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# The Well-Being of Secondary School Principals One Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic

**T**his Data Note describes findings from a nationally representative sample of secondary school principals about their well-being and job-related stressors one year into the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Understanding principals' views on these topics at a national level can help education leaders and policymakers identify ways to support principal wellness, reduce job-related stress, and improve job satisfaction, performance, and retention.

Effective principals are critical for improving student achievement. They do so by creating an environment that is conducive for learning, improving teachers' working conditions, and hiring, developing, and retaining effective teachers (Burkhauser, 2017; Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay, 2021; Grissom, Loeb, and Master, 2013). Principals face numerous challenges and pressures in their jobs and play multiple roles as instructional leaders and operational managers (Lashway, 2003; Wells and Klocko, 2015). Principals carry out these varied roles in an increasingly complex environment that involves the pressure of high-stakes accountability policies, multiple reform efforts, changing student demographics, reduced resources, and limited autonomy (Wells and Klocko, 2015; Sorenson, 2007; Levin, Bradley, and Scott, 2019; West, Peck, and Reitzug, 2010). Being a principal was a high-stress and challenging occupation prior to the pandemic (Sorenson, 2007), a notion that is supported by a survey of secondary school principals administered in 2019, which found that 42 percent of surveyed principals were considering leaving their jobs (Levin et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has likely exacerbated the job-related stress that principals experience (Brackett, Cannizzaro, and Levy, 2020). A 2021

## Key Findings

- Four out of five secondary principals experienced frequent job-related stress during the 2020–2021 school year.
- Secondary principals of color, female principals, principals serving high-poverty schools, and principals serving schools with high enrollment of students of color were especially likely to experience constant job-related stress.
- Secondary principals' top job-related stressors included supporting teachers' well-being and students' social and emotional learning, as well as navigating pandemic-related challenges.
- Secondary principals whose schools provided fully remote instruction were more likely to experience constant job-related stress than principals whose schools provided hybrid or in-person instruction; sources of job-related stressors varied by mode of instruction.

## Abbreviations

COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
FRPL	free or reduced-price lunch
LTS	Learn Together Surveys
NASSP	National Association of Secondary School Principals
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics

study suggests that principals' roles and responsibilities have evolved and expanded over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and that principals likely need more support to navigate emerging pandemic-era challenges (Clifford and Coggshall, 2021a; Clifford and Coggshall, 2021b). A nationally representative survey of principals fielded in March 2021 found that 72 percent of principals reported that the burnout associated with the stress from their jobs was a moderate or major concern (Kaufman et al., 2021).

In addition, recent data suggest that many principals are now considering leaving their jobs—a consideration that appears to be driven, in part, by pandemic-era working conditions. A poll conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in August 2020 found that pandemic working conditions had accelerated plans to leave the profession for almost half (45 percent) of surveyed principals and had caused almost one-quarter of surveyed principals to consider leaving the principalship for the first time (NASSP, 2020). According to the 2015–2016 National Teacher and Principal Survey, 16 percent of principals somewhat or strongly agreed that the stress and disappointments involved in being a principal were not worth it, and 25 percent somewhat or strongly agreed that, if they could get a higher-paying job, they would leave their job as soon as possible.<sup>2</sup> These percentages rose to 27 and 43 percent, respectively, in fall 2020 (Kaufman et al., 2020).

These findings are not surprising. Teachers are also facing heightened job-related stress because of the pandemic, and in January 2021, they were more likely to report frequent job-related stress than the general population of American workers were. Teachers were also more likely to report symptoms of

depression during the pandemic than the general population of American adults (Steiner and Woo, 2021).

Understanding the levels of stress and stressors that U.S. secondary principals experience in their jobs is critical. High levels of stress are associated with an array of negative physical, psychological, and work-related outcomes, including absenteeism and turnover (Sorenson, 2007). Principal turnover has been linked to other undesirable outcomes, including higher teacher turnover and negative impacts on student academic achievement (Levin and Bradley, 2019; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). Additionally, the cost of replacing principals can be substantial (Levin and Bradley, 2019). Thus, there is an urgent need to understand the job-related stressors that principals face and identify the ways that policymakers and education leaders can support principal well-being—and improve job performance and retention—during and beyond the pandemic.

In this Data Note, we use nationally representative survey data of *secondary principals*, defined as principals who serve in schools that include any grade from 6th grade to 12th grade (and hereafter referred to simply as “principals”), from the 2021 LTS to examine the state of principal well-being. To our knowledge, this is the first-ever nationally representative survey of the well-being of secondary principals. The 2021 LTS was administered in March and April 2021 to 1,686 secondary principals, one year after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several pieces of context are important to have when interpreting principals' survey responses. According to an analysis by the Center on Reinventing Public Education, at the time of LTS administration, about 57 percent of school districts nationally offered full-time in-person learning, about 10 percent were fully remote, and the remainder offered a hybrid blend of in-person and remote instruction. Secondary schools were less likely to offer in-person instruction than elementary schools were (Gross, Opalka, and Gundapaneni, 2021), although many secondary schools offered in-person instruction for at least some students. At the time of the survey, in early 2021, COVID-19 vaccines were widely available for educators, and the delta and

omicron variants had not yet become threats in the United States.

