

## **The Principal Well-Being Crisis: Examining Workload Isolation, and Sustainability in Kentucky School Leadership**

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### Abstract

This mixed-methods study examines the working conditions and well-being of Kentucky principals through surveys (N = 66), focus groups (24 principals and 15 superintendents), and analysis of the Impact KY Working Conditions Survey (2023–2024). *The well-being crisis among school principals is not merely an individual concern but a systemic issue operating at school, district, and state levels, with far-reaching implications for schools and students.* Findings reveal a profession under significant strain, with principals reporting inadequate support to meet the complex demands of an ever-evolving role. Key themes include excessive workload, professional isolation, emotional exhaustion, and the 24/7 nature of the principalship that threatens sustainability in the role. Principals cite time constraints, compliance burdens, and lack of work-life balance as primary barriers to effectiveness and well-being. The Impact KY data revealed significant perception gaps, with principals rating working conditions 19–33 points higher than teachers, suggesting leadership may not fully recognize the depth of challenges facing both principals and staff. Both principals and teachers identified resources and emotional well-being as areas of greatest concern. The study documents how compliance requirements, inadequate staffing, and limited mental health supports contribute to principal burnout and attrition. Findings call for strengthened mentorship systems, policy streamlining, increased operational support, and coordinated well-being initiatives across state agencies, districts, and universities to ensure principal effectiveness and retention.

*Keywords:* principal well-being, workload, professional isolation, burnout, principal retention

## Introduction

School principals serve as the linchpin of educational systems, directly influencing school culture, instructional quality, and student achievement at the school level. Research demonstrates that differences in principal effectiveness through their school-level leadership practices, can translate into substantial student outcomes. For example, replacing a principal performing at the 25th percentile with one at the 75th percentile can increase annual student learning in math and reading by nearly three months (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 4). Despite this documented impact, the principalship has become increasingly unsustainable, raising concerns about the capacity of school leaders to sustain effective practice under escalating demands. Principals face mounting pressures from accountability systems, staffing shortages, student mental health crises, and ever-expanding compliance demands. Little to no support exists for their own well-being.

The well-being crisis among school principals is not merely an individual concern but a systemic issue with cascading implications for schools and students. Principal turnover disrupts school improvement efforts and negatively affects teacher retention, as new leadership often means significant shifts in school vision and instructional priorities (Snodgrass Rangel, 2017). When principals experience burnout and leave their positions, schools lose institutional knowledge and stability precisely when consistency is most needed for sustained improvement.

This study investigated Kentucky principals' professional well-being through the lens of workload, isolation, and sustainability. Using mixed-methods data from principal surveys, focus groups with both principals and superintendents, and

analysis of the statewide Impact KY Working Conditions Survey, the lived realities of school leadership in Kentucky was examined. This work explores three central concepts:

(a) In which domains do principals and superintendents perceive the greatest need for support to improve working conditions and well-being? (b) What factors contribute to principal workload, isolation, and emotional exhaustion? (c) How do principals perceive support from state and local educational agencies in addressing these well-being concerns?

The findings revealed a profession at a critical juncture. While principals demonstrate extraordinary dedication to their school communities, systemic challenges threaten their capacity to sustain effective leadership. This article documents these challenges and proposes coordinated interventions to support principal well-being and retention.

## Literature Review

The literature on principal well-being, working conditions, and sustainability reveals consistent themes across contexts and time periods. This review examined research on working conditions, autonomy, professional isolation, and turnover. These are factors that directly influence a principal's capacity to lead effectively and sustainably.

## Working Conditions and Principal Effectiveness

Working conditions significantly impact a principal's ability to lead effectively. Principal burnout and turnover are fueled by excessive administrative tasks, increasingly high demands of the job, and inadequate resources (Rangel, 2017). Over time, the principalship has expanded beyond a primary focus on instructional leadership to encompass crisis management, mental

health coordination, legal compliance, and community relations—often without corresponding increases in support staff or resources. Research has consistently recommended reducing bureaucratic burdens on principals, increasing access to support staff, and fostering positive district–principal relationships to counteract these challenges (Grissom & Loeb, 2011).

