

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

WITHIN A CHANGING EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE



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TORONTO SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' ASSOCIATION

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TORONTO SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' ASSOCIATION BACKGROUND

The Toronto School Administrators' Association (TSAA) was formed in 1998 and, in 2023, is celebrating 25 years of dedicated service to working and retired administrators in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB).

The impetus for the formation of the association lies in the turbulent years in education highlighted by the then Conservative government's introduction of Bill 160, the Educational Quality Improvement Act. The legislation substantively altered policies and directions in education in Ontario, including governmental funding formulas, removing approximately one billion dollars from education funding in the province, the introduction of standardized testing across the province, the role of school trustees, and the amalgamation of school districts. The Act also transformed collective bargaining for all educational employees.

Of particular significance for principals and vice-principals was their removal from the teachers' unions within their specific jurisdictions, including French, Catholic, and public districts throughout the province. In Toronto, the seven former boards (Etobicoke, Toronto, York, North York, Scarborough, East York) were amalgamated into the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). With the uncertain future in mind for school principals and vice-principals in the newly formed TDSB, an incipient group of progressively minded and concerned administrators gathered to consider the direction for their collective future. Their work culminated on January 7, 1998, when the TSAA held its inaugural meeting.

Since that time, TSAA has been the collective voice for both secondary and elementary principals and vice-principals, building constructive relationships and sharing feedback with the TDSB senior leadership team, informing policy direction and implementation within the district and province, and negotiating terms and conditions for principals' and vice-principals' work. Through its collaboration and membership with the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC), TSAA expands its influence across the province. The TSAA has four Executive members who serve on the Ontario Principals' Council. Since its founding, three TSAA members have been elected President of the OPC. TSAA members, through various committees and serving as members at large within OPC, continue to contribute to and expand the influence of OPC as a provincial voice for school administrators in public schools in Ontario. TSAA supports the leadership growth of its members through annual conferences, social and networking opportunities, and professional learning.

From its beginning, TSAA has focused on engaging with its members to present their authentic yet diverse perspectives. The COVID pandemic has presented extraordinary challenges in education, so much so that it is common to have our current times in education labeled as unprecedented. These unprecedented times are correlatively highlighted by the changing roles and responsibilities of formal school leaders and provide an appropriate time to review and engage with administrative voices from the field. In that context, this survey explores the daily lived realities of school principals and vice-principals within the TDSB, supporting the role of TSAA in providing feedback and addressing the substantive concerns of its members at the local and provincial level. This survey is a first step in TSAA's advocacy for responsible and responsive actions to address the increasing demands and pressures on school leaders in the TDSB.

THE SURVEY: AN OVERVIEW

An online voluntary survey instrument was constructed and sent electronically to members. Members were assured that the survey was completely anonymous and that only aggregate data would be used in reporting on the data. The survey remained open for completion from January 3rd to January 27th, 2023.

The survey was made up of ten sections and contained 177 questions in total. Many questions in the survey were closed-ended and included Likert-scale questions. In addition, all close-ended questions in the survey were followed by an area for participants to make additional comments which provided respondents with an opportunity to qualify their responses or add contextual information. The qualitative data added depth to the quantitative survey data. Lastly, the survey encouraged participants to provide additional open-ended comments at the end of each of the ten sections and again at the end of the survey.

The Toronto School Administrators' Association represents approximately 1000 principals and vice-principals in 474 elementary and 110 secondary schools in the TDSB. The association also represents centrally assigned administrators who support schools through system portfolios. Since its early years, TSAA's voluntary membership has risen from 75% to 97% of practising school principals and vice-principals in the TDSB.

In total, 548 members of TSAA responded to the survey, representing 56% of the membership and providing a statistically significant number of responses to support the generalizations contained in this report. Response rates to the survey instrument aligned with the distribution of principals and vice-principals generally within the TDSB, with 71.9% (n=396) of the responses coming from elementary administrators, 26.3% (n=142) from secondary, and 1.8% (10) from K-12 principals and vice-principals. To contextualize the quantitative and qualitative data in the survey and as a means of discerning appropriate categories for exploration in this survey, this report includes an informal analysis of calls, emails, and consultations between members and the TSAA office over the past two and half years. This survey and these correspondences address several key themes, including:

- increased administrative workload,
- newly introduced school and district management systems,
- the intensification of student and family needs,
- increasing prevalence of workplace harassment and violent behaviours, and
- fewer financial resources and staffing shortages.

The cumulative effect of these pressures on school administrators is increased levels of stress. The heightened stress of the work frequently manifests in an increasing number of principals and vice-principals on stress leaves, administrators opting for early retirement, or school leaders leaving the profession immediately upon meeting their required age and service for retirement. Additionally, and as a result of these challenges, those aspiring to leadership may defer or not seek promotion to formal leadership roles given their perception of the work of school administrators as undesirable and unmanageable.

Overall, the survey sought to explore the current working conditions for school administrators within the TDSB, and the impact increasing requirements, working conditions, and added accountabilities are having on administrators.

CURRENT WORKING CONDITIONS AND WORKLOAD

The ever-increasing and competing demands of the principalship are well documented in the literature and provoke a portrayal of the work of administrators as unmanageable. Pollock et al. (2017) report that the work of principals in Ontario has intensified over the past years. Pollock and Winton (2016) note the increasing number of responsibilities school administrators must address in their work, including such things as administrative, legal, professional, moral, and performance-based dimensions of accountability. Pollock et al. (2017) note, “principals have little autonomy in their work, and that they struggle to achieve work-life balance while working long work hours and meeting the demands associated with increased layers of accountability” (p. 2). Perna (2022) reflects on this reality and posits that education is headed towards a “crisis of epic proportions” with a large percentage of principals considering quitting due to stress caused in part by the need to be accessible 24/7 and enduring the enormous scrutiny of public criticism that comes with the role.

