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Finding Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from School Leaders

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Project Brief Volume 1 Issue 1

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the ongoing social and political movements in the United States, has dramatically impacted the work of school leaders. Over the past year and a half, school leaders have navigated unprecedented challenges of crisis leadership while finding ways to lead schools for equity (Grissom & Condon, 2021). Such immense pressures have put school leaders in jeopardy of burnout and work-related fatigue, which may further escalate the already high turnover of principals. The 21st Century California School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) and the University of California Berkeley Leadership Programs launched the Resilient Leadership Project in the spring of 2021 to investigate individual and contextual factors that influence Californian principals' resilience and wellbeing. The aim of this longitudinal project is to better understand which groups of principals are most vulnerable to burnout and what factors protect them from burnout or exacerbate their risk of burnout. To examine this, our first wave of data collected information on principals' personal and school-level demographics, perceptions of self-efficacy in school-level and district-level improvement, perceived connectedness with schools and districts, perceived level of professional support, compassion fatigue, core values for pursuing a career in leadership, and within-school stressors (see sidebar for definitions of each variable). Items and questions were informed by the content from a pilot study¹ that we conducted in the early phase of the pandemic (June 2020). This pilot study was completed with the support of the Stuart Foundation and data were collected from graduates of the UC Berkeley and UCLA Principal Leadership Institutes.

With 234 responses, survey results indicated that principals across demographic groups reported high rates of stress but have different experiences with regard to factors of resilience and wellbeing. Specifically, gender, multilingual status, school location, and longevity are significantly associated with problems with connectedness and efficacy. With regard to stressors experienced by principals, new principals (1–2 years) reported significantly higher levels of school-level stressors compared to mid-career (6–10 years) and later-career (15 or more years) principals. Across all experience levels, principals rated “issues related to the reopening of schools” as the most stressful stressor. Additionally, findings indicated that high levels of connectedness with schools and districts, high levels of efficacy at both school and district levels, and high levels of professional support contributed to lower levels of compassion fatigue among principals. Finally, based on principals' self-reported core values for pursuing a career in leadership, four distinct profiles of principals were generated. Principals from the four profiles differed from each other with respect to their personal and school characteristics, suggesting the heterogeneity of principals' core values and setting the stage for further research on the correlations between principals' core values and well-being. Taken together, the first wave of this study suggests that the experience of stress and burnout, particularly for certain demographic groups, as well as effective support strategies, are areas where critical investigations are needed in order to address the broader issues of supporting the wellbeing and resilience of our leaders as they cope with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ Please use the following link for more information about this pilot study: <https://tinyurl.com/yc6svzmx>

KEY TERMS

- **Efficacy in school-level and district-level improvement:** Belief on how well the principal and their district are executing the necessary actions to produce improvements at the school level and district level
- **Connectedness with schools and districts:** Feeling of belonging to the school and district
- **Professional support:** Individually-sought job-related support for principals that goes beyond what their school site can provide
- **Compassion fatigue:** Behaviors and emotions resulting from being exposed to and knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by others and the stress resulting from wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person
- **Core values:** Purpose and motivation for pursuing a career in leadership

Background and Context

The pandemic has dramatically impacted the work of school leaders and leadership practice. Over the past year and a half, school principals were challenged to navigate and restructure ways to lead their schools amidst great changes and uncertainty (Harris & Jones, 2020). Similar to managing other types of crises, school leaders need not only to engage in effective communication and facilitate sensemaking in uncertainty, but also to be adaptive and attentive to the emotional wellbeing and health of their employees (McLeod & Dulskey, 2021). However, the current pandemic crisis differs from other catastrophic events in its year-long and unequal impacts on individuals and communities. Therefore, school principals were put in a position not only to practice crisis leadership (Grissom & Condon, 2021) but also to lead schools for equity, an unprecedentedly challenging role for many principals. Furthermore, in 2020–2021, the United States experienced waves of social and political movements related to both global health and social epidemics. In California, school leaders also faced financial constraints, anticipated state budget reductions, and coped with remote instruction for the bulk of the school year. These challenges have put school leaders in jeopardy of compassion fatigue and burnout.