Districts that invest in leadership development, recruitment, and ongoing support are more likely to experience stable and effective leadership across schools (Wallace Foundation, 2015). However, many principals report that their working conditions prevent them from focusing on instructional leadership activities most closely linked to student achievement. When principals spend disproportionate time on managerial and operational duties rather than instructional leadership, both their effectiveness and well-being are diminished, reinforcing concerns about the long-term sustainability of the role.

### **Autonomy and Self-Efficacy**

Autonomy is another critical factor influencing principal effectiveness and well-being. Principals benefit from increased decision-making authority, which allows them to tailor instructional approaches and allocate resources in ways that align with the unique needs of their schools (Leithwood et al., 2020). Research has shown that principals' self-efficacy is strongly associated with job autonomy, job satisfaction, and perceived contextual constraints (Federici, 2012). When district and state compliance requirements limit principals' ability to respond to local conditions, both confidence and performance suffer.

Support from district leadership in reducing unnecessary mandates and increasing flexibility in budgeting and

staffing decisions enables principals to focus more fully on instructional leadership and school improvement efforts. Addressing these constraints by providing principals with appropriate authority and support can enhance leadership capacity and job satisfaction (Federici, 2012). Nevertheless, many principals continue to describe feeling caught between accountability pressures from above and operational realities on the ground, with insufficient latitude to exercise professional judgment.

### **Professional Isolation and Decision-Making Burden**

The principalship is inherently isolating. Principals are required to make final decisions on matters ranging from personnel issues and student discipline to ethical dilemmas, child-welfare reporting, and crisis response, often with limited opportunities for support due to confidentiality requirements. This isolation is compounded by the pace and volume of decisions principals must make daily. Earlier research on principal working conditions has demonstrated that the combination of high-stakes decision-making, confidentiality constraints, and rapid task demands contributes to emotional exhaustion and a persistent sense of professional isolation.

Recent scholarship has further conceptualized isolation as a structurally produced feature of leadership work rather than an individual characteristic. Contemporary research on leader loneliness highlights how leadership contexts create distinctive pathways to social disconnectedness through reduced peer equivalence, impression management pressures, and limited safe spaces for candid sense-making, making isolation consequential for leader judgment and well-being (Lam et al., 2024). Empirical studies focused specifically on principals echo these dynamics. Dor-Haim (2022) documented

how principals experience both episodic loneliness associated with acute events and ongoing day-to-day loneliness embedded within routine role structures, underscoring that isolation is a patterned feature of the principalship itself.

Isolation also interacts with the fragmentation and intensity of principals' daily work. Large-scale observational studies reveal that principals' workdays are highly fragmented, dominated by short task episodes and frequent interruptions—conditions that intensify decision fatigue, limit reflective problem-solving, and reduce opportunities for sustained relational leadership that might otherwise buffer isolation (Grissom et al., 2025). These findings extend earlier literature by demonstrating how workload structure and time fragmentation exacerbate both decision-making burden and emotional strain.

At the same time, research suggests that social connection functions as a critical protective resource for principals. Professional learning communities, peer networking opportunities, and mentorship structures enhance principals' ability to share best practices and receive ongoing support (Goldring et al., 2012). Longitudinal evidence further indicates that principals' social capital—including internal and external professional ties—is meaningfully associated with well-being, supporting the argument that networked professional support can buffer strain arising from high demands and limited opportunities to share responsibility (Beausaert et al., 2023). Related research from pandemic and post-pandemic contexts reinforces the conclusion that principal stress is shaped by the balance between job demands and available resources, suggesting that isolation and decision burden are system-conditioned experiences that can be mitigated through organizational supports, collegial networks,

and role-appropriate staffing and boundary protections (Upadyaya et al., 2021).

Despite consistent recommendations in the literature, access to sustained mentorship and collegial networks remains uneven across districts and states. Structured mentorship programs and principal networks are frequently identified as essential supports, yet they remain inconsistently implemented, leaving many principals to shoulder complex decision-making responsibilities in relative isolation.

### **Principal Turnover and Sustainability**

Principal turnover remains a persistent challenge with implications for school stability and student achievement. Turnover rates are influenced by job dissatisfaction, lack of administrative support, and challenging working conditions (Snodgrass Rangel, 2017). High turnover disrupts school improvement efforts and negatively affects teacher retention, as leadership transitions often result in shifts in school vision, priorities, and instructional focus.

