

The Changing Nature of Principals' Work

By Katina Pollock, with David Cameron Hauseman and Fei Wang

Contemporary principals in many jurisdictions around the world are expected to be instructional leaders (Leithwood, 2012; Hallinger, 2005; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). This was not always the case, however. Up until the late 1970s, principals were mainly considered educational managers (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). The effective schools movement in the early 1980s brought new insight into what principals could do in their role. Among other things, it led to research and claims that principals can influence instruction and, in turn, support student achievement (Edmonds, 1979). The field of education leadership traditionally views an instructional leader as someone who is focused on the teaching and curriculum aspect of school leadership. Horng and Loeb (2010), for example, describe traditional instructional leaders as “outstanding teachers, inspired to use their exceptional

teaching skills to impact student learning. Leaders could mentor their teaching staff by observing practice, providing pointed feedback, and modeling instruction when necessary” (p. 66).

Principals in Ontario's public schools are expected to be instructional leaders who “embed direct involvement in instruction in their daily work through teamwork with all staff focused on improv[ing] school and classroom practices” (Leithwood, 2012). However, the work of principals is changing. These changes can be attributed to a number of interrelated global and local influences. Principals' autonomy has been reduced and their management tasks have been altered. This is the result of the proliferation of performance-based accountability initiatives, standardized curricula, national and international competitiveness and increased parent choice, all of which have created an expectation that decisions be made collaboratively (Court & O'Neil, 2011; Fink & Brayman, 2006; Gidney, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994; Lingard & Douglas, 1999). With rising levels of diversity, the changing nature of labour relations, and the advance of technology, principals' contemporary work is becoming increasingly complicated (Harvey & Houle, 2006; Ryan, 2006; Wallace, 2010). This evolving context has ramifications for how principals engage in instructional leadership and in other aspects of their work.

This article describes a study that explores the contemporary work of principals. Among other things, it explores the tension principals experience in trying to fulfill their role as instructional leaders.

In October 2013, an online survey with 60 questions focusing on 12 areas of principals' work was sent to 2,700 principals who were Members of the Ontario Principals' Council. With an overall 53% response rate, principals' responses provided a window into their work situation. This report focuses specifically on: 1) how principals feel about their work; 2) how they generally spend their time in relation to instructional leadership actions and other competing activities; 3) some of the challenges that prevent them from focusing on instructional leadership, including principals' work intensification; 4) how they cope with the demands of their work and; 5) the implications for succession planning.

HOW PRINCIPALS FEEL ABOUT THEIR WORK. Even though the nature of principals' work is changing, the data shows that, overall, principals think positively about what they do. Approximately 79% reported being satisfied with their job most of the time. The study showed that 92% believe their work makes a meaningful difference in the school community and 91% believed their school was a good place to work. As one principal reported, "it is a rewarding job. I love working with the students, staff, and community and feel that we make a difference in the lives of children."

Principals spend a lot of time at their work – approximately 59 hours per week – 14 hours a week more than Canadian occupational managers (Statistics Canada, 2013) and public sector professional executives, who work on average 51 hours per week (Association of Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada, 2013). Yet, 87% of the principals sampled indicated that they never seem to have enough time to do their work. Further, more than 72% of survey participants feel pressured to work long hours and only 38% feel they have the resources necessary to do their job properly.

HOW PRINCIPALS SPEND THEIR TIME. Principals spend most of their time on a combination of the activities that are not directly related to the traditional notion of instructional leader, such as: working with parents, internal school management, student discipline, compliance activities,

professional development, district school board office committees, school building maintenance and working with the community. Almost 82% of principals indicated that they were too busy dealing with managerial tasks to give instructional issues the attention they deserve. Survey findings highlight the tension faced by principals when trying to balance instructional leadership with other responsibilities. As displayed in *Figure 1: Hours Spent on Different Tasks, Duties and Responsibilities – Per Week*, on average, principals spend the largest amount of time dealing with student discipline concerns, which takes up more than seven hours per week. Principals spend 7.5 hours per week on other management-related tasks, described below as "internal school management." The majority of the sample (55%) indicated that they would like to spend less time on these issues. One participant stated, "improved achievement results can get me recognized; not being compliant can get me fired." Similarly, principals indicated that, on average, they spend over five hours per week on human resources management, although 29% of the sample would like to spend less time on these activities. The principals who responded to the online survey spend over five hours per week at the school district office, with 48% indicating that they would like to spend less time at the board office.

