home visits, which strengthened connections between the school and families. Another principal, new to the community, went door to door introducing themselves to residents, regardless of whether residents had school-aged children. These relationships with the community benefit administrators because “[community members] work really hard to support us where we need it.” One administrator noted the forethought of their LEA in pulling them from their previous assignment and giving them a few months before their new school opened. This allowed the principal and administration team to start building relationships with the community before the school year began.

One school went so far as to adopt the motto “connection and achievement,” intentionally placing “connection” first. This emphasis extended to relationships between the school and local nonprofits, businesses, church organizations, and other agencies within walking distance. The principal noted this created “additional relationships [and] connective tissues with the community,” helping families feel as comfortable with the school as the staff. Several principals emphasized the importance of convincing families their input was both wanted and needed.

Other community support came from within the education structure. All outlier principals mentioned the strong support and positive relationships they had with their super-

visors, who affirmed their authority and autonomy, served as sounding boards, supported decision-making, and helped gather resources. One principal noted their supervisor trusted them to make decisions independently but also valued their input. This principal described their job satisfaction as supported by “having a school district that is willing to talk with principals about where they work.” Another principal highlighted their supervisor’s proactive response when they expressed feeling burned out. The supervisor created a short survey asking what kinds of support would be most useful and appreciated, then followed through by establishing regular check-ins to provide that support.

Principals rarely mentioned district or LEA connections outside of their school community and immediate supervisors. One principal

even noted having had only one or two personal conversations with their district superintendent in their nearly 15 years of working. Meanwhile, another principal shared their area supervisor, despite being responsible for 12 schools, had established a personal connection. While personal connections to district leadership were not widely reported among outlier principals, strong relationships with their direct supervisors were a common theme.

Principals valued the sense of community they built with teachers and staff. Each principal mentioned small, friendly gestures they offered to staff, with staff offering them in return. These included throwing baby showers, sharing meals, writing notes, or simply taking time to chat about one another’s lives. One principal deliberately included connection time in every

staff meeting to foster these relationships. Another shared collaborative teaching teams, initially formed to focus on student outcomes, had “blossomed beyond that” into friendships, with teachers socializing outside of school. Others organized games and social events for staff to connect.

Principals acknowledged some staff members were more introverted or less likely to participate but still believed these activities were important. “They’re just like middle schoolers, but it’s like, ‘Nope, we’ve got to do this because we’ve got to build that community, that sense of trust and that sense of belonging as adults, just like we do for the kids,” one principal said of their “silly games” for adults. Another reflected, “We don’t have to pretend we’re a family, but we are a community, and within that community

Principals found low cost games and activities to play to infuse fun into their communities. Some activities were designed and paid for by parents, some were personally funded by principals, and some activities were supported through funds specifically designated for fostering community.



Connection Committee: This dedicated committee meets to discuss challenges across the ecosystem and develop solutions, and it also regularly helps support fun team building activities.



Faculty Forms: Teachers and staff fill in a form with their favorite snacks, beverages, colors, etc. and other faculty use that information to personalize birthday treats or gifts for life celebrations, such as baby showers and weddings.



Superstar in Your Pocket: In this game, eight random staff members are given a small star to keep in their pocket. Staff must talk to each other throughout the day to gather information and figure out who has the star.



Slug Bugging: Small plastic bugs are placed all over the building. Teachers and staff hunt for the bugs and bring them to the office for a treat.



Movie Night: A principal treats their staff to a movie once a year, while others do screenings in their community center or on outdoor projectors.

we are always looking for ways to build each other up.”

A notable aspect of community-building in principalship was the responsibility principals felt to create that sense of community both within their schools and in the wider community. They described specific actions and activities they undertook, often in collaboration with families. While they generally felt supported and connected to their supervisors, they did not mention initiatives specifically designed by others to foster a sense of community among school leaders. Instead, they focused on their own efforts to make staff feel heard and valued. It appears principals, while appreciating the community aspects of their roles, were largely responsible for cultivating those connections themselves.

Fairness

Fairness assesses the perception of equity and justice in the workplace, including aspects such as fair treatment and transparent decision-making. It can be understood by how equally rules are applied to everyone, how resources are allocated, and the degree of perceived respect (Leiter & Maslach, 2011). Equity theory posits people perceive inequity when there is an imbalance in their inputs, such as the time and expertise dedicated to a role, and the outputs, such as reward and recognition (Walster et al., 1973). In a worldwide survey of over 3,500 employees, only 18% reported their workplace as having a high level of fairness. However, research indicates fairness can improve both performance and retention by more than 25% (Kropp et al., 2022).

Much of the existing literature on

Four Elements of Fair Practice

Harvard Business Review research identified four questions that distinguish high-fairness environments from low-fairness ones.