Research indicates that investments in principal development and support can mitigate turnover and promote leadership stability. Wallace Foundation studies have shown that strategic investments in principal preparation and development, when paired with effective hiring practices, are associated with gains in student learning and teacher satisfaction (Wallace Foundation, 2015; Grissom et al., 2021). However, these investments must extend beyond skill development to address systemic conditions—including workload, professional isolation, autonomy constraints, and insufficient organizational support—that undermine principals' capacity to sustain long-term leadership in demanding contexts.

### Method

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to investigate Kentucky principals' well-being, working conditions, and sustainability in the role. Under the direction of the Kentucky Department of Education, a subgroup of the University Principal Preparation Initiative conducted the research using multiple data sources to triangulate findings and provide both breadth and depth of understanding.

### Participants

#### *Principal Survey*

The principal needs survey was distributed to all head principals across Kentucky through state listservs, university educator preparation provider representatives, and education cooperatives. Sixty-six principals completed the survey, representing all eight educational cooperative regions: Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative (22%), Green River Regional Educational Cooperative (19%), Kentucky Educational Development Cooperation (6%), Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative (3%), Northern Kentucky Cooperative for Educational Services (1%), Ohio Valley Educational Cooperative (12%), Southeast South-Central Educational Cooperative (12%), and West Kentucky Educational Cooperative (24%).

Respondents were evenly distributed by gender (51% male, 49% female). The majority described their setting as rural (64%), with 24% suburban and 12% urban. Seventy-five percent led Title I schools. School levels represented included elementary (40%), high school (30%), middle school (15%), and other configurations (15%). In terms of experience, 39% had served 0–3 years as principal, 27% had 4–7 years, 15% had 8–12 years, and 19% had 13 or more years of experience.

#### *Focus Groups*

Twenty-four principals and 15 superintendents participated in focus groups conducted either in person or virtually. Focus group questions explored principals' daily challenges, factors influencing their well-being, sources of support, and sustainability in the role. The protocol received Institutional Review Board approval, and all participants signed informed consent documents. Sessions were recorded, transcribed, and coded to maintain anonymity.

Focus group participants represented diverse locales based on National Center for Education Statistics classifications. Among principals, 10 served in rural districts, 8 in town settings, 4 in suburban areas, and 2 in urban contexts. Among superintendents, 9 led rural districts, 2 served towns, and 4 led suburban districts. Gender distribution among principals included 10 females and 14 males; among superintendents, 2 females and 13 males participated. Furthermore, focus group participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across geographic regions (within Kentucky), district types, and leadership roles. Principals and superintendents were recruited through district leadership networks, educational cooperatives, professional associations, and partnerships affiliated with the University Principal Preparation Initiative. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided.

#### *Impact KY Working Conditions Survey*

The Impact KY Working Conditions Survey, administered biennially to all Kentucky educators, provided data on teachers', principals', and other education professionals' experiences and working conditions. The 2023–2024 administration yielded 39,406 respondents. The survey measured favorability across nine domains: staff-leadership relationships, educating all students, school leadership, managing

student behavior, school climate, professional learning, feedback and coaching, emotional well-being and belonging, and resources.

### **Procedure and Data Analysis**

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns in principals' experiences and perceptions. Survey questions aligned with Impact KY categories, allowing for comparison between principal self-reports and statewide working conditions data. Many survey questions permitted respondents to select up to three choices, with results reported as percentages indicating the proportion of respondents who selected each item.

Focus group transcripts underwent thematic analysis using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to identify initial patterns and candidate themes. AI-generated outputs were treated as a preliminary analytic scaffold rather than final findings. Members of the research team independently reviewed transcripts alongside AI-identified themes to verify alignment with participant language and intent. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through researcher consensus, and themes were refined to ensure they were grounded in the raw data and accurately represented participant perspectives.

The convergent design allowed for integration of quantitative survey data, qualitative focus group narratives, and existing statewide survey data. This triangulation strengthened findings by revealing where different data sources confirmed common themes and where they illuminated different dimensions of principal well-being and working conditions.

