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Finding Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from School Leaders (Part 2)

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

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*Project Brief Volume 1 Issue 2*

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## Executive Summary

In the fall of 2021, most California public schools returned to in-person learning after months of remote learning. This brought about additional challenges for our leaders, as their roles and responsibilities continued to evolve and expand over the course of the pandemic (Clifford & Cogshall, 2021). For example, principals found themselves in the position of bearing additional duties such as navigating public health mandates and implementing pandemic-related policies, exacerbating the job-related stress that they experience. In addition, recent research from The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP; December, 2021) reported that the pandemic conditions have contributed to alarming rates of principals who are expecting to leave the profession. Specifically, NASSP found that 4 out of 10 surveyed principals reported that they plan to leave the profession in the next three years. To minimize the already high levels of turnover, burnout, and work-related fatigue experienced by our principals, it is critical to better understand the levels of stress and stressors experienced by our principals and examine which groups of principals are most vulnerable to burnout and what factors protect them from burnout. It is also important to examine how the levels of stress have changed or remained the same across the distinct phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, as each phase has elicited specific demands on our principals.

To address this research gap, our research team collected a second wave of the Principal Resilience survey in the fall of 2021—a time when principals were navigating the return to in-person learning. Open to all who served as K–12 school principals in California during the 2021–2022 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 program alumni during late fall of 2021. Specific to the current brief, we included longitudinal data of principals who completed both the first and second wave of our survey, to draw comparisons between the two phases of the pandemic. In addition, we also included open response data about how principals have found their resilience during the pandemic, in order to highlight the voices of our school leaders.

Results of stressor rankings indicate that principals chose additional duties surrounding public health mandates as the highest stressor, followed by staffing shortages, implementing/communicating/reinforcing pandemic-related policies, and meeting the needs of my school community as additional stressors, respectively. Our longitudinal findings of compassion fatigue show that it continues to be essential for school districts to foster collective efficacy for school leaders and involve them in the decision-making process and making sure their voices are heard. Finally, the results from the open-ended responses indicate the complexity with which principals are navigating the risk and resilience factors that come with their work both in and outside the formal functions of their role. The results from these open-ended findings highlight that school leadership happens outside of the formal work space, but also outside of the formal role itself. Taken together, the findings from this brief suggest that the experience of stress and burnout as well as effective support strategies, are areas where critical investigation is needed in order to address the broader issues of supporting the wellbeing and resiliency of our leaders as they cope with the continuous repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 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

### *Overview of the First Brief*

Our first brief, published in March 2022, included responses from 234 principals who completed our survey in the spring of 2021. In this brief, we reported that principals across demographic groups reported high rates of stress, but had different experiences with regard to factors of resilience and wellbeing. We found that gender, multilingual status, school location, and longevity (years in profession) to be significantly associated with levels of connectedness and efficacy. Regarding school level stressors, principals rated “issues related to the reopening of schools” as the most stressful stressor. 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 which differed from each other with respect to their personal and school characteristics. Taken together, the first brief suggested 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.

### *Changes in the Second Brief*

In the second wave survey we continued to examine the levels of stress experienced by our principals as well as what factors

protect them from burnout, as they navigated the return to in-person learning. Specific to the second brief, we also included longitudinal data of principals who completed both the first and second wave survey, to draw comparisons between the two phases of the pandemic. We also included open response data about how principals have found their resilience during the pandemic, in order to highlight the voices of our school leaders.

### *Specific Aims of Second Brief:*

**Main Research Question:** How do California principals describe the stressors, perceive their wellbeing, and find resilience across different stages of school transitions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1. Identify main stressors experienced by principals and how the stressors have shifted across the pandemic
2. Understand school leaders’ wellbeing and factors that could help reduce principal compassion fatigue
3. Explore effective strategies practiced by principals to promote their resilience

## Overview of the Principal Resilience Survey

Open to all who served as K–12 school principals in California during the 2021–2022 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 Leadership Programs and UCLA Center X to regional directors of 21CSLA and networks of Leadership program alumni during late fall of 2022. Survey questions were adapted from the first wave of the study and were split into seven sections: the first six sections included response items on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 and the last section included an open response question.