1. Are your employees informed?
2. Are your employees well supported?
3. Do all employees get a fair chance at internal opportunities?
4. Do leaders and managers recognize employees' contributions?

(Kropp et al., 2022)

fairness in the workplace stems from equity theory and the fields of business organization and management. The literature existing within education often focuses on how teachers perceive the fairness of their principals' actions. Other studies focusing on equity and principal supervisors relate to the work of developing fair and equitable teaching practices within schools, rather than for the principals themselves.

Having helpful, valid, and fair mechanisms for principal feedback, evaluation, and mentoring was one recommendation of a large national study by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Learning Policy Institute (Levin et al., 2020). This study found principals who did not trust their evaluation systems were more likely to leave their current roles. Of the principals planning to leave their positions, more than half reported unstructured evaluations.

While feelings of inequity negatively impact job satisfaction, applying uniform responses to issues faced by principals is also poorly received. Although principals desire fair and consistent rules, a study on control and autonomy found per-

sonalized approaches to autonomy, based on individualized needs, were better perceived by principals than impersonal consistency (Liljenberg et al., 2023).

Fairness related to compensation is a complex issue. One aspect of fairness is whether employees are rewarded for their efforts, which includes salary. In their review of the research on principal turnover, Levin and Bradley (2019) found principals often leave their jobs for higher paying roles. In one high-cost city, those in the lowest bracket of principal salaries were ten times more likely to leave their jobs than those in the highest bracket (Levin & Bradley, 2019). In the 2023-24 Utah Educator Exit survey, 32% of respondents said pay would their decision to leave (USBE, 2024). Notably, most respondents in the Exit survey were not in administrative roles. In contrast, in the open-ended question section of our burnout survey, financial need was only the tenth most common reason principals indicated they would consider leaving their current job, and pay was not mentioned once as adding to job satisfaction.

Outlier principals emphasized the

importance of fair and consistent application of rules and policies. They believed transparency and open communication contributed to a sense of fairness within their schools. As with community, principals readily shared strategies they employed to create a transparent system of communication with their staff. However, they shared less about the transparency afforded to them by their supervisors or LEA administration.

Each principal first described how they strive to listen to teacher concerns, share important information, and maintain consistency with all stakeholders. Only then did they mention how they were treated fairly themselves.

Principals said they felt policies were applied consistently, even when they disagreed with the outcome. Several principals explained how policies could be frustrating when they made sense on paper but created barriers at the school level. For example, one principal admitted they sometimes wanted to ask, “Do you recognize how that impacts a school?” in reference to fiscal policies. However, they followed up by saying, “I have to trust those that are making decisions, that they’ve been here, that they’ve been a principal before.”

Offsetting some of those frustrations was the fact principals usually felt they had an avenue to voice their opinions. “I can voice my opinion,” one principal said, but noted, “I feel like I have that avenue... but I don’t always get what I want.” Another principal shared a practice to improve fairness is offering the ability to play devil’s advocate when discussing policy concerns. This principal not only invites teachers to try and poke holes in policies but feels empowered to ask questions and push back on LEA policies themselves. “I think that is really weirdly important to have a person that’s going to questions and push, even if they don’t believe it,” the principal reflected, adding it builds a sense of ownership over final decisions.

One principal mentioned the importance of having different approaches for different schools. They explained while every principal is expected to be ethical, moral, and abide by policies and procedures, expectations and approaches may differ. “Do I think that my needs at my school require a slightly different approach?” they stated. “Yeah, for sure.” Another principal shared extra scrutiny is usually grounded in a reason, such as a higher level of parent complaints or declining test scores. They argued addressing concerns can still be fair if done systematically and with transparency. This principal offered the example of escalating consequences with detailed explanations of the issue, much like how a tardy child would be treated.

Outlier principals generally felt they were treated fairly and policies and procedures were uniformly

applied across schools. While all principals cited instances of disagreeing with a particular policy or situation, they acknowledged having avenues for expressing their concerns and being heard. They emphasized the need for high levels of transparency and consistency to foster fairness. Furthermore, as with community, they felt a strong sense of responsibility to treat others fairly, even more so than they spoke about being treated fairly themselves.

Values

Values explores the alignment between an educator’s personal values and those of the school, including a sense of purpose and shared commitment. When a gap exists between personal and organizational values, employees face a trade-off between what they want to do and what they have to do (Leiter & Maslach, 2011). A conflict in values between the employee and their organization can contribute to all three dimensions of burnout (Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment), while aligned values predict higher retention rates and can decrease educator turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Leiter & Maslach, 2006; Wang & Klassen, 2023).

