

The Changing Nature of Principals' Work Study by Western University 2014 Q and A

Q 1. Why was this study undertaken?

A. Over the past several years, we have been hearing from principals who are increasingly frustrated by the changing nature of their role. While many teachers enter the role of the principal to focus on instruction and curriculum, they find that they end up spending much of their day on activities that have little to do with instruction, staff or students.

We commissioned Western University to conduct some research into what principals do, and to establish a more accurate picture of principals' work, as little data was available on that subject. The survey examines how principals approach their work, how they spend their time and the challenges their work presents.

The data allows us to have a better understanding of the changing nature of the role, will inform and refine our advocacy efforts, can be used to better inform potential principals about what to expect from the role, and offers insights into how the OPC can provide the necessary supports to help our Members adapt to, and succeed at, the changing role.

Q 2. How many people took part in the study?

A. 1423 completed online surveys were used for data analysis, which is just over half (53%) of our principal membership. Three-quarters of survey respondents were elementary principals, and about 63% were women.

Q 3. Why did so few principals take part?

A. Actually, given the time to complete the survey, and the constant demands on a principals' day, we were quite pleased to have such a large number take part in the survey. A 50%+ participation rate is very good.

Q 4. Why were there so many elementary principals and women, and so few secondary principals/men who took part?

A. The gender and panel of principals who took part in the survey reflects our membership. About 72% of our membership is in elementary schools and about 63% of our membership is women.

Q 5. What methodology was used?

A. Data collection was carried out using a mixed methods design that included focus groups and an online survey. The researchers from Western University can provide more details about the methodology.

Q 6. How much did the study cost?

A. The cost of the study was about \$50,000.

Q 7. That's a lot of money. Is that an appropriate use of your member fees?

A. Yes it is. One of the mandates of the OPC is to advocate on behalf of our Members. In order to do so constructively and competently, we need to have up-to-date data. This study provided us with that data, so that we can now talk to the Minister and others about what is needed to address the challenges of the role.

Q. 8 What are the results of the study?

A. The survey found that while principals like their jobs and feel they are making a difference, the role is becoming increasingly complex and overwhelming, and is having a major impact on attracting and retaining the best candidates.

Q 9. What is the issue around recruitment?

A. Too few educators are aspiring to the role of the principal in Ontario. While principals encourage teachers to move into the administrative role, many teachers view the role as unattractive, with too many demands leading to too much stress. If we want to attract the best people to the role and keep them there, then we need to better understand the role, its challenges, and how best to support principals and vice-principals.

Q 10. What are you asking for?

As a result of the report, the OPC is advocating for

- More autonomy for principals and vice-principals so that we can make decisions in the best interests of our students related to safety, well-being and instruction
- Fewer mandated initiatives or more admin time to enable us to keep up with the increasing number of new responsibilities and resulting workload
- The revocation of Regulation 274.

Q 11. How much will these recommendations cost?

A.Revoking Reg 274, providing more autonomy to principals and removing some responsibilities from our plates will cost nothing. If the government decides to continue adding responsibilities and initiatives to an already overburdened workload, then we are asking for additional vice-principals to help us keep up. We have not yet determined how many VPs are needed. That will depend on the response we receive to the other recommendations.

Q 12. What did you learn from the study?

A. The survey indicated that the principalship has become so structured and rooted in compliance that there is little room for principals to demonstrate professional judgement or autonomy in their daily work. In essence, principals are not being given the opportunity to use their expertise, experience and professionalism to make decisions at the school level.

Despite the fact that the Minister, ministry and school boards place a strong emphasis on the principal as the instructional leader in the school, on average principals spend only five hours per week on curriculum and instruction. 82% of respondents would like to spend more time on these tasks.

Q 13. What exactly does the changing nature of principals' work mean? What has changed?

A. Over the past decade, many new responsibilities have been added to the principal's plate. While principals would prefer to spend more time with students and staff and to be the school's lead learner, the survey indicated that over the past year, emotional intelligence/relationship-building skills, inter-personal communication skills and knowledge of effective teaching and learning were three important areas that principals needed to strengthen to better navigate the changing education agenda.

Q 14. What does more autonomy mean?

A. There are many initiatives that are mandated by school boards and the ministry. While each one is valuable, not all necessarily apply in equal measure to every school. For example, a school that is performing well on its math scores may not need to do more work in that area, but may instead need to spend more time on mental health issues.

Increased autonomy means allowing principals to prioritize the mandated initiatives and focus on the ones that are most important in their own school, based on the needs of the school community.

Q 15. Reg 274 is supposed to lead to fairer hiring practices. How can you be opposed to that?

A. While we support transparent and reasonable hiring practices for occasional, long-term occasional and permanent teachers, seniority should not be the deciding factor. We have made it clear to the government that we believe the Regulation has had a detrimental impact in schools and should be scrapped. We would support a regulation that is very concise, requiring only that school boards develop and post fair and reasonable hiring practices for these positions.

