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

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Project Brief Volume 1 Issue 3

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Executive Summary

Throughout the pandemic, school communities have faced the tremendous tasks of navigating the unprecedented challenges of remote learning, returning to in-person learning, and attending to the spillover effects of the pandemic, all while supporting the needs of the school community. The demands accompanying these tasks especially impacted school principals, as their roles and responsibilities continuously expanded to attend to crisis-related needs (Clifford & Coggs, 2021). School principals were positioned with bearing additional duties such as navigating public health mandates and implementing pandemic-related policies, which exacerbated their already high levels of job-related stress. As the impact of the pandemic continues, it is likely that long-term demands will exceed the personal strengths and professional resources of school principals, increasing their vulnerability to burnout and turnover (Kniffin et al., 2021). It is critical to understand how principals experience school-related stressors, delineate the factors that protect principals from burnout, and examine which groups of principals are most vulnerable to burnout to minimize the increasingly high levels of turnover, burnout, and work-related stress experienced by school principals.

To address this practice and research need, the 21CSLA research team launched the Principal Resilience Study, a longitudinal survey study designed to identify significant school-related stressors and psychological factors that protect school principals from burnout, specifically in the COVID-19 context. Open to all K-12 school principals in California, our team collected a total of 690 responses across the three waves. In this brief, we present data across all three waves of our study to draw comparisons between the different phases of the pandemic.

Results of this brief highlight the changing demands faced by principals across the phases of the pandemic and the need for greater systems of support for principals. These results were especially true amongst Principals of Color and principals serving urban schools. First, when comparing the highest-ranked school-related stressors across the three waves, our results suggest that principals in the first two years of the pandemic were most stressed about the immediate needs of their school communities (e.g., reopening of schools) and pandemic-related policies and mandates (e.g., additional duties surrounding public health mandates and communicating pandemic-related policies). However, after three years of the pandemic, results show that principals were most stressed about the aftereffects of the pandemic (e.g., staffing shortages and spillover effects of COVID-19 pandemic) and their own mental health and wellbeing.

Furthermore, our third wave data suggest that principals who work in urban schools felt less connected to their districts, had lower self and district efficacy, and reported higher levels of stress overall, compared to suburban and rural principals. Similarly, our third wave data suggests that Principals of Color, compared to White Principals, experienced higher levels of stress, felt less connected to their district, and had lower efficacy toward their district. Taken together, our findings across the three waves suggest that many of the highest stressors reported by our principals are occurring at the systems level, as opposed to the individual level and principals are less likely to utilize professional support tools provided at the systems level. These results highlight the need to move away from conceptualizing principal resilience as an individual-level factor, and shift towards understanding the systemic factors that contribute to their burnout and resilience. There is also a need to understand the working conditions of our principals, especially for our principals who may be most at highest risk of burnout.

Background and Context

Our study was designed to identify school-related stressors and examine the psychological factors that protect principals from burnout during the pandemic. Our research team collected survey responses from K-12 Californian principals across three time points: spring 2021, fall 2021, and fall 2022. The current brief draws from data across the three waves, with a focus on the most recent data collected in fall 2022. Variables examined include school-related stressors, principal self-efficacy, perceived district-efficacy, sense of connectedness to the school and district, professional support, and professional core values. We also collected personal and school-level demographic information to better understand how principal resilience is distributed across personal and environmental factors within specific contexts and career trajectories. The scaled responses were averaged to compare the changes among groups and across time points. The surveys were distributed by 21CSLA as well as UC Berkeley Leadership Programs and UCLA PLI to regional directors of 21CSLA and networks of UC alumni. Across the three timepoints, we received 690 responses from California principals serving our K-12 schools who represented 41 counties across California. Below is the breakdown of the respondent counts at each time point:

- ▶ 1st wave - Spring 2021: 234 participants
- ▶ 2nd wave - Fall 2021: 209 participants (46 returning participants)
- ▶ 3rd wave - Fall 2022: 247 responses (88 returning participants)

