

PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS OF STRESS IN SCHOOL

Major themes and representative quotes from principal interviews.

Qualitative interviews conducted with 14 RRISD principals in the summer of 2022.

Researchers from UT Austin and UNC Charlotte

1 Stress is a major issue.

Principals talked about overwhelming numbers of stressors in their schools during and coming out of the pandemic and emphasized the intensity of those stressors.

2 Addressing these issues is a top priority for principals.

Principals discussed the weight and importance of their responsibility to mitigate stress in their schools.

3 It's all about people.

Principals emphasized that their efforts are people/relationship-centric.

4 Principals are under a lot of stress themselves.

Principals spoke about the many stressors they face and must cope with while also being the one primarily responsible for managing others' stress.

TAKEAWAYS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the challenges that principals identified as causing significant stress in their schools centered on **complex, difficult-to-solve problems** (e.g., teacher shortage, rising concerns around student and staff mental health). Principals recognize that many of these issues **don't have quick, easy fixes**, and understand that the district has limitations with implementing solutions.

That said, one of the **biggest takeaways** is that principals need to **feel seen, understood, and respected**. Each school presents a **unique set of challenges** that require different and nuanced support. Principals noted how **meaningful acknowledgment and understanding** by the district of a principal's and school's challenges, along with concerted efforts to provide **individualized support** based on these unique needs would be beneficial.

Examples

In some schools, this might be in the form of de-emphasizing academic outcomes in favor of a stronger focus on well-being initiatives for students.

In other schools, this could mean providing more mental health support for teachers or principals.

Emphasis on more **individualized support and recognition of daily realities** would be more beneficial than prioritizing district-wide directives. At the time of the interviews, some principals expressed appreciation for researchers' interest in their perspective on these issues, explicitly indicating that no others had. The district may consider additional ways to **hear and integrate principal voices** into change efforts.

1

STRESS IS A MAJOR ISSUE

Principals discussed **ongoing stressors** that preceded COVID, such as **challenges with attending to staff and student needs** (e.g., addressing student behaviors), managing **demands from the district and state** (e.g., standardized testing), and feeling the **weight of being ultimately responsible** for decisions that affect their schools.

"It's harder to retain teachers [...] so that directly impacts the climate and culture at the campus. It doesn't matter how much I impact a positive culture, [...] I mean you can only be worn down so much before you have to seek other opportunities and you have to start prioritizing yourself."

"I feel like [...] I am supposed to be taking care of whatever it is that the needs are on my campus. And even if I ask for something that best meets the needs of my campus, there are so many barriers to get whatever it is, that it's always a 'no.'"

"A lot of students come from trauma [...] but we are still expected to prioritize [academic growth]."

2

ADDRESSING THESE ISSUES IS A TOP PRIORITY FOR PRINCIPALS

Principals discussed their efforts to address new stressors and demands that were exacerbated by the pandemic, such as **limited interpersonal connection** due to years of social distancing, **having to create plans from scratch** due to the novelty of COVID-19, **struggling with the staff shortage**, and difficulties **maintaining school safety** during the pandemic (e.g., rises in COVID cases).

"We have seen escalated [student] behaviors. Teachers feeling the stress of trying to deal with lack of respect they feel from parents, from what they see out in the public and in the politics. The workload is heavy, and they see people around them making more money and working from home, and yet they have to come and give more of their time [...] And so, [...] taking care of my staff has become a really big stress because all of those things are mine to figure out. How do I balance [the] reality, but make it still a good place to work?"

"If I don't take care of [the teachers], there's no way they can be their best selves in the classroom."

3

RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY TO MITIGATING TEACHER STRESS

Principals talked about the essential role relationships play within their school. They often **leaned into relationships** to help address teacher and student stress, such as by **prioritizing communication, focusing on socioemotional support** (e.g., focusing on student wellbeing), and **emphasizing opportunities for collaborative decisions** (e.g., supporting staff's autonomy).

"Relationships are one of the most important, if not THE most important [parts]. Relationships with staff are critical, with families...and the students. Yes, relationships [are] big, big, big."

"I make myself unbelievably available to my staff. I get text messages all the time from them. But I just feel like [if] they have that connection with me, they know if something's wrong, if they need something, if they just need someone to talk to, that I'm there and present. And so I think that that helps them. I mean I think it heightens my stress, because then it is on me. But I think it helps them and helps their connection to hear that someone wants them to be here."

"I think relationships are critical to dealing with stress."

4

PRINCIPALS ARE UNDER A LOT OF STRESS THEMSELVES

Principals talked about stress related to their **many roles within the school**, such as being managers, social workers, and academic leaders. They noted the challenges of managing the demands on their plate while **attending to the needs of everyone else**. They expressed flexibility from the district, mentorship in leadership from other administrators, and additional socioemotional supports for their schools would be **helpful moving forward**.

"I have to be everything for everybody. I listened to all of their stories, I listened to all of their problems. It's my job to fix it, to make it okay, make a way for them to function. And yet, I sometimes feel like there's not that for me."

"I think [district] mandates are really hard. It's really hard when every minute of your professional development time is taken by something outside of [the things that a principal feels are important for their school to work on]."

"I feel like I get so busy during the day that I don't take care of myself and eat. And I think that anyone who's a principal is going to tell you that."