We have collected dozens of example from our Members about the very difficult challenges that the regulation has caused in schools including

- Teachers are being hired based on seniority, who have the qualifications on paper for a particular role (eg music) but who cannot adequately teach the subject area
- Hiring can take 4-6 weeks (post to Contract teachers, then to the LTO list, then post to the OT Roster, and then post to external)
- Positions not filled on the first day of school can result in students having a number of short-term supply teachers for the first month of school. This is upsetting for the students and the parents, and affects the delivery of the curriculum.

Q 16. How hard is it to hire good teachers?

A. Under Regulation 274, principals have lost the ability to consistently hire the teachers who they consider to be the best fit for a classroom. Instead, hiring is now driven by seniority. This is a clear example of how principals need the autonomy to be able to make decisions that are the best ones for their schools.

Q 17. If the hiring regulation is revoked, won't principals return to relying on nepotism to hire teachers?

A. First, there is little if any evidence that principals hired teachers based on nepotism. Although that claim has been made, it has never been shown to be accurate.

Second, we support fair and transparent hiring practices, which in our view are already in place in boards across the province. If the ministry were to develop a regulation based on fair and transparent practices, that allow principals and school boards to consider, select and hire the best teacher, we would support it.

Q 18. How are principals spending their time?

A. The survey indicated that principals work an average of 60 hours per week. Of this (rounded):

- 15 hours per week are spent in meetings
- 11 hours are spent reading and writing emails
- 8 hours are spent on student discipline or attendance
- 6 hours are spent on personnel
- 5 hours are spent on curriculum and instruction
- 5 hours are spent on school board committees
- 2 hours are spent on building maintenance.

Q 19. Are principals generally happy with the way they are spending their time?

A. No. Principals want to spend more time interacting with students and staff. While almost half of a principal's average day is spent in his or her office, a little over 10% is spent in classrooms or hallways. More than 80% of principals would like to spend more time on curriculum and instruction; proactively walking the hallways, playground and lunchroom; and on classroom walkthroughs, where they can see the teaching and learning in action. And ¾ would like more time for professional development to strengthen their own skills.

Q 20. What do you mean by lead learner?

A. A Lead Learner is a principal who facilitates a collaborative and professional learning environment for teachers, students and staff, to maximize the teaching and learning potential of the group, while also focusing on the operational and managerial responsibilities of the role in a way that supports student achievement and well being. So instead of defining a principal as either an instructional leader or a manager, a lead learner is both, recognizing that there are important managerial and operational duties that support student achievement as much as direct instructional leadership does. In essence, a lead learner is an instructional leader who also spends time on tasks that help increase student achievement such as student discipline, parent communication, timetabling and being visible throughout the school.

Q 21. Isn't it a principal's job to be in their office and doing paperwork? Shouldn't it be up to teachers to walk the halls and be in classrooms?

A. A principal is an educator. While there are administrative aspects to the role, the most important part of any educator's day should be the time they spend with kids. Principals feel strongly that spending time with students and staff – whether that be walking the halls, visiting classrooms, supporting teams or clubs, working with teachers to support and improve their practices or being accessible to the school community – are all important aspects of being the lead learner in the school. They simply want more time to do that. Right now, there are just too many balls in the air.

Q 22. Well if the principal isn't going to be doing some of that administration, who will?

A. Earlier this year, we proposed a review of the role of the principal. In our view, some of a principal's current roles could more efficiently be performed by other professionals. For example, Compliance Officers could take on much of the paperwork and reporting (in relation to Ministry initiatives and health and safety responsibilities) that are increasingly becoming an onerous part of the job. Or business officers could look after budgets, acquisitions and maintenance issues. While these things need to be done, we do not believe they always necessarily need to be done solely by the principal.

Q 23. Are there any areas in which principal time has increased dramatically?

A. Mental health is a growing issue in all schools. 88% of principals are involved in school-based programs designed to support student mental health. Anecdotally, we are hearing from our Members that the mental health needs of our students have become more complex. While the system is attempting to respond, there are not enough resources – human or financial – to address the increased needs. And there are issues related to accessing community supports in a timely manner.

Q 24. How else are principals spending their time?

A. A number of initiatives mandated by the government take up much of a principal's work day including Regulation 274 (80%), Growing Success (77%), *Safe Schools Act* (69%), anti-bullying (66%), full-day kindergarten (50%), equity and inclusive education (43%), and the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (35%).

In relation to Reg. 274, principals reported that it has led to

- the best teacher not always being hired for the position, due to seniority as a criteria
- a loss of autonomy in making important decisions related to hiring teachers
- the inability to hire quality teaching staff
- a time-consuming process that diverts attention away from teaching and learning
- a process that is not in the best interest of students
- a barrier to having a more representative population (diversity) of teachers in the classroom.

Q 25. Principals reported issues with staff apathy, resistance to change, and lack of teacher knowledge and skills. There is clearly a poor working relationship between principals and teachers.

A. I don't think that is an accurate reflection of the data. In any workplace and in any sector, there are employee issues. Principals are responsible for mentoring, supervising and assessing teachers. In some situations, challenges arise. More autonomy would help principals better manage staff issues. But most principals I know respect and enjoy working with their teaching staff.