It is none too surprising then that Pollock and Wang (2020) found that principal participants in their study reported feeling emotionally drained (64.7% of participants), 45.9% psychologically drained, and 44% physically drained by their work (p.4). The corollary of these emotional, psychological, and physical demands caused by work intensification are increased levels of stress and fatigue, exemplified in administrators reporting impacts on their well-being, including their inability to acquire adequate sleep, nutritional breaks, and physical activity. This is having an unintended but direct impact on recruitment and succession planning as many teachers observe the challenges being faced by administrators in their roles, forcing some to reassess the principal pathway as a career trajectory.

As the OPC (2017) reports, “the principalship is an increasingly undesirable position for prospective and current administrators, creating issues of both recruitment and retention across systems” (p. ii). Within the TDSB, school leaders’ succession planning is likewise undermined. As retirements rise, those who would have traditionally filled the roles of retiring colleagues are opting out of the role due to their perceptions of unfavourable working conditions and work intensification. Perna (2022) notes,

Teachers see firsthand the pressure, hours and lack of positive feedback their leaders experience. As a result, these potential school leaders see low resources and high levels of critique and wonder if a change to school leadership is worth it. (p. 16)

In sum, the role of principal and vice-principal is both internally (by those in the role) and externally (by those aspiring, however reluctantly to the role) seen as increasingly demanding, stressful, and unmanageable.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STRESS

School leaders place high expectations upon themselves and strive to succeed in supporting students, families, and their school communities. These high expectations, when juxtaposed with unrealistically and demanding working conditions, have a negative impact on administrators' mental health and overall well-being and, consequently, affect their abilities to carry out their duties effectively. A significant contributing factor to administrators' overall stress is the lack of support for school leaders to address competing and demanding workloads. Traditionally, principals and vice-principals could rely upon mentor-coaches selected from experienced colleagues and support from their school superintendent. The increase in retirements from both the principal and superintendent ranks has decreased the number of experienced mentors and coaches available for principals and vice-principals. In addition, budget cuts have resulted in fewer allocations for support staff in schools, leaving administrators to contend with complex student needs with less support from key staff, such as lunch supervisors, school-based safety monitors, child and youth workers, educational assistants, special needs assistants, and clerical workers.



In our survey, a majority of TSAA members (61.2%) indicated that they could not realistically lead their schools successfully given their current workloads. Despite these challenges, principals and vice-principals remain optimistic and resilient in their work. However, an alarming 65% of respondents reported that their current sense of their own well-being was concerning, while almost half of these same respondents rated their well-being as poor or very poor. Over 75% indicated that their work-life balance was not optimal, with 44.9% of these same respondents rating it as poor or very poor. Only 29.2% reported their stress levels as manageable, indicating that over 70% of TSAA members are struggling with stress. Finally, 66.8% of respondents reported lower levels of job satisfaction with over half of these same respondents rating their overall job satisfaction as low or very low.

It is important to note that some administrators are managing complex sites with various differing scenarios but essentially each task is doubled (two budgets, two sets of school council meetings, two school improvement plans, two staffing models and hiring, etc.). These scenarios include two schools to manage; sometimes, the two schools are within the same building, but other times they are located at two separate sites. The setup may sometimes include two different panels, for example, a middle school within a secondary school. At times, the spaces are shared with the Catholic school board, or the city manages facilities. These scenarios present a different yet even more complex and often heavy workload. Despite this, they are staffed similarly to a school without such a complex scenario.



Members report several challenges that continue to complicate their daily work. Daily absenteeism and unfilled vacancies for absent staff continue to be reported as critical concerns for administrators. Similarly, the loss of guidance counsellors in elementary and middle schools not only means a loss of support from an additional caring adult in the school but intensifies the workload of principals and vice-principals now responsible for managing potentially hundreds of entrance applications for secondary schools. In addition, the continued reduction of vice-principals each school year further removes a caring adult and often means more TDSB schools become single administrator sites supporting large and complex communities. Finally, members indicate that a reduction in school-based safety monitors (secondary) and lunchroom supervisors (elementary) has meant an increase in safety concerns and reportable incidents, at once increasing the supervision load on administrators while also expanding the time spent on investigations and safe school reports. Complicating this is the number of unfilled jobs for these positions leaving principals and vice-principals to do their best to cover and supervise multiple spaces where in the past they would have made a point of circulating to supervise and support the supervision staff.



Finally, 94% of respondents listed newly introduced school technology systems, like the PowerSchool roll-out, as a significant source of stress. PowerSchool is an integrated technology system supporting student registration, class set-up, grades, scheduling, and reporting. Our members expressed that this system was not sufficiently robust enough to address the complex needs of the district. Members also felt that the implementation process of PowerSchool lacked consultation and that preparation, training, and support offered in the roll-out was insufficient or relied too heavily on individual members' initiative to acquire efficacy in using the new learning management system. Members continue to struggle to adjust to this new system at a time they are concurrently dealing with an increase in student and staff needs. Members question the timing of this rollout especially when they consider the number of technologically related initiatives and other district initiatives being implemented within the same timeframe. Despite this, school administrators continue to support each other and office staff as they adjust to this new, comprehensive learning management system. They hope that key improvements will be made to address issues they have raised with the existing functionality.

Administrator Morale, Mental Health and Well-being

Currently, within the TDSB, there are a large number of administrators who are new to the role. Of the TSAA members who completed this survey, approximately 33% have been in their jobs for less than five years, while just over 54% have been in their roles for less than ten years. Table 1 provides the breakdown of administrative experience from survey respondents.

**Table 1:
Years of Administration Experience
of School Administrators**

Years of Experience	% of Members
Less Than 2 Years	16%
Less Than 5 Years	17%
Less Than 7 Years	11%
Less Than 10 Years	10%
More Than 10 Years	19%
More Than 15 Years	27%

The transition of new principals and vice-principals to the role has been further impacted by the recent pandemic, limiting the ability for leaders to gather in person, creating greater degrees of isolation and limiting the opportunities for new leaders to network or gain access to mentors and coaches, and providing less opportunity for formal training for both management and leadership competencies within schools. Some school leaders have had little or no formal leadership experience outside the pandemic experience. Much like students who missed opportunities for social, emotional, and academic growth, new administrators lost opportunities to interact with more experienced colleagues and develop their leadership capacities. This is an important consideration as newly promoted leaders now begin to reach out and access support, training, mentoring, and leadership opportunities.