Scholars are starting to understand how school principals have navigated challenges in the COVID-19 pandemic (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; McLeod & Dulskey, 2020; Netolicky, 2020). For example, Netolicky (2020) explored tensions that principals have experienced during the pandemic as they try to adapt their leadership and balance equity, excellence, and accountability while considering both schools' outcomes and wellbeing of students, families, and teachers. However, there has been a scarcity of empirical evidence examining principal wellbeing and resilience under the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from the aforementioned pilot study conducted in the

fall of 2020 revealed that school principals' stress levels during the pandemic varied across demographic groups.² Based on the preliminary findings of the pilot study, 21CSLA and the University of California Berkeley Leadership Programs launched the Resilient Leadership Project in the spring of 2021 to investigate individual and contextual factors that influence principals' resilience and wellbeing. The project aims to better understand which groups of principals are most vulnerable to compassion fatigue and what factors protected them from compassion fatigue or exacerbated their risk of compassion fatigue. It also focused on a broad representation of California principals.

Overview of the Principal Resilience Survey

Open to all who served as K–12 school principals in California during the 2020–2021 school year, this survey was designed to identify significant stressors and examine the psychological factors that protect school leaders from burnout during the pandemic, including principal self-efficacy and district efficacy, sense of connectedness to the school and district, professional support, and professional core values. The survey was distributed by 21CSLA as well as UC Berkeley and UCLA Leadership Programs to regional directors of 21CSLA and networks of Leadership Programs alumni during early spring of 2021. Survey questions were adapted from the 2020 pilot survey and were split into six sections, with each response item on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. Below are the descriptions of the key measures and sample items:

- **Self-efficacy in school level and district level improvement** refers to the principal's belief on how well the principal and their district are executing the necessary actions to produce improvements at the school level and district level.
 - Example response items for school-level principal efficacy include: *nurture positive changes in your school, create a positive learning environment in your school, and improve student learning as demonstrated by formative and summative outcomes.*
 - Example response items for district-level efficacy include: *our district has successfully recruited, retained, and supported high-quality teachers and district staff members value collective and team leadership.*
- **Connectedness with schools and districts** refers to the principal's feeling of belonging to the school and district.
 - Example response items include: *I feel like I belong at my school/district, I feel I am treated with respect by others at my school/district, and I feel a sense of community with my school/district.*
- **Professional support** refers to the job-related support principals seek out when they need help that goes beyond what their school site can provide.

²Please use the link below for more information about this pilot study: <https://tinyurl.com/yc6svzmx>

► Example response items include: *contact former program leaders and/or instructors, reach out to peer colleagues who will assist me, and reach out to others on social media/support groups.*

► **Compassion fatigue** refers to “the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other and the stress resulting from wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person” (Figley, 1995, p. 7). For school principals, compassion fatigue might result from their desire to support their students and staff who experienced life challenges caused by the pandemic.

► Example response items include: *I find myself distressed when listening to my students’/families’ stories and situations and I can feel overwhelmed trying to cope with the emotional, physical, and psychological responses from my job.*

► **Core values** refer to the purpose and motivation for pursuing a career in leadership.

► Example items include: *make a contribution to the community, better address the needs of students and families, and have more decision-making authority and voice.*

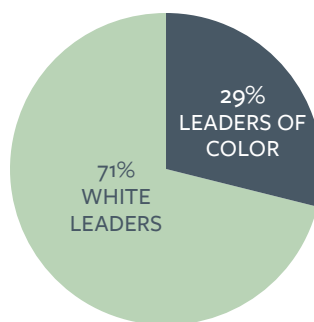
While anonymous, the survey also collected personal and school-level demographic information, including the participant’s credentialing process, current work environment, years employed as a principal, years employed at current site (regardless of their role), and years employed at current district (regardless of their role) to better understand how principal resilience is distributed across personal and environmental factors within specific contexts and career trajectories. In order to examine 1) demographic differences across all response variables; 2) key variables that influence compassion fatigue and principal self-efficacy; and 3) potential associations between professional core values and compassion fatigue, we conducted various statistical analyses.³ The following sections highlight the major findings.

Demographic Information of Survey Participants

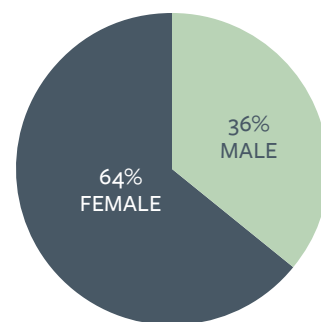
Data was collected from 234 principals in California during the spring of 2021. The graphs display the demographic backgrounds of our participants:

The racial/ethnic backgrounds of our interviewees were as follows: 66.1% White, 4.8% Asian American, 7.3% Black or African American, 29% Hispanic or Latinx, 1.6% Native American, 6% two or more races, and 7.3% identified as another race.

