

Report of Findings from the Second Biennial

MINNESOTA PRINCIPALS SURVEY 2023

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This executive summary is not intended to replace the complete report. For full details, including methodology, author and collaborator credits, references, and data, please refer to z.umn.edu/mnps23-24.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 2023 SURVEY

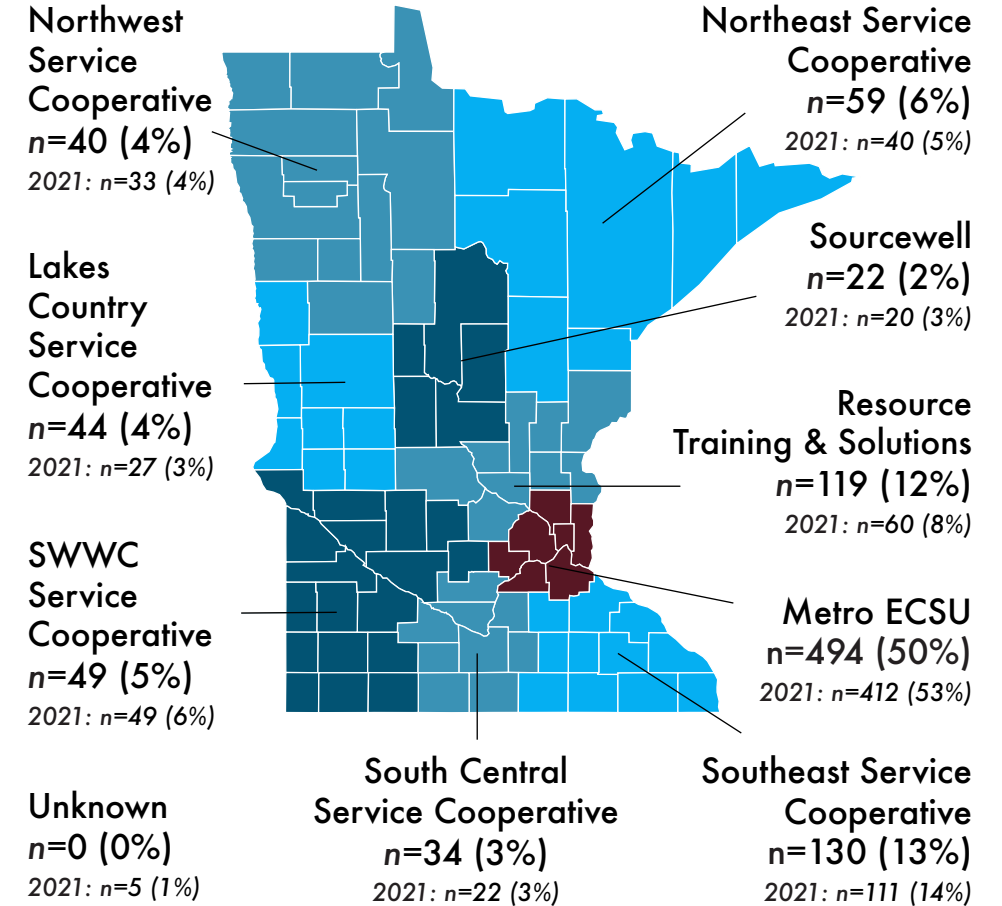
Over 2,400 school leaders in Minnesota were invited to take the second biennial Minnesota Principals Survey (MnPS) in November 2023. Generously funded by The Minneapolis Foundation and The Joyce Foundation, the MnPS seeks to elevate the voices of principals, assistant principals, and charter school leaders across the state. The survey was originally developed in 2021 by researchers at the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota in collaboration with a diverse group of educators and partners, and updated in 2023 in response to a shifting educational context and feedback from survey users. Topics new to the survey in 2023 were student and staff mental health and wellbeing, and recent legislative changes.

Nearly 1,000 school leaders took the 2023 MnPS, with an overall response rate of 41% (up from 34% in 2021). Among respondents:¹

- 50% were from Greater Minnesota and 50% were from the seven county Twin Cities metropolitan area.
- 50% worked in secondary schools, 47% worked in elementary schools, and 2% worked in other kinds of schools (e.g., K-12 schools).
- 92% worked in district schools and 8% worked in charter schools.
- 71% were principals, directors, or co-directors; 26% were assistant or associate principals; and 3% had other roles.
- 89% were White, 9% were Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC), and 2% preferred not to disclose their racial/ethnic identity.

This Executive Summary presents select findings from the 2023 MnPS. We encourage readers to view the full report for additional details about our methodology and findings. In the coming months, we will publish a Tableau dashboard where users will be able to explore MnPS survey data and disaggregate findings by school- and principal-level variables. Additional “Policy & Practice Briefs” will be produced based on findings from follow-up focus groups, which will be conducted in Summer 2024. All MnPS reports, supplemental materials, and links to our Tableau dashboard are available at <https://carei.umn.edu/mnps>.

Responses by Minnesota Service Cooperative Region



1. School-level information was unknown for 1% of respondents; as such, percentages may not add to 100% for all school-level variables.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

We learned a lot about the state of the principalship in Minnesota through the 2023 MnPS, as we did in 2021. While principals' perspectives varied in important ways, the following "key takeaways" represent overarching themes in the data. We found that principals:

1. **Feel their jobs are unsustainable...** Consistent with 2021 survey findings, principals told us that their job responsibilities far exceed the time they have available to fulfill them, leading to stress, burnout, and, in some cases, intentions of leaving the principalship.
2. **...and yet, demonstrate slight improvement in some measures of wellbeing.** For instance, leaders reported working an average of 1.6 hours less per week than they did in 2021—though they're still working an average of 57 hours per week. Principals were slightly more likely to agree that their workloads were sustainable and that they were generally satisfied with being a school leader than they were in 2021.
3. **Don't have enough time for instructional and community-engaged leadership.** Principals shared they must sacrifice time they would like to spend (and are expected to spend) on instructional leadership and community engagement to attend to administrative tasks (e.g., filling staffing shortages) and respond to urgent student needs (e.g., student dysregulation). This finding was also very consistent with 2021 MnPS data.
4. **Engaged less frequently in some culturally responsive school leadership practices than they did in 2021.** Specifically, a smaller percentage of principals reported developing culturally responsive teachers and including families in school-level decisions on a monthly or more frequent basis than they had in 2021. At the same time, principals were more likely to engage monthly or more often in the analysis of student data to identify academic and disciplinary disparities than they were in 2021.
5. **Lost confidence in their ability to carry out many leadership activities.** The MnPS asks school leaders to report how much confidence they have in their ability to carry out 49 different leadership activities, in light of their own capabilities and available resources. The percentage of principals who reported having sufficient confidence decreased for 47 out of those 49 leadership activities between 2021 and 2023.
6. **Perceive student mental health as their single greatest challenge.** Almost all (94%) principals *agreed* or *somewhat agreed* that student mental health challenges represent a major barrier to student learning at their schools. Principals believed that the student mental health challenges they witnessed at school were primarily caused by student trauma, social media engagement, and the mental health challenges of caregivers.
7. **Are frustrated with unfunded mandates and a lack of state guidance to meet their requirements...** Many principals felt that the perspectives of school leaders were not heard during the last legislative session. They expressed that new regulations required significant staff time to implement without commensurate increases in staffing. Furthermore, they reported needing timely and clear guidance from MDE on how to implement new policies, including The READ Act and legislation around non-exclusionary discipline.
8. **...and as such, demand more funding from the legislature.** Principals report needing more staff to support students experiencing mental health crises; more staff to free up teachers' time for problem solving, professional learning, and collaboration (or more paid time without student supervisory responsibilities); and more reliable access to substitute teachers. Such changes require meaningful increases in funds for personnel.
9. **Foster wellbeing at school by authentically listening, building relationships, and demonstrating care.** With the mental health challenges of students and staff at an all-time high, according to MnPS respondents, principals find success in building resilient school communities by prioritizing the more human elements of their work: giving students, staff, and families voice; nurturing genuine connections; and asking "How can I help?"
10. **Love their jobs despite the challenges.** While this sentiment was not universal, that 86% of principals reported being satisfied with their jobs suggests that, despite the many and significant challenges they face, principals view their roles as fulfilling and meaningful. In the words of one principal, "It's a REALLY DIFFICULT job, that I wouldn't trade for anything."

Below, we summarize findings from each section of the 2023 survey, which further explain these ten key takeaways. We present findings on principals': careers, preparation and licensure, working conditions, professional development, leadership self-efficacy and needed supports, engagement in culturally responsive practices, perceptions of state and district policy and supports, and perspectives on student and staff mental health.

CAREER INFORMATION

Participants had worked as school leaders in any capacity for an average of 10.9 years, and had worked in their current roles for an average of 6.2 years. More than a third (36%) had been in their roles for 2 years or less. Primary factors for pursuing their current position included *opportunity for impact*, *location*, and *ties to the surrounding community*.

Principals reported anticipating staying in their roles for an average of 6.7 years. Similar to the results of the 2021 survey, nearly two-thirds of participants (64%) expected to remain in their roles for 6 years or less. One in five principals expected to be in their roles for only 2 years or less. Top factors influencing principals' decisions to stay in their roles included factors such as *opportunity for impact*, *staff culture*, and *compensation*.

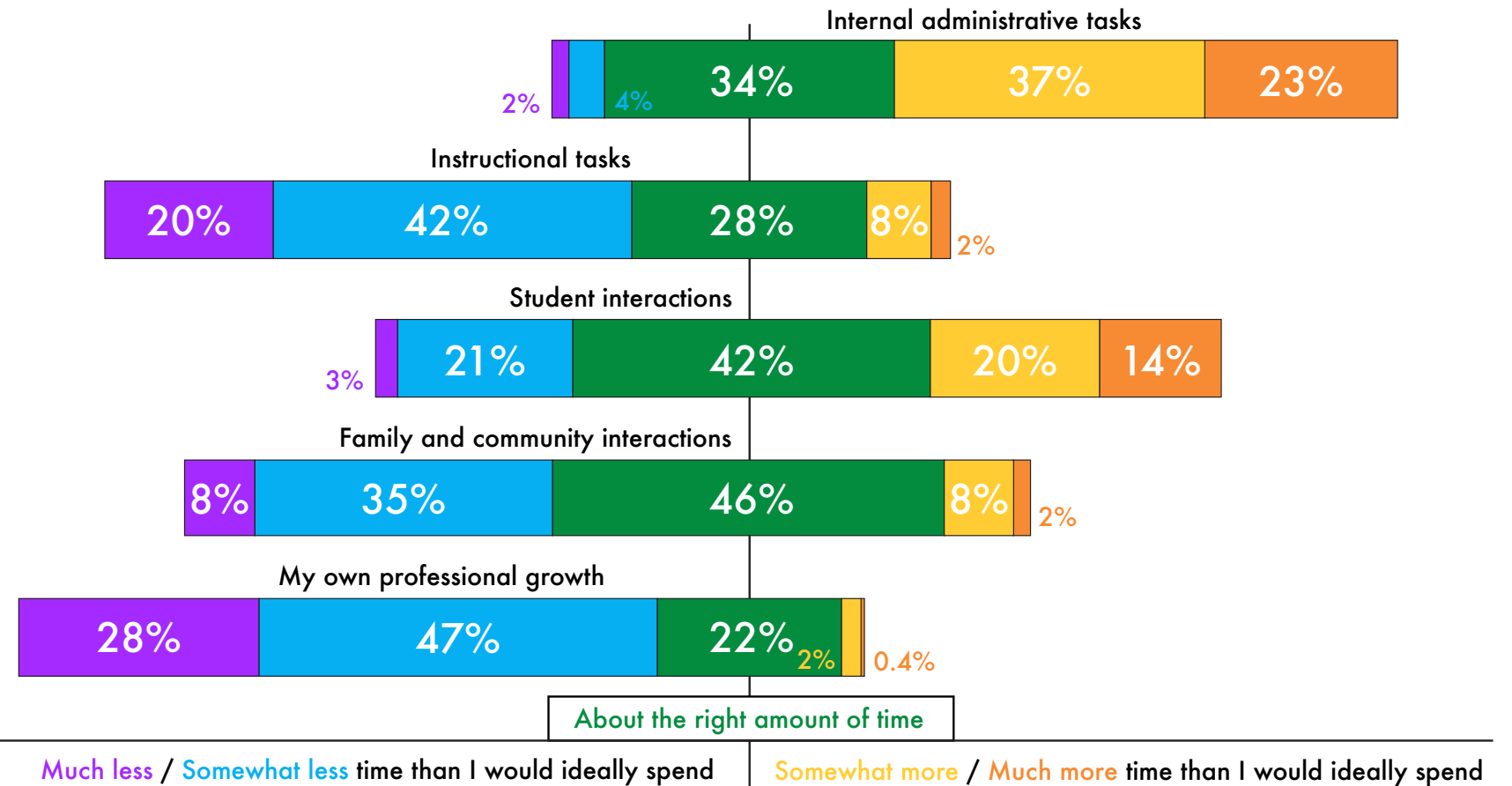
Retirement was most frequently reported as respondents' next career step with 32% selecting this option. Eight percent (8%) plan to move into a role outside of public education, up from 5% in 2021. Nearly a quarter (23%) were undecided.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Multiple survey questions asked about the nature, intensity, and subjective quality of principals' work lives. Key findings from this section of the survey included the following:

- Principals reported spending an average of 57.0 hours working per week, down slightly from 58.6 hours in 2021.
- Just over half (52%) of 2023 respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that their workloads are sustainable, an increase from 46% in 2021.
- When asked how they spend their time with regard to various leadership tasks, 62% reported they spend *much less* or *somewhat less* time on instructional tasks than they would like. Conversely, 60% of respondents indicated they spend *somewhat more* or *much more* time on internal administrative tasks than they would like. This pattern is consistent with 2021 findings.
- 77% of respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My primary role as an administrator is to be an instructional leader*. However, only 58% of respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My supervisor ensures I have the time to be an instructional leader*.
- 98% of principals reported spending their personal funds on their schools. On average, principals who reported using personal funds for school purposes spent \$777 per year.
- Agreement with three statements about the appropriateness and adequacy of compensation, healthcare benefits, and retirement benefits fell from 2021 to 2023.
 - 54% of principals *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My compensation is appropriate for the work I do in 2023*, compared to 64% in 2021.
 - 69% of principals *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My healthcare benefits are adequate* compared to 76% in 2021.
 - 62% of principals *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My retirement benefits are adequate* compared to 77% in 2021.
- 86% of 2023 participants *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they were generally satisfied being a leader at their school, compared to 83% in 2021. Top factors contributing to principals' job satisfaction included *relationships with students*, *seeing students grow socially and emotionally*, and *relationships with staff*.