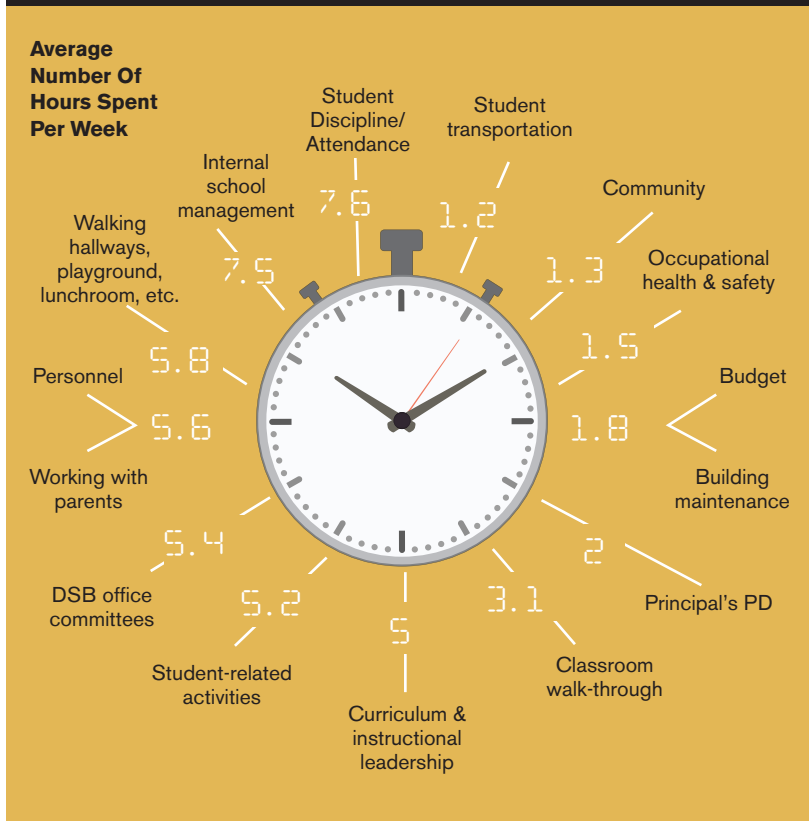
Principals are engaged in instructional leadership activities. On average, they spend five hours per week on curriculum and instruction, a number that 82% would like to increase. Similarly, only an average of three hours each week is spent on classroom walkthroughs, a practice with which 83% of the sample would like to be more engaged. Principals also indicated that they spend an average of only two hours every week on professional development. Nearly three-quarters of the sample (74%) would like to spend more time engaging in teacher professional development opportunities.

While these percentages are not exact for every principal each workweek, it demonstrates that principals' work is intense and complicated by multiple competing priorities.

CHALLENGES. Principals encounter many challenges. One is devoting sufficient time to instructional matters. One school principal stated: "I continually strive to maximize my time as an instructional leader." Time spent dealing with issues associated with students and parents, the school community and the political environment made it difficult for many to spend more

FACT
38%
feel they have the resources necessary to do their job properly

FIGURE 1: HOURS SPENT ON DIFFERENT TASKS, DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES – PER WEEK



time on instructional matters. Principals indicated that they are heavily engaged in mental health and social programs. When asked about school-based programs that influence their work, 88% of principals indicated that they were involved in school-based programs designed to support student mental health, while 87% administer programs aimed at improving the social skills of their students. Principals indicated that schools were engaging with, on average, four community groups.

Feedback from principals indicate that school-based programs and community partnerships require dedicated time to be successful, extend the principals' workday, add to paperwork and email communication and are often delegated to principals because teaching staff are hesitant to take the lead. Principals specifically indicated the focusing on school-based programs and community partnerships can take away from time spent on other school priorities, including instruction related activities such as classroom visits, and interactions with students outside of dealing with discipline issues.

