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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8gs679qs>

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Publication Date

2026

DOI

10.1108/978.1.80686.359.420261002

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CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING RISK AND RESILIENCE IN CALIFORNIA'S SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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INTRODUCTION

As in many other states, and in countries across the world, normal operations in California ceased in March 2020 and the chaos of the early days of shelter-in-place orders ensued. Some schools were already utilizing one-to-one laptop technology and fewer were already operationalizing remote learning. Others had experience with virtual learning in response to previous disasters such as wildfires that caused public health concerns. In all schools, leaders struggled to keep up with the deluge of changing health department mandates, increased student needs, and technology constraints while shifting from in-person to virtual instruction and developing their own visions of success in a role that was already immensely challenging.

In this chapter, we draw on multiple papers developed over an extended period as part of a longitudinal research project that explored issues of educational leadership and resilience. Our project began with the Resilient

Leader Project, initiated by the first author during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, which initially aimed to understand the risk factors school leaders were experiencing. As the crisis unfolded, our understanding of resilience deepened; it came to be seen not as a fixed trait but as a process that evolves in response to changing conditions. We invited school leaders to share their experiences in their own words, adding a qualitative element which served as a valuable complement to our initial quantitative design. This helped us identify emerging risk and resilience factors not otherwise captured in the original survey measures, enabling us to implement a four-wave survey cumulatively building and informing both research and practice in the professional development of school leaders across California. What began as an urgent inquiry into the challenges presented by a global health crisis evolved into a deeper investigation into how resilience in school leaders develops across time and context. This chapter focuses on amplifying the voices of California school leaders as they navigated their leadership journeys in a range of school contexts during this challenging time and shares some lessons learned. The integration of this narrative data source offers a more layered and comprehensive understanding, ultimately leading to the development of three core lessons presented in this chapter.

Context and Background

As principals navigated the rapidly shifting realities brought on by the pandemic, they were called on to enact forms of crisis leadership (Grissom & Condon, 2021) while also striving to uphold their roles as equity-driven leaders. Unsurprisingly, these new demands and additional duties exacerbated principals' already heightened levels of job-related stress. Principal turnover in US schools is at a crisis point: A survey from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2021) revealed that 40% of principals expected to leave the profession within three years, thereby threatening school improvement and stability. Given that it typically takes five to seven years for school leadership to effect meaningful change (Fullan, 2002), high turnover disrupts progress, hampers policy implementation, and leads to costly hiring and onboarding processes.

The data collected for this project occurred between 2020 and 2024 during pandemic shelter-in-place orders in collaboration with the 21st Century California School Leadership Academy State Center (21CSLA), Leadership Programs at the UC Berkeley School of Education, and the Principal Leadership Institute at UCLA. A state funded initiative, 21CSLA is charged with providing guidance and support to deliver high quality, equity-centered professional learning to California's leaders at no cost to participants. Offerings focus on capacity building for equity leadership and continuous improvement and include communities of practice, localized

opportunities, and leadership coaching. Given the general lack of systematic data collection of the voices of principals and in light of potentially new needs emerging as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 21CSLA decided to administer a four-wave survey to California K-12 public school Principals, timed to capture information at different milestones of the pandemic: shut down, preparing for reopening, reopening, and prolonged pandemic recovery. This chapter briefly describes the methods used and summarizes the key takeaways across the four waves. Additionally, a subset of the research team was simultaneously working on a separate qualitative research study to understand the leadership experiences and sensemaking of multiply marginalized school leaders as they navigated wellbeing. The participants in that research offered a wealth of insight and wisdom regarding what it means to lead during challenging times. Given the synergy between the qualitative and quantitative studies, we have included the voices from both data sets in this chapter. Together, they describe common stressors and supports as well as distinct tools and experiences of wellbeing for underrepresented leaders.