Organizational values are often stated through a vision or mission statement. Conflict can arise when experienced behaviors do not align with these professed values. In this way, a values conflict does not have to be overt; it can occur even when the stated values of an organization seem sound if a principal perceives a disconnect between words and actions. One study found leaders did not easily recall stated organizational values, and these

values had a limited impact on their daily practice (Gurley et al., 2015). Yet, the conception and perception of shared values are paramount to success. While few resources discuss how principals perceive organizational values, many point to the importance of a shared vision among staff as a key factor in school success (Englert & Barley, 2008; Gurley et al, 2015; Kose, 2011; Lefkowitz, & Woempner, 2006).

Principals are often charged with communicating the values and goals within a school. When a shared understanding of values is lacking among school staff, it can add additional stress to the principal's role (Skaalvik, 2020). In a study comparing the highest- and lowest-performing high schools, the primary factor differentiating performance was a shared mission and goals (Englert & Barley, 2008).

Further contributing to the potential for values conflict for principals is the tendency for political differences to permeate school management. In a nationally representative survey of high school principals, more than two-thirds (69%) reported

substantial conflict about political issues. Nearly half (45%) reported the level of community conflict in the 2021-22 school year was "more" or "much more" than in prior years (Rogers et al., 2022). The study further inferred these conflicts increase stress and anxiety among staff and students, with principals more inclined to consider leaving the education field in response.

More than two-thirds (72%) of Utah principals agreed or strongly agreed their values and the values of their school were aligned. That said, principals also reported experiencing conflict when their values and those of other adults in their building did not align. It is encouraging, then, 72% of principals also agreed or strongly agreed their personal career goals were consistent with the schools' stated goals.

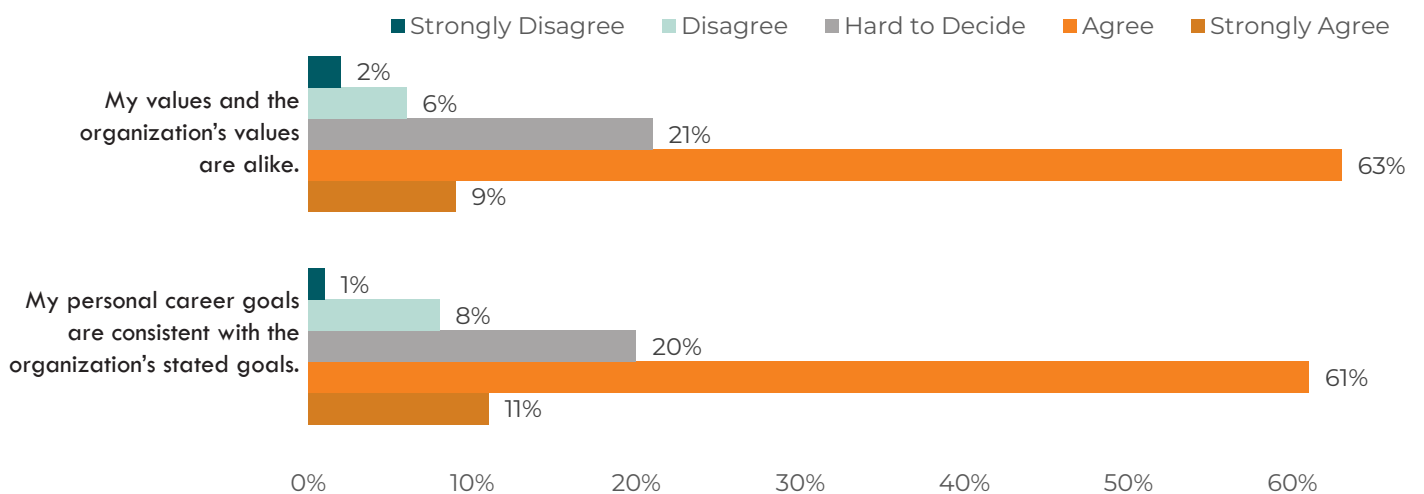
Outlier principals reported a strong sense of alignment between their personal values and the values of their schools and districts. They believed this alignment contributed to their job satisfaction and their ability to effectively lead their schools. They highlighted the importance of

values such as respect, community, and student success.

principals spoke positively about the values demonstrated by their district leaders, the sense of shared community values, and their belief in the work happening in their own schools.

While only one principal directly repeated their LEA's vision statement, multiple principals felt they had alignment with the values held by their leadership. For example, one principal said "...whenever the superintendent gets up and speaks about what you're trying to achieve for students and for success, I would say our values are very tightly aligned." While not directly referencing policies or written statements, these principals acknowl-

Utah Principal Survey responses demonstrate alignment between Utah Principals' values and goals and those of their organizations.



(Cox, 2024)

edged a general sense of shared ideals.