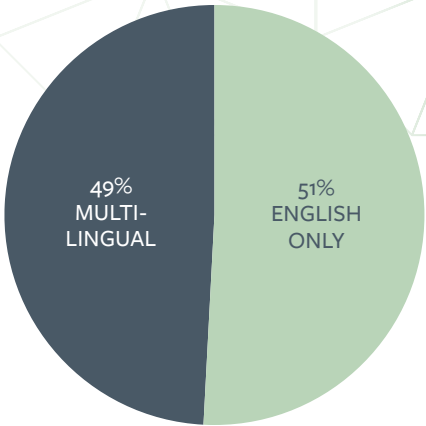
While anonymous, the survey also collected personal and school-level demographic information including the participant’s credentialing process, current work environment, years employed as a principal, years employed at current site (regardless of their role), and years employed at current district (regardless 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. The following sections highlight the major findings.

# Demographic Information of Survey Participants

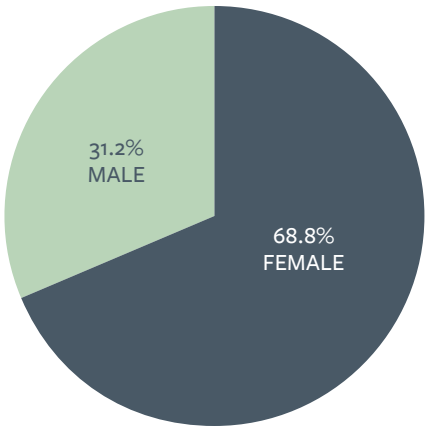
Data were collected from 209, K–12 school principals in California who served during the 2021-2022 school year. Of the total participants, 46 principals were returning participants who also completed the first wave of our study. The total sample included 141 female participants and 64 male participants. The racial/ethnic background of our participants were as follows: 5% Asian/Asian American, 7% Black or African American, 61% Caucasian/White, 16.5% Hispanic/Latinx, 10% Multiracial, and 1% Native American. With regards to educational background, 8% of our participants held a Bachelor’s degree, 77% held a Master’s degree, and 11% held an EdD or PhD.

| YEARS EMPLOYED AS PRINCIPAL | COUNT | PERCENTAGE |
|-----------------------------|-------|------------|
| 1-2                         | 40    | 19.4%      |
| 3-5                         | 62    | 30.1%      |
| 6-10                        | 65    | 31.6%      |
| 11-15                       | 27    | 13.1%      |
| > 15                        | 12    | 5.8%       |