We analyzed both the numeric response data and responses to an open-ended item asking principals about their sources of job-related stress to examine three research questions:

1. What is the state of secondary principals' well-being nationally?
2. Does principal well-being differ across demographic characteristics and school contexts, such as years of experience, race, locale, or population of students served?
3. What are principals' major job-related stressors, and do principals' sources of stress differ depending on demographic characteristics or school contexts?

We highlight principals' responses to the open-ended survey item as quotations throughout this report. Next, we discuss our key findings, and then we conclude with implications and policy recommendations.

## Four out of Five Secondary Principals Experienced Frequent Job-Related Stress During the 2020–2021 School Year

Eighty-three percent of principals (or about four out of five) reported experiencing frequent job-related stress during the 2020–2021 school year, as shown in Figure 1. We defined *frequent* job-related stress as responses of “often” or “always” (shown by the blue and green icons, respectively) to the question, “Since the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, how often has your work been stressful?” Twenty-nine percent of principals reported experiencing *constant* job-related stress, which we defined as responses of “always”. Twice as many principals experienced frequent job-related stress as employed U.S. adults did. In a nationally representative survey administered at

about the same time as the LTS, only 40 percent of employed U.S. adults reported frequent job-related stress, and 11 percent reported constant job-related stress (Steiner and Woo, 2021).

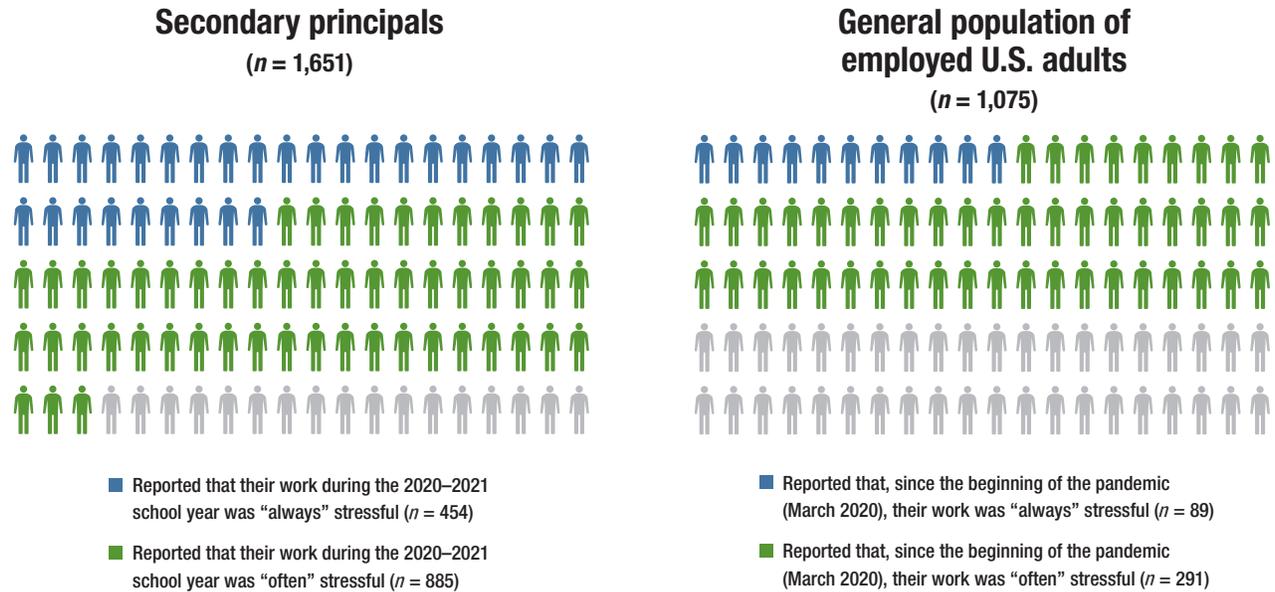
Frequent job-related stress was prevalent among all the principal subgroups that we examined. We explored reports of job-related stress among principals with varying levels of experience, principals of different races, principals of district-run public schools and charter public schools, principals of different genders, principals serving schools with varying levels of student poverty and different student racial/ethnic compositions, principals whose schools provided fully in-person instruction and whose schools provided fully remote or hybrid instruction, schools of different sizes, and schools in different locales (urban, suburban, and town or rural). Regardless of how we categorized principals, about 75 percent to almost 90 percent of principals in each of these subgroups reported that they experienced frequent job-related stress.

We did observe a few noteworthy differences among principal subgroups. Principals serving schools with the largest enrolled student populations were more likely to experience frequent job-related stress than principals serving schools with the smallest enrolled student populations.<sup>3</sup> More-experienced principals, defined as having 11 or more years of experience, were less likely to experience frequent job-related stress than their less-experienced counterparts with six to ten years of experience.<sup>4</sup>

About one in six principals (16 percent) said that they had difficulty coping with their job-related stress, with few significant differences among principal subgroups.<sup>5</sup> We did find significant overlap between principals who reported frequent job-related stress and principals who had difficulty coping with that stress. Unsurprisingly, 60 percent of principals who had difficulty coping with their job-related stress experienced constant job-related stress and nearly all (98 percent) experienced frequent job-related stress.

FIGURE 1

## Percentage of Secondary Principals Who Experienced Constant or Frequent Job-Related Stress Compared with the General Population of Employed U.S. Adults



NOTE: Principal data presented in this figure are drawn from the following survey question: “Since the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, how often has your work been stressful?” Responses were given on a 5-point scale of 1 = never, 2 = hardly ever, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = always. We defined *constant* job-related stress as a response of “always” and *frequent* job-related stress as responses of “often” or “always.” Data from the general population of employed U.S. adults are drawn from a nationally representative survey described in Steiner and Woo, 2021. Employed U.S. adults were asked the same question as principals who completed the LTS during a similar time frame. Each icon represents 1 percent of respondents.