Time spent on various leadership tasks



Examples of tasks within each category

Internal administrative tasks: personnel issues, scheduling, reports, budgeting, operational meetings

Instructional tasks: curriculum, instruction, assessment, PLC meetings, data analysis, classroom observations

Student interactions: academic guidance, discipline, seeking student voice, relationship building

Family and community interactions: attending events, seeking parent or community input

My own professional growth: self-reflection, attending PD, reviewing research, reading, networking

PREPARATION AND LICENSURE

We asked principals a series of questions about their administrative licensure and leadership preparation experiences. Nearly all respondents (98%) had completed an administrative licensure program, with license holders having completed their programs between 1990 and 2023. Preparation and licensure perceptions among those who reported completing their licensure programs in 2018 or later included the following:

- Principals felt most prepared to *apply the code of ethics for school administrators, understand the role of education in a democratic society, and share leadership with teachers and staff.*
- Principals felt least prepared to *recruit and retain staff, address emergency and crisis situations, formulate a site improvement plan, and manage facilities.*
- The proportion of program completers who reported insufficient preparation in several domains of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) was far less than it was in 2021. We suspect this may be because respondents to these items had completed their licensure programs within the past 5 years, when content related to CRSL may have been more prevalent, whereas respondents in 2021 included all licensure program completers dating back to the 1990s.
- Top content reported as missing from administrative licensure coursework included *special education due process, staff recruitment and retention, teacher development and evaluation best practices, and school finance.*
- Top experiences reported as missing from administrative licensure internships included *addressing student discipline challenges, developing and evaluating non-teaching staff, and budgeting experience.*

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

One section of the survey captured principals' experiences with and perceptions of their own professional development (PD). Key findings from this section included the following:

- Principals were most likely to report having participated in the following types of PD during the 2022-23 school year: *presentations at scheduled school or district meetings, networking with other educational leaders, and other workshops or trainings*, the same top responses as in 2021.
- Principals rated the following types of PD as most useful: *networking with other educational leaders, Minnesota Principals Academy, and other cohort-based learning experiences.*
- Principals rated the following types of PD as less useful: *presentations at scheduled school or district meetings, formal mentoring, and doctoral coursework.* However, most respondents (76%, 84%, and 85%, respectively) did view these forms of professional development as either *moderately* or *very useful*.
- As in 2021, the PD type with the lowest usefulness ratings—*presentations at scheduled school or district meetings*—is also the type participated in most.
- 64% of principals *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My performance evaluations help me to grow in my leadership practice.*
- 80% of principals *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *I am satisfied with the opportunities I have to grow as a leader in my role.*
- 91% of principals reported having access to professional development funds from their employers.
- Top barriers to participating in PD included *feeling obligated to be in the school building, limited time, and limited staff coverage.*

“What types of Professional Development did you participate in during the 2022-23 school year?”

	2021	2023
Presentations at scheduled school or district meetings	70%	73%
Networking with other educational leaders	66%	65%
Other workshops or trainings	57%	65%
State or local conferences	30%	42%
MASSP provided opportunities	26%	35%
MESPA provided opportunities	28%	31%
Other cohort-based learning experience	26%	25%
National conferences	7%	18%
Formal mentoring	9%	14%
Formal coaching	11%	12%
Minnesota Principals Academy	7%	7%
Doctoral coursework	5%	5%

“How would you rate the usefulness of each type of professional development you participated in during the 2022-23 school year?”

Percent responding “moderately useful” or “very useful”

	2021	2023
Networking with other educational leaders	98%	97%
Minnesota Principals Academy	100%	96%
Other cohort-based learning experience	95%	94%
MESPA provided opportunities	87%	93%
Formal coaching	93%	93%
State or local conferences	92%	92%
MASSP provided opportunities	90%	91%
Other workshops or trainings	87%	90%
National conferences	96%	88%
Doctoral coursework	92%	85%
Formal mentoring	98%	84%
Presentations at scheduled school or district meetings	78%	76%

LEADERSHIP SELF-EFFICACY AND NEEDED SUPPORTS

Several survey questions were designed to answer questions about school leaders' self-efficacy, or the degree to which they feel capable of carrying out their work in light of their own capabilities and available resources. Key findings from this section were as follows:

- In 2023, 89% of respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the general statement *I can be successful as a leader at this school*, compared to 90% in 2021.
- Principals' reported self-efficacy decreased in 47 of 49 leadership activities from 2021 to 2023, with an average decrease in the percentage reporting *sufficient* or *more than sufficient* confidence of 7 percentage points.
- The largest decreases in self-efficacy from 2021 to 2023 were in *engaging families in school-level decision-making* and *engaging students in school-level decision-making*, both of which saw a 17 point drop in the percentage of principals reporting having sufficient or more than sufficient confidence in these areas.
- Among these 49 activities, respondents reported the highest level of self-efficacy in the following five leadership activities: *explaining administrative decisions to staff*, *engaging staff in school-level decision-making*, *facilitating decision-making in teams*, *setting meaningful student learning goals*, and *establishing discipline practices*—all activities pertaining to management and decision-making.
- Conversely, respondents reported the lowest level of self-efficacy in the areas of *creating culturally responsive assessments*, *addressing staff mental health challenges*, *engaging families in school-level decision-making*, *addressing student mental health challenges*, and *designing culturally responsive curriculum*—with mental health and culturally responsive practices being clear themes.

- Of all 49 leadership activities included on the survey, *addressing student mental health challenges* was the most frequently selected activity identified as posing the single greatest challenge to school leaders, by far. When asked what would most help school leaders address this challenge, top themes among responses included:
 - Funding to hire more mental health staff.
 - Better access to mental health resources for students, staff, and families.
 - Training and professional development for principals and staff (e.g., initiating conversations about mental health, trauma-informed practices).

“Students are mentally imploding the minute they get off the bus and we don’t have the staff on hand to deal with it.”

“We are in a post-pandemic mental health crisis with more... mental health needs than ever. We need more help and more training for all staff around how to best support our students.”

- The next most frequently selected “single greatest challenges” were: *establishing a robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)*, *addressing staff mental health challenges*, *supporting instruction in all content areas taught at my school*, *communicating about race, gender, and culture with families and community members*, and *engaging families in school-level decision-making*.

Change from 2021 to 2023 in percentage of respondents reporting *sufficient confidence* in 49 leadership activities

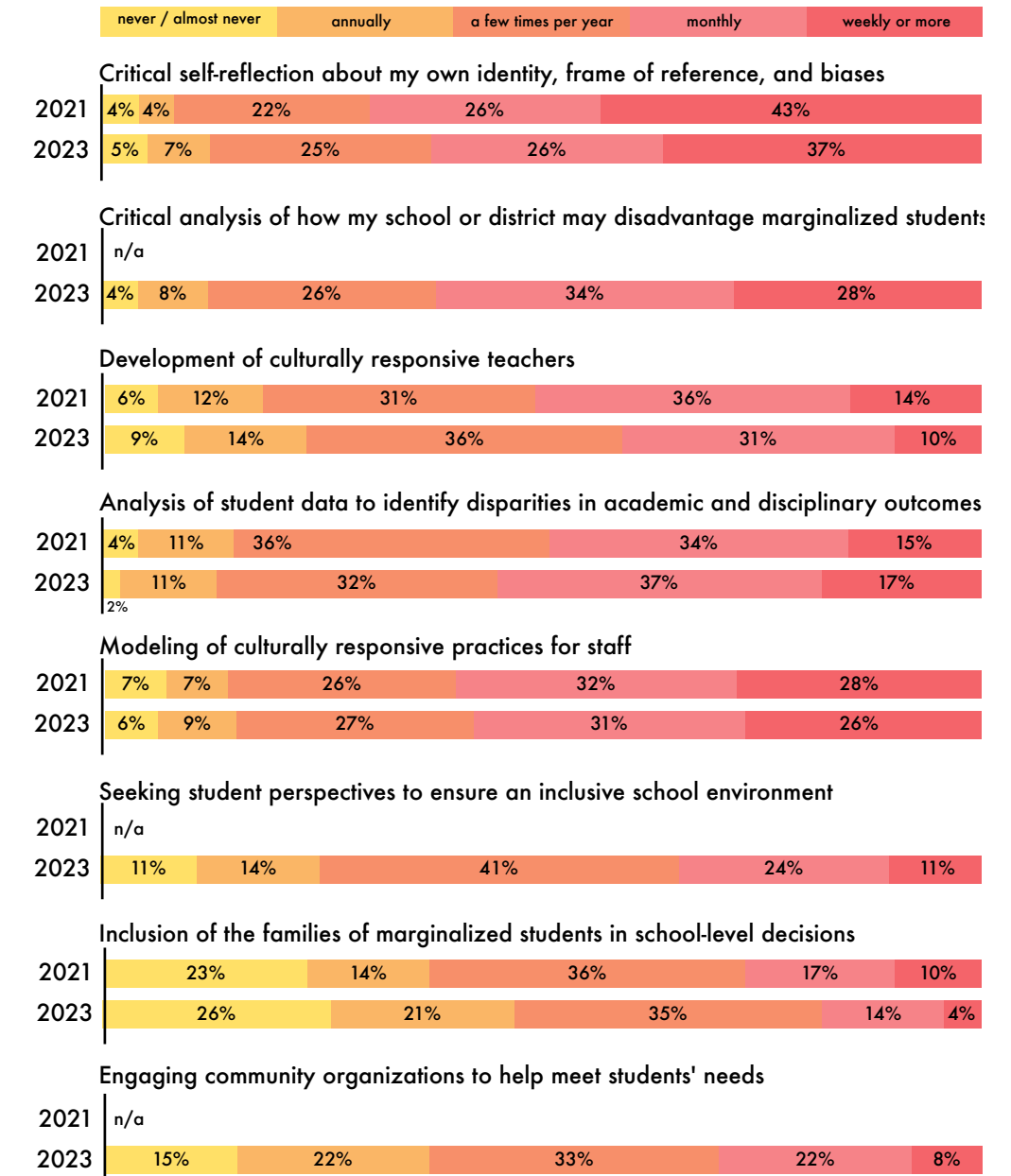
1%	Supporting culturally responsive pedagogy
0%	Balancing our school's emphasis on academics and social and emotional learning (SEL)
-1%	Creating culturally responsive assessments
-2%	Designing culturally responsive curriculum; Boosting staff morale; Explaining administrative decisions to staff; Facilitating professional development for teachers; Establishing a robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)
-3%	Critical self-reflection about my own identity, frame of reference, and biases; Evaluating teachers; Facilitating decision-making in teams; Ensuring all students' sense of belonging at school
-4%	Engaging staff in school-level decision-making; Coaching teachers; Facilitating conflict resolution; Establishing a vision for my school; Motivating a majority of my staff to implement changes; Setting meaningful student learning goals
-5%	Establishing discipline practices; Hiring new teachers; Designing professional development for teachers; Communicating about race, gender, and culture with families and community members; Ensuring all staff members' sense of belonging at school
-6%	Gathering and analyzing student-level data to personalize instructional supports; Collaborating with staff to implement a school improvement plan; Implementing changes with fidelity; Gathering and analyzing student-level data to personalize behavioral supports
-7%	Addressing staff performance concerns; Monitoring changes to our practice over time; Facilitating discussions with staff about race; Facilitating discussions with staff about gender identity; Supporting instruction in all content areas taught at my school
-8%	Evaluating programs and initiatives; Analyzing perception data from staff about school climate; Facilitating discussions with staff about sexual orientation
-9%	Explaining administrative decisions to families or community members; Motivating teachers to take responsibility for school improvement; Deciding how the school budget will be spent; Analyzing data to identify areas needing improvement; Motivating teachers to help each other improve instruction
-10%	Managing multiple initiatives simultaneously; Addressing staff mental health challenges
-11%	Analyzing perception data from students about school climate
-12%	Applying research-based approaches to school improvement planning
-13%	Analyzing perception data from families about school climate
-15%	Addressing student mental health challenges; Leveraging research findings to inform decision-making
-17%	Engaging students in school-level decision-making; Engaging families in school-level decision-making

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

One section of the survey pertained to school leaders' culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) practices. Specifically, we sought to understand the frequency of their engagement in practices associated with the four domains of CRSL as described by Khalifa et al. (2016): critical self-reflection, developing culturally responsive teachers, promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments, and engaging students, families, and communities. We found the following:

- In the area of **critical self-reflection**:
 - 63% of respondents indicated that they engaged in *critical self-reflection about my own identity, frame of reference, and biases* at least on a monthly basis (compared to 69% in 2021).
 - 61% of respondents reported engaging in *critical analysis of how my school or district may disadvantage marginalized students* (a new item in 2023) on a monthly or more frequent basis.
- In the area of **developing culturally responsive teachers**:
 - 41% of respondents reported engaging in *development of culturally responsive teachers* at least monthly, down from 50% in 2021.
 - 55% of respondents indicated having engaged in *analysis of student data to identify disparities in academic and disciplinary outcomes* at least monthly, up from 49% in 2021.
- In the area of **promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments**:
 - 57% of principals reported *modeling of culturally responsive practices for staff* at least monthly, compared to 60% in 2021.
 - 34% reported *seeking student perspectives to ensure an inclusive school environment* (a new item in 2023) at least monthly.
- In the area of **engaging students, families, and communities**:
 - 18% of principals reported *engaging in the inclusion of the families of marginalized students in school-level decisions* at least monthly, far fewer than the 27% who reported doing so in 2021.
 - 30% of principals reported *engaging community organizations to help meet students' needs* (a new item in 2023) at least monthly.
- 50% of respondents reported attending community events with students and their families *a few times per year* (compared to 49% in 2021), with about one in five indicating they did so *monthly or more* (21%, compared to 23% in 2021).

Approximately how often do you engage in the following culturally responsive school leadership practices?



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

STATE AND DISTRICT POLICY AND SUPPORTS

One section of the survey pertained to principals' perceptions of, and experiences with, accountability, support, and policy at both state and district levels. Key findings from this section included the following:

- 41% of respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that state accountability measures used to evaluate schools were reasonable, compared to 73% of district respondents that felt district accountability measures were reasonable.
- 72% of charter respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that charter authorizer accountability measures were reasonable.
- 84% of district respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they feel supported by district leaders, as in 2021.
- 78% of charter respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they feel supported by their charter authorizers, a decrease from 93% in 2021.
- 45% of principals *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they knew of several ways they could influence state policy, compared to 83% who *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they knew of several ways they could influence district policy.
- Most leaders wanted greater influence over state and district policy:
 - 76% of respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they wanted greater influence over state policy, up from 70% in 2021.
 - 79% of district respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they wanted greater influence over district policy, compared to 78% in 2021.
- 32% of principals have not sought to influence state policy in the past two years.
- The most common way principals reported seeking to influence state policy in the past two years was by *sending written communication to legislators*, with 48% of respondents selecting this option.
- 5% of principals have not sought to influence district policy in the past two years.
- The most common way principals reported seeking to influence district policy in the past two years was by *contributing as a member of a district-level committee*, with 82% of respondents selecting this option.
- *Lack of time* and *feeling my voice will not be heard* were the top two barriers to both state and district policy influence cited by principals.
- Principals were far more likely to report facing barriers to influence at the state level than at the district level, with 7% indicating they

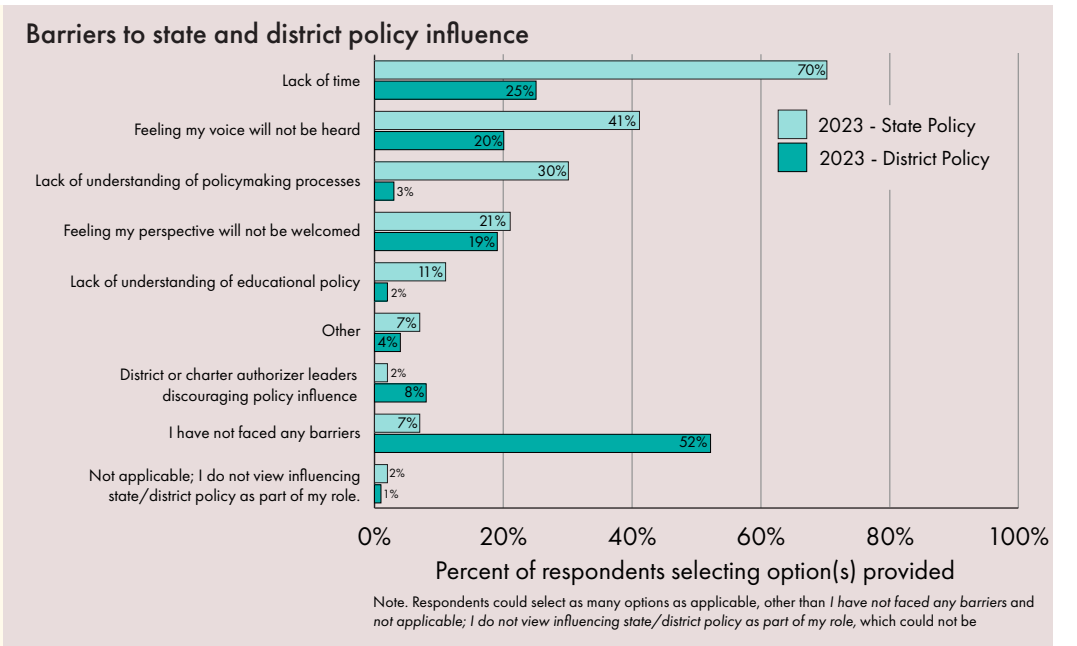
"I mostly need those that are making the recommendations to understand what it's like to be an elementary principal on a Tuesday. Some of the changes feel unrealistic at times, and the recommendations given thus far are so broad and vague that it's more frustrating than helpful (mostly around NED, Recess Detention and K-3 suspensions)."