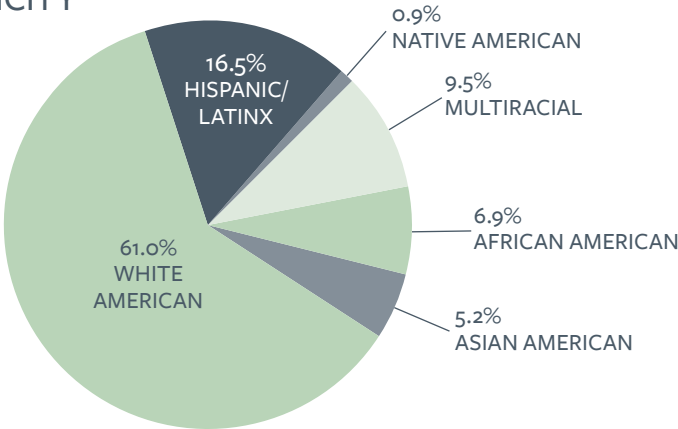
MULTILINGUAL STATUS



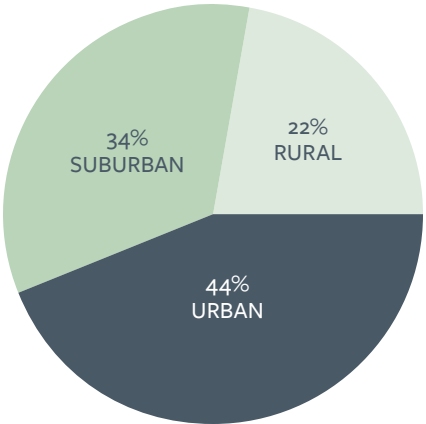
GENDER



RACE/ETHNICITY



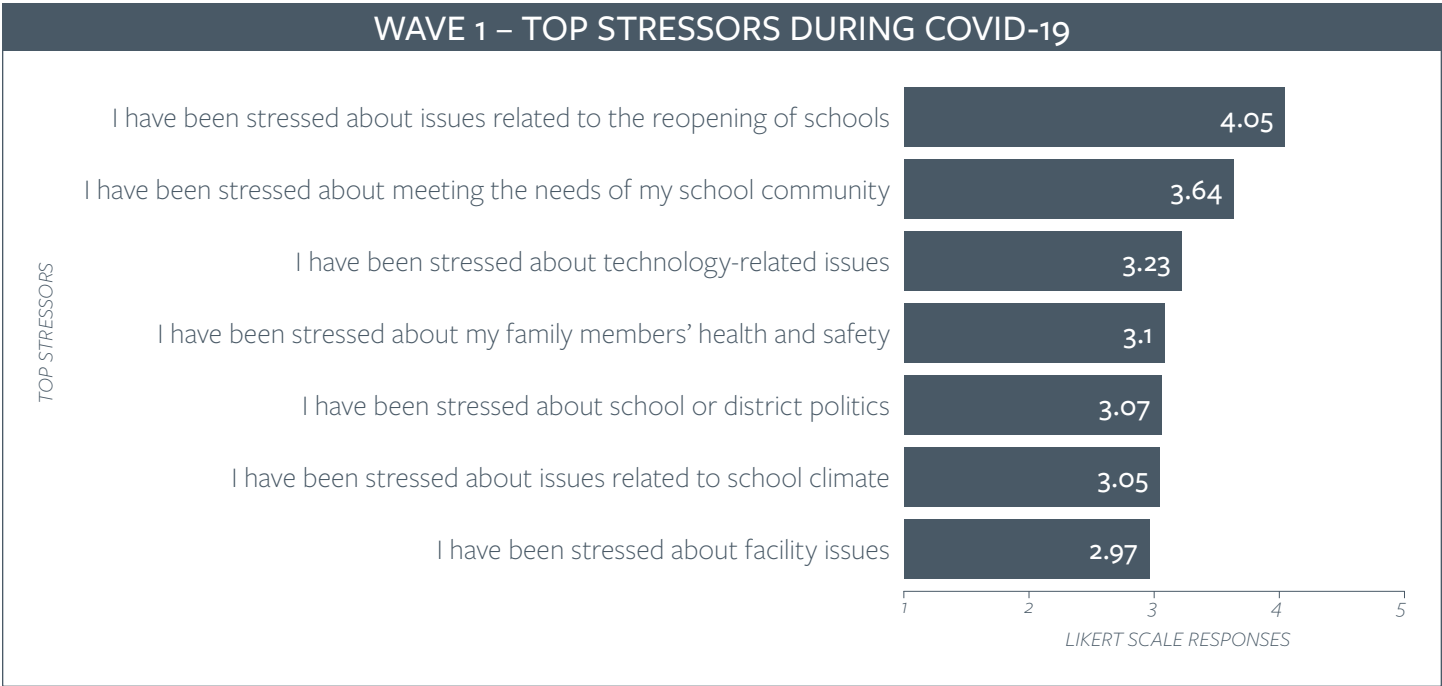
SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT



# Ongoing Stressors throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

The figures below show the top seven stressors rated by our principals during the first wave survey (spring 2021) and the second wave survey (fall 2021). As evident from the first graph, principals chose the reopening of schools as the highest stressor, followed by meeting the needs of the school community, and stress related to technology-related issues during the first wave of data collection. During the second wave of our study, we included additional stressors in our survey items in order to capture the changing demands and duties of principals (e.g., COVID-19 related mandates and policies). In the second

wave data, we found that principals chose additional duties surrounding public health mandates as the highest stressor, followed by staffing shortages, implementing/communicating/reinforcing pandemic-related policies, and meeting the needs of my school community as additional stressors, respectively. The shift in the highest ranked stressors across a mere few months shows the evolving and expanding role of leadership during critical times as well as the impact of staffing shortages across education that is jeopardizing the wellbeing of our leaders.