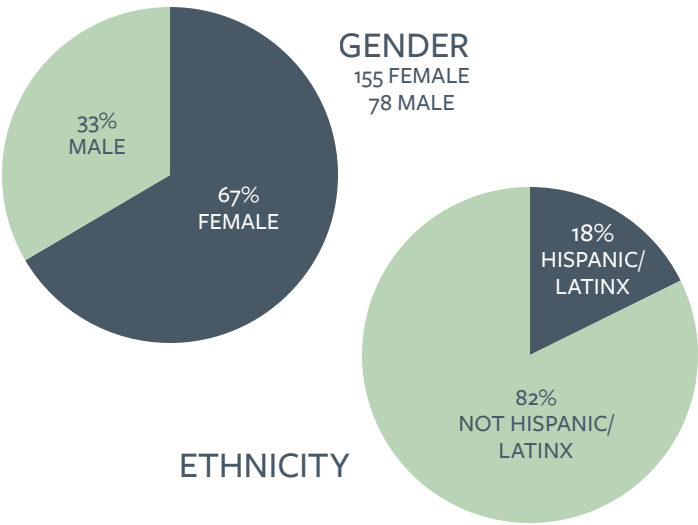
(For information on the demographic background of our Wave 1 and 2 participants, please see our 1st and 2nd briefs)

The following sections highlight the major findings, with a focus on the most recent third wave of data collected in fall 2022.

KEY TERMS

- ▶ **Efficacy in school-level and district-level improvement:** Belief in 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

WAVE 3 PARTICIPANTS



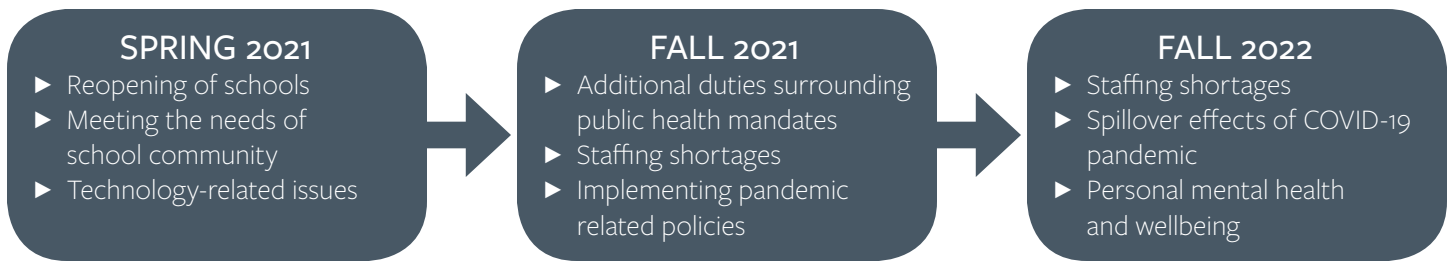
RACE
WHITE/CAUCASIAN: 160 (68.7%)
BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN: 17 (7.3%)
ASIAN AMERICAN: 17 (7.3%)
NATIVE AMERICAN: 3 (1.3%)
NATIVE HAWAIIAN AND OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDER: 1 (0.4%)
TWO OR MORE RACES: 23 (9.9%)
OTHER: 8 (3.4%)

Key Findings

Principal Stressors across phases of the Pandemic:

Our data across the three time points corroborate previous findings on the high levels of job-related stress experienced by principals (Mahfouz, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, principals were placed in a challenging position of navigating increased demands from all directions: managing public health mandates and implementing pandemic-related policies, while meeting the needs of their school communities. During spring 2021, principals, on average, were most stressed about supporting their schools during uncertain times, which included the reopening of schools, meeting the needs of their school community, and technology-related issues. A few months later in the fall of 2021, principals, on average, were most stressed about managing pandemic-related policies and mandates (e.g., additional duties surrounding public health mandates and communicating pandemic-related policies). Now, after three years of the pandemic, principals, on average, are most stressed about managing the aftereffects of the pandemic: navigating the staffing shortage crisis and spillover effects of the pandemic (e.g., interrupted schooling), as well as their own mental health and well-being.

TOP 3 STRESSORS AT EACH WAVE



Over the three years, principals have been stressed in supporting the immediate needs of their school communities. Now they are left to manage the systemic aftereffects of the pandemic—a decreased workforce and interrupted schooling—all while managing their own burnout, which has risen to the top of the stressor ranking after months of managing other job-related stressors.