While acknowledging occasional differences in perspectives, outlier principals did not perceive any fundamental conflicts in values. For example, one principal would like to rearrange the district priorities to give certain ones more weight. Another principal explained while they shared values with leadership, they sometimes disagreed with the way departments interpreted and implemented those values. “The order of that goes a little wrong, but that’s the idea. I love that. And I think that’s really the aspiration,” one principal said of the slight mismatch in implementation but overall alignment to a shared vision.

Multiple principals discussed a sense of shared community values. “I do interact with people, and I know a lot of parents who come here from my community involvement... there is overlap there,” shared one principal. Another principal said they make a point to treat students as they would want their own children to be treated, fostering a sense of respect and shared values within the community.

At the school level, outlier principals were particularly passionate about their work. These principals perceived a high level of belief among staff in shared goals, and they were personally invested in their schools’ values. One principal even shared they could likely earn more money in a different role, but said “I wouldn’t be at a school where I believed so wholeheartedly in what they were doing and how they were doing it.”

Outlier principals acknowledged minor implementation hiccups when translating system-wide values into actions, but overwhelmingly felt aligned with the values of their schools, communities, and systems.

“Maybe I could earn more money... but I wouldn’t be at a school where I believed so wholeheartedly in what they were doing and how they were doing it.”

PREVENTING BURNOUT

One critical aspect in addressing educator burnout is the overreliance on personal strategies to mediate stressors. This approach places the onus on individuals experiencing stress, requiring them to accurately self-assess and then possess the knowledge and ability to employ effective coping strategies. Unfortunately, this expectation is unrealistic, given research indicating principals rarely, if ever, receive pre-service or in-service professional learning on coping strategies (DeMatthews et al., 2021 a). DeMatthews and colleagues (2021 a) found principals rarely sought help from their districts in mediating stress and instead adopted coping behaviors independently. However, even those who identified healthy coping behaviors (such as exercising) struggled to manage their stress.

National research on teacher and principal well-being found districts can best support principals by informing them about available mental health and well-being resources and by addressing barriers to accessing them, such as appointment availability and lengthy wait times (Steiner et al., 2022). Educators have reported being unable to prioritize self-care, even when aware of stress-relieving techniques. In one study, an educator was quoted as saying, “I am constantly told to care for myself, however, the work that is expected is always pressing” (Kendrick, 2024, para 9). While coping behaviors can help reduce feelings of stress, they cannot completely prevent or overcome burnout.

Because burnout is not created by a lack of self-care, addressing self-care alone is not an effective strategy for eliminating it. In a *Scientific American* podcast, Burnout researcher Anthony Montgomery shared burnout stems from an individual’s relationship with their work and working environment, and therefore, individual solutions will not address the root of the problem (Love & Broderick, 2024).

Harvard research urging systemic solutions to burnout in the field of healthcare identified two major concerns with prescribing self-care and/or wellness strategies to individuals experiencing burnout. First, devoting limited time and resources to “makeshift solutions fail to address the root causes of burnout while preempting more effective interventions.” Second, “such an approach inaccurately suggests that experience and consequences of burnout are the responsibility of individual[s]” (Jha et al., 2019, p. 3). The report further argues asking individuals to work harder to manage their own stress will never be effective. It is “akin to asking drivers to avoid car accidents without investing in repairing and improving hazardous roads. Simply asking physicians to work harder to manage their own burnout will not work” (p. 3).

Addressing burnout should prioritize intentional, systemic solutions rather than relying on individuals to manage their own stress. Four common

strategies evidenced in outlier principal interviews and supported by research on principals and burnout are:

1. **Communicate About Needs**
2. **Understand and Reduce Workload**
3. **Focus on Positive Relationships**
4. **Provide Supports and Resources**

Communicate About Needs

Communication from the LEA level to principals is often directive or focused on information sharing but is not grounded in what principals need. In contrast, outlier principals cited frequent opportunities to discuss their needs and concerns with direct supervisors. Bauer and Brazer (2013) suggested, “Principals may be better supported if school district communicate with them regularly and openly about their needs and the degree to which those needs are being met by whatever support the district provides” (p. 172).

This proved true among outlier principals. One principal mentioned weekly check-ins with their supervisor that followed a consistent format for discussing successes, action items, goals, and support. Another principal’s supervisor followed up on conversations with relevant books and articles addressing a discussed need, or they provided ideas for addressing a current issue. When one principal reported

feeling particularly stressed, their supervisor created a personalized survey to understand how they were feeling and what specific actions would best support their emotional well-being. Instead of relying on the principal to offer their own solutions, the supervisor listed potential supports and asked which would be most helpful, relieving the principal of the burden of developing ideas.