OVERVIEW OF PRINCIPAL RESILIENCE PROJECT

The aim of this longitudinal project was to better understand how to ameliorate burnout in California's principals by identifying the risks and the resilience factors. To examine this, the first wave of data collection (2020–2021) focused 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. In the second wave survey (Fall 2021), we continued to examine the levels of stress experienced by principals as well as the factors that protected them from burnout as they navigated the return to in-person learning. In Fall 2022, we collected the third wave of data focusing on school-related stressors, principal self-efficacy, perceived district-efficacy, sense of connectedness to the school and district, professional support, and professional core values, including the addition of an open-ended response item. In the 2023–2024 school year, we collected the fourth wave of data, including a new measure on turnover and retention. Across all four waves, 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. [Table 1.1](#) summarizes the timing of each wave and total participants.

The results from each individual wave of the survey reveal significant risk factors as well as sources of resilience for California school principals who

TABLE 1.1 Purpose and Method Used Across the Four Waves of the Study.			
Wave: Term and Year	N	Focus of Study (as Noted in Published Project Briefs)	Method Used
Wave 1: Spring 2021	234	“...to investigate individual and contextual factors that influence Californian principals’ resilience and wellbeing” (Stomski et al., 2022, p. 1).	Survey questions adapted from pilot survey and survey items validated using a confirmatory factor analysis
Wave 2: Fall 2021	209	“...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” (Stomski & Cheung, 2022, p. 1).	Survey questions adapted from wave 1. In addition to survey questions, the final section included open response questions.
Wave 3: Fall 2022	247	“...to 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” (drawing on data from the first three waves; Stomski & Cheung, 2023, p. 1).	Variables examined: school-related stressors, principal self-efficacy, perceived district-efficacy, sense of connectedness to the school and district, professional support, professional core values. Scaled responses were averaged to compare the changes among groups and across time points.
Wave 4: Fall 2023	116	“... to highlight and examine the specific experiences and determinants of principal turn over in the state” (Stomski & Cheung, 2024, p. 4).	Included a new measure on turnover and retention, using an eight-question measure developed by Taie and Lewis (2023).
Total	806		

dared to forge ahead in uncertain and deeply challenging times. Wave one pointed to demographic differences in the presence and impact of risk factors such as burnout and stress and highlighted the factors associated with lower levels of risk such as school efficacy, connectedness, and professional support (Stomski et al., 2022). Wave two broadened the scope of the investigation by including the use of open-ended responses and included validated measures of resilience. Additionally, wave two provided a longitudinal perspective. Certainly, in 2021 as schools returned to in-person programming and instruction, stressors persisted. A specific issue among

participants who took the survey in both wave one and wave two was the stress that led to additional duties, as well as increased levels of compassion fatigue. Yet, of particular note to our team, results showed that while principals found resilience factors at the individual and school level, they rarely reported receiving any form of support from the district or state level (Stomski & Cheung, 2022). Researchers also conducted an ecological analysis of principal risk and resilience, which will be shared in the following chapter (Cheung et al., 2025). Wave three enabled us to draw conclusions regarding the shifting nature of stress and resilience for principals that took the survey during all three waves. Of note was that by Year 3 of the pandemic, stressors had shifted from the immediate needs of their school communities toward the rapidly approaching aftereffects of the pandemic such as staffing shortages. Wave three also showed a clear shift in principals becoming increasingly aware of, and worried about, their own mental health and wellbeing. Wave three presented clear differences between the stressors and worries of principals who supported urban and rural communities (Stomski & Cheung, 2023). Lastly, wave four allowed us to gain crucial insights into the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on principal wellbeing, including turnover and persistence in the role. For example, wave four showed that male principals who took the survey were more likely to express desire to stay in the role. Another significant finding was that principals in rural areas reported a greater desire to stay in role than their urban counterparts (Stomski & Cheung, 2024).

The qualitative research followed a case study design (Mills et al., 2010) and involved a purposive sample of participants from a professional development support network (PDSN) for leaders of color. The PDSN is an organized structure intentionally designed to support leaders who were othered in City District (anonymized). The primary author served as an action researcher for this project, participating in the facilitation and design of PDSN activities. The secondary author participated in sessions and conducted the interviews. Data collection included taking descriptive and reflective field notes, collecting artifacts, and conducting two interviews with each participant within a four-month period. Data analyzed included individual interviews; feedback surveys and participants' written accounts; descriptive and reflective field notes; and artifacts including publicly accessible material. Taken together, these voices and experiences offer new insights into what it means to practice resilience in times of upheaval and immense challenge.