"The K-3 suspension is difficult without additional funding for staff. I completely agree that suspensions actually make the situation worse. However, a change like this should have been connected to an increase in funds for mental health professionals in schools to help proactively support students."

had not faced barriers to state policy influence compared to 52% reporting no barriers to district policy influence.

- We asked principals to report their familiarity with, extent of responsibility for, and self-efficacy in implementing ten policy changes enacted during the 2023 Minnesota legislative session. These changes pertained to: The READ Act, non-exclusionary discipline, K-3 suspension, recess detention, prone restraint and physical holds, pupil withdrawal agreements, ethnic studies requirement, American Indian culture and language requirement, personal finance graduation requirement, and the government and citizenship graduation requirement.
- Respondents were most familiar with policy changes relating to **non-exclusionary discipline** and **prone restraint and physical holds**. These were also the two policy changes that principals were most likely to report having responsibility to implement.
- Respondents were least familiar with policy changes relating to **American Indian culture and language** and **ethnic studies** requirements.
- Principals who reported being primarily or partly responsible for implementing certain policy changes then reported their confidence in being able to implement those changes. Principals were most likely to report confidence in their ability to implement changes

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relating to **recess detention** and **prone restraint and physical holds**, and least likely to report confidence in their ability to implement changes relating to **American Indian culture and language** requirements and **the READ Act**.

- With respect to American Indian culture and language, leaders reported a need for teachers, access to curriculum, implementation requirements and timelines, classroom space, and professional development.
- With respect to the READ Act, leaders requested a wide range of needs including basic information about the legislation and its requirements, specific implementation strategies, curricular resources, support for implementing with secondary students and multilingual learners, and other resources, like money and time to hire and train staff.
- Across policy areas, principals reported **needing information, guidance, and support** to comply with recent legislation. They also needed time to plan, train their staff, and make necessary adjustments to local policies and practices. Many leaders reported needing funding, especially to fund staff that could support policy implementation. And finally, many respondents noted **frustration with new mandates**, especially those that did not come with additional funds or clear guidance from MDE.

MENTAL HEALTH

The 2023 MnPS included an “insert section” on mental health given the topic’s salience to principals, as indicated by findings from the 2021 MnPS as well as follow-up focus groups conducted in 2022 (Brogan et al., 2023; Pekel et al., 2022). Here, we summarize key findings from the mental health section, including questions on student mental health, staff mental health, and principal wellbeing.

With respect to **student mental health**:

- As described above, principals selected *addressing student mental health challenges* as the leadership activity posing the “single greatest challenge” to them more than any other activity in 2023.
- 94% *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *Student mental health challenges represent a major barrier to student learning at my school.*
- 45% *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My school or district is able to provide adequate support for students experiencing mental health challenges.*
- The three most-selected perceived root causes of student mental health challenges were: *trauma experienced firsthand (primary trauma)* (74% of respondents selected this option), *student engagement with social media* (59%), and *mental health challenges of caregivers* (40%).
- Principals suggested policy and practice changes to address what they viewed as the root cause(s) of student mental health challenges:
 - To address **trauma experienced firsthand**, principals suggested: greater access to mental health providers such as therapists, counselors, and social workers; community support from county agencies and nonprofits; more expansive therapy options for

“[We need] more mental health professionals and support in the schools—and more money to pay for it!”

“[We need a] statewide ban of cell phones in schools. End the distractions in schools.”

“[We need] consistent and proactive support from the county/non-school entities for families who are struggling with mental health.”

students and families; and trauma-informed care training and implementation support for all staff.

- To address **student engagement with social media**, principals suggested: cell phone bans or limited use policies; parent/caregiver education and involvement; curriculum on the negative impacts of social media use; and legal and/or legislative action to prevent social media and technology companies from targeting children.
- To address **mental health challenges of caregivers**, principals suggested: increasing caregivers’ access to mental health services and more robust wrap-around services provided at school sites.

With respect to **staff mental health**:

- As described above, *addressing staff mental health challenges* was the third most-selected leadership activity posing the “single greatest challenge” to principals out of 49 possible activities.
- 70% of principals *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *Staff mental health challenges represent a major barrier to student learning at my school.*
- 43% of school leaders *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My school or district is able to provide adequate support for staff experiencing mental health challenges.*
- The three most-selected perceived root causes of staff mental health challenges were: *challenging student behavior (e.g., disengagement, threats, verbal or physical attacks)* (81% of respondents selected this option); *inadequate time to fulfill work responsibilities* (65%); and *staffing shortages* (63%).
- Principals suggested policy and practice changes to address what they viewed as the root cause(s) of staff mental health challenges:
 - To address **challenging student behavior**, principals suggested: more staff to support students; revising or potentially repealing the non-exclusionary discipline policy; and more funding to support staff and student learning and development (e.g., de-escalation strategies).
 - To address **inadequate time to fulfill work responsibilities**, principals suggested: increased non-instructional staff time; a reorganization of the school day and year (e.g., transitioning to a four-day workweek); and more funding to support these and other changes.
 - To address **staffing shortages**, principals suggested: increasing the pay of teachers, paraprofessionals, and substitute teachers;

“Non-exclusionary discipline is good in theory, when there is SEL support to teach alternate behaviors. We do not have the staff (too many students in need for our current staffing) or funds to provide the necessary support.”

“[We need to] restructure the school day/year so that there is adequate time for professional development, reflection, and collaboration.”

“With the cost of living increases continuing to outpace salary/benefits increases, we continue to have less and less applicants for all positions.”

expanding pathways and opportunities for teacher licensure; and alleviating substitute teacher shortages by allowing paraprofessionals to sub or by funding full-time building substitutes.

With respect to **principal wellbeing**:

- 81% *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *Most days, I experience an overall sense of wellbeing as a school leader.*
- Top factors most detracting from principals’ wellbeing as school leaders included: *inadequate time to fulfill work responsibilities, staffing shortages, and challenging student behaviors (e.g., disengagement, threats, verbal or physical attacks).*
- 52% of principals *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My district is able to provide adequate support for school leaders experiencing mental health challenges.*
- When asked what lessons they had learned about fostering wellbeing in their school communities, top themes included the importance of: building relationships, listening and responding to needs, leading through positive messaging and modeling, and establishing schoolwide programming and practices intended to promote wellbeing.

“[Fostering wellbeing is] all about establishing trusting relationships with all stakeholders. If you have that you can work through all other things.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS FROM EXPERIENCE AS A SCHOOL LEADER

As the final question on the survey, we asked leaders: *Is there anything else about your experience as a school leader that may be helpful for various education stakeholders to know—including local and state-level decision-makers?* Responses aligned with 7 major themes, which are summarized below in order of prevalence in the data.

Theme 1: Unsustainable Conditions for Teaching, Learning, and Leading

Consistent with open-ended comments from 2021, the most prevalent theme among open-ended comments was the perspective that the current conditions under which teaching, learning, and leading are taking place are not sustainable and require urgent action to improve.

“I am an extremely passionate educator who wants to be in this profession and make a difference but something has to give. I am barely surviving day to day operations and I know I can’t keep this up. It’s extremely disappointing because I know that education is where I always wanted to be and believe I thrive, but something has to give. It’s an impossible profession.”

Theme 2: Frustration with Legislative Process and Outcomes

Numerous principals cited frustration with what they viewed as unfunded, unclear, or unrealistic mandates.

“The people making laws aren’t at the ground level seeing how the changes affect schools. Making decisions in theory vs. practice are two VERY different things. More unfunded/underfunded mandates create stress and push people out of education.”

Theme 3: Positive Outlook or Perspective

While most open-ended comments revealed frustration, disappointment, and/or burnout with the current conditions facing Minnesota schools, a sizable minority of leaders conveyed a positive outlook or perspective on their jobs or on public education, generally. Many expressed that, despite its challenges, the principalship is a fulfilling job.

“This is an amazing profession that impacts the lives of so many students and families. Anyone in the position is blessed with opportunity, relationships, and an impact far greater than they know.”

Theme 4: Need for Fundamental Change in Education

Leaders used words and phrases such as “crisis,” “pivotal point,” “uncharted territory,” “underlying stress,” and “fundamental problem” to describe the urgency and gravity of their situations and why fundamental change is necessary. They also used words like “reinvent,” “reimagine,” “rethink,” “reorganize,” “overhaul,” and “shift paradigms” to highlight that the changes they seek are not incremental but dramatic.

“I think public education as we know it is about to fundamentally change. I don’t know when, why, or how but there’s an underlying stress that is about to break loose and we (as a state and perhaps even a nation) are going to have to make some big decisions if this thing we value is going to continue to exist.”

Theme 5: Feedback for District Administrators

Some principals commented specifically on the support they do or do not receive from district administrators. Some school leaders acknowledged that district leaders make it possible for them to do their jobs well. Others shared frustration regarding increased demands on principals’ time, ineffective PD, lack of sufficient mentoring, supervision by individuals without experience in the principalship, having little voice in district decisions, and lack of adequate support for principals from marginalized communities.

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“Being a Black leader in [a] mostly white community and among a white staff requires district leadership to understand how those racial dynamics impact mental health and create many barriers that are both passively and aggressively placed in the way by colleagues and the community. [District] leadership can’t believe their sympathy or empathy is enough, they have to act and they have to have a strategic plan to support, recruit and retain other Black leaders.”

Theme 6: Gratitude for the Opportunity to Provide Input

As in 2021, respondents shared gratitude for the opportunity to provide their perceptions of the principalship via the Minnesota Principals Survey.

“Thank you for asking about our perspective. We want to do this work and do it well for the students, families and staff we serve. However, as education is currently, I don’t know how we can continue to retain high-quality individuals without some change.”

Theme 7: Personal and Professional Reflections

A final theme from open-ended responses was the expression of personal or professional reflections regarding the principalship. These reflections included lessons learned about school leadership, core beliefs about work in education, and advice for others in school leadership positions.

“I believe in order to continuously be successful at this job, one needs to truly love people and know your work is for them!”

INTRODUCTION

More information on the history and original development of The Minnesota Principals Survey is provided in the *Report of Findings from the First Biennial Minnesota Principals Survey*, available at carei.umn.edu/mnps.

The inaugural Minnesota Principals Survey (MnPS) conducted in 2021 elicited a strong initial response with 34% of eligible principals, assistant principals, and charter leaders across the state sharing their thoughts about school leadership in Minnesota. Data from that survey was shared widely at over 15 presentations across the state, and resulted in a number of impacts. Specifically, the 2021 MnPS:

- Led to changes in administrative licensure coursework and internship projects.
- Drove the development of an MDE pilot of principal professional development surrounding culturally responsive school leadership.
- Informed planning for nine focus groups that, in turn, informed [five policy and practice briefs](#).
- Supported a statewide landscape analysis of school mental health resources and needs.
- Prompted a collaborative research project on the redesign of the principalship.

In the second iteration of the MnPS, administered in Fall 2023, we saw a significant growth in our response rate from 34% to 41%, with 212 more school leaders responding than in 2021 ($n=991$). Principals shared their perceptions of various aspects of their job, the confidence they have in executing their work responsibilities, and the supports they need. We hope that the information reported here will continue to inform policymakers, decision makers, preparation programs, and all of those who support principals and the schools they lead across the state.

WHY PRINCIPALS?

We know from research that principals have a significant impact on school culture and student performance (Grissom et al., 2021; Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005). In fact, in a recent synthesis of research on principals' effects on students and schools, Grissom et al. (2021), concluded that principals' contributions to student achievement were almost as large as those of teachers. However, "principals' effects," the authors argue, "are larger in scope because they are averaged over all students in a school, rather than a classroom" (p. xiv). For instance, principals are also often responsible for the recruitment, hiring, and development of the teachers they lead.

The role of the principal has been conceptualized in a myriad of ways: instructional leader, community leader, culturally responsive leader, manager, decision-maker, collective or distributive leader, or student-focused leader. In fact, according to

[MN Administrative Rule 3512.0510](#), to earn a K-12 Principal License in Minnesota, candidates must demonstrate competence in 86 areas. Arguably, principals are expected to do a lot. In an effort to inform those who support and hold principals accountable, we offer this report as a source of actionable insights surrounding many aspects of the principalship and across multiple contexts.

WHAT IS CONTAINED IN THIS REPORT?

This report provides detailed information on the following:

- Survey methodology and updates from 2021
- Respondent demographics
- Findings relating to principals' career information, experiences with preparation and licensure, working conditions and job satisfaction, professional development experiences and barriers, self-efficacy in specific areas of leadership along with desired supports, time spent on various tasks, frequency of enactment of specific culturally responsive school leadership behaviors, perceptions of state and district accountability and supports, actual and desired engagement in policy influence, thoughts on the ongoing challenges related to both student and staff mental health, and familiarity with (and confidence in the implementation of) 10 policies directly affecting schools enacted in the 2023 legislative session.

Each section describes the data gathered from all survey respondents and is presented both in writing and often in a visual display. 2023 MnPS data can eventually be further explored using our online data visualization platform, Tableau. Survey users will be able to analyze data by respondent race, gender, level (elementary vs. secondary), building size, school demographics, years of experience, geography, and other variables. Additional "Policy & Practice Briefs" will be produced based on findings from follow-up focus groups, which will be conducted in Summer 2024. All MnPS reports, supplemental materials, and links to our Tableau dashboard will be available at <https://carei.umn.edu/mnps> in the months ahead. Provide your email address at z.umn.edu/MnPSupdates to receive a notification email any time the MnPS web pages have been updated.

A note about the word 'principal': The survey is titled "The Minnesota Principals Survey," for ease of communication. In fact, respondents include principals, assistant or associate principals, individuals serving in dual roles (e.g., principal and superintendent, teachers taking on building-level leadership responsibilities), and charter school leaders.

METHODS

This section details the content of, and modifications made to, the MnPS for the 2023 administration. We also describe survey testing, administration, and analysis procedures. For more information on the initial development and testing of the MnPS, please reference the Report of Findings from the *First Biennial Minnesota Principals Survey*, available at carei.umn.edu/mnps.