### **Results**

The findings revealed four major themes related to principal well-being and sustainability: (a) overwhelming workload and time constraints, (b) professional

isolation and decision-making burden, (c) emotional exhaustion and work-life imbalance, and (d) significant perception gaps between principals and teachers. Each theme was supported by converging evidence from surveys, focus groups, and Impact KY data. While both principal and superintendent focus groups addressed overlapping topics, superintendent contributions most frequently emphasized issues related to decision-making burden, delegation, and leadership isolation; therefore, superintendent perspectives are most prominently reflected within that thematic area.

### **Theme 1: Overwhelming Workload and Time Constraints**

Principals consistently identified time as the most significant barrier to effectiveness. When asked what factor hindered their ability to provide meaningful feedback to teachers, 77% of survey respondents selected time constraints. This finding aligned with focus group narratives describing days filled with competing urgent demands that leave little room for instructional leadership.

Focus group participants described the principalship as requiring constant decision-making—what one principal characterized as "a thousand decisions" daily. Principals reported that the pace and volume of work make it difficult to prioritize instructional leadership activities. One principal noted spending "75 to 80 percent of my day managing special education issues," leaving minimal time for classroom observations, teacher coaching, or curriculum leadership.

The workload extends beyond the school day. Multiple principals described the 24/7 nature of the position, with one reflecting, "I took five days off in June, but my phone rang all day, every day." The constant connectivity through digital

communication means principals never fully disconnect from work responsibilities, contributing to exhaustion and preventing recovery time essential for sustained performance.

Principals identified several factors contributing to excessive workload. Survey respondents cited being asked to take on too many responsibilities (71%) and lack of staffing to address critical issues (59%) as factors contributing to negative well-being. In focus groups, principals described intensifying student needs—particularly in special education and mental health—without corresponding increases in specialized support staff. One principal explained: "Fourteen years ago, I'd get 70 applicants for one position. Now, I'm lucky if I get five—and sometimes none of them are qualified."

Compliance requirements emerged as another significant contributor to workload. Principals expressed frustration with state and federal policy demands that detract from instructional priorities. They voiced particular concern about the timing and utility of state assessment data, noting that delayed results make it impossible to use data for instructional improvement within the same year. One stated: "Science scores don't arrive until December," rendering the data largely irrelevant for current students and teachers.

Principals characterized many mandates as "compliance, not improvement," contributing little student value while consuming substantial administrative time. Frequent policy shifts compound this burden. One principal commented: "I need to know a year in advance if we're going to take the ACT or SAT. How do I plan for something that changes every summer?" This unpredictability prevents strategic planning and forces principals into reactive rather than proactive leadership.

## **Theme 2: Professional Isolation and Decision-Making Burden**

The isolating nature of the principalship emerged as a powerful theme across focus groups. Principals described decision-making as both isolating and emotionally taxing, particularly when decisions involved confidential personnel, student discipline, or ethical matters. One reflected, "Until you become the principal, you don't realize they really want you to make them—it's your decision."

The confidentiality inherent in many principal decisions limits opportunities for support. As one principal shared, "You can't always talk about what's weighing on you. Sometimes you just carry it." This inability to process difficult decisions with others contributes to the emotional burden of leadership. Principals noted that the weight of high-stakes decisions, combined with their confidential nature, creates a pervasive sense of isolation.

Survey data revealed that principals value trust as central to their work, with 77% identifying the level of trust and openness between leadership and staff as the factor most positively influencing their ability to engage teachers in shared decision-making. However, Impact KY data showed that trust between principals and faculty was one of the lowest-rated subcategories in the staff-leadership relationship domain, suggesting a disconnect between principals' perceptions and teachers' experiences.

This disconnect may relate to principals' difficulty with delegation. Superintendents in focus groups identified deficits in principal candidates' ability to delegate and distribute leadership, noting that "leaders must develop teams—they cannot do it alone." Yet principals in focus groups acknowledged struggling with delegation, contributing to their sense of

being overwhelmed and isolated in decision-making.

The emotional toll of decision-making extends beyond workload to the nature of decisions themselves. Principals described the tension between doing what is ethically right and managing the emotional consequences of those actions, such as reporting families to authorities or addressing staff misconduct. One superintendent noted the importance of transparency about these challenges, warning that aspiring principals need mentors who will be "100% transparent about what the job entails."