Our experience conducting a four-wave survey served as a reflective lens through which we observed the evolving school and community contexts in California over time. As school leaders navigated stressors, professional fatigue, and the continuing challenges of educational leadership during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, their narratives highlighted the critical need for intentional support structures that foster conditions for individual

and collective resilience. This chapter shares the core lessons that emerged from these studies, drawing from both a systems-level view and a time perspective on resilience. In the following section, we present three key lessons that capture the patterns, shifts, and insights gained through this longitudinal inquiry, highlighting how resilience was cultivated and sustained in diverse school settings.

KEY LESSONS FROM PRINCIPAL RESILIENCE PROJECT

In keeping with the goal of this book, we offer insights from the data in the form of lessons from our participants. In doing so, we reviewed all findings from the four waves of the Principal Resilience study and the aforementioned qualitative study. In doing so, three main themes emerged through reflexive, thematic analysis. We offer these thematic insights in the form of lessons learned from our participants—told through their voices.¹ Table 1.2 is a summary of the top stressors for each wave of the survey. We focus on three major themes identified through the voices of school leaders, as shown in Table 1.2. While neither an excerpt nor vignette could ever fully explain what it means to be a school leader in a time of crisis, we offer the wisdom we heard as windows into the layered complexity that our leaders continue to navigate. Ultimately, this chapter stands as an extended lesson in the promise and perils experienced by courageous and resilient school leaders navigating their roles in response to seemingly insurmountable calls for educational equity and excellence in times of crisis in a field that continues to experience inequity, precarity, and forced resilience, as well as joy, success, and willful ingenuity.

Lesson 1: The Struggle to Navigate Persistent Risk to Wellbeing

The first wave of our Principal Resilience Project revealed that school principals were experiencing elevated levels of school-based stressors and compassion fatigue, some rooted in the unprecedented demands of leading during a crisis. The top stressors revealed in the responses were:

TABLE 1.2 Key Lessons in Four Waves of Principal Resilience Project.		
Lesson 1	The Struggle to Navigate Persistent Risk to Wellbeing	Risk and Resilience—Individual in Contexts
Lesson 2	Leadership Identity Matters	Individual Resilience
Lesson 3	School Context Matters	Collective Resilience

“Additional duties, staffing shortages, implementing [actions], meeting the needs, one’s own mental health, one’s physical health.” We explored principals’ perceptions of risk factors within the framework of work-related stressors and examined the stressors and resilience factors at the personal, micro, macro, and exo-system levels in detail in Chapter 2.

Participant responses indicate that professional factors, such as expanded support systems and meaningful peer connections, may have played a vital role in sustaining the resilience of some principals. Based on the findings of the different waves of the project, what follows are snapshots of school leaders’ experiences as they navigated stressors in their efforts to cultivate resilience within challenging contexts during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This year is so much harder than I imagined it would be. I am feeling a sense of hopelessness about education and our society at large that can feel pretty overwhelmed. I am a generally optimistic and positive person, and I have great relationships with staff and students, but I am questioning the sustainability of this work in a way I never have before ... Spending time in classrooms and with teachers and students when I can helps keep me focused on why I do this work. (Amanda, Urban Middle School)

The leaders in our survey spoke to a wide range of challenges, opportunities, and aspects of their overall professional wellbeing. Among the most striking results of our survey was the number of educators who reported a tension between sustaining themselves in a precarious inflection point and holding steadfast to their sense of purpose and passion. When participants were asked whether they planned to continue as a principal, more than half (56%) said they would, indicating that a majority of California principals are committed to remaining in the profession. However, when responding to the item, “I plan to remain a principal ... until a more desirable job opportunity comes along,” almost half (45%) agreed, suggesting that while the majority of principals intended to stay in their roles, nearly half were open to exploring more attractive opportunities. When asked about the top three stressors during the fourth wave, the following items emerged as highest, in rank order:

- I have been stressed about meeting the needs of my school community.
- I have been stressed about my mental health and wellbeing.
- I have been stressed about managing different initiatives and priorities.