2023 SURVEY CONTENT AND MODIFICATIONS

As in the 2021 MnPS, the 2023 MnPS included questions for principals pertaining to the following topics:

- Career information
- Preparation and licensure
- Working conditions
- Professional development
- Leadership self-efficacy and needed supports
- Culturally-responsive school leadership
- State- and district-level policy and supports

In addition, as in the 2021 survey, the 2023 MnPS included an “insert” section, designed to change with each administration in response to the most pressing needs facing Minnesota schools. Whereas the 2021 insert section sought principal input on challenges and opportunities related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2023 insert section, as agreed upon by our Advisory Council, focused on **student and staff mental health**. New survey questions for this insert question were informed by focus groups conducted in Summer 2022² and were developed in partnership with Advisory Council members and local and national experts in the area of school mental health.

While the 2023 MnPS largely mirrored the 2021 survey in content and format, several changes were made to the survey to improve respondents’ experience and interpretability of results. Categories of changes included:

- **Additions to, or deletions of, response options for multiple-choice items.** Common “Other” responses provided in the 2021 survey were added as response options, while existing response options that were infrequently selected were removed.
- **Deletions of underutilized items.** 42 total items were removed from the survey, not including those items that made up the COVID-19 insert section

2. A summary of findings from focus groups pertaining to student and staff mental health is available as part of the MnPS Policy & Practice Briefs series: carei.umn.edu/mnps/policy-practice-briefs.

3. Not all participants were given all items. For example, principals indicating they were not at all familiar with a specific legislative change were not then asked whether they were responsible for implementing that change or how confident they were in implementing that change.

in 2021. These items generated little interest among survey users (e.g., roles held prior to becoming a school leader) or furnished responses that were redundant with those of other items (e.g., categories of professional development needed), and were thus deemed non-essential to understanding and conveying principals’ experiences.

- **Additions of new items.** 39 total new items³ were added to the survey, not including those items that made up the mental health insert section. Most of these new items pertained to state legislative changes made in 2023. Other new items were added to support subgroup analyses, including a question asking for principals’ total years of experience as a school leader, and another asking for the year of completion of the administrative licensure program. Three new items were written to better capture the range of CRSL practices described in Khalifa et al.’s (2016) framework. One item about barriers to influencing state or district policy was split into two items (one for state policy, one for district policy) to support interpretability.
- **Restructuring of leadership self-efficacy and needed supports section.** One of the most utilized sections of the 2021 survey was the section on principals’ leadership self-efficacy and needed supports across 49 leadership responsibility areas. However, when we asked principals to select needed supports for the areas that posed the “greatest challenge” from a predefined list of supports, their responses (e.g., “increasing my knowledge and skills” and “tools or frameworks”) offered little actionable guidance for survey users. Therefore, we restructured this section of the survey to allow open-ended responses to the question, “What would most help you to effectively carry out” their identified greatest challenge.
- **Skip functionality.** One section of the survey pertains to principals’ preparation for their jobs via their administrative licensure programs. Given that (a) responses to this section were unlikely to have changed between 2021 and 2023, and that (b) findings were useful to administrative licensure program providers only to the extent that they referenced recent program completers, we employed skip logic and limited access to this section only to respondents who had not completed the same section in 2021 and who indicated they had completed their administrative licensure programs in 2018 or later.
- **Other changes.** Other changes included changing an open-ended question about access to funds for professional development (“How much employer-provided money...”) to a closed-ended question (“Do you have access to

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employer-provided money...”), adding response validation to items requiring a numeric response, and adding clarifying language to indicate the timeframe referenced by a particular question (e.g., “in the past two years”).

Where relevant, changes described above are noted in our reporting on individual survey items throughout the remainder of this report.

SURVEY REVIEW AND TESTING

Details regarding testing of the original MnPS instrument are provided in the Report of Findings from the *First Biennial Minnesota Principals Survey*, available at carei.umn.edu/mnps. The 34-member 2023 MnPS Advisory Council reviewed survey changes identified above, including multiple drafts of new survey sections (i.e., the insert section on mental health and the addition of items related to recent legislative changes).

The MnPS research team conducted multiple rounds of internal testing of the 2023 MnPS instrument in Qualtrics, a secure, cloud-based survey platform, to ensure that items were functioning as intended. In addition, the 2023 MnPS was tested by other researchers at CAREI who were not part of the MnPS team as well as by practicing school leaders not involved in the survey’s development ($n=17$). Minor revisions were made to survey directions in response to test feedback, but no test participants reported difficulty interpreting survey items or challenges completing the survey, and as such, we made no further changes.

SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

The final 2023 MnPS instrument was administered between November 1 and 22, 2023 to all eligible Minnesota school leaders, defined as anyone working as a principal, assistant or associate principal, director, co-director, or in some other school-level leadership role in a Minnesota publicly-funded elementary, middle, and/or secondary school.

The surveyed population included 2,406 school leaders, primarily identified using a publicly-available list of school administrators downloaded from the MDE website and supplemented with Minnesota

Elementary School Principals’ Association (MESPA) and Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP) member lists.⁴ Eligible school leaders not on the merged list could request to be included by completing a short Google form shared widely on a Frequently Asked Questions document and via social media.

Members of MESPA and MASSP received an email from their respective organization’s Executive Director the week prior to the survey launch informing them of the survey and encouraging them to complete it. Then, on November 1, school leaders received an email from the MnPS team at the University of Minnesota inviting them to take the survey within Qualtrics via an individual link. Follow-up emails were sent to nonrespondents on November 8, 17, and 21, and the survey was closed to further responses on November 23.

Data on the duration of survey engagement per participant indicated that the final survey took most individuals between 25 and 40 minutes to complete.

DATA ANALYSIS

A total of 998 participants opened the survey, of whom 991 indicated they were currently working as a principal, assistant or associate principal, or school-level leader in a Minnesota public school and were therefore included in the dataset, representing a response rate of 41% (up from 34% in 2021). Of the 991 eligible respondents, 836 (84%) completed the entire survey. See Table 1 for a comparison of 2021 and 2023 participation and completion rates.

Using state school ID numbers, publicly available school-level demographic information was matched onto survey response data such that responses could be disaggregated by variables such as geographic location (Greater Minnesota vs. Metro), level (elementary vs. secondary), and school type (district vs. charter). For a small number of respondents ($n=8$, or 1% of all respondents), school-level data was not available, either because the individual was not affiliated with a specific school (e.g., a Principal on Special Assignment) or because the school ID number associated with the individual’s response could not be found in state

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enrollment files. School ID numbers and any other potentially identifying information about survey respondents and their schools (e.g., school names and IDs, total student enrollment) were subsequently removed from the dataset to protect participant privacy.

Data analysis of close-ended survey items involved calculating response frequencies, identifying the rank order of response options, and calculating descriptive statistics for quantitative data⁵ (e.g., mean, standard deviation). Free-response data (i.e., other responses and answers to open-ended questions) were analyzed inductively for major themes using a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

In the results sections that follow, we report summary-level findings across all survey participants. Where applicable, we include tables and charts comparing 2021 and 2023 survey responses. Breakdowns of survey data by school- and respondent-level variables, including geographic location (i.e., Greater Minnesota and Metro) and school level (i.e., Elementary and Secondary), will be possible using our interactive Tableau reporting platform, which we expect to publish in the coming months at <https://z.umn.edu/MnPS23Viz>.⁶

Table 1. MnPS Participation and Completion Rates, 2021 and 2023

	2021		2023	
	n	%	n	%
Surveyed population	2323	100%	2406	100%
Participants	779	34%	991	41%
Completers (% of population)	631	27%	836	35%
Completers (% of participants)	631	81%	836	84%

Note. Participants include individuals who began the survey and responded affirmatively to the eligibility question, “Are you currently working as a principal, assistant or associate principal, director, co-director, or in some other school-level leadership role in a Minnesota publicly-funded elementary, middle, and/or secondary school?” Completers include individuals who completed the entire survey.

4. Principals working at schools classified as Online Learning Programs were not included in the surveyed population in 2021 but were included in 2023. These principals represented 2% of the surveyed population in 2023 ($n=44$).
 5. For some quantitative items (e.g., work hours, anticipated years in role) and on a case-by-case basis, individual responses were excluded from analysis as outliers when determined to be impossible or highly unlikely (e.g., weekly work hours greater than 168) or reflective of unusual circumstances (e.g., work hours of 20 hours per week or fewer).
 6. Breakdowns of 2021 MnPS data by school- and respondent-level variables are now possible using Tableau; see <https://z.umn.edu/MnPS21Viz>.

WHO RESPONDED?

Principals, assistant or associate principals, and charter school directors from all regions of Minnesota completed the 2023 MnPS. This section describes the demographic characteristics of the individuals who participated in the survey and the schools they led, along with comparison data from 2021 (see Table 2, right, and 3, next page). Responses were largely representative of the overall composition of the state’s schools in terms of location, level (elementary vs. secondary), and type (district vs. charter). However, we were unable to obtain updated principal demographic information from the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) through a public data request in 2024 as we had in 2022, and as such cannot report whether the breakdown of 2023 respondents by gender identity and race/ethnicity reflected that of the overall population of Minnesota school leaders. Given only minimal fluctuations in respondents’ reported demographic characteristics from 2021 to 2023, however, we have no reason to suspect the overall representativeness of respondents to have changed.

GEOGRAPHY

Half of survey respondents (50%, $n=494$) were affiliated with schools in the 7-county Twin Cities metropolitan area (“Metro”) and half (50%, $n=497$) were affiliated with schools in non-Metro counties (“Greater MN”). This represents a slight increase in the proportion of respondents from Greater MN from 2021 to 2023.

Figure 1, next page, displays the breakdown of responses by Minnesota Service Cooperative region.⁷ The distribution of responses across regions differs minimally from the overall distribution of Minnesota public schools.⁸

LEVEL

Just under half of respondents work in elementary schools ($n=470$, 47%) and half ($n=496$, 50%) work in secondary schools (classified as Senior High Schools, Middle Schools, Secondary Schools, Area Learning Centers, and Junior High Schools), compared to 50% and 44% of eligible schools statewide, respectively. About 2% ($n=16$) work in online learning programs, which make up 6% of survey-eligible public schools statewide.

7. See <https://www.mnservcoop.org/>.

8. Information on Minnesota public schools obtained from Minnesota Department of Education 2023 Student Enrollment file, obtained at <https://public.education.mn.gov/MDEAnalytics/Data.jsp>, and limited to schools with the following classification codes: 10, 20, 31, 32, 33, 40, 41, or 46.

Table 2. School Characteristics of MnPS Participants, 2021 and 2023

Geography	2021		2023	
	n	%	n	%
Greater MN	362	46%	497	50%
Twin Cities	412	53%	494	50%
Unknown	5	1%	0	0%
Total	779	100%	991	100%

Service Co-Op	2021		2023	
	n	%	n	%
Lakes Country Service Cooperative	27	3%	44	4%
Metro ECSU	412	53%	494	50%
Northeast Service Cooperative	40	5%	59	6%
Northwest Service Cooperative	33	4%	40	4%
Resource Training and Solutions	60	8%	119	12%
Sourcewell	20	3%	22	2%
South Central Service Cooperative	22	3%	34	3%
Southeast Service Cooperative	111	14%	130	13%
SWWC Service Cooperative	49	6%	49	5%
Unknown	5	1%	0	0%
Total	779	100%	991	100%

Level	2021		2023	
	n	%	n	%
Elementary	381	49%	470	47%
Secondary	373	48%	496	50%
Other	8	1%	17	2%
Unknown	17	2%	8	1%
Total	779	100%	991	100%

School Type	2021		2023	
	n	%	n	%
District	718	92%	907	92%
Charter	58	7%	84	8%
Unknown	3	0.4%	0	0%
Total	779	100%	991	100%

WHO RESPONDED?

Table 3. MnPS Participant Characteristics, 2021 and 2023

Current Role	2021		2023	
	n	%	n	%
Principal, Director, or Co-Director	547	70%	704	71%
Assistant or Associate Principal	204	26%	255	26%
Other	26	3%	28	3%
Total	777	100%	987	100%
Gender Identity				
Female	310	49%	406	49%
Male	313	50%	415	50%
Non-binary	0	0%	0	0%
Other	0	0%	1	0.1%
Prefer not to answer	7	1%	8	1%
Total	630	100%	830	100%
Race/Ethnicity				
White	549	87%	736	89%
Black or African American	26	4%	31	4%
Two or More Races	17	3%	17	2%
Asian	10	2%	10	1%
Hispanic/Latino	8	1%	13	2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0.3%	5	1%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	2	0.3%	2	0.2%
Other	2	0.3%	0	0%
Prefer not to answer	12	2%	15	2%
Total	628	100%	829	100%
Highest Degree Earned				
Bachelor's degree	3	0.5%	2	0.2%
Master's degree	49	8%	52	6%
Administrative License	312	49%	399	48%
Educational Specialist degree (Ed.S.)	208	33%	300	36%
Doctoral Degree (Ph.D., Ed.D)	60	9%	77	9%
Total	632	100%	830	100%

Note. Totals exclude participants who did not provide an answer.

SCHOOL TYPE

Principals from district schools were somewhat more likely to participate in the survey than those from charter schools. The majority of respondents ($n=907$, 92%) work in district schools whereas 8% ($n=84$) work in charter schools, compared to 86% and 14% of survey-eligible schools statewide, respectively.

CURRENT ROLE

Survey participants were asked to indicate their current role. Most respondents indicated they are currently a *principal, director, or co-director* ($n=704$, 71% of responses), about one-quarter indicated they are an *assistant or associate principal* ($n=255$, 26%), and a small minority selected *other* ($n=28$, 3%). Common other responses included hybrid roles (e.g., principal and superintendent, assistant principal at one school and principal at another), executive directors, and teachers serving in a school leadership capacity.

GENDER IDENTITY

Approximately half of respondents identified as *female* ($n=406$, 49%), half identified as *male* ($n=415$, 50%), a small number preferred not to answer ($n=8$, 1%), and one selected *other* ($n=1$, 0.1%).

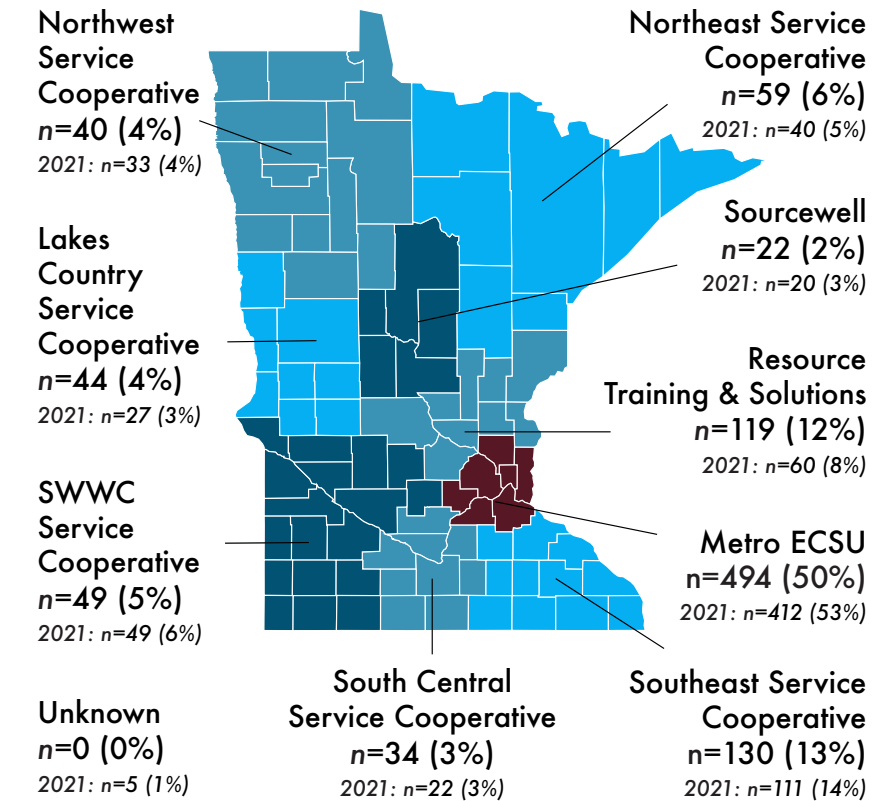
RACE/ETHNICITY

Table 3 includes a breakdown of the racial/ethnic identities of survey respondents. Of the 829 respondents indicating their race/ethnicity, a large majority ($n=736$, 89%) identify as *White*. The next most common response categories included *Black or African American* ($n=31$, 4%), *two or more races* ($n=17$, 2%), *I prefer not to answer* ($n=15$, 2%), and *Hispanic/Latino* ($n=13$, 2%). Other responses included *Asian* ($n=10$, 1%), *American Indian or Alaska Native* ($n=5$, 1%), and *Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander* ($n=2$, 0.2%).