### Secondary Principals of Color, Female Principals, Principals Serving High-Poverty Schools, and Principals Serving Schools with High Enrollment of Students of Color Were Especially Likely to Experience Constant Job-Related Stress

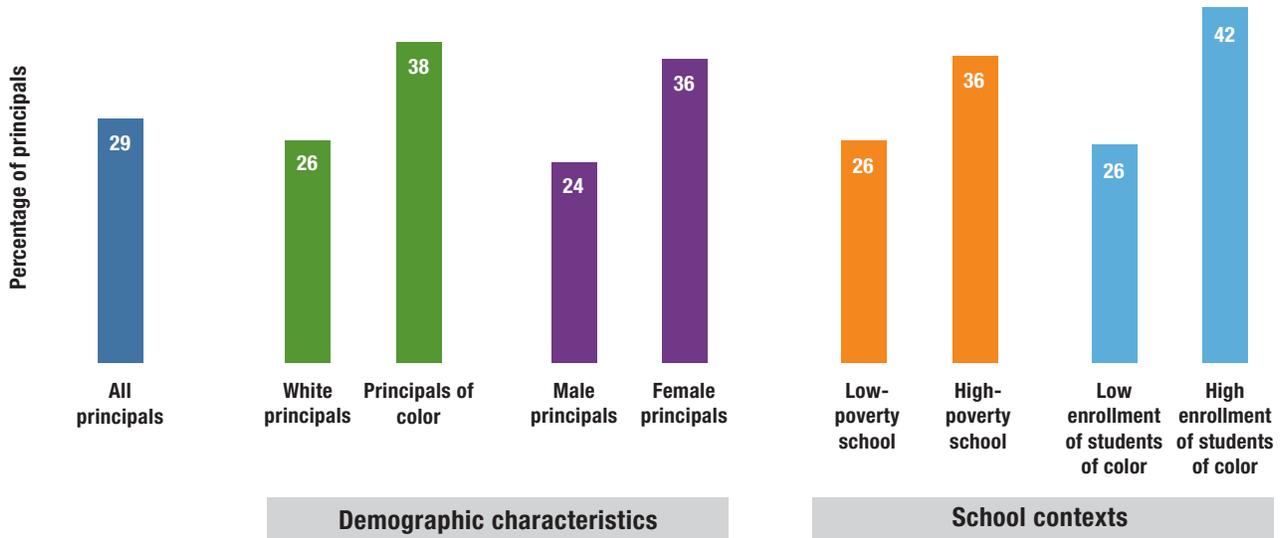
Although frequent job-related stress was prevalent among all principal subgroups that we examined, we found that principals with certain characteristics and principals in certain school contexts (race/ethnicity, gender, and the composition of the student population served) were more likely to experience *constant* job-related stress (i.e., they responded that their jobs were “always” stressful) than their counterparts with different characteristics and in different school

contexts were. Nearly 40 percent of female principals and principals of color reported constant job-related stress, compared with about 25 percent of male principals and White principals (see Figure 2).

Principals who led schools with high enrollment of students of color or high-poverty schools were also more likely to experience constant job-related stress than principals who led schools with low enrollment of students of color or low-poverty schools.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, 36 percent of principals in high-poverty schools experienced constant job-related stress compared with 26 percent of principals in low-poverty schools. The difference between principals who served differing enrollment levels of students of color was even more dramatic: Forty-two percent of principals serving schools with high enrollment of students of color reported experiencing constant job-related stress compared with about one-quarter of principals (26 percent) serving schools with low enrollment

FIGURE 2

## Percentage of Secondary Principals Who Reported Experiencing Constant Job-Related Stress One Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic



NOTE: We defined *constant* job-related stress as a response of “always” to the following survey question: “Since the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, how often has your work been stressful?” We defined a *low-poverty school* as one that falls in the bottom 25 percent (1st quartile) of schools with students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), while a *high-poverty school* falls in the top 25 percent (4th quartile). A school with *low enrollment of students of color* is defined as one that falls in the bottom 25 percent (1st quartile) of school enrollment of students of color, while a school with *high enrollment of students of color* falls in the top 25 percent (4th quartile). All differences presented in this figure are statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ . Other statistically significant differences not presented here for ease of interpretation are as follows: principals serving schools in the 2nd quartile of FRPL eligibility versus principals serving schools in the 4th quartile, principals serving schools in the 2nd quartile of enrollment of students of color versus principals serving schools in the 4th quartile, and principals serving in the 3rd quartile of enrollment of students of color versus principals serving schools in the 4th quartile. All principals,  $N = 1,651$ ; White principals,  $n = 1,288$ ; principals of color,  $n = 330$ ; male principals,  $n = 989$ ; female principals,  $n = 697$ ; principals of low-poverty schools,  $n = 423$ ; principals of high-poverty schools,  $n = 331$ ; principals of schools with low enrollment of students of color,  $n = 502$ ; and principals of schools with high enrollment of students of color,  $n = 346$ .