While not surprising during a period of unprecedented challenge brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, our participants’ responses to the open-ended questions revealed a sobering account of how risk and resilience converged over their day-to-day experiences. In their courageous

vulnerability, principals spoke clearly about the troubling nature of the task before them. For the participants, the challenge was not new, but the pandemic created new and novel points of pain that seemed to cut into their sense of solace that the challenges inherent in the traditional role of school principal were germane to the nature of public education. Instead, the principals consistently noted the weight of expectation for them to navigate the educational ship through continuously changing rapids, tides, and waves with no guiding lighthouse in sight. In exacting words, one principal revealed the layered nature of the risks to their professional stability:

I am stressed about the lack of district-wide collaboration and commitment to shared leadership. I am especially concerned about the attitude of some in the district office who purposefully want to punish parents and families who don't agree with the district's opinion of whether students should be coming back for face-to-face instruction. I am stressed about the pervasive belief that we need to just do the bare minimum for some, but reward those who follow what the district administration believes. I worry about people not being able to stand up to this attitude and bring light to the issues. I worry that the school board is not strong enough to stand up for what is right and truly represent their constituents because the district administration consistently "snows" them with alternate facts. (Cam, Suburban High School)

A middle school principal echoed similar sentiments while noting the impact on their personal life. In his response to questions about stressors, Carl notes:

the sheer amount of responsibility. It is very overwhelming and hard to see how it will be sustainable for me and my family. There is no foreseeable reduction in this. It will not be possible to sustain.

Carl mentions how the upheaval created reverberations that troubled the waters of the personal (and interpersonal) sphere of his life. After years of dedicated service to the field, they could not detect a foreseeable pathway forward. For a role that necessarily bridges a wide array of stakeholders (e.g., parents, state departments, districts, counties, students, faculty, etc.), one is inclined to ask what foundations support the person holding up the bridge?

Certainly, the level of clarity afforded in this sharing of experiences was not uniform. Yet, the vast majority of principals reported a level of compassion fatigue that seemed to corroborate what researchers have articulated as particular to school leaders (Yang, 2021). Within this risk to wellbeing, compassion fatigue became an effective heuristic for the ballooning of pre-existing challenges that became magnified during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the lack of support for school principals in navigating multiple levels of wellbeing (micro, meso, macro, exo) was also magnified. Sam (a

suburban middle school principal) gave clarity to this shifting nature of the risk factors when he reflected on the stress he felt about staying up to date and communicating pandemic-related policies (e.g., masks, vaccination mandates, etc.). Even when responding to questions regarding support, Sam noted that “a major stressor is dealing with a teacher union that came away from the pandemic empowered and challenged previous work items.” In providing this explanation, principals challenge us to consider the complex nature of their role as educators tasked with responsibility for the needs and demands of a wide variety of people (e.g., students, faculty, staff, parents, district administration, county policy administrators, etc.). For Catherine, those shifts became part of her contemplations about leaving the field altogether, even as she responded to a question about suggestions for supporting school principals:

Emotional and physical wellbeing [is supported]. Guidance during transitions such as constant change of superintendents, Board members, and staff shortages. Someone to check in to ensure principals have mental support to help when the job becomes so overwhelming one considers leaving a profession they used to love. (Catherine, K-8)

For Catherine, who has been administrator at her school for 6–10 years, the strain became undeniable. Yet, it is important to also recognize the incredible resilience of school principals in the midst of such chaos and upheaval, perhaps, in part, due to the pre-existing challenging nature of the role. The principals in the study spoke clearly about their construction of resilience through a wide array of spheres in their lives (physical health, family, spirituality and religion, etc.). Interestingly, principals met the complicated, layered nature of their challenges with equally complex layers of resilience. For some, this meant leaning into their familial and spiritual connections as practices of community as well as reflective spaces in the midst of tense work challenges. For others, resilience was afforded through grounding themselves in their passion and original reasons for entering the field of public education, even while recognizing how precarious that groundedness may be at times:

I try to stay focused on beliefs about education and its role in ending the inequities and racism in our communities. I use data to ground my emotions and remain logical. (Janet, High School)

For Janet, her passion not only served as a reminder, but also seems to be a buffer against the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue. Interestingly, the participants’ compassion for their students, faculty, and staff (i.e. potential source of compassion fatigue) seems to be intimately connected to their sources of resilience. While the number of principals that contextualize this quote serve as a sobering reminder of how precarious the role of a school

principal can be. It can also serve as a balancing measure to that very condition of burnout. For California school principals, wisdom can be found in both their resilience as well as their reflections on the risk of burnout. Schools, much like other forms of public services, seem to be always hanging by a thread. Perhaps as a society it is easy to assume that the thread dangles on its own, suspended by the very sociopolitical infrastructure that underwrites the imperative for a public education system. Our participants shed light on the very real crux of such precarity and resilience: the unwavering commitment to an ideal that our nation is better served when every child receives a quality education regardless of their financial status or skill level at the point of entry. Encouragingly, California principals' weaving of passion, tenacity, and personalized wellness activities offer both insight into the difficulty of sustaining school leadership and what is most useful to them in safeguarding their own resilience. Chief among the resilience factors seems to be the solemn reminder that education institutions, systems, and organizations can help as a buffer against the precarity that undermines sustainability in the role by offering space and resources to ensure that principals can not only engage their passions and resilience but do so before their passion becomes their last ditch effort to stay in their role. That is, with intentional redesign and prioritization, districts and states can clear the path to sustainability by taking on some of the logistical and operational tasks so that the principalship is more of a sustainable profession.

Lesson 2: Leadership Identity Matters

For my black students, their parents would tell me it's important for us—that our babies see you knowing that you're a brown woman. And that you're smart and you're intellectual, and that you can run things, like [really] run it. That's really important because they don't see that enough. They don't see Latina women in leadership. And especially bilingual ones...they just don't see it. So you're just like, thank you. Yeah, you know. (Maria, K-5 Principal)

There is little debate that school leadership is difficult and challenging. When we (the authors) share that some of us are former school leaders and school psychologists, the first response is usually that odd mixture of reverence and sympathy. The other response is bewilderment that we have made it through such a challenge. Both indicate what many know, perhaps from their own experience in schools: Being a school principal comes with a host of responsibilities and challenges that are markedly far and above that of many other professions (Cheung et al., 2025). However, the profession itself continues to uncover new insights into the experiences of varying genders, and how their professional experience and efficacy may be mediated, in part, by the way society reads and interprets their subjectivity due to their

gender. Recent studies point to the unique experiences of women K-12 public school principals by noting the multiply marginalized aspects of their role enactment and experiences (Burton et al., 2020). Meanwhile, there is also evidence pointing to the unique contributions of Black and Brown women in the profession (Bass, 2009; Nash & Peters, 2020; Weiner & Burton, 2016). Such evidence indicates a need to learn from the ways that Black and Brown woman principals might be an important point for further inquiry in order to understand, and therefore better support, the experiences of women school principals who make up just over half of all public school principals.

In our survey we sought not just to understand gender as a variable, but to gain insight into the ways in which gendered experiences may be mediating the efficacy, resilience, and navigation of the role in the midst of extant challenge and the chaos associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. While our results indicate that gender seems to be a significant variable across most waves of the data, deeper learning is found in how these women discuss their experiences. In another project, informed by the then burgeoning results of the multi-wave risk and resilience study across the state, we began to ask questions about how multiply marginalized women experience, navigate, and respond to the parts of their role that might be intimately associated with their identity as women of color. In providing their wisdom, our participants illuminated and contextualized some of what we were seeing in the broader survey data from hundreds of school principals in California.

Gender and Race: In each of the four waves, demographic differences such as gender and race affected connectedness, efficacy, and stress. For example, in wave 1, 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. In wave 2, overall, female principals experienced higher compassion fatigue than male principals throughout the pandemic. In wave 4, female principals reported being more likely to leave the profession compared to their male counterparts.

Multilingual Principals: In wave 1, 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.