It is essential that leaders have access to critical training that is relevant to their roles. Seventy-five percent of respondents to our survey indicated that they are worried they will be held accountable for job-related tasks that they have not been sufficiently prepared to perform. Providing training for essential and mandatory operational tasks, including policies, procedures, and duties, is necessary. In an already lengthy day, Learning Network meetings provide the best setting for learning experiences where more experienced colleagues and newly promoted administrators can learn alongside their school superintendents in a supportive manner.

The research of Pollock et al. (2017) indicates that principals and vice-principals report working well over the traditional 40-hour work week. Although the researchers report a 54.5-hour work week on average for principals and vice-principals, our inquiries indicate that principals and vice-principals work well beyond this average within the TDSB, particularly during and following the COVID pandemic. In fact, it is not uncommon for TDSB administrators to tell us they are working 80 hours per week. Despite TDSB Policy 102, optimistically entitled, "Disconnecting from Work", in this document working hours are listed as 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM (i.e., a 12-hour day!). Given this, it is not difficult to surmise that administrators are feeling compelled to "put in" long hours at work.

Although school leaders have a special responsibility for the care of those around them, including students, families, staff, and teachers, their own well-being is frequently not considered. Mahfouz et al. (2022) note that despite recognizing the importance of personal well-being generally within schools, the focus is usually not inclusive of administrators' social and psychological needs. Urlick et al. (2021) contend,

The normed silence on topics such as self-care and well-being in the workplace is particularly problematic for school leaders. Today's principals are one of our nation's most stressed and burned-out cohorts of professionals, leaving the field at alarming rates" (para 27).

This is especially concerning for those school administrators who have experienced a tragic event or crisis at their school. While they are tasked with and dedicated to supporting students, community, and staff following tragic events, their own well-being and trauma related to the event is often not prioritized.

Finally, Kelly (2022) posits that failing to understand the importance of principal well-being has ramifications as "the success of schools depends upon effective and stable leadership at the principal level" (para. 2). Lip service is insufficient to address the factors contributing to the deterioration of the mental health and well-being of our members. Concrete steps need to be taken in order to better support principal and vice-principal mental health and well-being.

Workplace Harassment and Human Rights



Based on the data gathered through our survey and our daily interactions with our members, we can unequivocally state that the workplace harassment experienced, through bullying, intimidation, and threats, by vice-principals and principals is on the rise. Although some of these acts fall under the Ontario human rights code, they often go unreported. This unwelcome behaviour also originates from sometimes surprising and unexpected sources.

School leaders understand that working with students, parents, and families is complex and requires building trust as well as understanding the unique lived experiences that each child and family brings to their school community. We acknowledge that leaders hold positional power and represent institutions that have caused harm for many historically and currently marginalized and underserved communities, such as those identifying as Black, Indigenous, Latino, and 2SLGBTQ+. We need to work to create brave spaces for students, families, and community members to voice concerns and to be heard and understood. This work can, however, come with significant and challenging emotional responses, especially from families who have experienced trauma and harm from systemic barriers inherent within organizations like schools. In working with TDSB staff, leaders continue to develop their capacity to ensure that the conditions are created for students, parents, guardians, families, and community groups to address concerns and speak to their experiences and personal narratives in a space where they feel heard and respected.

Riley (2018), in his assessment of health and well-being for Australian school principals, notes that rates of adult-to-adult bullying, incidents of threats, and acts of physical violence, especially towards female leaders, are on the rise. In Ontario, the work of Pollock and Wang (2020) suggests that a similar increase in harassment, physical assault, and threats by parents, students, and staff is occurring. Troubling for us as an association is hearing about the seeming acceptance of aggressive and threatening behaviours reported to us by members. Increasingly (as documented in TDSB Human Rights Update: Annual Reports), administrators are included as respondents in human rights cases but fail to report or seek redress when their own rights within the workplace are violated. Members often feel that reporting to a supervisor is career-limiting or might invite reprisals. In our survey, 40% of respondents indicated that when they did report violations to their supervisors, they did not feel that the case was taken seriously or that noticeable actions were taken to remedy the problem.

TSAA members confirm in this survey that workplace harassment and human rights violations are increasing for principals and vice-principals. Given the nature of administrative work, especially due to the reality that principals and vice-principals frequently enter difficult, volatile, confrontational, and highly emotional situations in their work, it is not surprising that such incidents are on the rise. Forty-five percent of respondents reported that they experienced workplace harassment. An additional 13.7% report “maybe” experiencing harassment, citing experiencing bullying and intimidation, but of concern to our association, describing and accepting such experiences as part of the job. A full 34% of principals and vice-principals responding to our survey do not feel they are provided with the tools, information, or support to deal with personal incidents of harassment. The reluctance of principals and vice-principals to report incidents of harassment and human rights violations is very concerning to TSAA.

Table 2 outlines the responses of members indicating various employee groups and their perceived levels of harassment by percentage. In addition to teachers leading the table for acts of perceived harassment, 44% of principals and vice-principals also responded that they were concerned about retribution from staff (including teachers) for completing their assigned duties as supervisors. As the face of the organization within the school setting, members feel they are being held to task by the very policies that are meant to create a safe work environment for all, including themselves. Many members are responding to issues of harassment and other human rights issues as per district and Ministry of Education directions and, as a consequence, becoming litigants themselves in the process. Many feel that these policies and procedures are being weaponized against them.

Table 2: Workplace Harassment of Members from Employee Groups

Staff Category	Percentage
Teacher	66%
Another Administrator	29%
Superintendent	20%
Office Administrator/Clerical	16%
Educational Assistant	10%
Custodian/FTL	10%
Central Staff	6%
Child & Youth Workers	5%
Special Needs Assistants	4%
Union (ETT, OSSTF, Executive Officers)	2%

In addition to bullying, intimidation, and harassment from staff members, 43% of respondents indicate they have been experiencing harassment from parents, guardians, and/or parent advocacy groups and/or community advocacy groups. Additionally, 37.2% of members have experienced or are experiencing workplace harassment from staff.