9. In Minnesota, District principals are required to have an administrative license, which entails an additional 60 credits beyond a Bachelor's degree and successful completion of a graduate degree. Charter school leaders are not required to hold an administrative license.

THE MINNESOTA PRINCIPALS SURVEY

Figure 1. Responses by Minnesota Service Cooperative Region



EDUCATION

Participants were asked to indicate the highest degree they have earned. As in 2021, the most common response selected was an *Administrative License* ($n=399$, 48%), followed by an *Educational Specialist degree* ($n=300$, 36%), *Doctoral degree* ($n=77$, 9%), *Master's degree* ($n=52$, 6%), and *Bachelor's degree* ($n=2$, 0.2%).⁹

COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP

We asked survey participants whether they lived in the same community in which they worked. Just under half of respondents ($n=376$, 45%) replied *Yes* and over half ($n=455$, 55%) replied *No*. As in 2021, Greater MN respondents were far more likely to select *Yes* than Metro respondents (59% vs. 32%, respectively; see Table 4).

Table 4. Do you live in the same community in which you work?

	2021		2023	
	n	%	n	%
Overall				
Yes	300	48%	376	45%
No	327	52%	455	55%
Total	627	100%	831	100%
Greater Minnesota				
Yes	194	65%	247	59%
No	103	35%	174	41%
Total	297	100%	421	100%
Twin Cities Metro Area				
Yes	106	32%	129	32%
No	224	68%	281	69%
Total	330	100%	410	100%

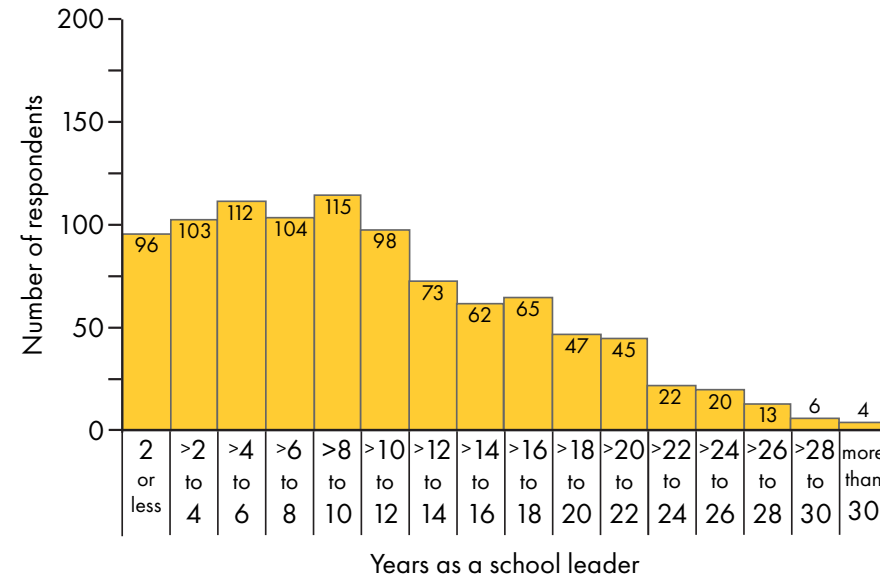
CAREER INFORMATION

Two sections of the survey asked respondents to provide information about their work experience and career trajectories. Below, we summarize response data from both sections, including current role tenure, total experience as a school leader, teaching experience, job selection factors, and future plans.

YEARS AS A SCHOOL LEADER

We asked respondents to provide the total number of years they have served as a school leader (defined as a principal, assistant or associate principal, school director, or co-director) in any setting. Figure 3, below, displays the distribution of responses to this question in two-year increments. Respondents reported an average of 10.9 years of experience as school leaders, with responses ranging from 0 to 35 years.

Figure 3. Years of School Leadership Experience

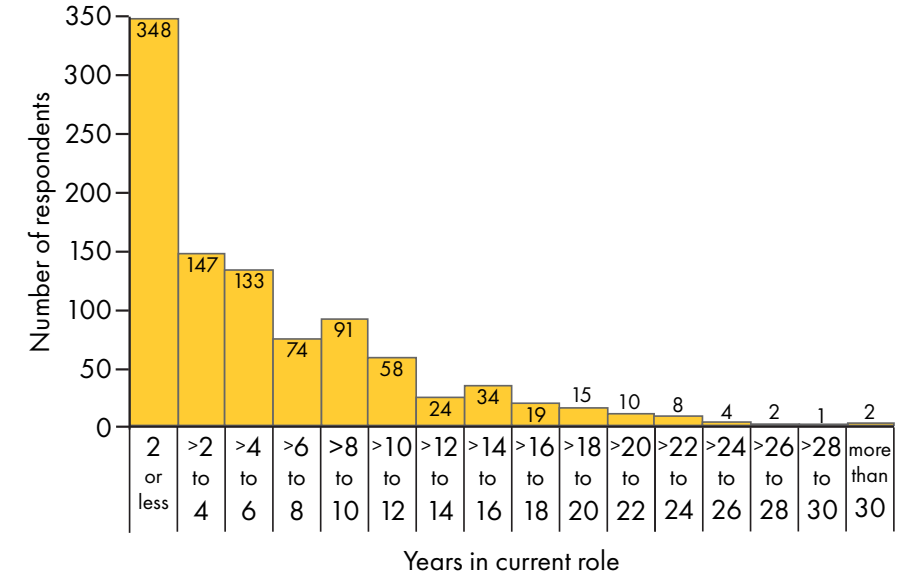


Note. This question was added in 2023 to allow for disaggregation of survey data by total school leadership experience.

YEARS IN CURRENT ROLE

Respondents were also asked to indicate the number of years they have been working in their current role. Figure 4, below, displays the distribution of responses to this question. Responses ranged from 0.5 to 32 years, with an average of 6.2 years in the current role, down slightly from 6.7 years in 2021. As in 2021, the distribution of responses was highly positively skewed. However, more than a third of respondents reported having worked in their current jobs for only two years or less ($n=348$ of 970 responses, or 36%), compared to 25% of 2021 respondents. These findings point to the overall population of school leaders being newer to their roles than they were two years ago.

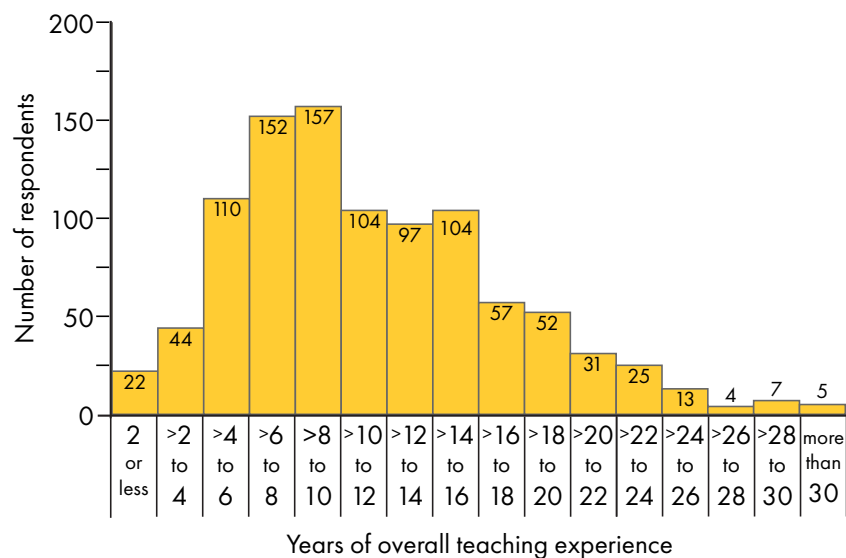
Figure 4. Years in Current Role



PRIOR TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the number of years of teaching experience they had prior to becoming a school leader. The distribution of responses to this question are provided in Figure 5, below. The average number of years of prior teaching experience reported was 11.8 (up from 11.1 in 2021), ranging from 0 to 35 years.

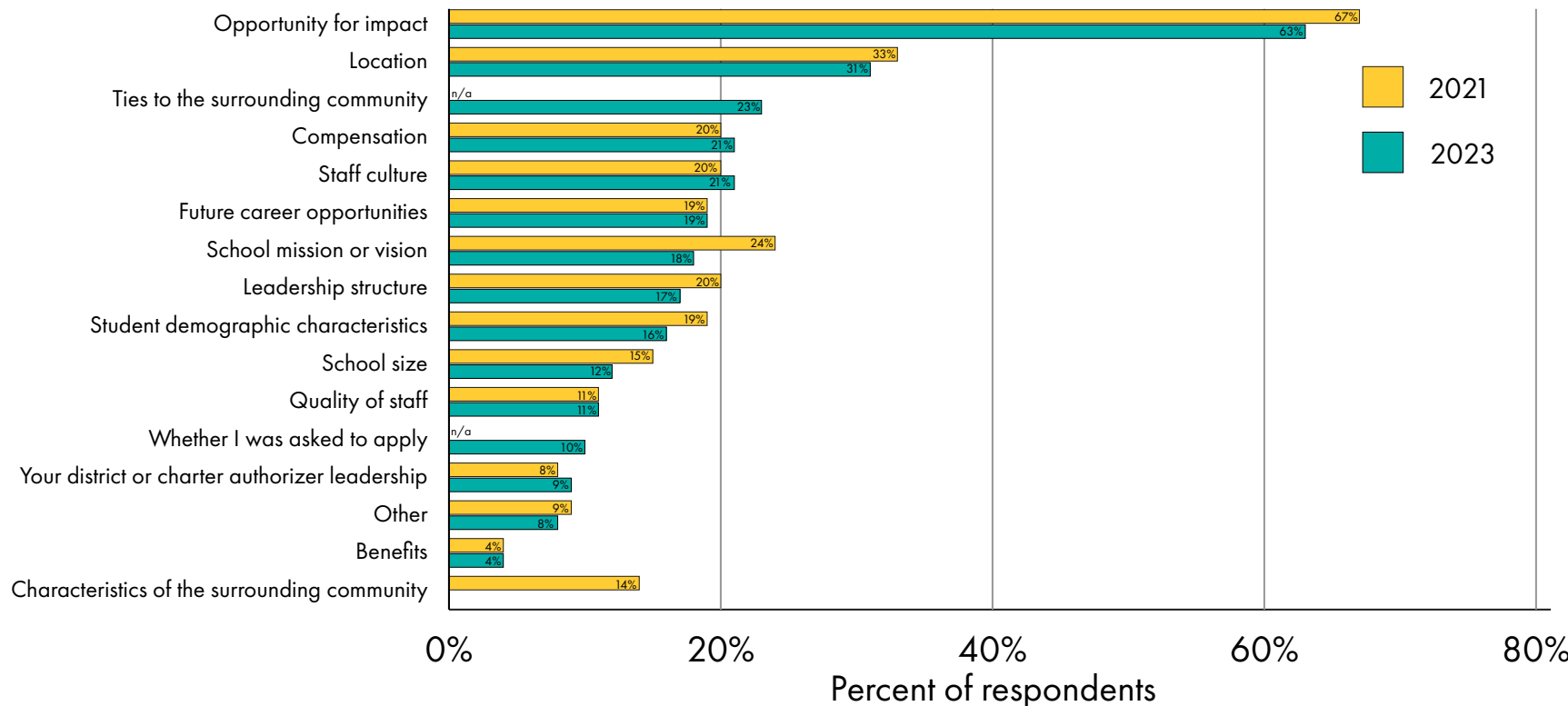
Figure 5. Years of Teaching Experience



JOB SELECTION FACTORS

We asked school leaders *When deciding whether to pursue your current position, what were the most important factors you considered?* Participants could select up to 3 factors among a list of 15 options. Figure 6 shows the percentage of respondents who selected each option in 2021 and 2023, ordered from most frequently selected to least frequently selected in 2023. As in 2021, the top job selection factor was *opportunity for impact*, with 63% of respondents selecting this response option. Other top factors included *location* (31%), *ties to the surrounding community* (23%), *compensation* (21%), and *staff culture* (21%). Among participants who selected *other* (n=74; 8%), opportunities for career advancement, the school program (e.g., Spanish immersion, alternative programming), and prior relationships with supervisors were the most frequently identified factors. Some school leaders also indicated that they did not have a choice and had been placed in their current positions.