Despite the positive examples of supervisor support, there is room for improvement at the district level. While outlier principals felt supported directly by their supervisors, they did not mention boarder efforts at the district level to regularly assess their needs. Creating a common system for gathering input, in addition to more personalized approaches, could be an opportunity for districts to develop open communication with principals. In addition to communicating about needs, districts should increase opportunities for principals to be actively involved and provide input in systemic ways. Multiple studies have found this can improve principal satisfaction and well-being (Steiner et al., 202; Wang et al., 2018; Kutsyruba et al., 2024).

Understand and Reduce Workload

The most stressful aspect of the principal role for our outliers, survey respondents, and principals in burnout research generally, is the overwhelming workload they face. Indeed, a study of outstanding principals found even outlier principals struggle with the demands of their workload (Kutsyruba et al., 2024). Similarly, while outlier principals in Utah successfully managed their workload, they acknowledged the varied and numerous demands of the job. The three most commonly

cited supports for outlier principals in managing their workload, as revealed in our data collection, were:

1. Sufficient/additional staffing, including assistant principals, coaches, counselors, and office staff
2. The ability to delegate responsibilities to trained staff and to divide administrative responsibilities among multiple administrators
3. Access to training on organization and time management

Additional research offers these suggestions based on the recommendations of award-winning principals:

- Limiting the number of meetings held away from the school
- Allowing for uninterrupted breaks without emails and texts during lunches, weekends, and holidays
- Minimizing time spent on administrative tasks able to be automated, such as pulling data from existing computer systems
- Streamlining paperwork and communication
- Ensuring full staffing

- Limiting or eliminating the number, frequency, and variety of sudden demands (Kutsyruba, 2024).

Utah principals were happiest when their workload allowed them to be in classrooms and interacting with students throughout the day. However, they noted this often came at the expense of other must-do administrative tasks, which then piled up for after-hours work. This aligns with research indicating principals who can focus on instructional leadership are more likely to remain in their current jobs (Steiner et al., 2022; Wang et al, 2018). Principals appreciated structures allowing for them to be visible instructional leaders in their buildings while reducing their time spent on administrative paperwork.

Several principals mentioned the value of a time audit, and one suggested principal supervisors should routinely participate in a time audit with their administrators. Again, principals stressed the importance of supervisor support and protected time to address workload management, rather than being expected to independently find and implement strategies.

Focus on Positive Relationships

Principals relied heavily on those around them, not only to accomplish tasks but also to bolster their positive feelings about their work. They reported positive working relationships with staff increased their job satisfaction and made their roles easier in various ways. As previously mentioned, outlier principals frequently mentioned their relationships with their director supervisors. All outlier principals indicated they regularly discussed concerns and

issues, received supportive advice, and collaboratively problem-solved with their supervisors. Additionally, principal supervisors need to be equitable in their application of rules and procedures while also attending to personal differences and needs to ensure fairness. The presence of this trusting relationship was highlighted in every outlier principal interview.

Beyond their supervisors, principals found support and derived satisfaction from their interactions with students and staff. Even when dealing with complex issues, they valued teachers who sought their advice, trusted their opinions, and collaborated to find solutions. They appreciated community-building activities fostering relationships among their staff, which in turn contributed to their own job satisfaction.

Principals also felt a sense of community with those outside of their school including families, the broader community, and even the local school board. One way to bolster this support, as Dilberti and Schwartz (2023) suggested, is to “give principals the same kind of policy attention as teachers.” Another research-based suggestion is to provide ample time for principals to build strong relationships within and beyond the school site (Wang et al., 2018). These strong relationships with colleagues have been shown to provide crucial support during periods of stress (Steiner et al., 2022).

Provide Support and Resources

Among principals who have considered leaving the profession, over half (53%) reported not being provided with adequate personnel or resources to meet students’ needs, which can encompass many

Local School District Highlight: Granite School District

The following is an overview of the George W. Bush Institute 2022 report [Principal supervision as a strategy for supporting and retaining school leaders: A case study of Granite School District.](#)

In 2018, Granite School District leaders shifted the principal supervisor role to “focus explicitly and primarily on building the capacity of principals as instructional leaders” (p. 4). Additional principal supervisors were hired to reduce caseloads, and biweekly meetings between principals and supervisors were restructured to:

1. Follow up on prior meetings
2. Connect to best practices shared in monthly group settings
3. Address individualized professional learning goals
4. Identify next steps

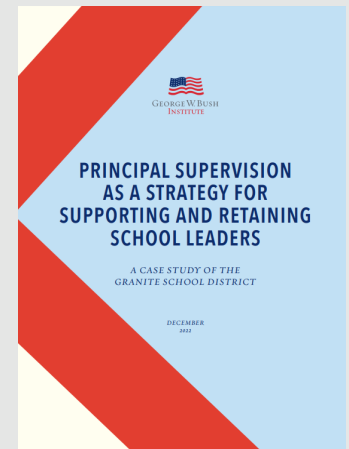
Principals reported appreciating the opportunity for professional growth in both group and individualized formats, the increased self-confidence gained from supported accountability, and the increased support from the district in understanding and addressing their needs.