### **Theme 3: Emotional Exhaustion and Work-Life Imbalance**

Principals openly acknowledged the toll the position takes on personal well-being. When asked what factors would improve emotional well-being among staff, 80% of survey respondents selected improved work-life balance—the highest percentage for any factor. This finding suggests principals recognize that sustainable professional practice requires reasonable boundaries between work and personal life.

However, achieving work-life balance proves elusive for many principals. The constant connectivity of digital communication and pressure to be ever-present contribute to emotional exhaustion. Focus group participants described difficulty establishing boundaries, with the job's demands bleeding into evenings, weekends, and vacation time. Many principals expressed desire for district and state-level recognition of the importance of principal wellness, including structured time off, mental health supports, and reasonable workloads.

Impact KY data revealed that emotional well-being and belonging was the second-lowest rated category among both

teachers (53% favorable) and principals (77% favorable). While principals rated this domain more favorably than teachers, a 77% favorability rating still indicated significant concern. Only 44% of teachers and notably higher percentages of principals responded favorably regarding their own personal emotional well-being as a result of work. Additionally, only 34% of teachers expressed favorable views about concern for colleagues' emotional well-being.

Principals identified multiple contributors to negative well-being. Survey data showed challenging student behaviors (73%) and being asked to take on too many responsibilities (71%) as top factors. The intensification of student needs—particularly mental health and behavioral challenges—compounds principals' stress. One principal noted the difficulty of maintaining energy and optimism: "Keeping adults inspired is harder than keeping kids focused." Others observed growing burnout among staff leading to a "3:30 mentality," where employees disengage at day's end due to exhaustion.

Despite these challenges, many principals described deliberate self-care and boundary-setting strategies as essential to sustainability. Several emphasized the importance of modeling healthy habits for staff, noting that "if you don't feel cared for, you're not going to perform." However, systemic factors often work against individual coping strategies, suggesting that principal well-being requires organizational and policy-level interventions, not merely individual resilience.

### **Theme 4: Significant Perception Gaps Between Principals and Teachers**

Impact KY data revealed striking perception gaps between principals and teachers across all working condition domains. Principals rated all categories 19–

33 points higher than staff, with the largest gaps in feedback and coaching (33-point gap), professional learning (32-point gap), and school leadership (32-point gap). These substantial differences suggest that principals may not fully recognize the challenges teachers face or may experience their work environment fundamentally differently than their staff.

The perception gap extends to specific practices. Impact KY showed that school leader responsiveness to feedback had a 36-point difference between teacher (62% favorable) and principal (98% favorable) ratings. Similarly, principals felt they effectively engaged teachers in decision-making, yet teachers rated this area among the lowest in favorability, indicating only 52% favorability regarding teacher input toward important decisions.

Communication emerged as a particular area of concern. While 46% of principals identified "communicating effectively with all stakeholders" as one of their top three ways of setting a positive tone, superintendents specifically highlighted communication skills as an area where principals need improvement. Superintendents noted that "it's not the amount but the quality of communication that matters" and emphasized principals' need to "read the room" and understand what quality messaging stakeholders need at a given time.

Interestingly, despite widespread perception gaps, principals and teachers agreed on the two lowest-rated domains: resources (principals 73% favorable, teachers 47% favorable) and emotional well-being and belonging (principals 77% favorable, teachers 53% favorable). This convergence suggests that while principals and teachers may disagree about the extent of challenges in most areas, both groups recognize resource limitations and well-being concerns as critical needs.

The perception gaps raise important questions about principal awareness, evaluation systems, and support structures. If principals consistently rate working conditions more favorably than teachers, they may underestimate the support teachers need or fail to recognize problems requiring intervention. Alternatively, the gaps may reflect principals' positional pressure to present favorable assessments or genuine differences in how leadership and staff experience the school environment.

### **Discussion**

This study documents a principal well-being crisis characterized by overwhelming workload, professional isolation, emotional exhaustion, and significant perception gaps between principals and teachers. These findings illuminate the complex challenges facing Kentucky school leaders and have important implications for policy, practice, and principal preparation.