of students of color—a difference of 16 percentage points.<sup>7</sup>

One possible explanation for the differences that we observed among principals of color and White principals, as well as among female and male principals, is that they may be related to school context. Principals of color and female principals tend to lead schools that are systematically different from schools led by White principals and male principals, respectively. Female principals and principals of color are generally more likely to lead schools that are urban and schools in which 75 percent or more of the student population is experiencing poverty (NCES, 2019). Additionally, female principals, principals of color, principals leading high-poverty schools, and principals serving schools with high enrollment of students of color were all more likely than their counterparts to provide fully remote instruction in

the 2020–2021 school year. When we statistically controlled for a host of school-level characteristics, including the percentage of students living in poverty, we found that the difference in constant job-related stress between White principals and principals of color was no longer significant. However, the difference between male principals and female principals remained significant after statistically controlling for these same school-level characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

Although it is possible that a more challenging school environment might have contributed to the higher levels of stress experienced by principals of color and female principals, it is also possible that other factors unmeasured by this survey, such as microaggressions, double standards, biases, a lack of adequate support for professional development, or personal factors (e.g., unequal division of household or caregiving responsibilities) (Wilkerson and

Wilson, 2017; Martínez, Molina-López, and Mateos de Cabo, 2021; Dunatchik et al., 2021), could have played a role.<sup>9</sup>

## Secondary Principals' Top Stressors Included Supporting Teachers' and Students' Well-Being and Navigating Pandemic-Related Challenges

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, principals have expressed concerns about students' social and emotional well-being and attendance, the difficulties of implementing COVID-19 mitigation measures and remote-learning options, and the challenges of changing their school's instructional model (e.g., from in person to remote) in response to local case rates (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Diliberti, 2020). In March and April 2021, most principals were stressed about three main areas of responsibility: (1) supporting the well-being of teachers and the

social and emotional learning of students in their schools; (2) managing pandemic-related conditions, such as changes to their school's instructional model and implementing COVID-19 mitigation strategies; and (3) administrative duties, such as managing staffing, tracking attendance, and determining schedules for their school (see Figure 3).

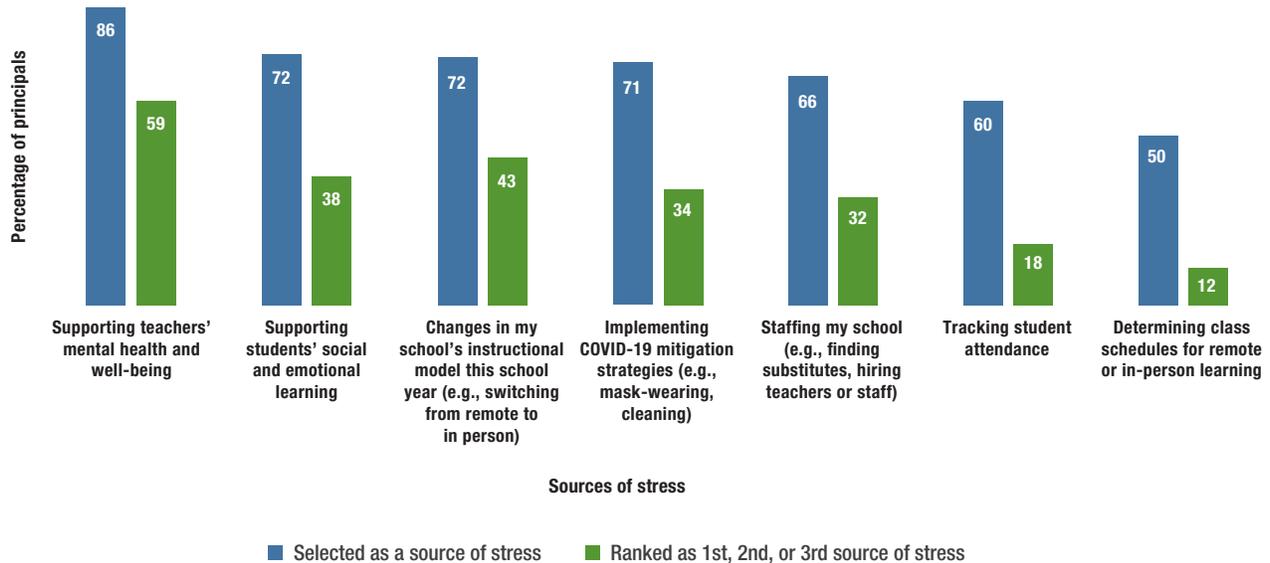
Notably, principals ranked these same stressors as their top sources of job-related stress. Nearly six in ten principals in our sample ranked supporting teachers as one of their top three sources of stress, and another four in ten principals ranked managing changes in their school's instructional model as one of their top three stressors.

Principals' concerns about teachers' well-being are warranted. Nationally, in spring 2021, a majority of teachers reported frequent levels of job-related stress, and teachers were more likely to experience such stress than were employed U.S. adults generally (Steiner and Woo, 2021).

Our results suggest that principals reported experiencing more stress when they perceived that

FIGURE 3

### Secondary Principals' Top Sources of Job-Related Stress



NOTE: We display sources of stress selected by 50 percent or more of principals in response to the following survey question: "Which of the following are sources of stress in your job right now?" Principals who selected stressors, *n* = 1,651; principals who ranked sources of stress, *n* = 1,650.

their teachers were experiencing more stress. We asked principals whether, since the beginning of the pandemic, there had been any changes in how often their teachers told them they felt stressed. Principals who reported that their teachers told them that they felt stressed a lot more were themselves more likely to experience frequent job-related stress than principals who reported no change or only a little change in how frequently their teachers told them that they felt stressed. Additionally, principals who reported that their teachers told them that they felt stressed a lot more were more likely to select “supporting teachers’ mental health and well-being” as a stressor than were principals who reported no change or only a little change in teachers’ reported stress.