To effect these changes in the principal supervisor role, Granite School District implemented the following:

- Decreased principal supervisor caseloads.
- Protected supervisor time to be in schools.
- Convinced stakeholders the same person could be a coach and a supervisor.
- Developed supervisors’ knowledge and skills.
- Obtained and conveyed supervisor support (p. 10)

These changes were fostered by articulating a new vision and explaining its necessity; engaging stakeholders through communication to build buy-in; investing in change through additional resources, tools, and processes; and building capacity by investing in professional learning. As a result, principals have reported enhanced job satisfaction, with 84% of principals reporting they are more likely to remain in their positions, and 66% reporting they are less likely to explore other job opportunities.

Ikemoto, G. (2022). *Principal supervision as a strategy for supporting and retaining school leaders: A case study of the Granite School District.* George W. Bush Institute. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED626774.pdf>



things, such as human resources in the form of staff, adequate funding, and effective strategies to meet school and student needs (Levin et al., 2020). In contrast, outlier principals felt they were provided with competent staff and had opportunities to strategize with their supervisors to address concerns.

In our survey of Utah principals, the most common reason respondents cited for considering leaving their role was “a lack of support.” Many were general in their statements, but commonly mentioned needing additional training and personnel to handle student behavior, as well as more strategies for addressing a myriad of complex concerns. Outlier principals, on the other hand, appreciated supervisors who had prior experience as principals in the same district, or even at the same school, because they felt this firsthand understanding of the role gave their supervisors valuable context for offering support and understanding current needs.

Research suggests principals lack adequate professional learning opportunities, especially those targeted at specific needs. Principals often cite the need for more development opportunities, along with opportunities for professional collaboration with other principals (Kutsyuruba et al., 2024). While no outlier principals isolated district support for professional or personal well-being, research shows having access to at least one employer-provided mental health support increases principals’ ability to cope with job-related stress (Steiner et al., 2022). This support could include peer support groups, counseling, or employee assistance programs.



REPLICATION & SCALING

One example of effective systemic support in Utah can be found in the Granite School District (see page 29). Many factors contribute to principal job satisfaction and burnout reduction, and most rely heavily on adequate support for principals, including workload reduction and plentiful resources, as exemplified in this case study. Granite School District offers a system-level solution for addressing principal support, which relies on additional staffing and professional development. Outlier principals echoed the value of additional staff, such as assistant principals, coaches, and office support. To scale and replicate these experiences, more highly trained principal supervisors would be necessary, in addition to more full-time staff positions. Of course, increasing staff and providing more professional development can be costly endeavors, which is a barrier especially for districts with limited budgets.

However, as outlier principals pointed out, not all suggested supports require extensive funding or staffing. Outlier principals offered suggestions for smaller, more intentional actions, such as surveying principals and creating spaces for them to openly discuss their needs, concerns, and desired support mechanisms. Principals also appreciated strategies to help them organize their priorities and manage their workloads effectively. Key elements of principal support included routine meetings with supervisors, consistent and structured meetings, and follow-through on offered supports. Having a trusted, available, and experienced administrator for guidance was deemed invaluable.

Initiatives to help principals prioritize and manage their workloads, such as assistance in routinely conducting time audits, represent another low-cost strategy not requiring additional staff. Principals also need dedicated time to foster relationship building, which starts with a strong and positive relationship with their direct supervisor. These measures are personal, can be challenging to control, and may take time to develop, but they are not constrained by budget or staffing limitations.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations to consider when interpreting the findings. First, the survey relied on self-reported data, which is susceptible to response bias and social desirability effects. This may have led participants to over-report positive behaviors and under-report negative experiences, potentially skewing the results. Second, administering the survey in December, approximately four months into the school year, may have influenced responses, as principals' experiences and perceptions of burnout may vary throughout the school year. Third, the sampling method, using the membership lists of the Utah Association of Elementary School Principals and the Utah Association of Secondary School Principals, was a convenience sampling that could have resulted in a sample that is not fully representative of the population, limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of principals in the state. Furthermore, relying on these two online listservs to distribute a voluntary survey may have limited the response rate, resulting in a self-selected sample of those with the time and motivation to participate, which could introduce non-response bias.