Figure 6. Job Selection Factors, 2021 and 2023

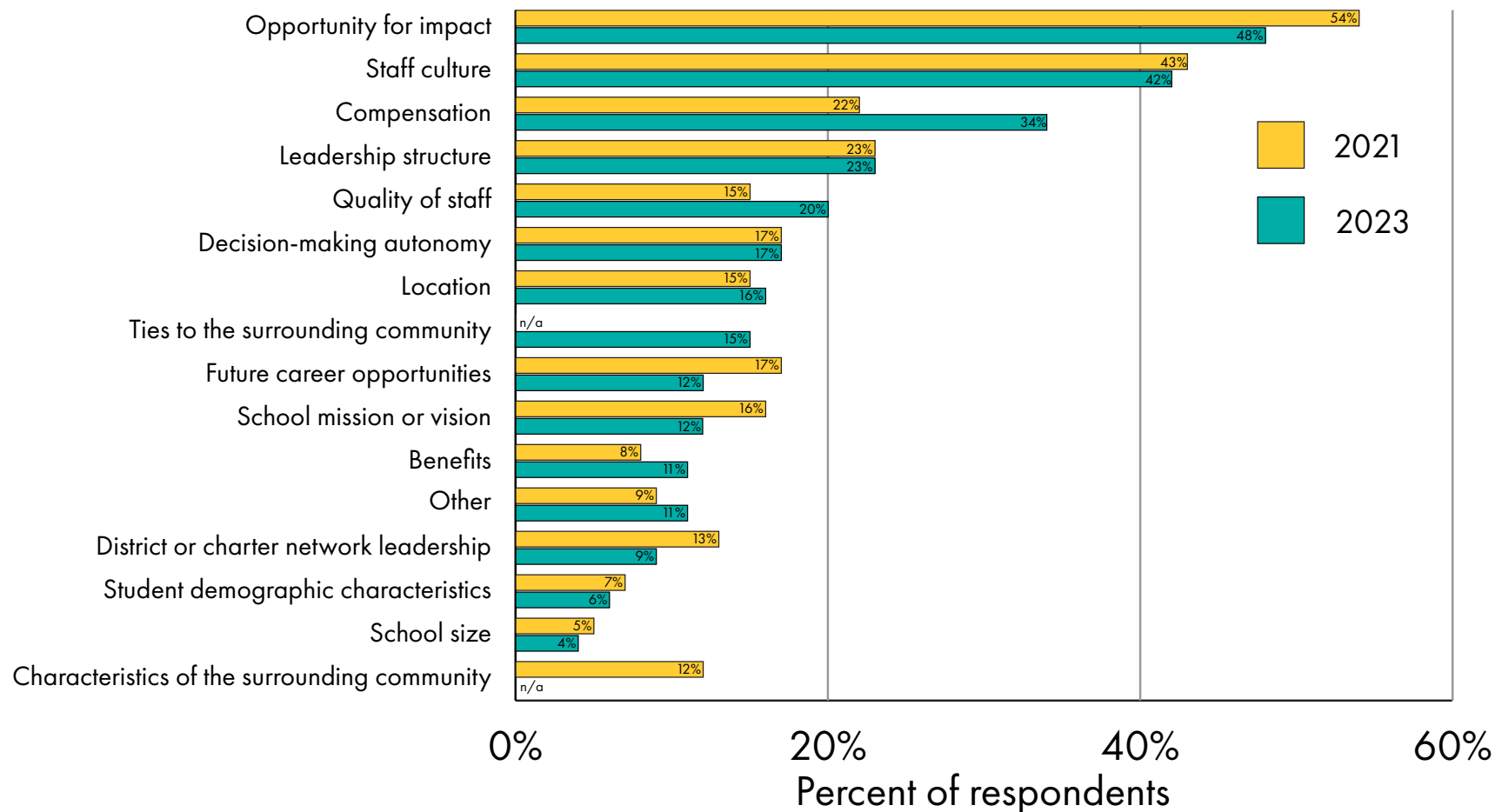


Note. Two changes were made to 2021 response options in 2023 to reflect common other responses provided in 2021. One 2021 response option, *characteristics of the surrounding community*, was replaced in 2023 with *ties to the surrounding community*. An additional response option, *whether I was asked to apply*, was added in 2023.

JOB CONTINUATION FACTORS

We also asked *When deciding whether to continue in your current position, what are the most important factors you consider?* Participants could select up to 3 of 15 listed factors. Figure 7 shows the percentage of respondents who selected each option in 2021 and 2023, ordered from most frequently selected to least frequently selected in 2023. Again, *opportunity for impact* was the most common reason cited for remaining in their roles, with 48% of all respondents selecting this option. Other top job continuation factors included *staff culture* (42%), *compensation* (34%), *leadership structure* (23%), and *quality of staff* (20%). Notably, the percentage of respondents selecting *compensation* increased substantially from 22% in 2021 to 34% in 2023. Themes among *other* responses ($n=89$; 11%) included sense of meaningfulness or purpose, nearness to retirement, and capacity to manage workload.

Figure 7. Job Continuation Factors, 2021 and 2023

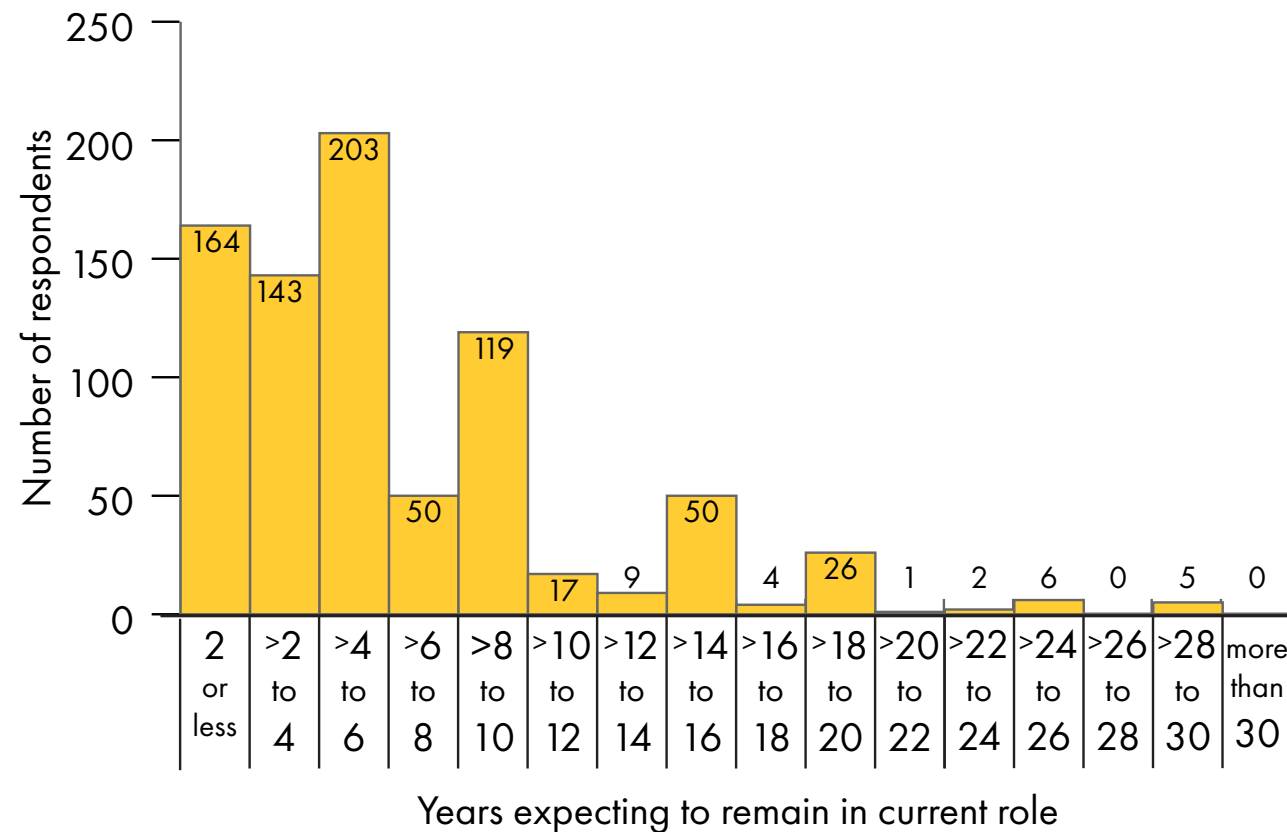


Note. One 2021 response option, *characteristics of the surrounding community*, was replaced in 2023 with *ties to the surrounding community* to reflect common other responses in 2021.

ANTICIPATED TENURE IN CURRENT ROLE

Respondents were also asked to indicate the number of years they planned to stay in their current roles. Figure 8, below, displays the distribution of participants' responses, which ranged from 0 to 30 years and averaged 6.7 years, including the current school year (compared to 6.5 years in 2021). As reported in 2021, the distribution of responses was positively skewed, with a majority of principals ($n=510$ of 799, or 64%) indicating they expect to stay in their roles for 6 years or less.

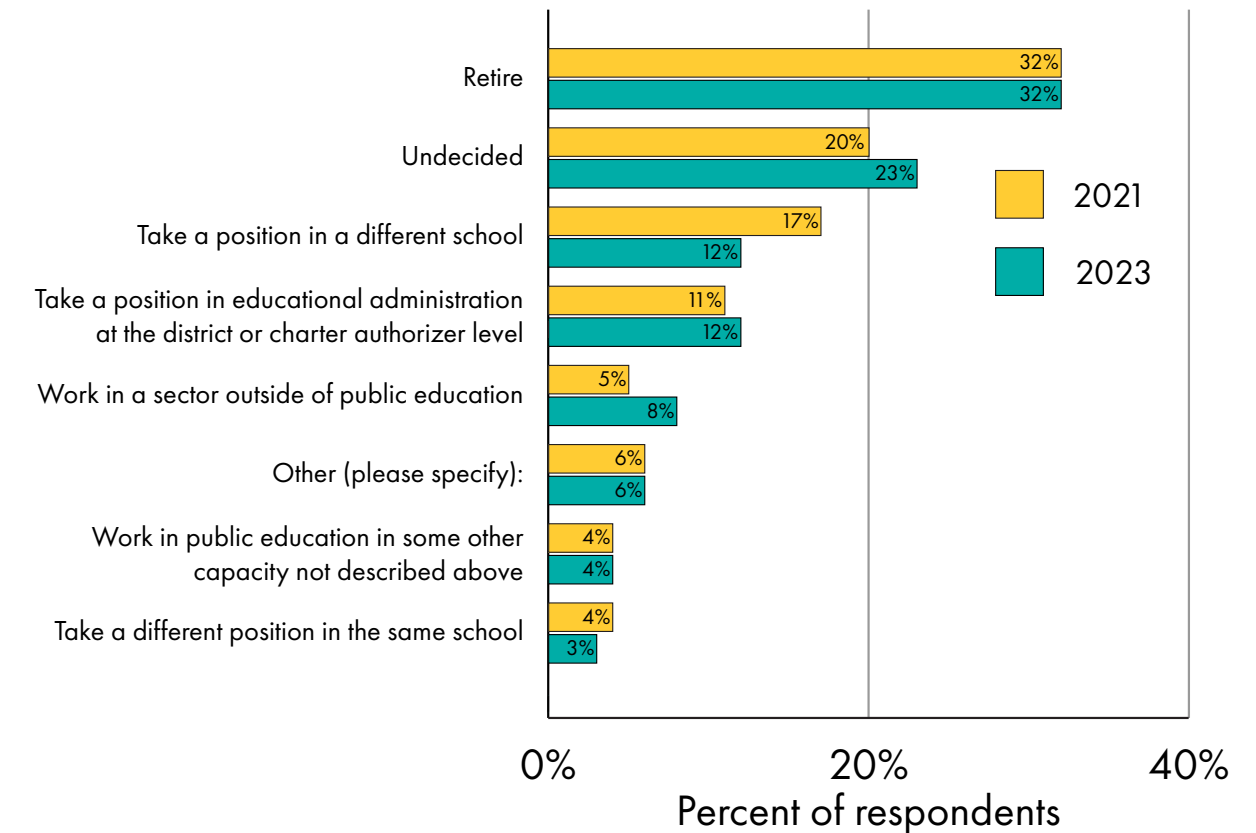
Figure 8. Years Expecting to Remain in Current Role



NEXT STEPS

The final question in this section of the survey asked participants, *what do you hope to do upon leaving your current role, whenever that may be?* Participants were given a list of 8 options and could select only 1. Figure 9 displays the breakdown of responses in both 2021 and 2023, ordered from most to least frequently selected in 2023. The most common response was *retire*, with about one-third of respondents (32%) selecting this option, followed by *undecided* (23%), *take a position in a different school* (12%), and *take a position in educational administration at the district or charter authorizer level* (12%). Relative to 2021, respondents were slightly more likely in 2023 to be undecided or to want to work outside public education, and less likely to want a position in another school. Among participants that selected *other* ($n=48$, or 6% of responses), some desired to return to the classroom as a teacher, become a consultant, or take a position in higher education (e.g., supporting pre-service teachers).

Figure 9. Next Steps in Career, 2021 and 2023



PREPARATION AND LICENSURE

In the state of Minnesota, “principals” serving in traditional district schools must be licensed according to [Minnesota Administrative Rule 3512.0220](#). Charter school leaders are not required by Minnesota Rule to be licensed as a K-12 principal. To earn a K-12 principal license, candidates must demonstrate competency in twelve core leadership areas and 86 specific competencies per [Minnesota Administrative Rule 3512.0510](#) via one of the 13 approved administrative licensure programs, and complete an internship of 340 hours.

One section of the survey included a series of questions about participants’ administrative licensure and leadership preparation experiences. Overall, 98% of respondents indicated they had completed an administrative licensure program, as in 2021. A new question was added in 2023 to understand when respondents had completed their licensure programs. Figure 10 shows the distribution of responses to this question, which ranged from 1990 to 2023 with a median of 2012.

As described in the Methods section (page 15), only individuals who had not completed the preparation and licensure section of the survey in 2021 and who indicated they had completed their administrative licensure programs in 2018 or later answered follow-up questions about their principal preparation and licensure experiences. In the paragraphs that follow, we describe these participants’ perceptions of their level of preparation across various school leadership domains as well as their thoughts on the content and experiences they felt were missing from their administrative licensure preparation programs.¹⁰

LEVEL OF PREPARATION IN LEADERSHIP DOMAINS

Those individuals who answered that they had completed an administrative licensure program in 2018 or later (i.e., within the past 5 years), and who had not completed the survey in 2021 ($n=188$) were asked to indicate the level of preparation their licensure programs provided in 30 leadership domains (derived from the “Core leadership competencies for Minnesota administrative licenses” as detailed in [Minnesota Statute 3512.0510, Subpart 1](#)). Participants could select one of the following response options for each domain: little to no preparation, insufficient preparation, sufficient preparation, or more than sufficient preparation.