Thirty-seven percent of members report having experienced harassment for leading board and Ministry initiatives related to inclusion, interrupting bias, anti-racism, and anti-oppressive work. A significant concern continues to be the harassment that many racialized leaders, particularly racialized female leaders, experience when leading critical equity and inclusionary work. Some have expressed feeling further traumatized and harmed as they take the lead with staff and communities to undertake anti-Black racism work.

On February 16, 2023, The Ontario Human Rights Commission released a [public statement](#) that indicates their knowledge of the increasing violence and harassment directed at educators when leading this vital work. The statement reads in part,

“

The OHRC is aware that many duty-holders across the public school system have made efforts toward advancing and maintaining the human rights of everyone by using resources which address discrimination, including anti-Black racism, homophobia, and hate. However, it continues to hear about the increasing violence targeted at education officials for doing human rights work.

Duty-holders, such as the Ministry of Education and school boards, have a legal duty to ensure that education is provided in a manner consistent with the *Code*. Also, the *Code* requires that people engaged in this work be able to do so without being subjected to discrimination and harassment and without fear for their safety and security. (paras. 4-5)

”

This statement provides not only acknowledgment for our members but also hope that understanding and action will be taken to support TSAA members experiencing harassment when leading this work.

In addition, the growing number of members indicating they are experiencing workplace harassment from another administrator is very troubling for us as an association. This is an important issue that TSAA, OPC and the TDSB need to investigate further and address through support, learning, and communication of the roles and responsibilities of vice-principals and principals and the expectations for collaboration between these two roles.

Student Well-being and Behaviour

During the pandemic, students lost opportunities to interact and build critical social skills. Planbook (2022) notes, for example, as students returned to schools, educators “described children as being aggressive, anxious, frustrated and emotional” (para. 5). This was not at all surprising given what children, both younger and older, have experienced (and not experienced) in these unprecedented times. The invaluable learning of participating in daily in-school activities, taking turns, listening to others, negotiating friendships, and productively solving conflicts, were all put on hold. Superintendent Bo Griffin is quoted in Blad (2022), where he opines following the return of students to school, that “many children appeared overwhelmed at the task of lining up, making conversation, and eating among hundreds of their peers after months of relative isolation at home” (para. 1).

Complex emotional and social factors impacting students, and the subsequent and necessary focus on mental health and well-being in schools following the tumult caused by the pandemic, have fallen squarely at the feet of all within public schooling, but have had a particular effect on school principals and vice-principals.

Some 80% of TSAA members responding to this survey note that school staff are experiencing challenges managing student well-being, with 74% of respondents reporting challenges managing student behaviour post-pandemic. Thirty-six percent characterize these

behaviours as violent in nature. A lack of staff, resources, and support is attributed by 89% of administrators to the continuing challenges related to student well-being, behaviour, and safety. Principals and vice-principals comment that staff absences and consistently low fill rates for those positions pose an additional challenge of mitigating and addressing efforts to support students’ mental and physical well-being. TSAA contends that a vice-principal allocation at every school and additional school support staff, including school-based safety monitors, lunchroom supervisors, CYWs, psychologists, social workers, and elementary school guidance counsellors, are required in order to provide students with the ongoing support they require to be successful.

The current situation in schools approaches a veritable perfect storm, a conflation of factors impacting the daily work school administrators engage in to promote a safe and healthy environment for all. Some administrators have indicated that almost 90% of their days are spent dealing with issues related to student behaviours, crisis intervention, or student well-being. At the same time, administrators note that at times, parental support in dealing with serious behavioural issues has led to harassment from parents and/or community members, with 40% of respondents indicating a lack of support when dealing with confrontational interactions with parents and workplace harassment. Sometimes, frustrated parents turn their frustration to blaming the school rather than working in partnership with schools. Overall, 36% of administrators in our survey indicate that violent and inappropriate behaviours are on the rise in schools, including fighting, verbal abuse, and in some cases, the possession of weapons. In response to increasing behavioural concerns, 46% of members responded that requests for additional supports from central departments for students in crisis go unanswered or denied. This is likely due to budget restraints. Without adequate resources or support, administrators are commenting that they feel ill-equipped to address the numerous and complex issues related to student well-being.



School Safety

With resources continuing to shrink and essential support personnel reduced, association members indicate concerns related to overall school safety. It is unsurprising that 89% of survey respondents indicated that they feel ill-equipped to maintain school safety without sufficient financial and physical resources and personnel. A significant number of administrators (50%) indicate a lack of staff training and an incomplete understanding of policies and procedures related to safe schools negatively impacts schools. While school leaders (77.6%) indicate that overall their superintendents are supportive, 47% note that central staff and superintendents are not responsive in terms of providing physical resources and personnel to address ongoing issues around school safety. Fifty-one percent of respondents feel a lack of efficacy in addressing supports or consequences to mitigate negative student behaviours.

An especially challenging issue for members in managing school climate and safety is the use of formal school suspensions when necessary and required. In addressing inappropriate behaviour, members remain deeply committed to centering student well-being and responding to student needs by considering individual factors, mitigating circumstances and different options before suspensions are even considered. School leaders use early and ongoing intervention and progressive discipline to help students learn from their choices and promote more positive behaviour. However, in some cases where the behaviour is serious and persistent, school leaders have a legal obligation to follow TDSB policies, guidelines and procedures in accordance with the *Safe Schools Act and Regulations* and the *Ontario Schools Code of Conduct* to impose mandatory suspensions and expulsions or consider discretionary suspensions and expulsions.

Discussions about suspension data, caring adults, mitigating factors, and all the steps and interventions initiated to support students who are facing challenges are critical considerations before any suspension should be issued. However, these considerations must be balanced with the repetitive or severe nature of the acts and the potential impact on overall student and staff safety. Still, over 50% of respondents report being discouraged or not supported for using suspensions despite conducting a thorough investigation and considering all mitigating circumstances. Furthermore, many administrators feel obligated to follow their duties as outlined in policy and the education act but, at the same time, feel conflicted when asked to consider or do something in opposition to these obligations based on discussions and guidance from supervisors.