This Utah principal sample may possess different characteristics or perspectives compared to those who did not participate. Lastly, the small sample size in the qualitative interviews may limit the transferability of findings, as data saturation may not have been achieved. Nonetheless, this research provides valuable insights into job satisfaction and burnout among Utah principals.



CONCLUSION

This report synthesizes findings from research literature, our survey of Utah principals concerning job satisfaction and burnout, and our interviews of Utah principals with low levels of Emotional Exhaustion. Overall, it highlights the critical role of principals in student success and the factors influencing principals' well-being and retention. As one principal reflected, "The principal sets the tone for the building," so managing their levels of burnout is key to a healthy school.

For a more detailed analysis of the survey findings, refer to the report ["Principal Job Satisfaction: Five Takeaways from a Burnout Survey of Utah Administrators."](#) The case study of Granite School District's successful efforts to support principals through enhanced supervision provides a valuable model for system-level change (Ikemoto, 2022).

Retaining effective principals is crucial for student and school success. Addressing the factors influencing principal well-being and job satisfaction requires systemic efforts from districts and LEAs. By creating supportive environments and providing necessary resources, we can ensure principals are empowered to lead effectively and remain committed to the profession. Four specific steps highlighted by outlier principals to improve job satisfaction include:

- **Communicate Needs:** Regularly assess principal needs and provide channels for open communication with supervisors and district leaders.
- **Reduce Workload:** Provide adequate staffing, training, and resources to alleviate administrative burdens and allow for focus on instructional leadership. "If it's not on the schedule, it's not going to happen... because something will fill your time."
- **Foster Positive Relationships:** Promote collaborative cultures, encourage relationship-building activities, and prioritize time for principal-staff interactions.
- **Provide Support and Resources:** Offer targeted professional development, mental health resources, and access to peer support networks.

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APPENDIX A

Principal Burnout in Utah Survey Overview

To inform this report, we employed a mixed-methods study, with quantitative and qualitative data collection occurring from December 2023 through June 2024. The study aimed to assess the following:

- The status of Utah principals' job satisfaction and burnout
- Utah principals' average scores on burnout and work-life constructs compared to normative groups
- The factors inhibiting satisfaction and leading to burnout
- The factors contributing to job satisfaction and reducing burnout.

Quantitative data via survey administration addressed the first two items, while qualitative data gathered via survey administration and principal interviews addressed the factors inhibiting satisfaction and inducing burnout, as well as those contributing to job satisfaction and reducing burnout.

The MBI-ES/AWS Survey

The study questionnaire primarily consisted of the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators Survey (MBI-ES) and the Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS). These instruments aim to measure the degree of burnout experienced by educators and to identify potential contributing factors within the work environment. The MBI-ES is an adapted version of the original Maslach Burnout Inventory that is designed for use with educators, including administrators (Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1996). Originally published over

40 years ago, the MBI employs the World Health Organization's definition of burnout and is used in more than 88% of burnout research publications and includes multiple scales to align with different fields of work (Boudreau et al., 2015).

The MBI-ES assesses the three core aspects of burnout syndrome: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment. Respondents' frequencies of experiencing feelings related to each MBI-ES scale are assessed using a seven-point, fully anchored response format (Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1996). Cronbach alpha ratings of 0.90 for Emotional Exhaustion, 0.76 for Depersonalization, and 0.76 for Personal Accomplishment were reported (Iwanicki & Schwab, 1981), with subsequent measurements yielding similar results, which supports the scale's reliability (Gold, 1984). Alpha values can vary depending on the sample and specific context. The MBI-ES has been extensively validated across various educational settings and is widely recognized as a reliable and valid instrument for measuring burnout in the education field.

In addition to assessing individual burnout, the study also examined the workplace environment using the Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS). The AWS complements the MBI-ES by examining the workplace environment. It assesses six key areas contributing to or mitigating burnout: Workload, Control, Reward, Community, Fairness, and Values. By assessing these six areas in relation

to the three dimensions of burnout measured by the MBI-ES, the AWS provides a comprehensive understanding of six factors contributing to educator well-being and job satisfaction. This information can be invaluable for developing targeted interventions and support systems to address burnout and promote a healthy work environment for educators (Leiter & Maslach, 2004).

After the MBI-ES/AWS sections, the questionnaire included a segment with additional multiple-choice and open-ended questions. These questions addressed job satisfaction, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, factors influencing turnover, and factors promoting retention. A section with supplemental demographic questions followed. While the survey promised anonymity, participants had the option of providing contact information for potential follow-up interviews.

Survey Participants

The MBI-ES/AWS was distributed online from December 2023 to January 2024. An email containing a link to the self-administered, web-based survey was sent to each member of the Utah Association of Elementary School Principals and the Utah Association of Secondary School Principals currently serving as K-12 principals in Utah. Only school principals participated in the survey. In total, 184 Utah principals completed the survey, which collected data on the three MBI constructs, six AWS worklife domains, and job satisfaction.