Figure 10. Year of Completion of Administrative Licensure Program, 2023

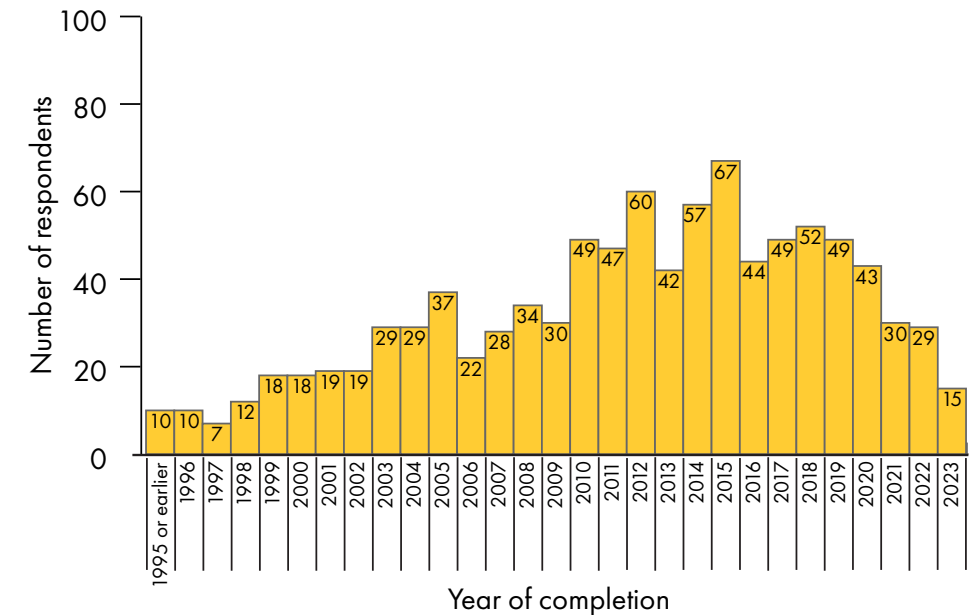
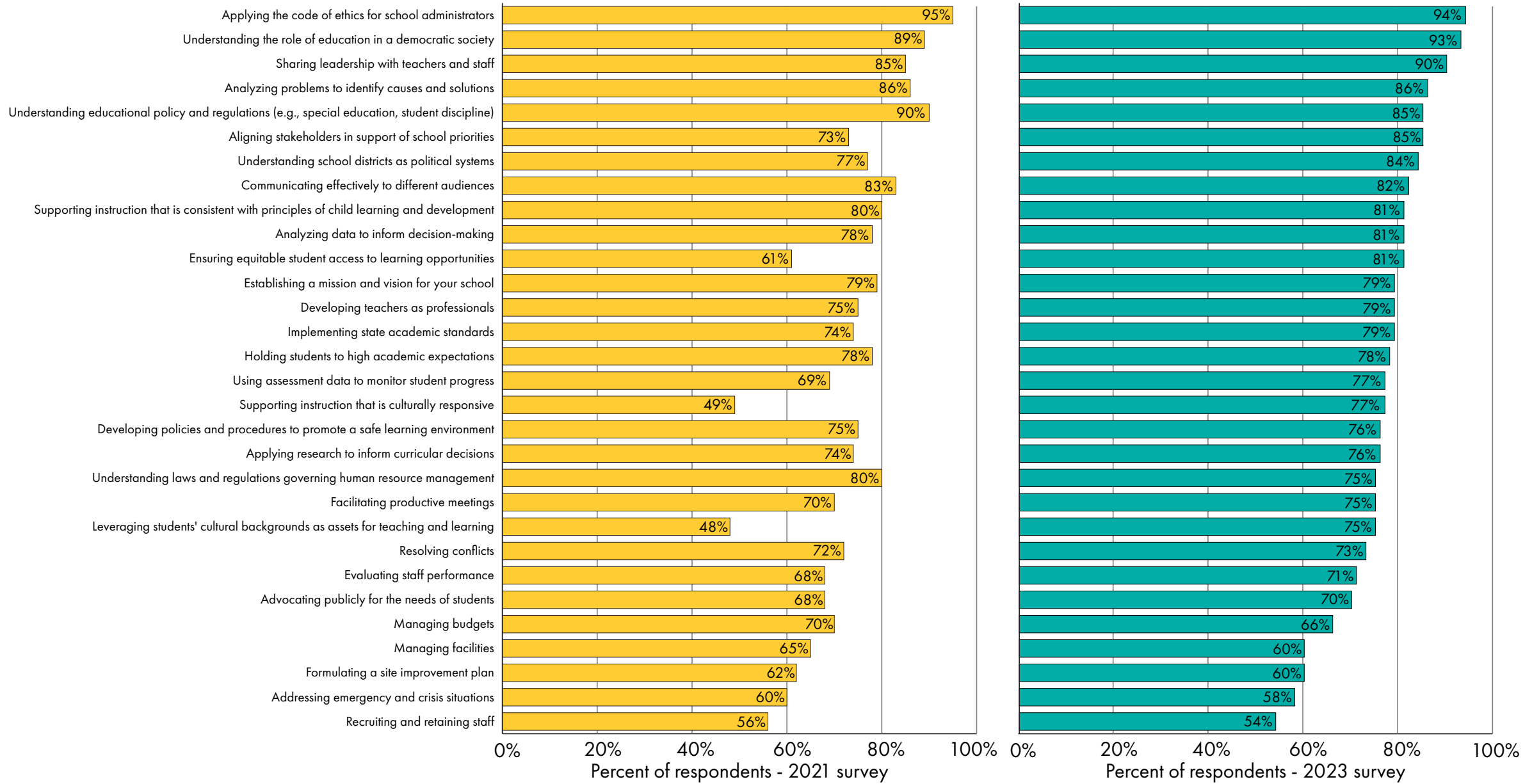


Figure 11 (next page), displays the percentage of respondents who selected *sufficient preparation or more than sufficient preparation* in 2021 and 2023 for all 30 leadership domains. **Importantly, percentages for 2021 and 2023 should not be compared directly because they reflect responses from substantially different populations:** whereas all 2021 participants who reported having completed an administrative licensure program were asked about their level of preparation across the 30 leadership domains, only more recent program completers who had not also responded in 2021 were asked these same questions in 2023.

The leadership domains with the highest percentage of respondents reporting sufficient or more than sufficient preparation included: *applying the code of ethics for school administrators* (94% reported sufficient or more than

10. Respondents were asked to indicate which preparation program they attended. Program-specific survey results will be shared with individual administrative licensure programs but will not be reported publicly.

Figure 11. Percentage Reporting Sufficient Preparation, 2021 and 2023



Note. Percentages represent the proportion of respondents who answered *sufficient preparation* or *more than sufficient preparation* out of those who responded. 2021 data include responses from participants who completed their administrative licensure programs before 2018, but 2023 data do not; use caution in interpreting differences.

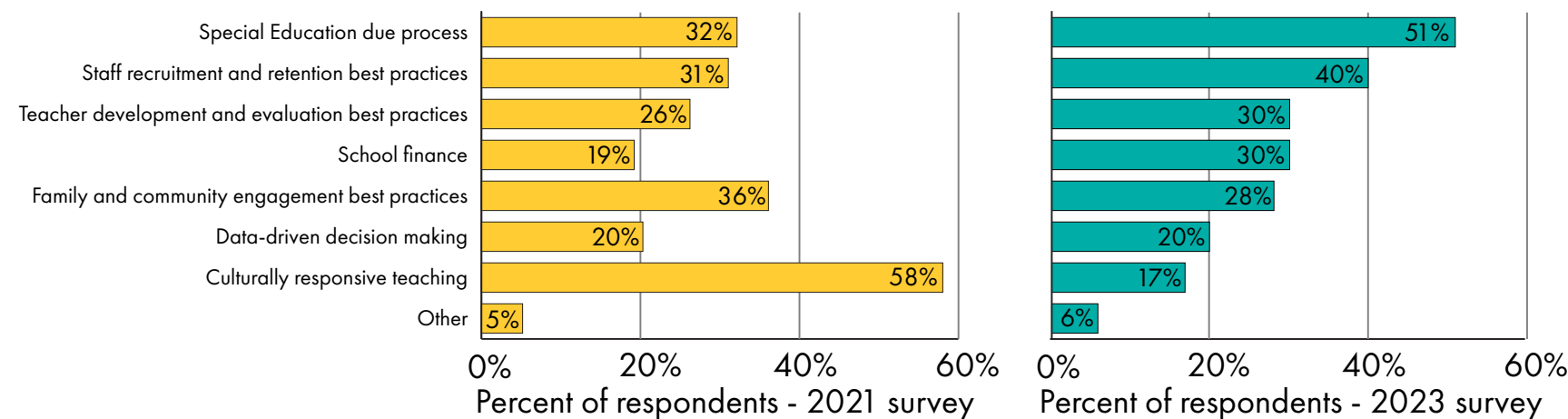
sufficient preparation), understanding the role of education in a democratic society (93%), sharing leadership with teachers and staff (90%), analyzing problems to identify causes and solutions (86%), and understanding educational policy and regulations (e.g., special education, student discipline) (85%). The leadership domains with the lowest percentage of respondents reporting sufficient or more than sufficient preparation included: recruiting and retaining staff (54%), addressing emergency and crisis situations (58%), formulating a site improvement plan (60%), managing facilities (60%), and managing budgets (66%). Notably, unlike in 2021, none of these low-preparation domains pertain specifically to culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) practices. Because this section of the 2023 survey was given only to those who had completed their licensure programs in 2018 or later, this difference may reflect a trend toward greater inclusion of CRSL competencies in preparation programs in recent years.

CONTENT MISSING FROM ADMINISTRATIVE LICENSURE COURSEWORK

Individuals who completed an administrative licensure program in 2018 or later, and who had not completed the survey in 2021, were asked, *what content, if any, was missing from your administrative licensure coursework that you wish had been addressed?* Respondents could select up to 3 options from a list of 8 (including an *other* option with text entry). Figure 12 displays the response frequencies for each option in 2021 and 2023, ordered from most to least frequently selected in 2023. Overall, 162 participants answered the question. Top responses included *special education due process* (51% of respondents), *staff recruitment and retention* (40%), *teacher development and evaluation best practices* (30%), and *school finance* (30%). Among other responses ($n=9$, or 6% of respondents), some desired more practical and applied learning (e.g., creating budgets, role playing scenarios) and content in crisis management.

Interestingly, the most frequently selected content missing from coursework in 2021, *culturally responsive teaching*, was the least frequently selected option in 2023. Again, given that 2023 responses include only those who completed their programs in 2018 or later, this finding suggests that preparation programs have been incorporating more content relating to culturally responsive practices in recent years than they had been previously.

Figure 12. Coursework Missing from Administrative Licensure Programs, 2021 and 2023



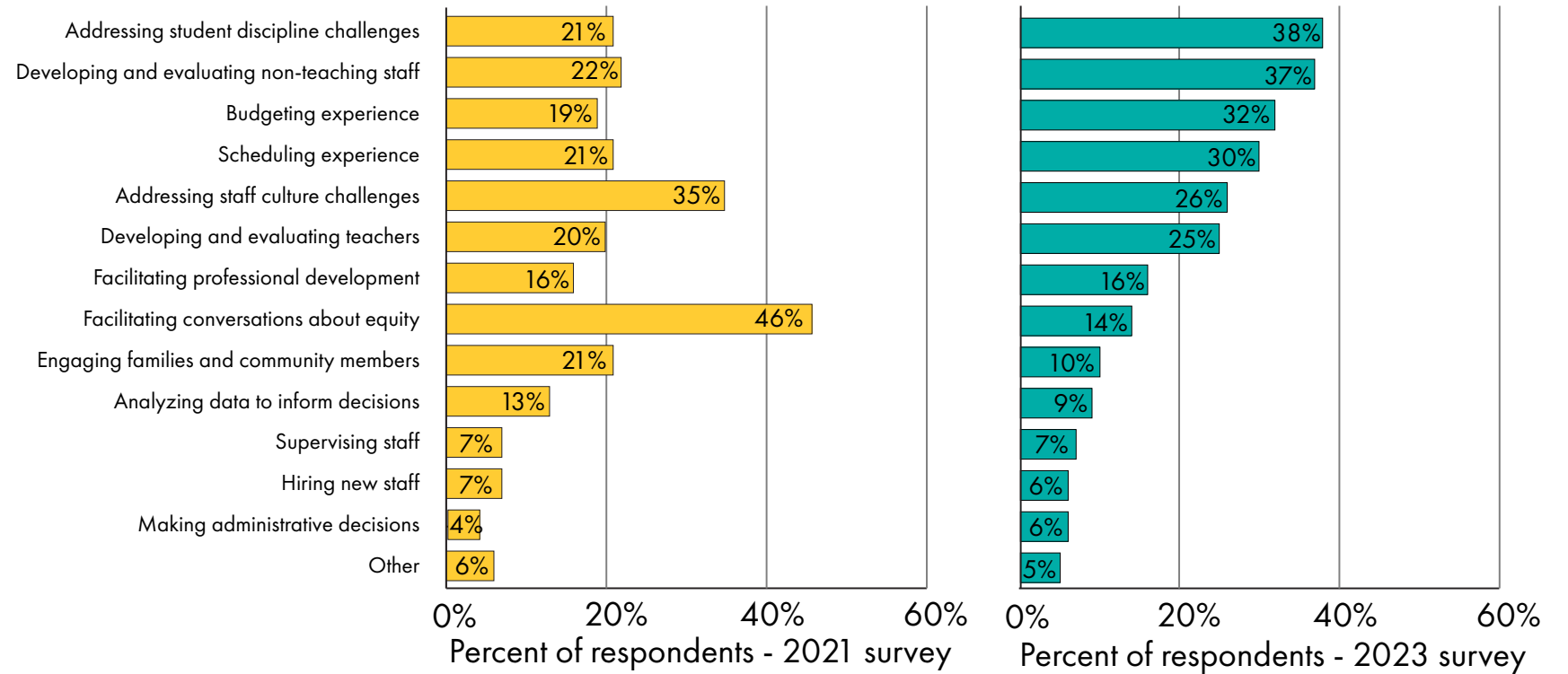
Note. 2021 data includes responses from participants who completed their administrative licensure programs before 2018, but 2023 data does not; use caution in interpreting differences.

EXPERIENCES MISSING FROM ADMINISTRATIVE LICENSURE INTERNSHIP

Similarly, recent program completers were asked, *what experiences, if any, were missing from your administrative licensure internship that you wish had been included?* Again, respondents could select up to 3 options (including an *other* option with text entry) from a list of 14. Figure 13 displays response frequencies for 2021 and 2023 in order from most to least selected in 2023. Overall, 175 participants answered the question in 2023. Top responses included *addressing student discipline challenges* (38% of respondents), *developing and evaluating non-teaching staff* (37%), and *budgeting experience* (32%). Themes among *other* responses ($n=9$, or 5% of respondents) included addressing the legal aspects of school discipline, ensuring school safety (e.g., lockdown procedures), and recruiting and supervising new staff.

We noted a 32 percentage point decrease in the proportion of respondents who selected *facilitating conversations about equity* as a missing internship experience from 2021 to 2023. We believe the most likely explanation for this finding is that the population of respondents in 2023, who likely completed their internships within the past 5 years, had more opportunities to facilitate equity-related conversations than the population of respondents in 2021, which included principals who had completed their licensure programs decades ago.

Figure 13. Experiences Missing from Administrative Licensure Internship, 2021 and 2023



Note. 2021 data include responses from participants who completed their administrative licensure programs before 2018, but 2023 data do not; use caution in interpreting differences.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Multiple survey questions asked about the nature, intensity, and subjective quality of principals' work lives. This section summarizes findings pertaining to respondents' workloads, compensation and benefits, and job satisfaction.

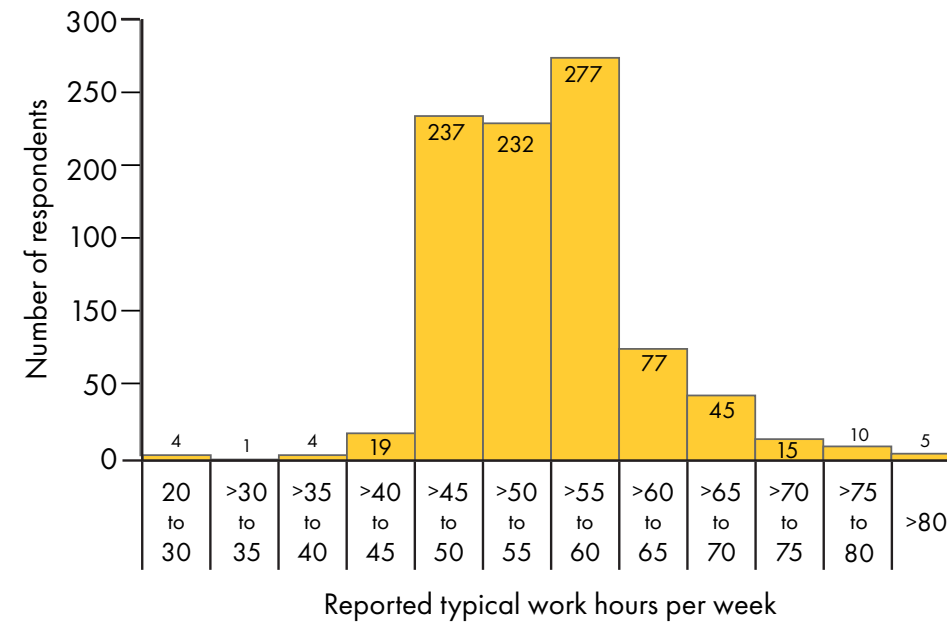
WORKLOAD

Several aspects of principals' workloads were examined, including work hours per week, work days per year, actual and ideal time use across leadership functions, and perceptions of the sustainability of their jobs.