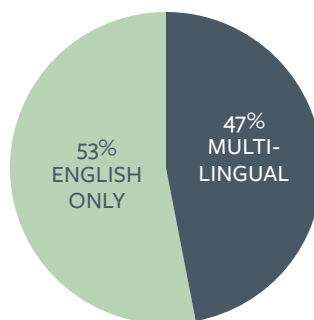
RACE



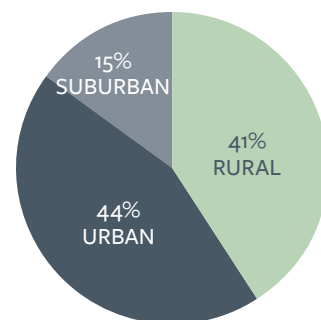
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LANGUAGES SPOKEN

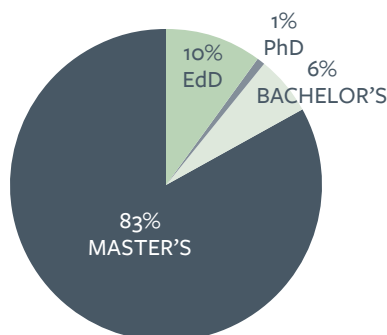


ENVIRONMENT

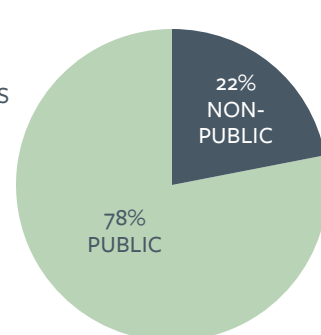


YEARS	% OF YEARS PRINCIPAL	% OF YEARS AT CURRENT SITE
1-2	20%	32.61%
3-5	30.87%	40%
6-10	33.04%	20%
> 11	16.09%	7.30%

EDUCATION LEVEL

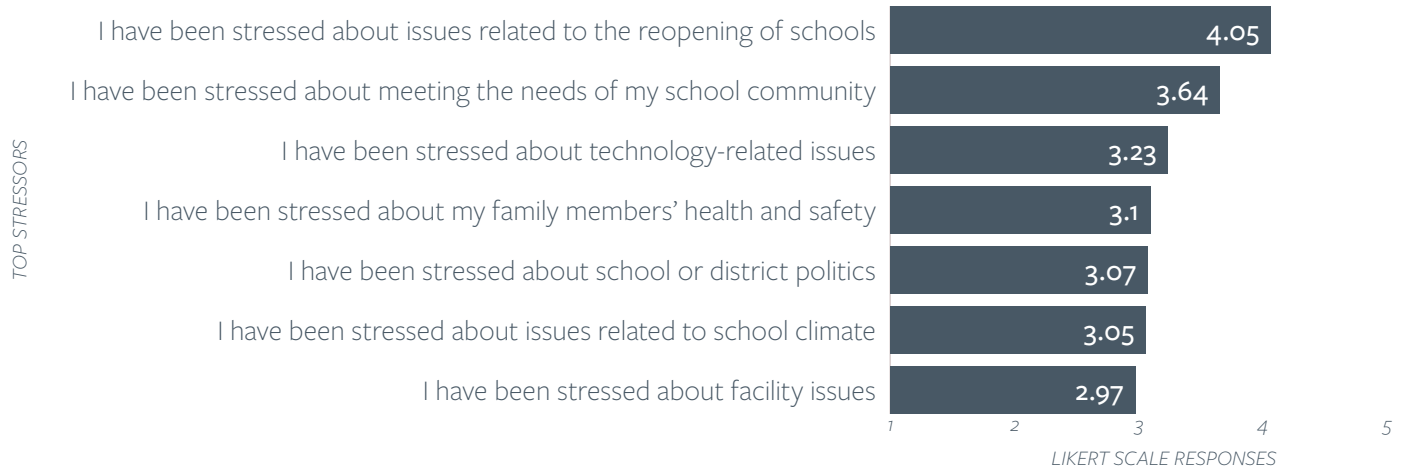


SCHOOL TYPE



³In order to interpret the responses, we conducted group mean comparisons, multiple regressions, and latent profile analysis using Stata. The group mean comparisons and multiple linear regressions were used to compare the averages of the variables by certain demographic factors and analyze if these differences were statistically significant, while controlling for all other variables. Further multiple logistic and linear regressions were used to examine main and interactive effects of key variables on principals’ compassion fatigue and also examine what factors contribute to the development of principal self-efficacy. Additional multiple linear regressions were used to detect potential associations between principals’ professional core values and compassion fatigue, and, in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of principals’ professional core values, profiles of principals were generated based on their responses to the professional core value items.