Q 26. Why are principals spending so much time on mental health issues?

A. The mental health community estimates that 1 in 5 Ontario children under the age of 19 experiences a mental, emotional or behavioural disorder that is severe enough to seriously affect their daily functioning at home and in school. As a result, we are seeing a lot more students in our schools who have been diagnosed with mental health issues and require treatment of some kind, or who appear to be struggling but do not have a formal diagnosis. Educators are not medical professionals, so our ability to help these students is limited. Instead, we need to make sure they find the resources they need so they can safely and effectively be part of the school system.

Unfortunately, we often hear from families that those services are simply not available, or kids are on very long waiting lists to access the services. This is having a huge impact in schools and is taking up more and more of a principal's time.

Principals have repeatedly reported a lack of resources – both human and financial – to deal with the number of students suffering from mental health issues. And we also do not have the autonomy to ensure these kids are appropriately placed in schools and are receiving the assistance they need.

Q 27. What are some of the mental health issues schools are dealing with?

A. There are a variety of issues such as anxiety disorders, depression, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism, behaviour disorders, eating disorders, schizophrenia, mood disorders and substance abuse.

Q 28. In the study, principals also reported tensions with parents as a challenge. How prevalent is that?

A. We have over 2 million students in the public school system. They come from many backgrounds, cultures and religions. And there are many different parenting styles. So sometimes there are differences of opinion between the family and the school. Parents often expect that the Principal has considerably more authority and autonomy than is actually the case, which can lead to expectations that can't be filled.

Part of our job is to engage parents, help them navigate an education system that can be overwhelming and represents high stakes for their children, and help them step back and see how decisions affect all students, not just one or two. Principals reach out to parents through school communication, school events and School Council meetings to try to find solutions that are in the best interests of the kids.

Q 29. The survey notes that almost 30% of principals are self-medicating. Is there a substance abuse problem in the school system?

A. Principals were asked how they cope with emotionally draining days. The vast majority of principals use a number of positive strategies to cope such as spending time with family and friends (86%), talking with colleagues (75%), engaging in physical activities (66%) and watching TV/movies (60%).

While we don't know what respondents were referring to when they checked off the self medication option, it could be that they have a glass of wine after a particularly difficult day at work, which may not be that uncommon from the general adult population.

Certainly it is a concern when any employee feels the need to engage in some kind of self medication to cope with a difficult or stressful job. We do not have statistics on other professions to compare these numbers. But what it does tell us is that we need to understand the stresses of this job and find ways to assist principals to deal with that stress in a positive way.

Q 30. The report also notes that this 30% number could be low, as some principals may have under-reported on this. Is that the case?

A. We have no way of knowing if any under-reporting occurred.

Q 31. Do these stats indicate principals are unhappy with their job?

A. More than 90% of principals believe their school is a good place to work and perceive that their job makes a meaningful difference in the school community. Those numbers indicate high job satisfaction, despite the challenges and pressures.

Q 32. What are some of the other challenges that principals face?

A. 87% of principals feel they never have enough time to do their work. 72% feel pressured to work long hours. And only 38% feel they have the resources necessary to do their job properly.

Q 33. Is it concerning that 21% of principals wish they had remained a teacher or would have pursued a career in a sector other than education?

A. Stats like these are always concerning. A teacher's job and a principal's job are not the same. Some teachers who were very strong and successful teachers do not enjoy the role of the principal once they make that move. That is one of the reasons we have been lobbying the government to explore options with teachers' unions that would allow administrators to return to a teaching position with their seniority intact.

Q 34. Principals reported wanting additional Professional Development in a number of areas. Does that mean they are not qualified for the job?

A. What that means is that principals are acknowledging the changing nature of their role and the new responsibilities they have, and are seeking more training to help them manage and be successful in their role.

Q 35. If the surveys were completed in November 2013, why has it taken so long to release this report?

A. After the surveys were completed, the researchers spent months analyzing the data and then studying it for trends. It is a time-consuming process.

During the spring of 2014, the Ministry also conducted a workload study with principals and vice-principals as part of the agreement that was reached with principal groups in 2013. Initially we planned to release the Western study in concert with the Ministry study. However, the Ministry study, originally to be completed in December 2013, was delayed some months.

Q 36. Is this study being released now due to upcoming negotiations? Are you just using this to get a better deal?

A. No. The survey was conducted in 2013 in response to anecdotal evidence collected from our Members over several years that the role is becoming unmanageable. We contracted a university to collect up-to-date, relevant, credible data on the issue so that we could effectively and professionally advocate on their behalf. 1400 of our Members responded, which demonstrates how important these issues are for principals. The release date of the study has nothing to do with ongoing negotiations in the education sector. It is about determining the challenges of the role so that we can address them in the best interest of kids.

Q 37. Is it time to put principals back into unions so the government will treat them better?

A. Our Members are educators who belong to a professional association. It is not our wish to return to being union members and we don't believe that's necessary in order to improve the nature of the role. Principals and vice-principals lead and manage schools. We anticipate that the results of this survey will be of real concern to school boards and the government, and that the concerns identified in the study will be addressed.