Principals’ responses to an open-ended question about job-related stressors provide more insight into the struggles that principals faced in their own words. In addition to citing “student mental health” and “managing teachers’ stress” as challenges, principals expressed that they had to manage confusing, unclear, or changing guidance from district leadership while balancing multiple administrative responsibilities and communicating to parents in the midst of ever-changing pandemic conditions. Principals cited “adapting to evolving guidance,” “frequent changes with little lead time that require a lot of communication to parents and staff,” and “balancing all of the different responsibilities” with “not enough time” as stressors. As one principal summed it up, “This has been one of the toughest years for educators ever.”

## Secondary Principals Whose Schools Provided Fully Remote Instruction Were More Likely to Experience Constant Job-Related Stress Than Principals Whose Schools Provided Hybrid or Fully In-Person Instruction

At the time we administered the LTS in March and April 2021, about one in four principals reported that their school provided fully remote instruction to a large majority or all of their students since the

beginning of the 2020–2021 school year. About one in four principals reported that their school provided fully in-person instruction for the majority or all of their students. The remaining principals—about half—reported that their school offered hybrid instruction.

This has been one of the toughest years for educators ever.

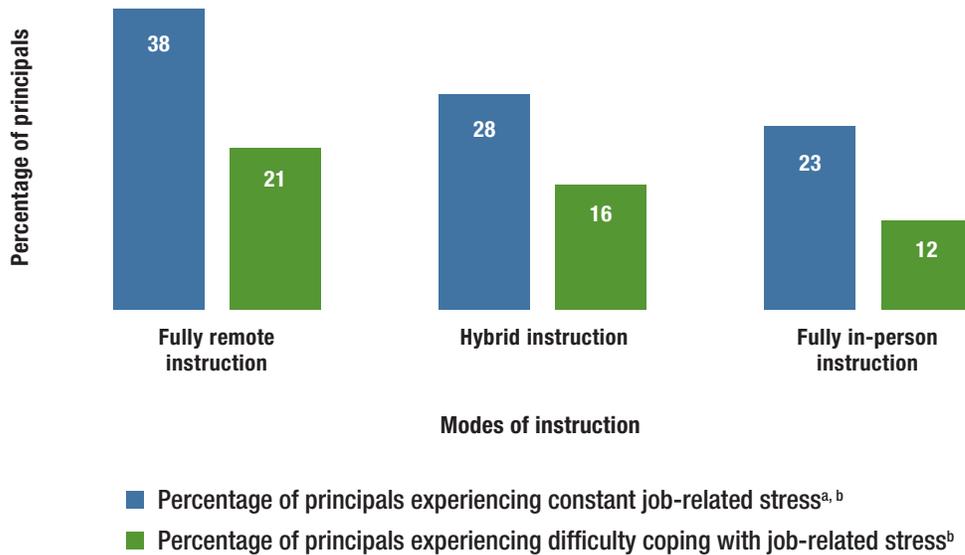
—Principal

Principals whose schools provided fully remote instruction were more likely to experience constant job-related stress than were principals whose schools provided fully in-person or hybrid instruction, as shown in Figure 4. Remote principals<sup>10</sup> were more likely to experience difficulty coping with their job-related stress<sup>11</sup> than principals whose students had received fully in-person instruction since the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year.

At the time of this survey, schools that provided fully remote instruction were likely to serve more students living in poverty and more students of color (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021b). After statistically controlling for various school-level characteristics, such as FRPL enrollment, student racial/ethnic composition, locale, size of school as measured by student enrollment, and grade level, these differences in constant job-related stress and difficulty coping with job-related stress remained significant. Although we are not able to determine causality, these results suggest that principals leading schools that provided fully remote instruction were experiencing higher levels of stress than their counterparts were, potentially because they experienced a different set of stressors and circumstances than principals leading schools that offered hybrid and in-person instruction.

FIGURE 4

## Constant Job-Related Stress and Difficulty Coping with Job-Related Stress Among Secondary Principals Whose Schools Provided Different Modes of Instruction



NOTE: We defined *constant* job-related stress as a response of “always” to the following survey question: “Since the beginning of the 2020–2021 school year, how often has your work been stressful?” Responses were given on a 5-point scale of 1 = “never,” 2 = “hardly ever,” 3 = “sometimes,” 4 = “often,” and 5 = “always.” We asked principals, “How well are you coping with the stress of your job right now?” and asked them to rate their coping ability on a 5-point scale from 1 (not coping well at all) to 5 (coping very well). We categorized those principals who rated their coping ability as a 1 or 2 as having difficulty coping. In order to determine the mode of instruction of principals’ schools, we asked principals, “Which of the following most clearly reflects how instruction has been provided to your students since the beginning of the school year (2020–2021)?” Schools that provided fully remote instruction,  $n = 362$ ; schools that provided hybrid instruction,  $n = 886$ ; schools that provided fully in-person instruction,  $n = 436$ .