TOP STRESSORS DURING COVID-19



Key Finding #1: *Demographic Differences Affect Connectedness, Efficacy, and Stress.*

We found that gender, multilingual status, school location, and longevity have statistically significant relationships with issues of connectedness, efficacy, and stress in the following ways:

Gender

On average, female principals reported utilizing significantly higher levels of professional support, including support from their schools, supervisors, and peers, compared to male principals. This difference was statistically significant, with female principals reporting 8% higher levels of using professional support than male principals.

Multilingual Status

Multilingual principals, or principals who speak at least one language in addition to English, reported significantly higher perceptions of district efficacy for school improvement and felt more connected with their district compared to principals who only speak English. In particular, multilingual principals reported 9% higher levels of district efficacy for school improvement and their district connectedness compared to English-only principals, and this difference was statistically significant.

School Location

Principals in rural districts reported significantly higher perceptions of district efficacy for school improvement than principals in urban and suburban districts. These differences were statistically significant, with principals in rural districts reporting 4% higher, on average, than suburban principals and 7% higher, on average, than urban principals with respect to their district efficacy for school improvement. Principals in rural districts also reported significantly higher levels of connectedness to their districts compared to principals in urban and suburban districts. These differences were statistically significant, with principals in

rural districts reporting 4% higher, on average, than suburban principals and 14% higher, on average, than urban principals with respect to their district connectedness.

Longevity

Principals at all years of practice rated 6 out of 13 stressors at the moderate to high level, with “issues related to the reopening of schools” being rated as their highest stressor. Figure 1 depicts the top seven stressors that were reported by principals across all years of practice.

In examining differences across years of experience, we found that new principals (1–2 years) reported significantly higher levels of school-level stressors compared to mid-career (6–10 years) and later-career (15 or more years) principals. In particular, new principals reported 12% higher, on average, than principals who have worked for 6–10 years in the profession and 12% higher, on average, than later-career principals with respect to their reports on within-school stressors. At the item level, principals who have worked at their current district for less than 10 years rated “stress about meeting the needs of my school community” as their second highest stressor, whereas principals who have been employed at their current district for 11 or more years reported “instructional issues” as their second highest stressor.

Principals of all years of practice reported feeling *often* or *almost always* connected to their schools. However, principals with 11–15 years of practice reported significantly higher levels of connectedness to their schools (12% higher on average) than principals who have been employed for 1–2 years. These findings slightly differed by the years employed at the current district: principals who have been employed at the district for 6–10 years reported 8% higher, on average, than new principals at the district with respect to connectedness to schools. Additionally, principals who have been employed at the district for 15 or more years reported 12% higher, on average, than new principals at the district with respect to connectedness to schools. The results suggest that longevity at the school and longevity in the district both contribute towards stronger feelings of connectedness.

Key Finding #2:

Principal Beliefs and Attitudes Impact their Resilience.

We found that principals’ connectedness and perceptions of efficacy are significantly related to compassion fatigue.

Connectedness Reduces Compassion Fatigue.

Principals’ sense of connectedness with both their schools and their districts also plays a significant role in affecting their perceived compassion fatigue. Principals with a high sense of school connectedness were 27% less likely to have high levels of compassion fatigue than principals with a low sense of school connectedness . Principals with a high sense of district connectedness were 24% less likely to have high levels of compassion fatigue than principals with a low sense of district connectedness.

Self-Efficacy Also Reduces Compassion Fatigue.

On average, principals with a higher sense of self-efficacy experienced lower levels of compassion fatigue than those with a lower sense of self-efficacy. Principals reporting a high sense of self-efficacy at the school level were 21% less likely to have high levels of compassion fatigue than those reporting a low sense of self-efficacy at the school level. Similarly, principals reporting a high sense of self-efficacy at the district level were 34% less likely to have high levels of compassion fatigue than principals reporting a low sense of self-efficacy at the district level. Principals’ sense of efficacy in improving their school is shaped by the following: how strongly they feel connected to their school; how strongly they believe in the district’s efficacy for school improvement; and how strongly they feel professionally supported.