Table 1 shows that Provincial policies have a significant influence on what principals actually do at work. Principals were asked to indicate which of the 13 major policies were influencing their work the most.

Regulation 274/12 (78%), which deals with hiring practices and regulations, Growing Success (77%), and the Safe School Act – Bill 212 (69%) were cited by the participating principals as having the most influence on what they do on a daily basis. Further analysis shows that Regulation 274/12 has impacted principals' work with classroom teachers over the past two years. Additionally, principals who indicated that Regulation 274/12 had an impact on their work were more likely to spend their time with district school board office committees and personnel management, such as hiring, evaluation, supervision, advising and mentoring, for example. Survey responses indicated that Regulation 274/12 is overwhelmingly frustrating for school principals.

Five general themes emerged from these responses. Principals believe that Regulation 274/12

- represents a loss of autonomy,
- forces them to hire lower quality teaching staff based on seniority rather than merit,
- diverts principals' attention away from teaching and learning,
- is time-consuming and
- is a barrier towards having a more representative population of teachers in the classroom.

TABLE 1: PROVINCIAL POLICIES THAT INFLUENCE PRINCIPALS' WORK

	None	A lot	N/A
Regulation 274/12 (Hiring Practice)	0.7%	79.6%	1.0%
Growing Success	0.1%	77.4%	0.3%
Safe School Act	0.2%	69.1%	0.4%
Anti-bullying (Bill 13)	0.3%	65.7%	0.3%
Putting Students First Act	1.0%	65.4%	0.1%
Full-Day Kindergarten	11.6%	50.5%	18.6%
Information and Communication Technologies in Ed Management	4.0%	48.3%	1.7%
Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy	1.2%	43.1%	1.2%
Occupational Health and Safety Act	3.3%	34.8%	nil
Parents in partnership	3.1%	24.0%	0.3%
Fluctuating Enrolment/School Closures	27.3%	23.4%	10.9%
Aboriginal Education Strategy/ FNMI Policy Framework	29.8%	6.8%	4.3%
Urban Priority High Schools Initiative	39.6%	2.2%	49.2%

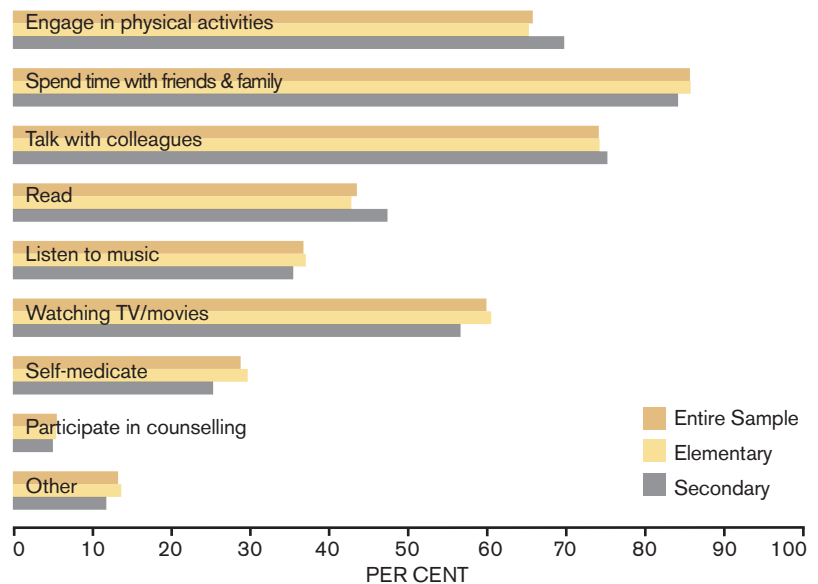
Principals who indicated the Growing Success policy had an impact on their work were more likely to spend their time on curriculum and instructional leadership, budgeting, internal school management, and walking hallways, the playground and lunchroom. Those who indicated that the *Safe Schools Act* significantly influenced their work spent most of their time on student discipline/attendance and working with parents.