<sup>a</sup> Indicates that the difference between principals of schools that provided fully remote instruction and principals of schools that provided hybrid instruction was statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>b</sup> Indicates that the difference between principals of schools that provided fully remote instruction and principals of schools that provided fully in-person instruction was statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

We found that the types of stressors that principals experienced varied according to their school’s mode of instruction, as shown in Table 1. Remote and hybrid principals were more likely than in-person principals to select the following as stressors: determining class schedules for remote and in-person teaching, navigating changes to their school’s instructional model, managing child care for their own children, ensuring that teachers had the technology they needed for remote teaching, their own job security, and the health of a loved one who is at high risk for COVID-19. In-person principals were more likely than remote principals were to select stressors associated with in-person schooling, such as imple-

menting COVID-19 mitigation measures, staffing their school, managing student behavior, and a lack of time to collaborate with colleagues.

Hybrid principals, who experienced challenges associated with remote and in-person instruction, tended to select stressors relevant to both of those instructional modes. Hybrid principals were more likely to select staffing their schools, managing student behavior, and tracking student attendance as stressors than remote principals were. There is some evidence that hybrid instruction is uniquely challenging for teachers (Steiner and Woo, 2021), and we might expect that it was similarly challenging for principals. However, remote principals were

TABLE 1

## Sources of Stress for Remote, Hybrid, and In-Person Secondary Principals

	More likely to be selected by a <b>remote principal</b>		More likely to be selected by a <b>hybrid principal</b>		More likely to be selected by an <b>in-person principal</b>	
	than an in-person principal	than a hybrid principal	than an in-person principal	than a remote principal	than a remote principal	than a hybrid principal
<b>Managing pandemic-related responsibilities and concerns</b>						
Child care for my own children	●		●			
Determining class schedules for remote or in-person learning	●		●			
Changes in my school's instructional model this school year (2020–2021; e.g., switching from remote to in person, or vice versa)	●		●			
Ensuring that teachers have the technology they need for remote teaching	●		●			
The health of a loved one who is at high risk for COVID-19	●		●			
Implementing COVID-19 mitigation strategies (e.g., mask-wearing, cleaning, testing, distancing)					●	
<b>Administrative duties</b>						
Staffing my school (e.g., finding substitutes, hiring teachers or staff)				●	●	
Managing student behavior				●	●	●
Tracking student attendance			●	●		
Finding instructional resources and materials			●			
<b>Other</b>						
Lack of time to collaborate with colleagues					●	●
My own job security	●		●			

NOTE: We found no statistically significant differences among principals whose schools engaged in different modes of instruction for the following stressors, which are not displayed in this figure: principal's health, school budget decisions, job security of the principal's spouse or partner, supporting teachers' mental health and well-being, and supporting students' social and emotional learning.

Students are losing instruction and our English-learning and African American students are in the percentage of students not returning for in-person [instruction].

—Principal

more likely to experience constant job-related stress than hybrid principals were. There was no difference between hybrid principals' and in-person principals' experiences of constant job-related stress.

Although our data do not shed light on why remote principals were more likely to experience constant job-related stress than hybrid principals were, one possibility is that remote principals were more concerned about their students' academic learning and well-being. Results from another nationally representative survey of elementary and secondary educators that was administered at the same time as the 2021 LTS suggested that remote students received less instructional time, were more likely to be absent, and were less likely to complete their assignments; they also suggested that teachers were able to cover less of their curricula. Principals whose schools provided fully remote instruction were also more likely than in-person principals were to estimate that their students were achieving below grade level (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021b).

Another hypothesis is that the higher levels of job-related stress experienced by remote principals could lie in their additional at-home responsibilities. As shown in Table 1, remote principals were more likely than in-person principals were to select "child care for my own children" as a stressor. This suggests

that remote principals' at-home responsibilities—such as child care—could reduce the time available for job-related tasks. Putting these results in context, if the principal's school was engaged in remote instruction, it is likely that other schools in the area were also remote and that remote principals had to manage their own children's remote schooling as well as their own job-related responsibilities.

## Implications and Recommendations

In this section, we offer recommendations for district leaders and state and local policymakers. This Data Note uses LTS data that focus on principal well-being and sources of job-related stress in March 2021, one year into the COVID-19 pandemic. As of the writing of this report, in fall 2021, students were beginning their third school year during the COVID-19 pandemic, and many conditions have changed. Vaccines are now widely available for children five years of age and older, and most schools have returned to in-person instruction for most students. However, disputes about mask and vaccine mandates as well as new variants of the virus, which have forced many schools to close or quarantine students, are complicating schooling in many communities. These conditions suggest that many of the job-related stressors discussed in this Data Note are likely to remain key stressors for principals in the 2021–2022 school year.

Although the recommendations that we offer are based on data gathered in March 2021, they remain relevant as the pandemic continues and as schools and districts plan for recovery and future large-scale disruptions of schooling. These recommendations are intended to encourage state and local policymakers and district leaders to consider principals' well-being and take steps to mitigate job-related stressors now and in the long term.

**Support the well-being and mental health of principals, especially principals from historically marginalized groups and principals who lead schools with high enrollment of students of color and students living in poverty.** If left unaddressed,

frequent job-related stress could lead principals to leave their jobs or the profession, as it has for some teachers (NASSP, 2020; Diliberti, Schwartz, and Grant, 2021). There is some prepandemic evidence that principals of color and principals leading schools with high enrollment of vulnerable students were more likely to leave than were their White peers and their peers who served less vulnerable students (Gates et al., 2006; Tekleselassie and Villarreal, 2011; Levin and Bradley, 2019). The high frequency of stress experienced by principals in these groups makes the threat of turnover particularly salient and could have implications for the diversity of the educator workforce.