Principal Stressors: Individual- and System-Level Stressors in the 3rd Wave

In addition to the ranked responses, the third wave survey included open responses from our principals in order to highlight their voices regarding their experiences with job-related stressors. We used thematic analysis to categorize the open responses into two levels—individual and systems—to highlight the various stressors that principals are navigating across levels. “Selected quotations” provide a preview of the principals’ experiences with these stressors:

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL STRESSORS	SYSTEMS-LEVEL STRESSORS
▶ Loneliness and Isolation ▶ Increased Workload ▶ Mental Health and Wellbeing	▶ Lack of Support System ▶ Post Pandemic Student Recovery ▶ Constrained Resources ▶ Broken Systems ▶ Workforce Disruption

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL STRESSORS

Loneliness and Isolation. Loneliness was reported by principals as a stressor, often coupled with the lack of a support system. Principals stated that “being a school principal often feels lonely,” so that they needed “collegiate support.” Their position required them to “deal with competing directives,” which makes theirs “a lonely position.”	“Being a Principal and sole administrator at a site can be very lonely and overwhelming at times.” <i>–Female, White, Elementary School Principal, Placer County</i>
Increased Workload. Principals shared that due to “exponential” and “overwhelming” workloads, they “never take a break.” This made it feel “hard to keep [their] heads above water.” They described themselves as being occupied by their “requirements, initiatives, and demands,” which “have evolved and constantly changed.”	“The workload of principals is untenable. Principals talk about doing this for a short amount of time, not for the duration of their profession. Additionally the declining enrollment in our District has forced cuts which have added to the admin’s workload.” <i>–Male, Latino, Elementary School Principal, San Francisco County</i>
Mental Health and Wellbeing. Principals reported that they were “enduring pressures from all avenues” with a “culture that does not reward overworking,” at a cost of their mental health and overall wellbeing. They described the need for “more support for the physical and mental health needs of administrators.”	“I constantly feel that I am not doing enough- and to not do it is at the cost of our kids which is something my moral conscience can not handle. So I do it. But it impacts me. I spent hours and money in therapy last year just to manage my work stress so I could go home and be a good mom to my own children. I live in a world of anxiety of not being able to do it all. I regularly debate leaving the profession but also have such a passion and find so much joy in public ed.” <i>–Female, White, Elementary School Principal, Sonoma County</i>

SYSTEMS-LEVEL STRESSORS

Lack of a Support System. Principals expressed their sense of “isolation” and “helplessness” due to the lack of a support system. They reported often feeling “overloaded” by the expectations of their districts “without proper support.” They stated that they had “no one to share responsibilities with or talk with to help support” them and “no district to look to for support.”

“There is no one to share responsibilities or talk with to help support you. We don’t have a district to look to for support.”
–Female, White, K-8 School Principal, Butte County

Post Pandemic Student Recovery. Principals also identified supporting student needs after the pandemic, such as SEL and behavioral problems, as a stressor and “students’ behaviors are nothing like [they] have ever seen before.” “Teachers are overwhelmed by students’ behavior, and it all falls to the principals.”

“Relatedly, student behavior and social emotional needs since the pandemic have grown exponentially. Teachers are overwhelmed with behavior and it all falls to the principal. Much attention has gone to the academic learning loss that kids may have experienced but the frequency and severity of behavior dysregulation is much harder to address than academic gaps. Running a school is overwhelming.” –Female, White, Elementary School Principal, Alameda County

Constrained Resources. Principals identified the need for financial support for their overtime work and leadership training. Insufficient funding made them “feel very devalued.” They “make a fraction of the money” paid to other professions, although they “are working with our future generations and [for] double the [conventional number of] hours.” Furthermore, “lack of funding [for] leadership training” precludes them from attending leadership training to better prepare them for their work.

“The amount of compensation is quite low. It is very humbling to look at other careers and see what they do compared to what they make. We are working with our future generations and double the hours and we make a fraction of the money. We are clearly not in it for the money but it can feel very devaluing.” –Female, White, Elementary School Principal, Sonoma County

Broken Systems. Systemic problems were cited by principals as stressors. These include “institutional racism,” “structural funding inequality between big vs. small and urban vs. rural schools,” and “achievement and opportunity gaps for students.”

“Address the structural problems: too much bureaucracy that doesn’t improve anything, structural funding inequity between big/small & urban/rural schools.” –Male, White, Elementary School Principal, Santa Cruz County

Workforce Disruption. Dealing with staffing shortages were reported to “take up an inordinate amount of time” and are “taking away opportunities to be an educational leader.” They shared the urgent need to “train and recruit high-quality people” to address the shortages.