WORK INTENSIFICATION FOR PRINCIPALS. So what does all this information tell us? We know that generally, principals find school leadership rewarding, fulfilling and they are, for the most part, satisfied and happy with their job. However, it would appear that there are many competing demands on principals' time – they cannot do it all and do it to their satisfaction. Some would argue that this has always been the case for school principals and it's part of the position.

Evidence from this study and others (Goodwin, Cunningham & Childress, 2003; Blouin, 2006) indicates that principals are working longer hours and have an increased workload. They are engaged in more tasks and roles than ever before, are doing so with fewer resources and are expected to do so within shorter time periods. This is known as work intensification (Allan, O'Donnell & Peetz, 1999). Decreasing autonomy appears to play a role in work intensification as well. As one principal pointed out, "In the past 20 years there has been a trend away from site-based decision making to a system of micro-management by the Ministry of Education and Boards." Not only do principals appear to have increased work expectations, perceived limited resources and increased rates of work, they also appear to work in a more structured environment of compliance that limits control over their own work, and this appears to be influencing their efforts to be effective instructional leaders.

PRINCIPALS' COPING STRATEGIES. Principals' work may be rewarding, but it is also taxing. "There is no job so satisfying; unfortunately there is no job so draining ..." stated one participant. Principals cope with this job intensification in a number of ways and some cope better than others. The majority of principals reported (Figure 2) engaging in coping activities such as spending time with friends and family (86%), talking with colleagues (75%), engaging in physical activities (66%) and watching TV/movies (60%).

FIGURE 2: COPING STRATEGIES USED BY PRINCIPALS – BY SCHOOL TYPE



These findings provide some indication that the current majority principal workforce is dealing with this proposed work intensification. However, 29% of the sample of principals also indicated that they self-medicate in an effort to cope with an emotionally draining day.

FUTURE SUCCESSION PLANNING. While it is quite encouraging that 79% of principals were generally satisfied with their work, approximately one fourth of the sample were dissatisfied. For instance, 21% wish they had remained a teacher rather than pursue administration, and another 21% agreed that they would have pursued a career in a sector other than education. Given the priority that Ontario government has given to succession planning and leadership development (Institute for Education Leadership, 2008), this group cannot be ignored.

While this study provides evidence that Ontario's principal workforce for the English-speaking public school system is quite positive about their work, there is a portion of the workforce that require additional attention, such as those who appear to engage in less positive coping strategies and those who regret committing to the school principal position. These groups of principals require attention because they are less likely to take on other leadership roles within the school district, engage in

principal mentorship programs as mentees or participate in or lead principal professional development or preparation.

CONCLUSION. Survey findings indicate that the nature of principals' work has changed. It appears the principalship has become so structured and rooted in compliance that there is little room for principals to exercise autonomy and professional judgment in their work. Principals' work expectations and the rate with which they are expected to complete these tasks have increased. These findings provide overwhelming evidence of work intensification. This work intensification also appears to be hindering principals' efforts to be effective instructional leaders.

Work intensification can be addressed at two junctures: the individual level and structurally. At first glance, some of the information provided in this report can be intimidating for aspiring principals. However, what prospective school leaders should take away from this is that while the role is complex and demanding, it can also be quite satisfying. Despite its challenges, the majority of principals want to be in this role. Aspiring school principals need to prepare for the expected challenges, but also possess a repertoire of skills to help them manage with the unexpected ones, and a strong set of healthy coping strategies that will sustain them over a long career trajectory.

From an organizational perspective, there can be two options to address principals' work intensification. One is to

streamline operational procedures so that there are not as many competing priorities. The other is to restructure the role so that principals do have time to engage in the important aspects of instructional leadership. If, in fact, the main role for principals is instructional leadership, then other personnel could conceivably attend to other role expectations that still need to be attended to. This approach has been implemented in the United Kingdom where additional office personnel are hired with the specific role of managing other administrative tasks not directly associated with instructional leadership.

To access the full report findings visit http://www.education.uwo.ca/faculty_profiles/cpels/pollock_katina/OPC-Principals-Work-Report.pdf. ▲

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