In support of TDSB's policies to use alternative methods to suspension, administrators report a need for more support in instituting these alternative strategies. For example, when attempting to enact forms of restorative justice, administrators note that supporting departments are extremely busy and unable to respond to requests in a timely manner. Additionally, some families and students are not amenable to these practices. Finally, administrators indicate more training and support are required and are seeking clearer direction on policies and procedures regarding viable alternatives to suspensions.

Beyond these policy and personnel concerns related to maintaining a safe school, principals and vice-principals shared frustrations related to managing the physical school facilities. Members note trying to be effective facilities managers, requesting improvements, but often being met with delays, backorders, backlogs, or a lack of funding. To better understand some of the specific issues, TSAA gathered the following data:

- Surveillance cameras – only 34% of members indicated that their schools had functioning security cameras. In comparison, the remaining 66% noted issues with existing cameras, requests for repairs, a lack of cameras where needed, or no cameras at all.
- Exterior doors – although 72% of respondents noted that doors were working properly, it is concerning that the remaining 28% of exterior doors had some deficiency, including not locking properly, being propped open, or waiting for repairs.
- Swipe cards – members reported that 46% of swipe card systems were working properly. The remaining 54% indicated that there was no swipe card system in their schools, some needed more at other entry doors, or the existing systems were not working properly.
- School Public Address (PA) systems – while 57% of administrators in the survey indicated that these systems were working well, 43% reported that PA systems in their schools were not functioning properly, were antiquated, or broke down often.

SAFETY

Responsiveness, Advocacy, and Support from TSAA & OPC



TSAA and the OPC play a vital role in advocating for members, and confronting the ever-increasing demands, working conditions, stressors, and work intensification for school administrators in the TDSB. Despite extensive communication and education from the association informing members about the services provided by TSAA and OPC, the association's advocacy role is sometimes misunderstood or not accessed by members for fear of reprisal or stigmatization.

A troubling 8.1% of members indicate that they have been discouraged from consulting with TSAA or OPC, with some members (3.3%) reporting that they experienced reprisal and an additional 1.5% of members saying they feared reprisal if they consulted with their professional association. Although the number appears small, it represents only those in the current survey that sought or considered seeking services from their association. In fact, these experiences, even if limited, speak to the need to ensure that both members and district stakeholders realize the critical role TSAA and OPC play in supporting and representing members within the district. All members should feel comfortable accessing professional support and advice when necessary. This is crucial to wellness, job performance, and job satisfaction.

Overall, 95.7% of members reported receiving timely responses when they reached out to their association, and a mere 2% of respondents indicated they had not yet connected with the association. Ninety-five percent of members felt the advice and information they received was useful in responding to their particular situations. Members described the response time as exceptional and felt that the chair and vice-chair provided empathetic and effective counsel. Principals and vice-principals commented that they found their contacts with TSAA provided them with a good venue to vent, sometimes listen to and hear alternative perspectives, or find timely responses to their queries when they could not connect with their superintendents or central staff. Others appreciated being guided through difficult and stressful situations by someone they felt they could trust. Finally, some members indicated how TSAA played a pivotal role in their work, especially in the current setting, where they described some tension and/or sense of judgement when they connected with their immediate supervisor.

Most respondents (91%) expressed their appreciation for the encouraging work of TSAA. They indicated that they believe the services provided by TSAA are valuable (i.e. consultations, advocacy, representation, negotiations, conferences, social events, newsletters, and updates). Still, some respondents anecdotally raised concerns about the limitations placed on TSAA due to its status as a professional association. Nine percent of respondents expressed some frustration regarding the overall advocacy of TSAA, particularly for larger, more complex issues, like job fill rates for absent employees and negotiated benefits and salaries. These feelings of frustration are understandable. Finally, a small percentage of administrators responding to our survey (5%) expressed that they did not always find the advice or response from TSAA helpful.

With respect to OPC, 86% of respondents indicate that they have received timely responses to their inquiries from the council, and 86.2% found the responses offered by the council's support teams were useful. For services offered by OPC (such as consultation, advocacy, professional learning, and central negotiations), 79.3% of respondents to our survey indicated that these supports were beneficial. However, some members commented that OPC needs to be more active, promoting more reasonable working conditions for members, including advocating for more district resources to support the work of administrators and improved benefits and wages for principals and vice-principals.

Responsiveness and Support from Central Departments

In our survey and through other contact with members, the responsiveness and support of central departments to schools and administrators paints a picture far from the district's stated goal of service excellence. Members were more apt to describe some central departments as part of an overtaxed and stressed system. These strong and empathic feelings are often in response to central departments not taking calls at all, failing to respond to calls or emails in a reasonable and timely manner, and requests that seem to go completely unanswered. These concerns significantly impact the ability of school leaders to provide safe and properly functioning spaces for students, families, and staff. The perception from school principals and vice-principals is that many critical central departments are overwhelmed. However, where administrators are expected to meet short timelines coming from multiple departments, respond in prescribed times to emails and calls, or address employee vacancies leading to safety concerns in an expedient fashion, some central departments shut down phones and emails to "catch up". Administrators feel that central departments are not held to the same high standards that they are and that a lack of response from departments is impacting schools negatively, holding the administrator responsible for situations that might have been remedied with consultation with supportive, central staff.

Administrators are especially concerned about the breadth of new initiatives from the district and Ministry and the unrealistic timelines, often associated with their implementation. Individual departments within the central district make policy and program demands on schools and the school's administration often without alignment among the various departments.

School principals and vice-principals are frequently responsible for reporting to more than one central department on several different initiatives. Subsequent pressures from departments through follow-up emails do not seem to honour the multitude of accountabilities faced by school administrators. Although new policy and programming events are often linked to Ministry of Education initiatives, TSAA contends that the district must be more deliberate and focused on the adoption, timing, and implementation. Additionally, members lament the lack of consultation, support, and training in the adoption of new projects, and in particular named technology-based programs like PowerSchool-School Information System, Excursion Management Application (EMA), MyBlueprint, and online registration processes as challenging.