Key Finding #3:

Professional Support has a Strong and Positive Influence on Resilience.

Principals who reported a high level of professional support were 32% less likely to have high levels of compassion fatigue than principals who reported lower levels of professional support.

Key Finding #4:

Professional Support Alone is Not Always Sufficient.

Professional support and efficacy beliefs do not impact principals’ resilience independently; instead, they interactively influence principal resilience. Principals with a combination of **lowest levels of professional support** and **lowest levels of efficacy beliefs** in both district- and school-level improvement reported the **highest levels of compassion fatigue**.

Moreover, principals with a combination of **highest levels of professional support** and **lowest levels of efficacy beliefs** in both school-level and district-level improvement reported the **lowest levels of compassion fatigue**. This counterintuitive finding indicates that among principals who perceived higher levels of professional support, those with lower self-efficacy beliefs might be more resilient (as indicated by lower level of compassion fatigue); and among principals who perceived lower levels of professional support, those with higher self-efficacy beliefs might be more resilient (as indicated by lower level of compassion fatigue).

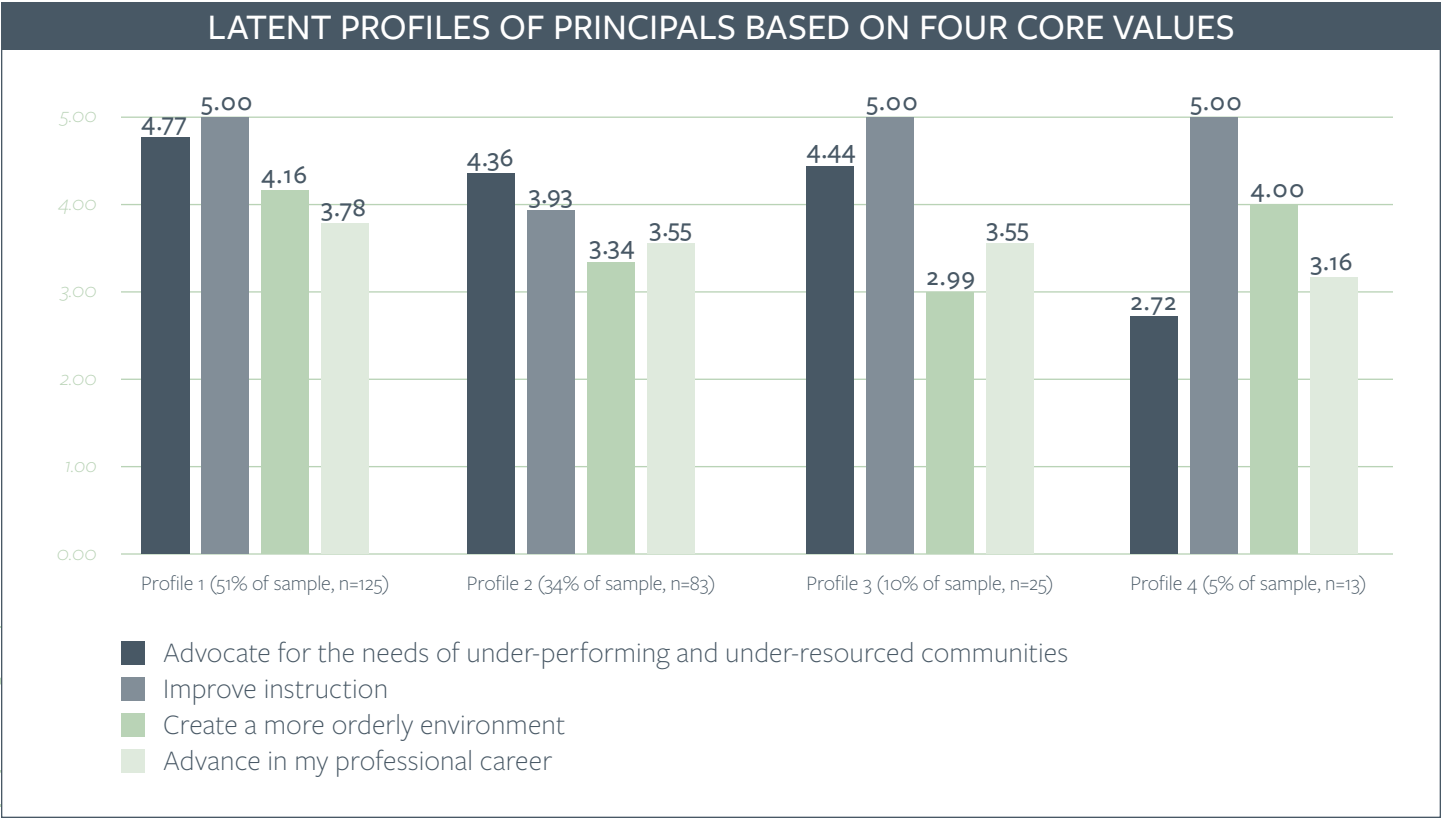


Key Finding #5:

Heterogeneity in Professional Core Values.

Principals were provided a list of 14 core values and were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of the options as their motivation for pursuing a career in leadership (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Based on principals' responses to the four most representative core values (as shown in the legend of the picture below), four profiles of principals that were conceptually meaningful and statistically fit were determined based on a series of latent profile analyses. While the four

profiles varied in the number of respondents in each category, each profile provides a distinct and comprehensive summary of the principals' motivation for pursuing a career in leadership. These profiles, as shown in the figure below, include Profile 1 (51% of respondents, or n = 125); Profile 2 (34% of respondents, or n = 83); Profile 3 (10% of respondents, or n = 25); and Profile 4 (5% of respondents, or n = 13).





Principals in these four different profiles are statistically different from each other in terms of their (1) education level, (2) percentage of students at their schools who are eligible for free and reduced lunch, (3) percentage of students at their schools who are English language learners, (4) school categories, and (5) school location.

STATISTICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE FOUR PROFILES

Profile 1

- is more likely to include principals from rural areas;

Profile 2:

- is more likely to include principals with a highest degree of PhD, and principals from suburban schools;

Profile 3:

- is more likely to include principals with a highest degree of EdD, principals from schools with the lowest percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch, principals from schools with the lowest percentage of students who are English language learners, principals from suburban schools, and principals from private schools;

Profile 4:

- is more likely to include principals from schools with the highest percentage of students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch, principals from charter schools, and principals from urban schools.