“The staffing shortage requires me to sub daily and to create lesson plans for classes when we can find subs. Due to being a rural district, we are required to do all the same as a large district with significantly less staff.” –Female, Asian Indian, High School Principal, Sonoma County

As highlighted in their voices, principals were navigating various stressors at both the individual and systems level. At the individual level, factors such as loneliness, isolation, increased workload, and mental health and wellbeing may be direct contributors to their burnout, especially if the level of stress is sustained across time. Furthermore, the systems-level stressors such as the lack of support, working within broken systems, and workforce disruptions may contribute to a sense of helplessness by our principals, who are constrained to their administrative duties by pressures and stressors they are unable to control.

Wave 3 - Group Differences

Location Matters

Our 3rd wave data showed that principals from different school locations (urban, suburban, rural) varied in their experiences with stressors and resilience factors. We compared responses across 74 principals from urban schools, 80 principals from suburban schools, and 78 principals from rural schools in California. Below are our key findings:

- ▶ **Urban principals feel less connected to their districts** compared to suburban and rural principals
 - ▶ Specifically, urban principals reported significantly lower levels of belongingness ($\alpha = <.001$), sense of community ($\alpha = <.001$), respect ($\alpha = <.033$), and care ($\alpha = <.001$) from their district, compared to suburban and rural principals. Interestingly, there were no differences regarding connectedness to their school sites across principals from the three location types.
- ▶ **Urban principals have lower self and district efficacy** than suburban and rural principals
 - ▶ Specifically, urban principals reported significantly lower levels of self-efficacy, (e.g., ability to support students, families, and colleagues ($\alpha = .015$) and how pleased they are with their ability to support students' learning during the pandemic ($\alpha = .022$)), compared to suburban and rural principals. Urban principals also reported significantly lower levels of district efficacy compared to suburban and rural principals, specifically with regards to the district success in recruiting, retaining and supporting high quality teachers ($\alpha = <.001$), district pursuing a commitment to educational equity ($\alpha = .038$), district members communicating a belief in the capacity of administrators to lead even in the most difficult circumstances ($\alpha = <.001$), and district staff members valuing collective and team leadership ($\alpha = <.001$).
- ▶ **Rural principals are significantly less likely to reach out to peer colleagues for professional support** ($\alpha = .012$) than urban and suburban principals.
- ▶ **Principals in different environments experience varying intensities of stressors**
 - ▶ Urban principals, compared to suburban and rural principals, reported significantly higher levels of stress overall. The following stressors were significantly higher for urban principals: meeting the needs of the school community ($\alpha = 0.12$), facility issues ($\alpha = .016$), and issues related to gun violence and school shootings ($\alpha = <.001$).
 - ▶ Rural principals, compared to suburban and urban principals reported significantly higher levels of stress ($\alpha = .037$) regarding the impact of fires and other natural disasters.

Race Matters

It may be of particular importance to focus on the experiences of Principals of Color, as the turnover rates for administrators of color are often higher than their white counterparts. By nature, school leadership is a stressful and isolated profession that has high incidences of burnout and Principals of Color are often even more in isolation, as they represent a small fraction of school principals (Whitaker, 1995; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Friedman, 1995). In wave three of our survey, we began to investigate the role of race and ethnicity, specifically, if Principals of Color were experiencing stressors and resilience factors differently from White Principals. Below, we highlight the preliminary findings from our third wave data. We had 89 principals identify as Principals of Color and 144 identify as White Principals.

- ▶ **Higher Stress - Principals of Color experienced higher levels of average stress** on all stressor items, compared to White Principals. Among these items, Principals of Color reported significantly higher levels of stress regarding issues with school politics ($\alpha = .033$), compared to White Principals.
- ▶ **Less Connected to District - Principals of Color feel less connected to their district** compared to White Principals. Principals of Color reported significantly lower levels of connectedness to their district (e.g., feel a sense of community ($\alpha = .004$) and feel like people in my district care about me ($\alpha = .007$)) compared to their white counterparts; however, this difference was not observed between these groups for the level of connectedness to their schools.
- ▶ **Lower Efficacy towards District - Principals of Color have lower efficacy towards their district** compared to White Principals. Specifically, Principals of Color reported significantly lower levels of the district's ability to pursue commitment to educational equity ($\alpha = .003$), recruit, retain, and support high quality teachers ($\alpha = <.001$), communicate a belief in the capacity of administrators to lead in the most difficult circumstances ($\alpha = .031$), and communicate a belief in the capacity of teachers to teach even the most difficult students ($\alpha = .005$). Interestingly, self-efficacy (e.g., beliefs about their own capacity to teach) did not differ significantly between the two groups.