Principals of Color: In wave 3, principals of color reported 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 ($p = 0.033$) compared to white principals. Simultaneously, they also reported feeling less connectedness and lower efficacy to their district. When compared to their white counterparts, principals of color reported significantly lower levels of the district's ability to pursue commitment to educational equity ($p = 0.003$), recruit, retain, and support high quality teachers ($p < 0.001$), communicate a belief in the capacity of administrators to lead in the most difficult circumstances ($p = 0.031$), and communicate a belief in the capacity of teachers to teach even the most difficult students ($p = 0.005$).

Among the interesting finds in the bigger survey data was the persistence of gender as a variable correlated with risk. Over the four waves, female principals consistently reported statistically significant levels of stress higher than their male counterparts. While it can be tempting to associate this finding with the role broadly (regardless of gender), the participants in the case study tell a more complete picture by illuminating issues of multiple marginalization. In discussing her experience in performing an otherwise commonplace function of the job of a woman leader of color, Priti gives illuminating detail of the extra layers of labor she does when performing performance reviews of teachers:

So I spent a lot of time on just the way that I would formulate emails on my phone. Just making sure [of] all of the things I had learned at administrator school, of course, you know, about how you soften certain blows, or whatever that you have to do. But also, I think, always in the back of my mind was the pressure of this could be brought up in somebody's case against you. And then, you know, being a person of color, and like this all white department, just really trying to, I don't think I was trying to prove myself, you know, but I think it, it was just a point of discomfort for me that was really hard to ever resolve. (Priti, High School Vice Principal)

For Priti, that task that leaders perform as a function of their role is almost a different task altogether; one that is done while attending to the many other functions of the job. Although there can be a temptation to see this as something all principals do, it is important to note how our participants directly named what they do as a function of their experiences as women of color. Accordingly, a question for the field of education arises: "Does a barrier need to be the fault of the institution to see it as a valid challenge to the actor within that institution doing their best work?"

Still, across both the bigger survey project as well as our case study the bright spots were as palpable as the immense challenges faced by school leaders, due, at least in part, to the gendered nature of social location. Of the success noted in the survey was the community care that seemed to flow from the "other mothering" of these courageous and resilient school leaders. Yet, as school leaders, those successes take time and are seldom shared

by the people impacted. One such example of this efficacy and passion came through when one Black school leader detailed their experiences of being called upon by students and families as the go-to administrator when it came to their child:

There's just tons of tension. Then all the Black folks being pissed at me because I'm the one breaking up the fight or calling home or you know, and inevitably, it always ends up with love, right? And just like so many families came out of their way [at graduation], and said "we couldn't have done it without you Ms. Jasmine...good work, we know you're in it, you know, for the kids". And you know, it doesn't always start out positive, but the kids that are able to stay... it ends up with love. (Jasmine, High School Vice Principal)

Lesson 3: School Context Matters

Another major finding was how work context and location impacts the responses of leaders. The varied results indicate how issues of leader retention and sustainability can be impacted by context. For example, in wave 1, 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 ($p < 0.05$), 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.

The third wave data indicated that principals from different school locations (urban, suburban, rural) varied in their experiences with stressors and resilience factors. Yet, the principals described two types of stressors: individual and systems level. [Table 1.3](#) summarizes the most common individual and system level stressors reported by the principals.

Individual stressors include loneliness and isolation, increased workload, and issues of mental health and wellbeing. Respondents identified isolation as a significant stressor, often linked to the absence of a support system. Several noted that "being a school principal often feels lonely," emphasizing the need for "collegiate support." They explained that their role requires them to "deal with competing directives," which contributes to the sense that it is "a lonely position." Principals conveyed a deep sense of exhaustion stemming from the relentless nature of their responsibilities.