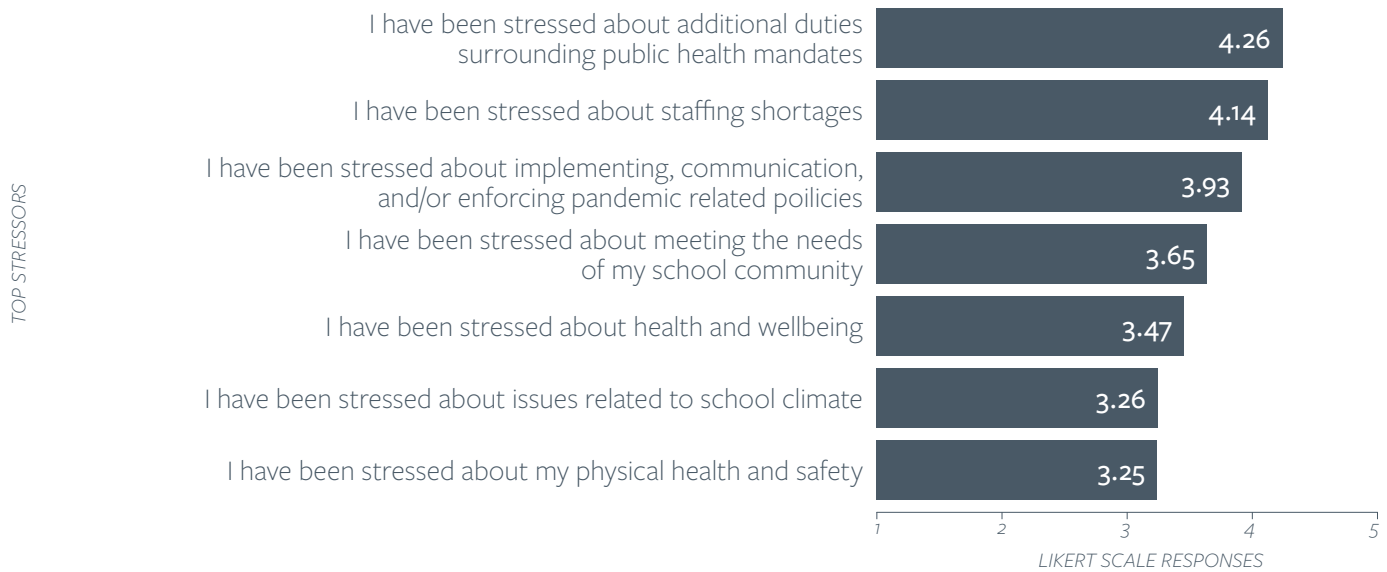


In addition to the items listed above, about a third of the leaders (29%) who completed the open-response question on additional stressors shared that they were stressed about district politics and organizational structures and practices. One principal shared: “The district communicates belief in principals, but are relying on old dysfunctional ways some departments are run that perpetuate the same old patterns before school shut down. That is most disheartening—when site leaders are expected to do a lot more, while being held accountable, but central leadership support departments don’t have consistency in their ability to deliver central support.” Another principal shared similar sentiments towards the district as well as the difficulties of staying in the profession: “After 22 years as a site administrator, this year is making me question how much longer I can sustain doing this work. I have never felt the sense of utter chaos and dysfunction from district and state leadership as I have this year. There is a total disconnect between the daily demands of site leadership in the pandemic and political expectations from above.” Other principals also shared difficulties with staying in

the profession, such as this one principal who said: “This has been the most challenging school year I have ever faced in my 15+ years. I have seriously considered leaving the field of education. Parents are out of control and so disrespectful to school staff. It’s just not rewarding at this point.”

The results from the stressors give insight into how principals make sense of the factors that could lead to burnout and compassion fatigue. It is important to note that even with stressors already listed, roughly a third of the respondents named, of their own accord, district politics and organizational structures and practices as a stressor in response to the open ended response. This might indicate the heightened role that particular stressor plays in the work of principals during the time of survey. Additionally, the open-ended responses indicate that while principals are aware of their stressors, they navigate and negotiate those stressors with a variety of tools and pieces of their ecological systems.

## WAVE 2 – TOP STRESSORS DURING COVID-19



## An Ecological Analysis of Principal Resilience

In addition to quantitative data, the second wave included open responses from our respondents in order to elucidate the voices of our leaders. The open-response question appeared at the end of the survey and asked about principals' resilience factors (*"We'd like to learn from your personal resilience strategies during these unusual times. Please tell us about the strategies you used to support your resilience during the pandemic, and if possible, what made these strategies successful"*). Principals, as the leader of school communities and representatives within the district, are influenced by a synergistic web between the surrounding ecological contexts in which they work in. Thus, we employed the ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) to examine how principal wellbeing is influenced by the interaction of their surrounding systems. Emerging corresponding sub-themes determined under the related ecological themes are depicted in the diagram below. "Selected quotations" provide a preview of the principals' experiences with sustaining and developing resilience in an era of uncertainty.

Results from open-ended responses regarding resilience show that 44.8% of principals navigate resilience at the individual level of the ecological system of wellbeing. Many principals also reported using various microsystem level factors of support and connectedness (~34%). Only one response mentioned the exosystem as a factor that helps contribute to their resilience

while many responses from the risk factors noted the exosystem as a factor. Roughly 6% of the responses in the "Macrosystem" mentioned the use of cultural beliefs and perceptions such as spirituality, faith, and religion and moral and ethical commitments as factors that contribute to their resilience.