Profile of Survey Participants

School Level



Elementary
71.2%



Jr. High/Middle
11.4%



High School
11.4%



Other
6.0%

School Locale



Rural
18.5%



Suburban
67.9%



Urban
13.6%

Gender

She/her
57.1%

He/him
40.2%

Prefer not to Say
2.7%

Age

20-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	<65
0.5%	30.4%	50.0%	17.9%	1.1%

Years of Experience as a Principal

<1-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	>20 years
39.1%	35.3%	14.7%	7.6%	3.3%

Race & Ethnicity

Asian	Hispanic or Latino	Two or More Races	White
0.5%	2.2%	4.3%	92.9%

Survey Findings

Utah principals feel a sense of accomplishment but are exhausted.

According to an analysis of our survey, the principal position comes with both ample stress and ample rewards. The MBI-ES defines burnout as a combination of three types of feelings: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and low Personal Accomplishment. Two of these areas are particularly significant to Utah principals. Emotional Exhaustion is high, with nearly two-thirds of principals feeling emotionally drained multiple days per week. However, a similar percentage of principals report high levels of Personal Accomplishment.

Utah principals feel their workload is overwhelming but they find strong overlap between their personal values and the values of their schools. This heavy workload and a lack of time to accomplish tasks may be driving Utah's relatively high levels of Emotional Exhaustion. Roughly three out of four principals indicated they do not have enough time to accomplish the work and work responsibilities detract from their personal interests.

Values of principals and their schools tend to overlap, and this alignment seems to make the work meaningful. Nearly three out of four principals found their personal, career, and school values to be in alignment. Given the high levels of self-reported job satisfaction (see next finding), it appears the rewards generally outweigh the stress for Utah principals.

Despite the challenges, Utah principals are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs than not. Principals were 1.69 times more likely to report being satisfied or very satisfied with their role than dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. This is noteworthy considering 82% of the Utah participants reported an increase in job stress since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relationships are key. Time spent working directly with students, staff, and the community contribute most to principal satisfaction. While principals identified varied stressors with the potential to influence their intention to leave their positions, they cited positive interactions within the school community as the main driver of satisfaction. This satisfaction stemmed from various interactions, including positive relationships fostering student achievement, teacher growth, and connection within the school community.

A more complete overview of survey findings and related analyses are included in the report *Principal Job Satisfaction: Five Takeaways from a Burnout Survey of Utah Administrators* at bit.ly/ULEADPrincipalSurvey.

APPENDIX B

Follow Up Interview Protocol and Questions

The interview consent form and privacy information were reviewed and signed prior to beginning the interview.

This interview is designed to understand what specific elements of your job have led to your level of satisfaction. This study does not aim to evaluate you or your employer. I am trying to describe the conditions that improve job satisfaction among principals. There are no right or wrong answers. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How long have you been in education? Your current position? At this school?
2. What do you enjoy most about your job?
3. What contributes to your job satisfaction? Additional probing prompts as needed to address both daily and overarching aspects of job satisfaction:
 - a. What in your day-to-day role contributes to your job satisfaction such as specific activities, responsibilities, or engagements...
 - b. What contributes to your job satisfaction outside of your day-to-day responsibilities?
4. What makes you feel most supported in your role?

Workload

5. Tell me about your current workload?
6. Are there specific supports that help you manage your workload? What are they?

Control

7. Tell me about your level of autonomy or sense of control in fulfilling your duties.
8. Are there any specific supports that contribute to your sense of autonomy? (e.g. is it just a feeling you have, or are there policies or procedures that lead to or take away from this feeling?)

Reward

9. Do you feel valued for the work that you do?
10. In what ways are you acknowledged for your work?

Community

11. Tell me about the working environment at your school and district. (e.g. supports, collaboration, people's feelings towards one another, social aspects, etc.)
12. Tell me about your relationship with the broader school community. (e.g. parents, community members, stakeholders, media, etc.)
13. Are interpersonal relationships fostered in the school or district with employees? How so? (activities, events, examples of community building)

Fairness

14. Do you think rules and policies are applied consistently at the administration level? Why or why not? (specifically from supervisors or at the LEA/district level)
15. What, if anything, fosters a sense of fairness in your school or system?

Values

16. To what extent does overlap exist between your values and the organizations?
17. What indicates to you there is / is not overlap?

Concluding Protocol

Thank you for participating in our discussion today. Again, I appreciate the rich conversation that has provided me with meaningful data that will help me understand factors contributing to principal job satisfaction.



Utah Leading through Effective, Actionable, and Dynamic Education

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