School leaders raise several concerns about the TDSB's Information Technology (IT) department's ability to effectively plan and implement critical change related to new initiatives and technologies, which have vast implications for the successful running of schools. Leaders continue to struggle to understand how PowerSchool, a critical School Information System that impacts so many areas of school life and school organization (report cards, time-tabling, registration, specialized programs, continuing education, student index cards, etc.), could be so poorly introduced and unprepared to meet the needs of a large and complex organization like TDSB. The lack of prior consultation with key stakeholders and users, limited support to mitigate implementation challenges, and lengthy wait times or unresponsiveness in responding to calls for support are some of the issues that continue to create stress for school leaders.

Where was the consultation?

Impossible timelines!

Another email sent but still no reply!

When can I find time to read this manual?



Too many new things at once!

Where do I focus?

Why doesn't this new system do what I need it to do?

Was this piloted?



When do I have time for training?

Where do I begin?

I need more staff!

I can't send staff for training with so many unfilled jobs!



Why won't anyone answer the phone?

I need help!

Is anyone listening?

Another deadline?

So many unfilled jobs again today!!!!



Several concerns were cited by respondents about various central departments. It is important, however, to note that many central departments within the TDSB are quite small in relation to the large board they serve, thus impacting their ability to respond promptly and effectively. In addition, some of the frustrations with specific departments and a lack of support from the departments are linked to issues with funding for human and other resources, which is often outside the department's control. For example, one department repeatedly noted as a concern by respondents was Special Education. Although our members are committed to the goals concerning inclusion, they commented that correlated support and resources to meet this laudable goal are not sufficient. A predictable and tiered approach and response to challenging cases was not provided by the district or the Ministry of Education. Unfortunately, flaws to the education funding formula continue to impact the ability for TDSB departments, like Special Education, to provide necessary and important resources to support schools and students. This was particularly challenging with the heightened needs of students and families following the pandemic.

Still, process and documentation changes initiated by the district in areas like the Special Education Program Recommendation Committee (SEPRC) and newly revised Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) were mentioned by administrators as incredibly challenging, with members raising concerns about the consultation process and the lack of ongoing opportunities for feedback. Principals and vice-principals questioned the timing of new implementation and the adequacy of implementation when appropriate training was challenging for staff and administrators to attend due to a lack of occasional teacher coverage and unfilled jobs. These changes occurred at the same time different departments initiated other changes, and with the increased dynamics in schools from other factors, this was too much for many leaders.

Members also expressed concerns with the ability of the Caring and Safe Schools department to manage increasing school needs. Respondents note that this small department seems unable to keep up with the growing number of requests for intervention and has been placed in a reactive rather than proactive position. School needs, especially since the return to school after the pandemic, outweigh the services and supports available. Administrators also note that among the many growing safety concerns, student safety in washrooms is now becoming a prevalent concern in their schools.

Many school administrators shared frustrations related to staff absenteeism, unfilled jobs, and what they feel is a lack of effective recruitment and hiring processes. While recognizing that the Employee Services department is severely understaffed for a board of our size, school leaders still struggle to understand why a more proactive solution-based approach with temporary strategies to address critical staffing issues has not been adopted. The area of this department dealing with support staff was noted as particularly challenging. A lack of clear direction, communication challenges, and often a lack of no response at all led many school leaders to feel that they were alone and would be held accountable for the unsafe conditions brought on by poor student to staff ratios.

Responsiveness and Support from Superintendents

Of the respondents, 77.6% feel supported by their Learning Network superintendents. Although this represents a significant majority, it does also present a concern that almost one in five do not feel supported by the individual who is the primary contact for school principals when they require support or assistance. The association confirms that the response and support of the administrator's immediate supervisor is critical to the success of the principal or vice-principal and the school community. Administrators are more likely to reach out to their supervisors if they receive timely and appropriately informed responses to their queries.

Superintendents must also acknowledge the demanding realities of administrative work and approach solutions with empathy. The social resources contained within the personal leadership resource of the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF, 2013) note the importance of perceiving and managing emotions as key to acting in emotionally appropriate ways. With the current demands of the work, administrators are seeking to build trusting relationships and emotionally empathetic responses when in contact with their superintendents.

Despite the overall support administrators expressed in relation to their superintendent, several challenges in the relationship were noted:

Challenges Noted

While most indicated superintendents were empathetic and compassionate, others experienced a lack of understanding and empathy from their direct supervisor, particularly in response to the work intensification in their role.

While many indicated the collaborative approach in decision-making assumed by their superintendent, others pointed to a lack of response to queries or authoritarian modes of decision-making enforced upon them and, sometimes, decisions being undermined by their supervisor. Of particular concern were examples of superintendents reversing or questioning decisions made by principals that were based on consultations with central departments and based on following board policies and procedures. These examples left administrators confused and fearful that they would be held accountable for something they were directed to do while their superintendent would escape responsibility.

Some principals and vice-principals suggest that the indecisive responses from some superintendents might indicate that their supervisor has little power to make decisions, was unable or feared making a decision, or simply did not have the knowledge and experience needed to make a decision. Such leaders frequently counselled administrators to seek advice and guidance through, as noted, already overwhelmed central departments and TSAA.

Finally, members expressed concerns about support from their supervisor when dealing with the ever-growing cases of workplace harassment from parents, community groups, and staff.

This survey and supporting data from TSAA's conversations and consultations with its members provide both promise and room for action in building effective and trusting relationships among principals and the central leadership team in the TDSB.

Learning Network Meetings

During the recent pandemic, and subsequently, through the educational workers' job actions, principals and vice-principals felt the relative isolation of participating in virtual meetings through such applications as ZOOM. Many craved a return to face-to-face connections. This was evidenced firsthand when TSAA held its first in-person conference in Niagara Falls since the pandemic. In much the same way, many administrators yearned to return to face-to-face meetings in their learning networks (LN).

The data from our survey corroborates this contention. Forty-six percent of respondents perceived LN meetings as valuable or sometimes valuable to their work. Administrators cite that the greatest value of the meetings are opportunities to network, collaborate, and share knowledge and best practices. Some noted concerns about the LN meetings. First, some noted the focus of the meetings to be too centered on elementary issues and less on secondary school realities. Additionally, others noted that some of the content items on the agenda for the meeting might be better addressed with a simple email so more time could be utilized for other priorities.