The results from the resilience factors, paired with the stressors we have examined in the early sections, help to round out the ecological framework in that not only are there clear leading resilience factors (i.e. tools and processes principals use that help buffer against the stressors), but also there are clear ways that these principals are negotiating between resilience and stress to navigate the ecology of their wellbeing. Some principals rely on factors that rest at the individual level of the ecological system (i.e. physical activity, self-care, positive thinking, etc), while others tend to rely on the microsystem (i.e family, colleagues, school communities).

## Longitudinal Findings—Perspectives from Returning Participants

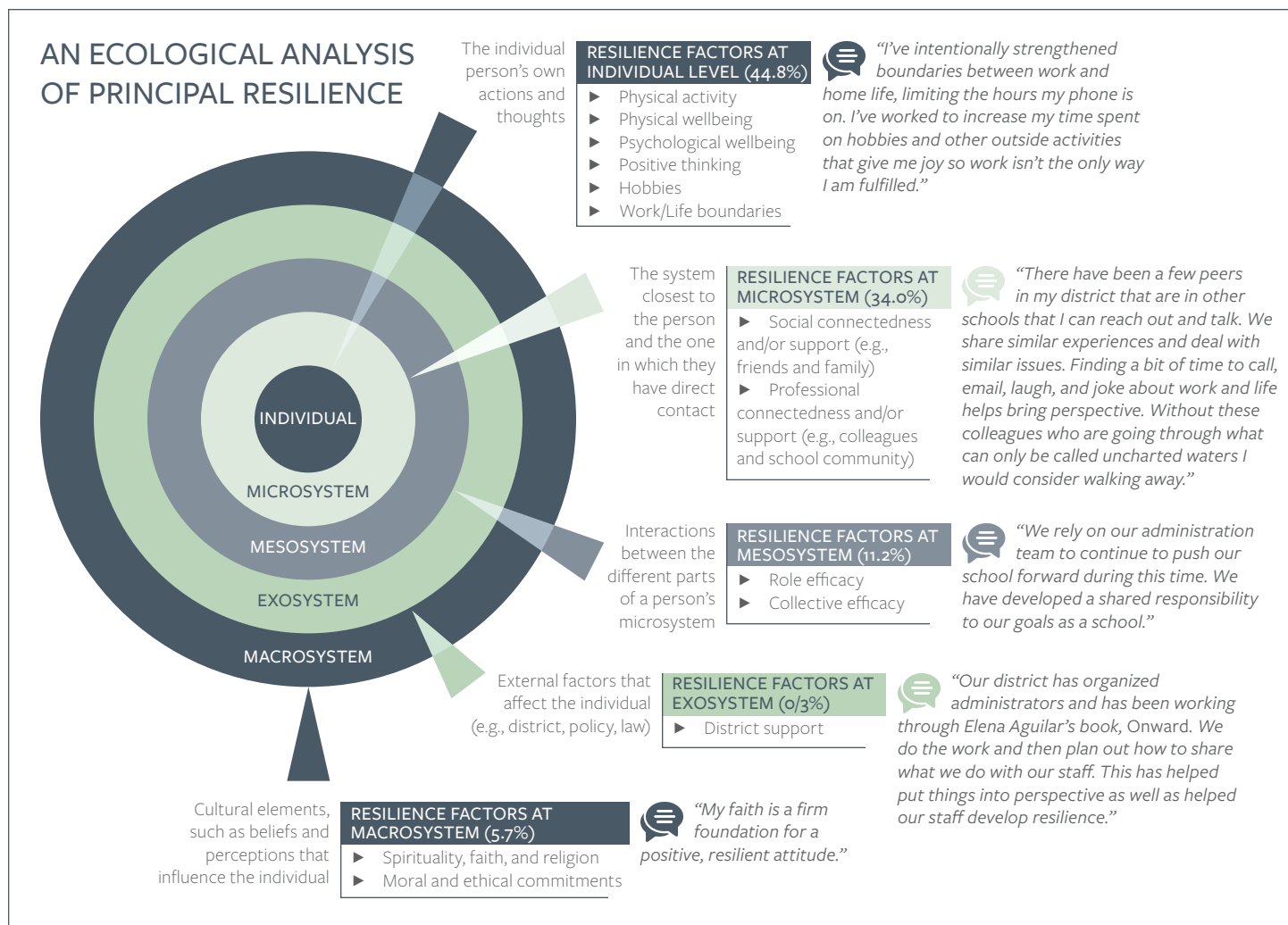
In order to get a deeper understanding of the changes across the two waves of data, we also compared the data between the first and second wave among our 46 returning participants. Longitudinal data examines within-sample change over time which allows us to measure the change of certain variables across a duration of time within the same group of individuals. The findings from the following section are pulled from the longitudinal findings.

