

The Changing Nature of Principals' Work 2014 Study by Western University Summary and Background

The Study

To date, little research has existed about the role of the principal in Ontario, what principals do on a daily basis and how the role is changing. While we have heard considerable anecdotal evidence about the changing nature of the role and how additional responsibilities were being added to the principal's plate, no one knew exactly if this was the case and, if so, to what extent.

Another pattern that has been noted is the reluctance of many teachers to aspire to the role of the principal. In order to attract and retain the best candidates, a better understanding is needed of the role, and the challenges need to be addressed.

The Ontario Principals' Council contracted Western University to conduct research on the role of the principal, examining how principals approach their work, how they spend their time and the challenges their work presents. 1,423 elementary and secondary principals took part in the survey.

Study Highlights

The report noted that the principalship has become so structured and rooted in compliance that there is little room for principals to demonstrate professional judgment or autonomy in their daily work.

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 matters
- 5 hours are spent on curriculum and instruction
- 5 hours are spent on school board committees.

A majority of survey respondents reported they would prefer to spend more time being the school's lead learner; walking the hallways, playground and lunchroom; doing classroom walkthroughs; and taking part in professional development. 82% of respondents reported being too busy dealing with managerial tasks to give instructional issues the attention they deserve.

Principals spend 48% of their day in their office, but only 13% in classrooms, 12% in hallways and 8% on the schoolyard.

Duties and Responsibilities

The survey noted that a number of recent changes and the nature of school-based programs have altered the work principals do on a daily basis:

- 88% of principals are involved in school-based programs designed to support student mental health
- 87% administer programs aimed at improving the social skills of students
- 64% engage in student leadership training
- 63% spend time on breakfast/nutrition programs.

In addition, recent provincial policy decisions have influenced principals' work. Principals reported that "a lot" of their time is taken up with:

- Regulation 274 (80%)
- Growing Success (77%)
- *Safe Schools Act* (69%)
- Anti-bullying (66%)
- *Putting Students First Act* (65%)
- Full-day kindergarten (50%)
- Equity and inclusive education (43%)
- *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (35%).

In relation to Reg. 274, principals reported:

- A loss of autonomy in making important decisions related to hiring teachers
- The inability to consistently hire quality teaching staff
- A time-consuming process that diverts their 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.
- A lengthy process that often results in classes without regular teachers at key times of the school year, such as opening day in September.

Challenges

The survey identified many challenges of the role including:

- Difficulty hiring and recruiting the right teachers
- Lack of time to evaluate teachers
- Teacher turnover
- Lack of time for teacher planning and professional development.

Other factors that affect principals' work include:

- Mental health issues among students/parents
- Student discipline
- Provincial mandates
- Pressure to constantly adopt new programs
- Lack of recognition for principals
- Negative stereotypes about the school community
- Social problems in the school community (poverty, gangs, drugs).

Well-Being and Work-Life Balance

Principals use similar strategies to cope with the stresses of the job. The most common coping strategies are:

- Spending time with friends and family (86%)
- Talking with colleagues (75%)
- Engaging in physical activities (66%)
- Watching TV/movies (60%).

29% of the sample indicated that they self-medicate in an effort to cope. What self-medicating entails was not identified, other than the researchers providing the example of having a drink of alcohol to cope with emotionally draining days.

Job Satisfaction

An overwhelming number of survey respondents have good things to say about the role:

- 91% of principals believe their school is a good place to work
- 92% perceive their job as making a meaningful difference in the community

At the same time, there are fairly consistent reports of detractors from job satisfaction:

- 87% indicate they never seem to have enough time to do their work
- 72% feel pressured to work long hours
- 38% feel they have the resources necessary to do their job properly
- 36% report they rarely achieve an effective work-life balance
- 21% wish they would have remained a teacher or would work in a sector other than education if they had a choice.

Professional Development

Although principals have been educators for many years, have advanced training and participate in ongoing PD, the changing nature of the job has led them to have to seek new skills in order to navigate the changing educational agenda, including emotional intelligence/relationship-building, communication skills, knowledge of teaching and learning, mental health counselling, political astuteness/awareness, stress management, technology skills, conflict mediation, statistics/data analysis and financial budgeting.

OPC Response

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.