Despite the benefits of LN meetings, administrators offered several potential improvements to the gatherings:

1

Allow for greater involvement of administrators in setting the meeting agenda. Our survey indicates that only approximately 33% of respondents are engaged in decision-making for agenda items at LN meetings.

2

Over 91% of respondents asked for a stronger focus on operational items, particularly for those who are new to the role.

3

Seventy-nine percent suggested that having at least 30 minutes dedicated to administrators involved in open and shared dialogue would be valuable, especially in terms of validating their shared frustrations, experiences, and potential solutions to complex and enduring issues.

4

Members also identified the importance of offering regular guest speakers from various central departments within the TDSB. Of the 91.4% who are requesting this, many commented that this could potentially bridge some of the difficulties being experienced (i.e., the responsiveness of central departments and training around various policies and procedures) noted in this report.

Administrators are genuinely invested in improving their own leadership practices to support, more effectively, students, families, communities, and staff. They need opportunities to equip themselves with the appropriate skills, collaborate with colleagues, and discuss core concerns and issues to be successful in this work. Embedding valuable, relevant, and engaging learning in the LN meetings is essential to operational success and, relatedly, school improvement and student success.

As Leithwood et al. (2004) and the Wallace Report (2021) confirm, principals and vice-principals are critical in setting the learning conditions that lead to student achievement and well-being. School leaders prioritize school safety as a primary consideration for student success but require the proper resources and personnel to provide the necessary safety and security for staff and students.

Despite the confirmed importance of principal and vice-principal leadership to school success, members continue to feel less than valued, with increasing, multiple, and frequently unrealistic expectations and accountabilities, while, at the same time, financial and personnel resources are decreasing. Our survey and the research literature support this growing alienation of school principals and vice-principals. Administrators were drawn to the profession to make impactful change and enhance the school experience for all students. Sadly, many now view their impact as limited or minimal.

Kelly (2022) captures the core issues addressed in this report well. The work is quoted extensively below,

“ For many parents, school leader well-being may seem a peripheral issue that does not concern them. The principal often seems removed from the daily experience of their children in the classroom. However, research tells us that the success of schools depends upon effective and stable leadership at the principal level. The influence of the school principal on student outcomes is second in importance only to the quality of teacher instruction. Principals set the direction and establish the culture of the school, influence the curriculum and teaching methods, and crucially appoint, develop and appraise teaching staff.

What parents should want, therefore, are schools with stable and effective leadership where the potential of their child can be maximised. To the contrary, we are currently witnessing a global crisis of recruitment and retention of school leaders as principals leave the profession in droves due to poor working conditions and overwhelming levels of stress. (paras.1-2)

”

Our work confirms the conclusions of Kelly (2022). Our survey indicates that 40% of our members are considering a medical leave due to the stress level in their daily work. Another 43.3% of administrators are considering early (or earlier) retirement, with some considering a career change or expressing regret about having entered the role. Of those administrators contemplating retirement, only 51% report that they would return to work on an occasional basis to support absent colleagues or system needs. A full 17% indicate they would not return, and 32% more suggest they would be reluctant to take on an occasional position after retirement. For those reluctant or firm in their decisions not to return, they report stress, work intensification, harassment, levels of support, burnout, and stability in the district and education system generally throughout the province as reasons to retire and not return, even on an occasional basis.

Finally, our members express concerns about the transfer and placement process for principals and vice-principals. Some 40% report the “career conversation” process utilized in the district as not helpful in guiding their career decisions and trajectory. Many commented that the process depended highly on how the superintendent enacted the procedures. Almost 20% of administrators (five years or less) indicated that they had not as yet undergone the process. Overall, members indicate key priorities they feel should be considered when contemplating transfers, which should include geography, childcare and parent-care obligations, and varying experiences with schools and communities. Many do not feel these concerns and factors are addressed when identifying new work experiences and work locations for administrators.

Much more analysis and data collection is required to connect with the evolving experiences of administrators in our district. TSAA recognizes that assisting administrators in being respected, valued, and heard is key to improving education and schooling. This survey is one contribution to this effort as TSAA and OPC continue to advocate for our principals and vice-principals.

Recommendations

In keeping with the data and analysis above, TSAA offers the following key recommendations. Please note that these recommendations are not an exhaustive list and are a starting point for follow-up and dialogue through focus groups, committees, etc., involving both TDSB administrators and members of the senior team.

1

Workload & Job Conditions

- Given the increase in workload for administrators and student needs, the Ministry of Education must address the funding formula and commit to addressing the need for more vice-principals in schools.
- School leaders require more opportunities and increased autonomy to use their training and professional judgement when identifying initiatives based on school priorities and needs.
- Demands must be aligned with available staffing and resources. In cases where there are reductions, they must be reviewed.
- Plotting a critical path using system and school calendars would enhance consideration for other critical school dates and timelines. This approach would reveal the number of initiatives, expectations, and deadlines expected from school leaders and where there are potential conflicts.
- Current engagement seems 'artificial' and needs to truly take into account staffing and resources necessary for implementation and act on critical feedback from users. When planning new initiatives, engage users and stakeholders in authentic consultation with opportunities to pilot, and provide respectful feedback.

2

Factors Contributing to Stress: Staff Absenteeism

- Engage a focus group of leaders to provide thoughtful and relevant feedback about staff absenteeism, retention, recruitment, and suggestions for streamlining the hiring processes.
- Implement a more timely and streamlined recruitment strategy focussed on decreasing turnaround for new employees, including a more reasonable and appropriate timeline for documentation processing.
- The district should inform the Ministry of Education about the increase in unfilled jobs, retention, and recruitment issues and create a strategy to address this.
- Better succession planning at all board position levels, including transfer and promotion of school administrators, must be developed.