### **The Workload Dilemma: From Instructional Leadership to Crisis Management**

The finding that 77% of principals identify time as the primary barrier to providing meaningful feedback represents more than a scheduling problem—it reflects a fundamental tension in the modern principalship. Research demonstrates that principals' instructional leadership activities have the strongest correlation with student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021), yet principals in this study report spending the majority of their time on operational management, compliance tasks, and crisis response rather than instructional leadership.

This tension is exacerbated by intensifying student needs without corresponding increases in specialized support staff. Principals describe managing

complex special education cases, coordinating mental health services, and addressing behavioral crises—responsibilities that in better-resourced contexts might be distributed among school psychologists, social workers, special education coordinators, and behavior specialists. When one principal reports spending 75–80% of time on special education issues, it becomes clear that the role has evolved far beyond what can be reasonably expected of a single individual, regardless of preparation or skill.

The compliance burden compounds workload challenges. Principals' characterization of many mandates as "compliance, not improvement" echoes research documenting how accountability systems can devolve into bureaucratic exercises disconnected from meaningful school improvement (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). When state assessment data arrive too late to inform instruction for current students, the data collection becomes purely compliance-driven rather than improvement-focused. This disconnect between policy intent and practical utility creates cynicism and contributes to principals' sense that much of their work adds little value to teaching and learning.

### **Isolation as an Occupational Hazard**

Professional isolation emerged as a defining characteristic of the principalship, with important implications for well-being and effectiveness. The confidential nature of many principal decisions—personnel matters, student discipline issues, family crises—means principals must often process emotionally complex situations alone. While confidentiality serves important purposes, it also creates an occupational hazard: principals carry the emotional weight of difficult decisions without the collegial

support available to teachers who can debrief with peers.

The finding that principals struggle with delegation and distributed leadership suggests that isolation is not merely circumstantial but may be reinforced by principals' own leadership practices. Superintendents' observation that "leaders must develop teams—they cannot do it alone" points to a potential intervention: helping principals build leadership capacity in others not only distributes work but also creates colleagues with whom principals can share decision-making and problem-solving.

However, structural factors limit the effectiveness of individual-level solutions. The research literature on principal working conditions emphasizes that mentorship programs and professional learning communities can mitigate isolation (Goldring et al., 2020), yet such supports remain inconsistently available across districts. When principals lack access to sustained mentorship or peer networks, they must navigate complex challenges without the benefit of experienced guidance or collective problem-solving.

### **The Sustainability Crisis: When Well-Being Becomes Untenable**

The finding that 80% of principals identify work-life balance as essential to improved well-being, combined with narratives of constant connectivity and inability to disconnect, reveals a profession approaching unsustainability. The principal who reported that vacation days still meant "my phone rang all day, every day" illustrates how the 24/7 nature of contemporary school leadership erodes the recovery time essential for sustained high performance.

This finding aligns with research on burnout, which identifies insufficient recovery time as a critical factor in

emotional exhaustion (Boyd et al., 2011). While individual principals described self-care strategies and boundary-setting efforts, systemic factors often overwhelm individual coping mechanisms. The culture of constant availability, combined with legitimate emergencies that do require immediate principal response, makes it difficult for principals to establish and maintain boundaries even when they recognize the need to do so.

The convergence of principal and teacher concerns about emotional well-being, despite their divergence on most other domains, suggests this is a school-wide crisis rather than solely a principal issue. Impact KY data showing that only 44% of teachers report favorable emotional well-being as a result of work indicates that the stress and exhaustion principals experience cascades throughout the organization. This finding has important implications: interventions to support principal well-being may need to address organizational culture and workload at the school level, not just individual principal practices.

### **Understanding Perception Gaps: Implications for Leadership and Evaluation**

The 19–33 point perception gaps between principals and teachers across all working condition domains represent one of the study's most troubling findings. These gaps suggest either that principals significantly underestimate challenges facing teachers or that principals and teachers experience the school environment so differently that they effectively work in separate realities.

Several factors may contribute to these perception gaps. Positional bias may lead principals to view conditions more favorably because they have greater

autonomy and authority than teachers. Social desirability effects may cause principals to report more favorable assessments when completing surveys about their own schools. Alternatively, the gaps may reflect genuine differences in how leadership and staff experience school culture—principals may focus on inputs and intentions while teachers focus on outcomes and implementation.