The Need for a Systematic Approach to Resilience

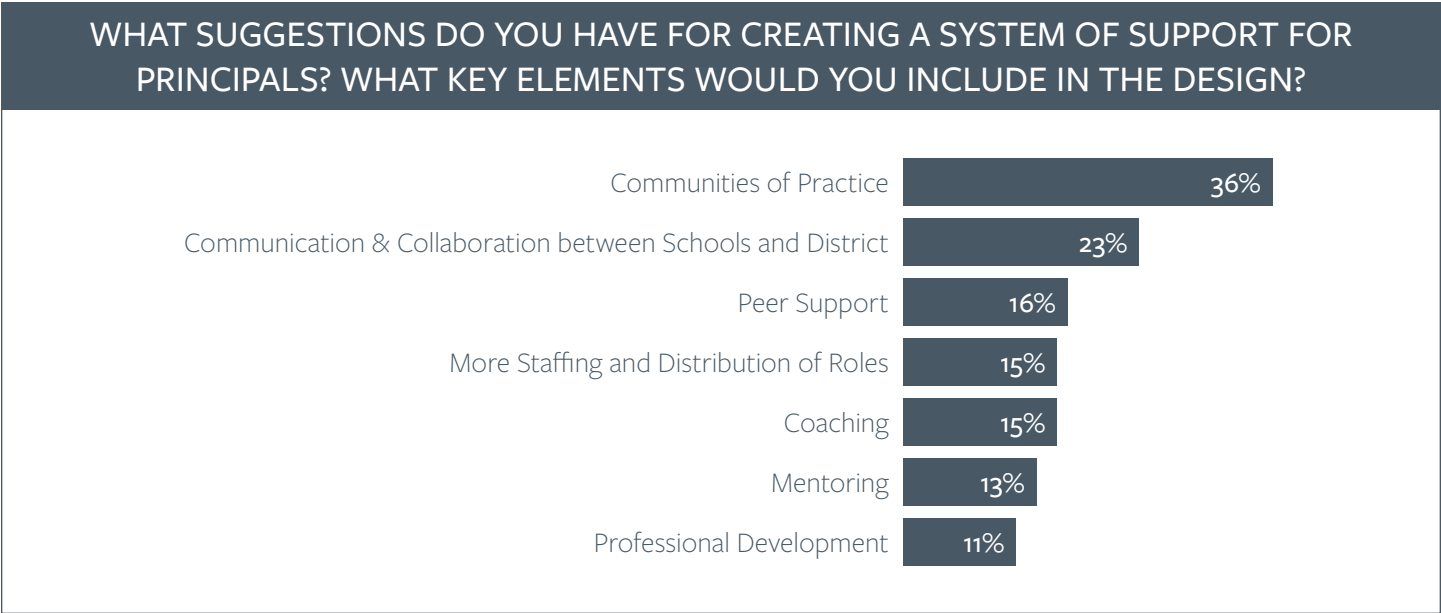
Prior studies on resilience and principal turnover have often focused on the individual level: for example, how can we foster resilience through examining individual factors such as hope, optimism, and trust? However, we believe that resilience is a more complex issue that involves both the individual and their interactions with surrounding systems. Research on resilience suggests that contextual factors such as policies and school climate can impact the development of resilience (Harrison et al., 2011). Therefore, when making sense of principal resiliency, more attention is needed to illuminate how the larger educational system contributes to issues of principal turnover and resilience.

Our findings across the three surveys suggest that many of the highest stressors reported by our principals during the pandemic were occurring at the systems level (e.g., school and district politics, policy implementation, staffing shortages) as opposed to at the individual level (e.g., their own physical health and safety, mental health and wellbeing, collegial relationships). Additionally, we found that principals are less likely to utilize

professional support tools provided at the systems level (e.g., district coaches, professional development resources) compared to their own networks of peers and colleagues. This may be because the professional support tools provided at the systems level are inadequate or do not meet the needs of our principals and calls for a need to better understand under what conditions the professional supports are helping our principals. Furthermore, our findings show that Principals of Color report lower levels of connectedness to their district as well as lower efficacy towards their district compared to White Principals, while reporting the same levels of self-efficacy and connectedness to their individual school sites as White Principals. Again, we see a pattern of district- or system-level factors that are challenging our principals’ sense of resilience, particularly for Principals of Color. In order to best support our principals, especially our most vulnerable principals, we must move away from conceptualizing resilience as an individual-level factor and focus our attention on understanding the systemic factors that are contributing to burnout or are not facilitating resilience.