3

Factors Contributing to Stress: School Safety

- The Ministry of Education must commit to improved funding to ensure human and other resources are available for students in order to focus on and improve their mental health and wellbeing
- Implement strategies to address schools that are unsafe due to staff shortages.
- Review resource allocations linked to alternatives to suspensions and tiered intervention strategies to support schools with viable consequences.
- Review the supports available through Special Education, Support Services, and Caring and Safe Schools to equip schools to better support students' complex needs in an inclusion model.
- Facilities issues must be addressed immediately to ensure all schools have the basic requirements to maintain school safety.
- Review the methods of communication used within schools to ensure safe, consistent, and timely communication, which is vital during school emergencies.
- Ensure collaboration among all employee groups to establish a culture where school safety is prioritized as a shared responsibility.

4

Workplace Harassment and Human Rights

- Toronto District School Board needs to implement a campaign where no one towards any stakeholder, including school administrators, will tolerate bullying, harassment, intimidation, and threatening behaviour. Policies need to apply to all staff. School signs, posters, phone messages, and the TDSB website should reflect this message.
- Each school year, school superintendents must review the Provincial Code of Conduct (Program Policy Memorandum 128), Workplace Harassment Prevention and Human Rights (TDSB, PR515), and TDSB Board Code of Conduct (TDSB, PR585) to ensure that all members of the school community, especially people in positions of authority, such as principals and vice-principals, are treated with respect and dignity.
- As outlined in Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act, supervisors must act when an administrator has brought forward a complaint of harassment, either verbal or written.
- In addition to discussion about school improvement, allocate some time during school improvement visits for leaders to discuss concerns about staff and/or community resistance, and workplace harassment experienced when implementing board and ministry initiatives related to inclusion, anti-oppression, and anti-racism. The response must be focussed on problem-solving strategies and actions.
- Ensure clear and specific strategies are developed and enacted to support racialized administrators when dealing with experiences of harassment, discrimination, racism, intimidation, and bullying in their efforts to implement board and Ministry of Education initiatives related to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.
- Ensure the TDSB Human Rights Office understands the duties of the principal to supervise staff, manage instructional programs, and ensure student safety when addressing concerns from stakeholders.
- Establish and communicate clear norms for all stakeholders to ensure respectful and brave spaces during meetings among stakeholder groups, including parents and advocates and advocacy groups.

5	<p>Morale, Mental Health & Well-Being</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the well-being of school leaders with a focus on healthy habits, work-life balance, and opportunities to reflect and recharge. • Establish networks for school leaders focussed on well-being. • Encourage school leaders to take contractually sanctioned lieu and personal days without guilt or worry about supervision. Particular attention needs to be paid to single administrators. • TDSB, TSAA, and OPC should continue providing social and networking opportunities for school leaders to address feelings of isolation. • Provide opportunities for professional learning and discussion about coping and wellness strategies at Learning Network meetings. • School Transfer and Promotion processes must consider geographical requests from administrators, thus addressing less travel time and the increased ability to spend time with loved ones, resulting in improved work-life balance and overall wellness.
6	<p>Relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate to clarify and communicate board expectations around vice-principal and principal roles. • Communicate, model, and provide opportunities to foster positive relationships between vice-principals and principals, and administrators and superintendents. • Expand the number of mentor-coaches available for vice-principals and principals to help build capacity. • Foster a culture of professional growth between and among principals and vice-principals, ensuring a commitment to continued capacity building.
7	<p>Responsiveness, Advocacy, and Support (TSAA & OPC)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate and ensure information campaigns are available for all members, including new members, to understand the role of TSAA and OPC and the differences between union membership and professional association. • Continue to seek ways to communicate and provide advocacy and communication of advocacy to members. • Provide clear communication regarding what is centrally negotiated and locally negotiated with Terms and Conditions. • TSAA, OPC, and TDSB must provide more precise information on where to access needed information on their websites
8	<p>Responsiveness, Advocacy, and Support (Superintendent)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster relationships built on mutual respect, empathy, and understanding. • Foster a culture of learning where individuals are encouraged to ask questions and take a learning stance. • Ensure that timelines regarding responsiveness are reinforced, i.e. 24 hour responses. • Ensure direct and appropriate support for well-being is provided by the superintendent to school administrators who have experienced a tragic event or crisis at their school

9

Responsiveness, Advocacy, and Support (Central Departments)

- Revisit 'Service Excellence' and review how various departments can improve their ability to support schools.
- Ensure Central Departments create yearly plans collaborating and communicating around timelines and deadlines to reduce duplication and competing interests from multiple departments.
- Involve stakeholders and users in consultation when implementing critical change and plan for on-going feedback to mitigate challenges.

10

Learning Network Meetings

- Engage administrators in setting agendas for Learning Network meetings, organizing guest speakers and choosing timing for meetings that work for all.
- Provide opportunities in Learning Network meetings for principals and vice-principals to discuss current issues and engage in collaborative problem-solving alongside superintendents.
- Adopt an empathetic, judgement-free, listening, and participatory culture at Learning Network meetings.
- Regular feedback should be sought from principals and vice-principals on how to improve the Learning Network meetings.
- Ensure mandatory professional learning is embedded and covered at Learning Network meetings to avoid additional expectations.

11

Professional Learning, Succession Planning, Promotion, and Transfer

- Provide opportunities for aspiring leaders to job shadow and better understand leadership opportunities before declaring their intent to pursue formal leadership.
- Revisit the paperwork and process of 'career conversations' to ensure a fair, consistent, and valuable process is established.
- Demystify the 'Dialogue Process' by offering sessions and including opportunities for interested candidates to network with candidates who were successful and can provide feedback.
- Ensure those aspiring to vice-principal roles have access and subsidy to engage in professional learning that will prepare them for the role (Emerging Leadership Program, PQP, TDSB mandatory learning, etc.).
- Ensure those aspiring to principal or centrally assigned roles have access and subsidy to engage in professional learning that will prepare them for the role (Principal Development Program, OPC courses, TDSB mandatory learning, etc.).
- Ensure consistency in Learning Centre offerings to support aspiring leaders.
- Provide subsidies and promote professional learning that school leaders can select from based on personal relevance and focussed on professional and personal capacity building.
- Offer professional learning within the learning network structure so that administrators and superintendents build capacity on how to encourage and manage parent/caregiver, student, and community voices when advocating for needs or challenging systemic bias or barriers.
- Provide opportunities for administrators to transfer within various learning networks.

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