TABLE 1.3 Common Individual and System Level Stressors Experienced by Principals.	
Individual Level Stressors	System Level Stressors
Loneliness and Isolation	Lack of Support System
Increased Workload	Post Pandemic Student Recovery
Mental Health and Wellbeing	Constrained Resources
	Insufficient Structures of Ad
	Workforce Disruption

They described their workload as increasingly intense, using terms like “exponential” and “overwhelming” to capture the magnitude of the daily demands. Many admitted they rarely, if ever, found time to pause or recuperate, often feeling as though they were barely managing to stay afloat. The shifting and expanding nature of educational mandates and the evolving expectations left principals feeling constantly burdened and unable to regain a sense of balance in their roles. Both urban and rural school principals experience the pressures of workload in their own ways. The following excerpt was echoed in the voices of principals in urban contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic:

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. (Elementary School Principal, Urban)

Importantly, principals reported “enduring pressures from all avenues” within a “culture that does not reward overworking,” often at the expense of their mental health and overall wellbeing. They emphasized the need for greater support in addressing the physical and mental health needs of school administrators. Comments from a woman rural school principal serve as an example of how their mental health and wellbeing were affected:

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 cannot 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. (Elementary School Principal, Rural)

Systemic level stressors included a lack of district support, constrained resources, and broken systems, and workforce disruption. Principals expressed feelings of “isolation” and “helplessness” stemming from the

absence of a reliable support system. Many reported feeling “overloaded” by district expectations, often noting that these demands came “without proper support.” They identified the need for financial support for their overtime work and leadership training. Insufficient funding made them “feel very devalued.” One woman rural school principal shared her concerns as:

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. (Elementary School Principal, Rural)

Systemic problems were cited by principals as significant stressors, which included “institutional racism,” “structural funding inequalities between urban and rural schools,” and “achievement and opportunity gaps” revealed in the voice of a white male school principal working in an urban context:

Address the structural problems: too much bureaucracy that doesn’t improve anything, structural funding inequity between big/small and urban/rural schools. (Elementary School Principal, Urban)

Finally, principals shared the urgent need to “train and recruit high-quality people” to address the shortages in the school contexts, which was felt more in urban areas.

Differences across contexts (rural and urban) were most noted in areas of connectedness, self and district efficacy, professional support, and intensity. For example, urban principals reported less connected to their districts compared to suburban and rural principals. Specifically, urban principals reported significantly lower levels of belongingness ($p < 0.001$), sense of community ($p < 0.001$), respect ($p = 0.033$), and care ($p < 0.001$) 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 also reported 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 ($p = 0.015$) and how pleased they were with their ability to support students’ learning during the pandemic ($p = 0.022$) compared to suburban and rural principals. Urban principals also reported significantly lower levels of district efficacy compared to suburban and urban principals, specifically with regards to the district success in recruiting, retaining and supporting high quality teachers ($p < 0.001$), district pursuing a commitment to educational equity ($\alpha = 0.038$), district members communicating a belief in the capacity of

administrators to lead even in the most difficult circumstances ($p < 0.001$), and district staff members valuing collective and team leadership ($p = < 0.001$). Rural principals reported that they were significantly less likely to reach out to peer colleagues for professional support ($p = 0.012$) than urban and suburban principals.

Finally, principals in different environments experienced varying intensities of stressors. Urban principals reported significantly higher levels of stress overall compared to suburban and rural principals. The following stressors were significantly higher for urban principals: meeting the needs of the school community ($p = 0.12$), facility issues ($p = 0.016$), and issues related to gun violence and school shootings ($p < 0.001$). Rural principals reported significantly higher levels of stress ($p = 0.037$) regarding the impact of fires and other natural disasters compared to suburban and urban principals. The unique stressors associated with rural environments was noted by multiple participants in their open-ended responses. One principal of a rural county noted that:

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. (K-8 Principal of a rural county)

While some of the comments highlight the survey numbers, some comments highlight aspects of the rural school principalship that we did not put on the survey yet warrant further consideration. One such aspect is the weight of expectations on principals that do not differentiate between rural and urban. One such comment came through a majority of open-ended responses and was clarified by a high school principal in a rural context who noted:

The staffing shortage requires me to sub daily and to create lesson plans for classes when we can find subs. Due to being [in] a rural district, we are required to do all the same as a large district with significantly less staff. (High School Principal of a rural county)