The perception gap regarding communication is particularly notable given superintendents' identification of communication as an area where principals need growth. The disconnect between principals' confidence in their communication effectiveness and superintendents' assessment of this as a deficit suggests that principals may lack awareness of how their communication is received. Superintendents' emphasis on "reading the room" and understanding stakeholder needs points to a more nuanced communication skill set than principals may recognize as necessary.

These findings have important implications for principal evaluation and supervision. If principals consistently overestimate working conditions and their own effectiveness in areas like feedback, professional learning, and communication, traditional evaluation approaches that rely heavily on principal self-assessment may miss critical areas for growth. This suggests a need for evaluation systems that incorporate multiple perspectives, including teacher feedback, and that explicitly address the perception gaps documented in this study.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings point to several critical areas for intervention to support principal well-being and sustainability. These implications span state policy, district

practice, and preparation programs, requiring coordinated action across multiple levels of the educational system.

### **Reimagining Principal Workload Through Policy Reform**

State educational agencies must undertake comprehensive review of compliance requirements to eliminate mandates with little demonstrable impact on student learning. The finding that principals characterize many state requirements as "compliance, not improvement" suggests that policy streamlining could significantly reduce workload while potentially improving, rather than harming, educational quality. Such reviews should include clear, evidence-based links between any new mandate and student outcomes.

Assessment systems require particular attention. The utility of assessment data depends on timely reporting that allows educators to use results for instructional improvement. When principals report that science assessment scores arrive in December—long after the tested students have moved on—the assessment serves accountability purposes but provides no instructional value. States should establish standards for assessment reporting timelines that ensure data can inform practice for current students.

Districts can reduce principal workload by increasing operational support staff. The finding that principals spend 75–80% of time on special education management suggests a need for specialized personnel who can coordinate services, manage compliance documentation, and support teachers working with students with disabilities. Similarly, student mental health needs require mental health professionals rather than asking principals to serve as de facto counselors and social workers.

Investments in School Administration Managers and other operational support positions would allow principals to focus on instructional leadership rather than operational management.

### **Addressing Isolation Through Structured Mentorship and Networks**

The pervasive isolation principals experience requires systemic intervention through structured mentorship programs and professional learning networks. Research demonstrates that high-quality mentorship supports principal effectiveness (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007), yet such programs remain inconsistently available across districts. State and regional education agencies should establish formal, funded principal mentorship programs that span at least two years and include peer networking opportunities.

However, mentorship programs must be carefully designed to avoid adding burden to already overwhelmed principals. One experienced principal noted serving as mentor for multiple new principals while acknowledging, "I'm in year 13 in this district and I'm working with principals that are in year 1, 2, and 3, so I've been a mentor for the last 5 or 6 years. I do feel like there's somebody else I need to go watch, but I'm busy helping these new principals." This comment highlights the need for mentor compensation, reduced workload expectations for mentors, and careful consideration of mentor-mentee ratios.

Professional learning networks should be restructured to serve principals' needs rather than district compliance requirements. Principals expressed desire for job-embedded professional learning that occurs in or near their buildings rather than requiring extensive travel. Regional cohorts, virtual learning communities, and embedded

coaching models could provide collegial support while reducing the stress of leaving buildings during critical operational periods.

### **Prioritizing Well-Being Through Organizational Culture Change**

The finding that 80% of principals identify work-life balance as essential to well-being requires organizational and cultural interventions, not merely individual coping strategies. Districts should establish clear expectations regarding after-hours communication, model healthy boundaries at the district level, and protect principals' ability to take leave without work intrusion. When principals report that vacation days still mean constant phone calls, the problem extends beyond individual boundary-setting to organizational culture that treats principals as perpetually on-call.

The convergence of principal and teacher concerns about emotional well-being suggests that interventions must address school-level culture rather than targeting only individual principals. Districts should provide resources for school-wide wellness initiatives, ensure adequate staffing to prevent overload, and include well-being metrics in school and district evaluation systems. The finding that challenging student behaviors contribute significantly to negative well-being points to a need for comprehensive behavior support systems and mental health resources that reduce rather than increase principal burden.