How do we Create Systems of Support? Voices of Principals from Fall 2022

In moving towards creating systems of support that meet the needs of our principals, we asked our principals in our most recent survey: “What suggestions do you have for creating a system of support for principals? What key elements would you include in the design?” We used thematic analysis to categorize the open responses. Below are our key findings (percentages indicate the percent of participants who mentioned each theme in their open response):



As highlighted in their responses, principals call for the need of more social and professional support in the form of greater collaboration, communication, and learning communities that are initiated and offered by their surrounding systems. To combat the high levels of burnout that our principals are experiencing, districts and counties should 1) prioritize the facilitation of built-in support for our principals, such as implementing communities of practice and spaces for more collaboration, and 2) ensure they are not placing the onus on our principals to seek out for these supports, especially as principals are already faced with navigating the various individual and system level stressors on their own.

Implications

The three waves of our Principal Resilience Study provide us with important practical and research implications regarding factors that contribute to and challenge the resilience of our principals. First, in comparing the three waves of our data paired with our third wave open-ended responses, our findings suggest that school principals continue to experience high levels of school-related stressors and that the highest ranked stressors from spring 2021, or early in the pandemic, to fall 2022, the return to in-person learning, have shifted over time. Specifically, early in the pandemic, principals were reporting that meeting the immediate needs of their school communities and managing pandemic-related policies and mandates were contributing most to their stress; however, after three years of the pandemic, principals are now most stressed about the spillover effects that they are tasked to manage as well as their own mental health and wellbeing. Finding ways to effectively support our principals by alleviating their responsibility to respond to system-related stressors (e.g., staffing shortages, post-pandemic student recovery, lack of support system) and providing direct support to help with their individual stressors, such as their mental health and wellbeing, may be critical to reducing burnout and turnover. However, despite the importance of providing individual level support for their mental health, across the three waves of our study, we continue to see a pattern of district or system level factors that are challenging the principals' ability to build resilience.

To best support our principals, we must move away from conceptualizing resilience at an individual-level and move towards a systemic approach to resilience or focusing on the systemic factors that contribute to burnout and resilience.

As highlighted in the open-ended response on creating systems of support, districts must prioritize providing built-in time and resources that principals can utilize for support by increasing communication, collaboration, and a sense of community, instead of placing the onus on the principals to seek out for their own professional and social support. Ultimately, our findings suggest that the existing support systems are not enough to combat the high levels of principal burnout and turnover.

The results from the third wave of our survey also highlight the importance of focusing our practice and future research on specific principals who may be experiencing heightened stressors, decreased connectedness, and lower efficacy towards the district, such as our Principals of Color and principals serving urban schools. To address their heightened levels of stress and low levels of efficacy, it may be important that we provide these principals with targeted supports such as coping

strategies and mental health supports, that are reflective of their specific needs. Additionally, districts should consider providing additional networks of social and professional support, especially from peer colleagues and mentors who reflect their identities and experiences, to increase their sense of belonging, connectedness, and perceptions of efficacy towards their districts. However, in order to gain a better understanding of their work experiences as well as their needs for mental health, social, and professional support, future research must attend to understanding the working conditions of Principals of Color and principals serving our urban schools and examine under what conditions the current supports are helping to meet their needs.

Our next steps include analyzing data collected during Winter 2024 from our returning participants, as well as new participants, to further monitor how their levels of school-related stress and promotive factors are contributing to their resilience and to gain a comprehensive understanding of California principals' experiences across various regions. Specifically, in the upcoming wave of data collection, we hope to further investigate the network of professional and social support, to better understand: 1) under what conditions do professional supports help principals; 2) who and what existing support networks are principals utilizing; and 3) identify specific gaps in the existing professional and social support networks. We also plan to include survey items about principals' turnover, to gain clarity about if and why principals want to leave the profession. In addition to our fourth wave of the survey, we are in the process of analyzing the existing data to develop a research brief that focuses on the specific experiences of Principals of Color. Our data thus far has elucidated the need to further examine the working conditions of Principals of Color, including how they are experiencing their workplaces and if this differs from White Principals. We hope to highlight their voices and experiences in the upcoming brief and continue our investigation to better understand and share their experiences.

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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Acknowledgements

We thank all of our 690 principal respondents for their time and efforts in participating in our study, especially with the little time they have as active principals. This study could not have been completed without your support. We also thank our collaborators, Dr. Chunyan Yang and Ella Rho in their support for the open-response analyses.

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