### Time, Gender, and Efficacy Continue to Matter

Compassion fatigue is an integrated indicator of burnout and secondary traumatic stress experienced by principals when they work with students, family and community members. It is important to understand the trajectory of principal compassion fatigue over a year during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine how principals' demographic characteristics and their

perceived efficacy beliefs, connectedness and support affect their compassion fatigue from wave 1 to wave 2. The following summarizes the key findings of our analysis.

1. **Time matters.** Since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, principals' level of compassion fatigue has significantly increased over the two wave periods of time.
2. **Gender matters.** Overall, female principals experienced higher compassion fatigue than male principals throughout the pandemic.
3. **Efficacy matters.** In comparison to the effect of school efficacy on compassion fatigue at wave 1, the effect of school efficacy is stronger in reducing principal compassion fatigue at wave 2. Furthermore, principals' district efficacy significantly reduced their compassion fatigue, and its effect is also stronger at wave 2 in comparison to that at wave 1. In other words, when principals feel more confident about their districts' effort in school improvement, they feel less compassion fatigue.



# Conclusions and Next Steps

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM WAVE 2

### 1. Additional Duties Leading to Heightened Stress:

Principals continue to experience very high levels of stressors and the stressors rated as highest by our principals were, additional duties surrounding public health mandates, staffing shortages, implementing/communicating/reinforcing pandemic-related policies, and meeting the needs of my school community, respectively. The shift in the highest ranked stressors across the two waves shows the evolving and expanding role of leadership during critical times that is jeopardizing the wellbeing of our leaders.

### 2. Principal Resilience in the Ecological System:

Open-responses on resilience factors show that most (44.8%) principals navigate resilience at the individual level of the ecological system of wellbeing. Many principals also reported using various microsystem level factors of support and connectedness (i.e family, colleagues, school communities ~34%). It appears that most principals rarely seek out resilience factors from more external systems such as support from the district.

### 3. Time, Gender, and Efficacy Continue to

**influence Compassion Fatigue:** Levels of compassion fatigue have increased between the first and second wave. Additionally, female principals continue to experience higher compassion fatigue across the two waves. Finally, the levels of efficacy towards their school and district helps reduce as well as predict levels of compassion fatigue across time.

The second wave of our Resilient Leadership Project suggests that school principals continue to experience high levels of school-level stressors and compassion fatigue, some of which are unique to the unprecedented challenges of crisis leadership as schools returned to in-person learning and principals were faced with added responsibilities. Finding ways to effectively support our leaders by addressing the highest rated stressors and examining the changes in stressors across waves may be critical to reducing compassion fatigue and turnover. The results from the open-ended responses indicate the complexity with which principals are navigating the risk and resilience factors that come with their work both in and outside the formal functions of their role. In order to better support schools and their leaders, the research must attend to the sense-making of principals as they go about their lives. The results from these findings indicate that

school leadership happens outside of the formal work space, but also outside of the formal role itself. That is to say, the principals in our study are employing many methods and tools for wellbeing that require them to see their role in the perspective of their larger lives. Our longitudinal findings of compassion fatigue shows that it is essential for school districts to foster collective efficacy for school leaders and involve them in the decision making process and making sure their voices are heard. It is also important to provide additional support for those school leaders who experience higher levels of compassion fatigue (e.g., female principals), helping school leaders not only become aware of their mental wellbeing, but also learn coping strategies to manage their work-related stress.

Our next steps include collecting a third wave of data in the fall of 2022 from our returning participants to further monitor how their levels of compassion fatigue and stressors change across the phases of the pandemic. We will also continue to collect data from new participants in hopes of gaining a comprehensive understanding of California leaders' experiences across different districts. We also hope to collect more qualitative data to further explore school leaders' perceptions of resilience factors. Specifically, we hope to use the open responses to better understand how schools and districts can help build the resilience of our principals in order to minimize their levels of stress, burnout, and turnover. Together, our data will inform how districts, policymakers, and preparation programs can combat leader compassion fatigue and increase principal support during times of crises.

## 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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[21cslacenter.berkeley.edu](http://21cslacenter.berkeley.edu)

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