As of the 2017–2018 school year, only about 22 percent of secondary public-school principals identified as people of color, and about one-third identified as female (NCES, 2019). Principals of color are more likely to lead schools serving large proportions of students of color and students living in poverty (Wilkerson and Wilson, 2017). Principals who identify as people of color play a significant role in increasing the diversity of the educator workforce by being more likely to hire and retain teachers of color than their White peers are (Lindsay and Egalite, 2020; Bailes and Guthery, 2021; Bartanen and Grissom, 2019). Thus, it is possible that a less diverse principal workforce could result in a less diverse teacher workforce.

Our data suggest that remote instruction could be one possible explanation for the elevated levels of frequent job-related stress experienced by these groups of principals, and these principals may also be experiencing other stressors that are unmeasured by the LTS. As a first step, district and state leaders could systematically gather data that shed light on the individual stressors and work experiences of principals. Analyzing these data by principal subgroups, along with conversations with principals, could help state and district leaders identify principals' most-pressing needs and develop feasible supports.

District leaders could also implement systems of culturally responsive mentorship and coaching, such as induction programs for novice principals and peer

support networks for more-experienced principals (Wilkerson and Wilson, 2017), or they could expand access to such programs if they already exist. Such programs can build persistence for individuals in underrepresented groups in other contexts, such as STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), by providing members of these groups with opportunities to build systems of social support, especially with peers and mentors who share similar identities or backgrounds (Stolle-McAllister, 2011; Strayhorn, DeVita, and Blakewood, 2012). Moreover, these programs may benefit principals of all racial/ethnic identities and backgrounds.

**Help principals support and improve teachers' and students' well-being.** Our results indicate that a top source of principals' job-related stress was concerns about teachers' well-being and students' social and emotional learning. This finding is supported by more-recent survey data, demonstrating that, in fall 2021, teachers' and students' well-being continued to be a top concern for many secondary principals (NASSP, 2021). Other national surveys have documented the pandemic-related stressors experienced by teachers (Diliberti, Schwartz, and Grant, 2021; Steiner and Woo, 2021; Kaufman and Diliberti, 2020a) and by students (YouthTruth Student Survey, 2021; Challenge Success and NBC News, 2021). This body of work suggests that teachers' sources of stress include remote and hybrid teaching, lack of adequate child care, limited technology support for remote teaching, and concerns about their health. Students' sources of stress include distractions at home, concerns about their health and the health of their family members, worries about doing well in school, and the uncertainty of life during a pandemic.

Although it is not possible for principals to mitigate all these stressors, district leaders should ensure that principals have the resources and autonomy to address, to the extent possible, the concerns of teachers and students that are within principals' influence. For example, many districts are working to hire counseling and mental health staff to support students (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2021). Districts should also consider hiring such staff to support principals and teachers or providing such services

virtually. District leaders could also provide principals with the financial and staff resources to provide on-demand technology and remote-learning support for teachers and could empower principals to develop remote-learning policies that meet the needs of their staff and student communities.

**Provide guidance and resources to help principals manage the operational aspects of their jobs.**

In addition to supporting the well-being of teachers and students in their schools, principals' main sources of job-related stress in March 2021 included managing pandemic-related conditions, such as changes to their school's instructional model and implementing COVID-19 mitigation strategies, and managing staffing, attendance, and schedules for their schools.

Thus, districts could consider how to support principals in managing the operational aspects of their jobs, both those directly associated with the pandemic, such as implementing COVID-19 safety measures, and those affected by the pandemic, such as managing staffing. Most districts have been working to hire staff, particularly substitute teachers, since spring 2021 (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2021), and numerous media reports indicate that in many places there are not enough applicants to fill open positions (Barnum, 2021). In this apparently tight labor market, district leaders should endeavor to prioritize principals' staffing requests to ensure that new staff are hired quickly.

To help principals manage pandemic-related stressors, state and district leaders could adopt guidelines for school safety provided by the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021) and allocate American Rescue Plan funding to implement those measures—and related communications materials—districtwide, thus relieving principals of the need to navigate these decisions for their school and communicate them to families and staff. These strategies can reduce the burden on principals as they endeavor to safely and smoothly resume in-person learning. Finally, in instances where in-person learning is not possible, state and district leaders should draw on lessons learned from the past two years to make high-quality virtual learning options widely available and work to ensure that student and teacher transitions between in-person and remote schooling are as seamless as possible.

## Limitations

This Data Note uses nationally representative survey data to provide insights into the state of secondary principals' well-being. There are several limitations to keep in mind when interpreting these results. First, the LTS did not include elementary school principals; thus, we do not capture their experiences. Second, all analyses across different principal subgroups are purely descriptive and do not suggest causal relationships. Third, all LTS items involve self-reported measures, which may be subject to reporting bias, particularly on survey items that are difficult for principals to self-assess or that have socially acceptable answers.

## How This Analysis Was Conducted

This Data Note uses responses from 1,686 secondary principals who responded to the 2021 LTS, focusing on items from the portions of the survey on principal well-being. Additional information about the survey methodology, weighting procedures, and descriptive tables for LTS questions can be found in *Learn Together Surveys: 2021 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (Young et al., 2021).