Results from this person-centered analysis highlight the heterogeneity of principals' core values and set the stage for future research on the connections between principals' core value profile membership and their perception of compassion fatigue.

Next Steps

The first wave of our Resilient Leadership Project suggests that school principals experience high levels of school-level stressors and compassion fatigue, some of which are unique to the unprecedented challenges of crisis leadership. Finding ways to effectively support our leaders through increasing levels of professional support, self-efficacy, and connectedness is critical to reducing compassion fatigue and turnover. How can we effectively reduce the stressors experienced by new principals? How can we better support our new leaders by making them feel more connected to their schools and districts?

Participant responses suggest that professional circumstances such as increased networks and support may contribute to the resilience of some principals. How can more supportive networks be developed and how do preparation/induction programs play a role? Given the enduring pandemic and the return of California schools to in-person learning, the Resilient Leadership Project will continue to investigate issues of principal resilience and wellbeing. It is imperative to continue to monitor the protective and compassion fatigue factors that principals experience as we enter a different phase of the pandemic, in which leaders will be expected to juggle existing challenges while managing new challenges that arise from the return to in-person learning. Our next steps include collecting a second wave of data in the fall of 2021 from our returning participants to monitor how their levels of compassion fatigue and wellbeing differ across the phases of the pandemic. Furthermore, as prior research has suggested that demographic characteristics, such as gender, race, educational level, and years of working are important factors to examine when investigating principal turnover (Rangel, 2018), we will continue to collect extensive demographic information to inform our analysis. We will also collect data from new participants in hopes of gaining a comprehensive understanding of California leaders' experiences across different districts. Together, our data will inform how districts, policymakers, and preparation programs can combat leader compassion fatigue and increase support during times of crisis.

About 21CSLA

The original California School Leadership Academy was established by Senate Bill 813 in 1983 and administered by the California Department of Education until 2003. Senate Bill 75 re-authorized the 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) in 2019. The grant is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. Headquartered at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, 21CSLA is led in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, the California Subject Matter Project, and seven Regional Academies across the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California that receive Title II funds. Programs are free to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve instruction and achievement outcomes for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, low-income students, and other historically marginalized students.

21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

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