State agencies can support principal well-being by establishing policies that explicitly recognize its importance. This might include principal wellness grants, regional retreat opportunities, or requirements that district principal evaluation systems include well-being and sustainability indicators. When principals model self-care and healthy boundaries for

their staff, they contribute to broader organizational wellness—but this requires systemic support rather than expecting principals to manage well-being while facing overwhelming workloads and constant availability expectations.

### **Addressing Perception Gaps Through Enhanced Feedback and Evaluation**

The significant perception gaps between principals and teachers require enhanced feedback mechanisms that help principals develop more accurate awareness of their schools' working conditions and their own effectiveness. Principal evaluation systems should incorporate multiple perspectives, including structured teacher feedback, rather than relying primarily on principal self-assessment or supervisor observation.

The specific finding that principals rate their communication effectiveness highly while superintendents identify communication as an area needing improvement suggests that preparation programs and professional learning should include explicit instruction in stakeholder communication, including simulation exercises that provide feedback on how communication is received. Superintendents' emphasis on "reading the room" points to social-emotional and contextual awareness skills that may not be adequately developed in traditional preparation programs.

Districts should consider implementing 360-degree feedback processes that systematically gather input from teachers, parents, and district leaders to help principals develop more accurate self-awareness. Such feedback mechanisms should be growth-oriented rather than punitive, positioning perception gaps as opportunities for learning rather than deficiencies requiring remediation. When

paired with coaching and mentorship, enhanced feedback can help principals develop the awareness necessary to bridge perception gaps and respond more effectively to stakeholder needs.

## Conclusion

This study documents a principal well-being crisis in Kentucky characterized by overwhelming workload, professional isolation, emotional exhaustion, and significant perception gaps between principals and teachers. These challenges threaten not only individual principal well-being but also the sustainability of effective school leadership across the state. As one focus group participant reflected: "We love the work. We just need a system that loves us back."

The findings reveal that principal well-being is not merely an individual concern but a systemic issue requiring coordinated intervention across state agencies, districts, and preparation programs. Workload must be addressed through policy reform that eliminates low-value compliance requirements and increases operational support staff. Isolation requires structured mentorship programs and professional learning networks designed to provide collegial support without adding burden. Emotional exhaustion and work-life imbalance demand organizational culture change that establishes reasonable boundaries and prioritizes sustainability alongside effectiveness.

The perception gaps documented in this study highlight the need for enhanced feedback mechanisms and evaluation systems that incorporate multiple perspectives. When principals consistently overestimate working conditions and their own effectiveness in critical areas, they lack the awareness necessary to improve practice. Closing these perception gaps requires both

individual development—helping principals become more attuned to stakeholder experiences—and systemic change in how principals receive feedback about their performance and their schools' environments.

The stakes are high. Research demonstrates that principal effectiveness significantly impacts student achievement, with the difference between a 25th and 75th percentile principal equivalent to three months of additional learning annually (Grissom et al., 2021). However, effectiveness cannot be sustained when principals experience chronic overload, isolation, and exhaustion. Principal turnover disrupts school improvement efforts and negatively affects teacher retention, creating cascading consequences for students and communities.

Addressing the principal well-being crisis requires recognition that current conditions are not sustainable and that incremental adjustments will prove insufficient. State agencies must fundamentally reconsider compliance requirements, assessment timelines, and policy stability. Districts must invest in operational support staff and establish cultures that prioritize well-being alongside accountability. Preparation programs must better prepare candidates for the realities of the role, including the emotional demands and need for boundary-setting.

Most importantly, the system must recognize principals not as superhuman individuals who can sustain impossible workloads indefinitely, but as professionals who require reasonable working conditions, ongoing support, and opportunities for recovery and renewal. The principals in this study demonstrated extraordinary dedication to their school communities. The question is whether the system will demonstrate equivalent dedication to supporting their

well-being and sustainability in this critical role.

Future research should examine the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to address workload, isolation, and well-being concerns. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking principal retention and effectiveness in relation to working conditions and support systems would provide valuable evidence for policy decisions. Understanding which supports most effectively promote principal sustainability will be essential as Kentucky and other states work to ensure that school leadership remains both effective and sustainable for the educators willing to take on this demanding role.

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