We compared principals' responses across different school characteristics, including school enrollment of FRPL-eligible students, school enrollment of students of color, school size, status as a charter public school or district-run public school, mode of instruction, and school locale (urban, suburban, and town/rural), as well as principals' years of experience, race/ethnicity, and gender as reported during the 2020–2021 school year. School demographic characteristics were obtained from the 2019–2020 NCES Common Core of Data, with the remaining characteristics identified through principals' survey responses. All comparisons mentioned in the Data Note are unadjusted for statistical controls, tested for statistical significance using *t*-tests, and are significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level unless otherwise specified. We tested the robustness of these patterns using regression models that controlled for the inclusion of school characteristics (e.g., locale, FRPL enrollment, student racial/ethnic composition, school size, grade level) and principals' total years of experience. Because these results are substantively similar unless otherwise noted, we have presented only unadjusted descriptive results.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We define *secondary principals* as principals who serve schools that include any grade from 6th grade to 12th grade. Hereafter, when describing data from the Learn Together Surveys (LTS) and referring to “principals,” we are referring to secondary principals.

<sup>2</sup> Data from the 2015–2016 National Teacher and Principal Survey was drawn from the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) DataLab.

<sup>3</sup> To explore differences among principals serving in schools with varying sizes of student enrollment, we used data drawn from the 2019–2020 Common Core of Data (NCES, 2020). We compared principals of schools in the top 25 percent of total student enrollment with principals whose schools were in the bottom 25 percent.

<sup>4</sup> Eighty-three percent of principals with five or fewer years of experience reported frequent job-related stress, compared with 86 percent of principals with six to ten years of experience and 77 percent of principals with 11 or more years of experience. Differences between principals with five or fewer years of experience and their more-experienced counterparts were not statistically significant.

<sup>5</sup> We asked principals “How well are you coping with the stress of your job right now?” and asked them to rate how they are coping on a 5-point scale from 1 (not coping well at all) to 5 (coping very well). We categorized those principals who rated their coping ability as 1 or 2 as having difficulty coping. The principal subgroups that we examined were as follows: experience (five years or fewer, six to ten years, and 11 or more years); race/ethnicity (Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin; White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; other; or prefer not to say); gender; school type (district-run public school and charter public school); school poverty level; race/ethnicity of student population;

school size (enrollment); locale (urban, suburban, and town/rural); and mode of instruction (remote, hybrid, in person).

<sup>6</sup> Data on school poverty level and school-level student racial/ethnic composition were drawn from the 2019–2020 Common Core of Data (NCES, 2020). We used school-level FRPL enrollment to measure school poverty level and compared principals who served schools in the bottom 25 percent (1st quartile; low-poverty school) with those who served schools in the top 25 percent (4th quartile; high-poverty school) of FRPL enrollment. Similarly, we compared principals who served schools in the bottom 25 percent of enrollment (i.e., low enrollment) of *students of color*, defined as non-White students, with those who served schools in the top 25 percent of enrollment (i.e., high enrollment) of students of color.

<sup>7</sup> After statistically controlling for mode of instruction, the difference between principals of high-poverty schools and principals of low-poverty schools was no longer significant. This result could be explained by the fact that high-poverty schools were significantly more likely to provide fully remote instruction at the time of the survey. However, even after statistically controlling for mode of instruction, the difference between principals serving schools with low enrollment of students of color and those serving schools with high enrollment of students of color remained significant.

<sup>8</sup> The school-level characteristics that we statistically controlled for included FRPL enrollment, locale, size of school as measured by student enrollment, student racial/ethnic composition, grade level, and mode of instruction.

<sup>9</sup> When asked about sources of job-related stress, principals were able to select “child care for my own children” as an option. Thirteen percent of principals selected child care as a stressor, and the difference between male and female principals was not statistically significant.

<sup>10</sup> We categorized principals by instructional mode based on their re-

sponses to the following survey question: “Which of the following most closely reflects how instruction has been provided to your students since the beginning of the school year (2020–2021)?” We categorized those principals who responded that the majority, if not all, of their students received in-person instruction each day as “in-person”; principals who responded that the majority or all of their students received some in-person and some remote instruction each day as “hybrid”; and principals who responded that the large majority or all of their students received fully remote instruction as “remote.”

<sup>11</sup> We defined *difficulty coping* as a rating of 1 or 2 in response to the question “How well are you coping with the stress of your job right now?” Principals could respond on a scale of 1, meaning that they were not coping well at all, to 5, meaning that they were coping very well.

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## About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country.

We are extremely grateful to the educators who have agreed to participate in the panels. Their time and willingness to share their experiences are invaluable for this effort and for helping us understand how to better support their hard work in schools. We thank Jill Cannon and Lindsay Daugherty of the RAND Corporation and Megan Kuhfield of NWEA for helpful feedback that greatly improved this report. We also thank Stephanie Lonsinger for her editorial expertise and Monette Velasco for overseeing the publication process for this report.

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More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this Data Note or about the Learn Together Surveys should be directed to [awoo@rand.org](mailto:awoo@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

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This Data Note series is intended to provide brief analyses of teacher and school leader survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. If you would like to know more about the dataset, please see *Learn Together Surveys: 2021 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (RR-A827-2, [www.rand.org/t/RR-A827-2](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A827-2)) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own analysis or reading other AEP-related publications, please email [aep@rand.org](mailto:aep@rand.org) or visit [www.rand.org/aep](http://www.rand.org/aep).

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