Both the quantitative and qualitative data emphasize the significant role of stressors from the exo and chrono systems on issues of leader resilience. While systemic stressors emerged as prominent themes in the quantitative responses and were reported frequently, the study was not designed to test the relative salience or interaction of systemic versus individual factors. Thus, we note that a fruitful area for future research would be to examine how individual, micro and meso level variables (e.g., coping strategies, resilience resources, identity factors) interact with or are shaped by systemic-level influences (e.g., district leadership structures, funding inequities, policy mandates). Our data indicates the need to move beyond seeing principal resilience as an individual-level factor to understanding the systemic

influences that contribute to resilience. The study participants highlighted the need for more social and professional support in the form of greater collaboration, communication, and learning communities that could be provided by their surrounding systems.

A Time to Listen, A Time to Act: The Way Forward

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. (Clara, Elementary School)

In listening to California school principals, it is impossible to ignore the pressure-cooker in which many school leaders found themselves as they strove toward sustaining themselves in this profession. It has been said that schools are microcosms of society. At times, this represents the best of society's ambitions. At other times, the microcosm can be a magnifying glass for all the difficulties society faces. And in times of extreme challenge and seemingly precarious chaos, the school can function as a mirror of the tightly woven, carefully balanced seesaw of promise and peril. For school leaders, that requires a series of tools and skills that might help navigate multiple spheres of influence on their wellbeing. At the individual level, it might mean stringing along a series of community building activities to ensure their staff and faculty stay engaged and connected in a time of social and physical distancing, as the case was during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, school leaders must also attend to the other spheres of their professional lives such as the school site, the district atmosphere, and finally state and federal policy apparatuses that were striving to both deliver the social good and services with which they were tasked while also maintaining public health in hopes of saving lives ([National Academies of Sciences, 2020](#)). Meanwhile, leaders are asked to carry all these interlocking mechanisms of promise and peril.

Encouragingly, we have wisdom offered through the voices and perspectives of school principals themselves. While many of our school leaders called for more financial resources, they did not shy from naming additional supports that require little funding increase. Among them were the need to have clear expectations across all authorizers; guidance on how changing policy might be effectively interpreted; opportunities to engage other school principals for support and idea-sharing; and time and space to lean into the things that matter the most—their compassion and curiosity for how to care for their communities while being *in community* with them.

Some could hear these calls and respond with platitudes of reverence for the hard work these individuals do in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. But research and history shows us that what matters more than accolades and platitudes are the material resources and support that provide the conditions for individuals to do the excellent work we ask them to do.

While school districts, educational municipalities, and state entities can work to restructure how they support school principals, research can start to ask dynamic questions that honor the complexity of what it means to be a school principal. For researchers engaged in quantitative work, this might mean braving the bridge of mixed methods to understand how the big trends and statistical analyses might be contextualized to illuminate answers that otherwise might be relegated to confounding variables or insignificant *p*-values. For researchers marshalling qualitative data to understand the role and experiences of school leadership, it might mean really stepping into the everydayness of a school principal and looking to conceptual and theoretical tools that are otherwise thought to be disconnected from the phenomenon of leading schools.

Whether it be a refocus on how we ask questions and pursue lines of inquiry in research, or the ways we construct and support the role of school principal, history has proven (again) the immense challenge of leading schools in troubling times toward the realization of a national mission to provide excellence and educational opportunity for all. Yet rather than merely a cycle or repetition of troubling eras, the present moment seems to be turning into a protracted time of immense challenge and peril. Fortunately, we are the field of education—a field uniquely poised to *learn* from our own history. The challenge we face—the invitation we extend—is to heed Dr. Maya Angelou’s (1993) wisdom spoken on that brisk morning precipice more than 30 years ago: to face the history of public education with courage so that it “need not be lived again.” Like all inspiring and effective leaders, the school principals in our studies have demonstrated such courage. Will we have the courage to listen and act accordingly?

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This project is based on the “21st Century California Leadership Academy Principal Resilience Project” with a grant received from California Department of Education (006376). We thank all 806 principal respondents for their time and effort in participating in this longitudinal study, especially with the little time they have as active principals. This study could not have been completed without their support.

NOTE

1. All participant names have been changed using randomly assigned pseudonyms.

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