WORK HOURS PER WEEK

All participants were asked to report how many hours they spend on all school-relevant activities during a typical full week. Figure 14 displays the distribution of responses, with the largest number of responses falling between the 55-60 hour range. Responses ranged from 25 to 105 hours per week, with respondents working an average of 57.0 hours per week, excluding outliers (compared to 58.6 in 2021).

Figure 14. Work Hours per Week, 2023

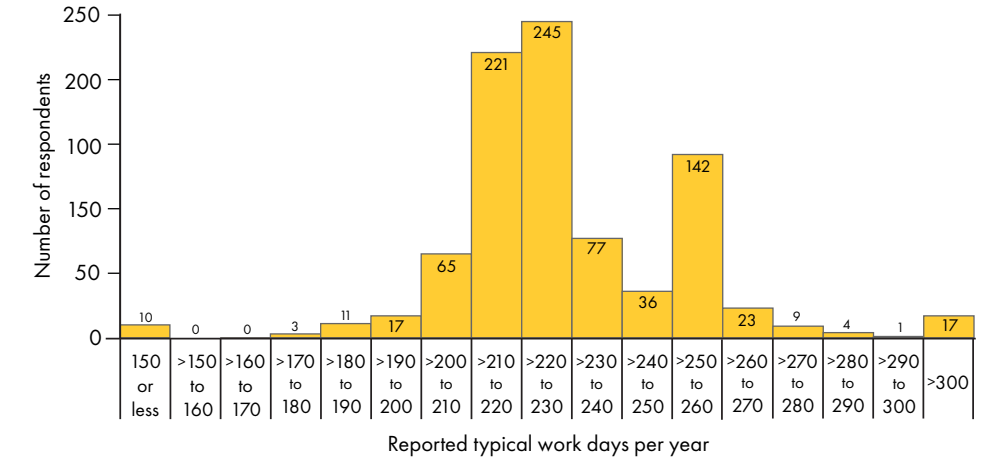


Note. Excludes values ≤ 20 ($n=18$) and > 168 ($n=1$).

WORK DAYS PER YEAR

Participants were also asked to indicate the number of days per year they are required to work under their current contract. Figure 15 displays the distribution of responses, which ranged from 100 to 365, with the largest number of responses falling between the 220-230 day range. Overall, respondents reported that their contracts required them to work an average of 231.7 days out of the year (compared to 231.3 in 2021).

Figure 15. Work Days per Year, 2023

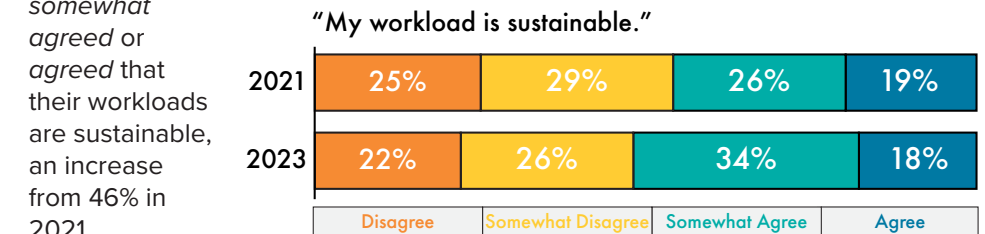


Note. Excludes values < 100 ($n=39$)

WORKLOAD SUSTAINABILITY

We asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, *My workload is sustainable*, specifically in reference to their work experience over the past three months (roughly since the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year). Figure 16 shows the breakdown of responses across all participants for 2021 ($n=635$) and 2023 ($n=841$). Just over half (52%) of 2023 respondents

Figure 16.



are sustainable, an increase from 46% in 2021.

USE OF TIME ACROSS LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS

Reporting from the 2021 MnPS generated widespread interest in principal time use across various types of leadership tasks. As in 2021, we asked 2023 respondents to characterize the time they typically spend on five types of tasks by selecting one of five response options: *Much less time than I would ideally spend*, *Somewhat less time than I would ideally spend*, *About the right amount of time*, *Somewhat more time than I would ideally spend*, and *Much more time than I would ideally spend*.

The five types of tasks were described as follows:

- **Internal administrative tasks**, including human resource/personnel issues, scheduling, regulations, reports, school budget, and attending operational meetings;
- **Instructional tasks**, including curriculum, instruction, assessment, PLC meetings, data analysis, classroom observations, mentoring teachers, and educator professional development;
- **Student interactions**, including academic guidance, discipline, seeking student input and engagement, and developing student relationships;
- **Family and community interactions**, including formal and informal interactions, attending events, engagement with specific groups, and seeking parent or community member input; and
- **My own professional growth**, including critical self-reflection, attending professional development, reviewing research, reading, and networking with other administrative colleagues.

Figure 17 displays the breakdown of responses across all participants in 2023, and Figure 18 displays the percentage of respondents selecting either *somewhat less* or *much less* time than ideal in both 2021 and 2023. As in 2021, a majority of respondents reported spending more time than they would ideally spend on **internal administrative tasks** (60% reported spending *somewhat more* or *much more* time than ideal in this area).

In contrast, a majority of respondents reported spending less time than they would ideally spend on **instructional tasks** (62% selected *somewhat less* or *much less* time than ideal) and **my own professional growth** (75% selected *somewhat less* or *much less* time than ideal).

As in 2021, principals were most likely to report spending about the right amount of time in the areas of **student interactions** and **family and community interactions**, with 42% and 46% of principals selecting *about the right amount of time* for these categories, respectively. However, with respect to **family and community interactions**, a significant proportion of respondents (43%) felt they spent *much less* or *somewhat less* time than ideal in this area ($n=952$).

Figure 17. Time Spent on Various Leadership Tasks, 2023

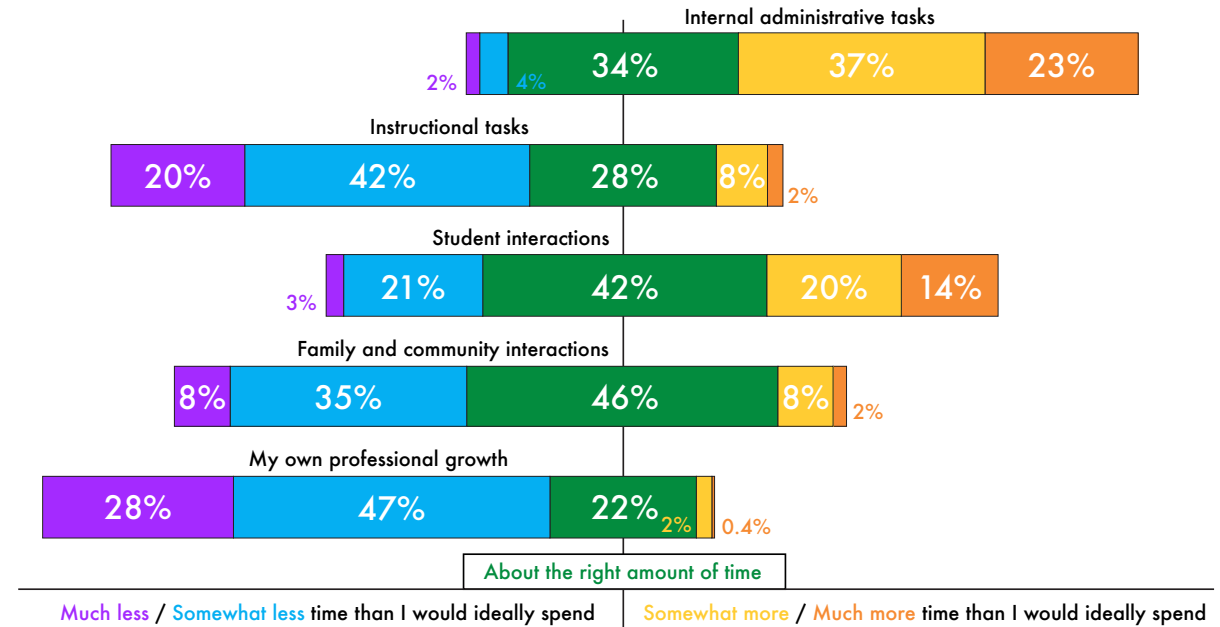
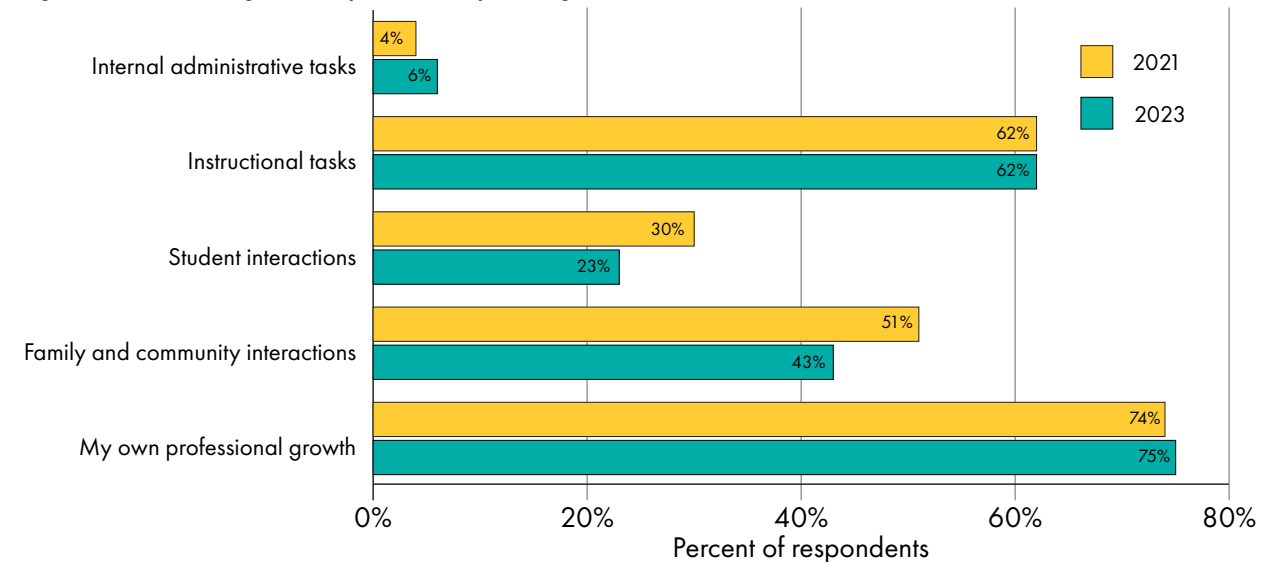


Figure 18. Percentage of Respondents Spending Less Time Than Ideal, 2021 and 2023



Principal as Instructional Leader: Belief Versus Capacity

Previous research demonstrates the tremendous impact principals have on student learning, particularly through their role as instructional leaders (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005; Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003). We asked participants to respond to two survey items designed to understand (a) the extent to which they believe their primary role is to be an instructional leader, and (b) the extent to which they feel their supervisor ensures they have the time to be an instructional leader.

Figure 19 compares participants' agreement with these items in 2021 and 2023. In 2023, 77% of respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My primary role as an administrator is to be an instructional leader* ($n=838$) compared to 79% in 2021. However, in 2023, only 58% of respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My supervisor ensures I have the time to be an instructional leader* ($n=836$), compared to 61% in 2021. These findings continue to highlight a disconnect between school leaders' belief in the importance of their instructional leadership role and the time they have available to act on that belief.

EXPENSES, COMPENSATION, AND BENEFITS

This section describes results regarding principals' school-related out-of-pocket expenses as well as their perceptions of their compensation and benefits.

Out-of-Pocket Expenses

We asked participants to report how much of their own money they typically spend each year on food, supplies, or other items for their school's staff, students, and families. In 2023, 98% ($n=916$) of respondents indicated they typically spent some amount of their own money, while 2% reported spending \$0 ($n=23$). The overall distribution of responses, excluding \$0 responses, is shown in Figure 20, right. Responses ranged from \$50 to \$9,000, with the largest number of responses falling into the \$400–\$600 range. In 2023, respondents reported spending an average of \$777 of their own money on food, supplies, or other items for their school communities, compared to an average of \$757 in 2021.

Satisfaction with Compensation and Benefits

Three survey items asked respondents to gauge the appropriateness of their compensation and the adequacy of their healthcare and retirement benefits. Figure 21 compares participants' agreement with these items in 2021 and 2023. In 2023, just over half of respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *My compensation is appropriate for the work I do* (54%, $n=839$), compared to 64% in 2021. Agreement with *My healthcare benefits are adequate* and *my retirement benefits are adequate* also fell from 2021 to 2023. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of respondents ($n=838$) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that their healthcare benefits are adequate in 2023, compared to 76% in 2021. Sixty-two percent (62%) of respondents ($n=837$) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that their retirement benefits are adequate in 2023, compared to 77% in 2021.

Figure 19. Agreement with Instructional Leadership Items, 2021 and 2023

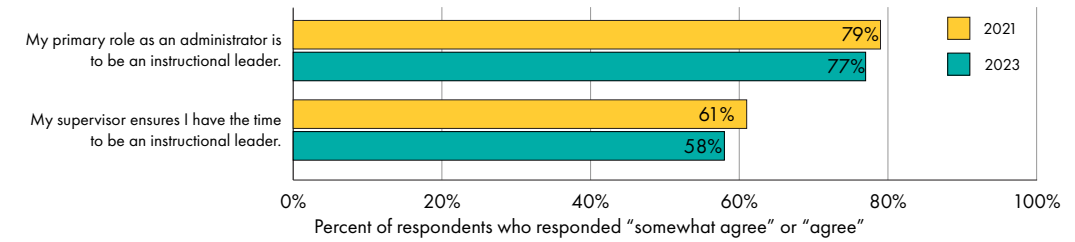
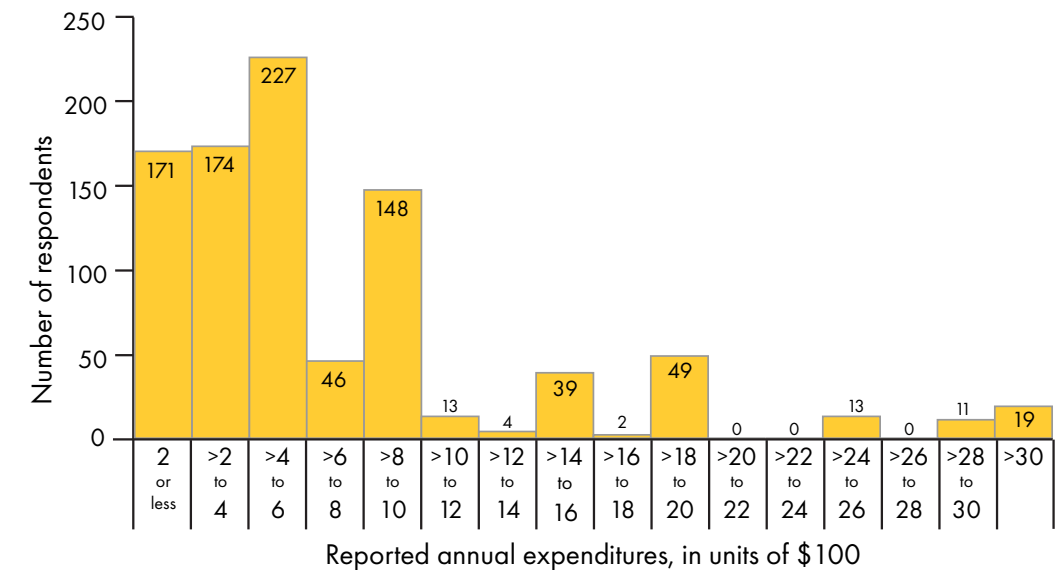
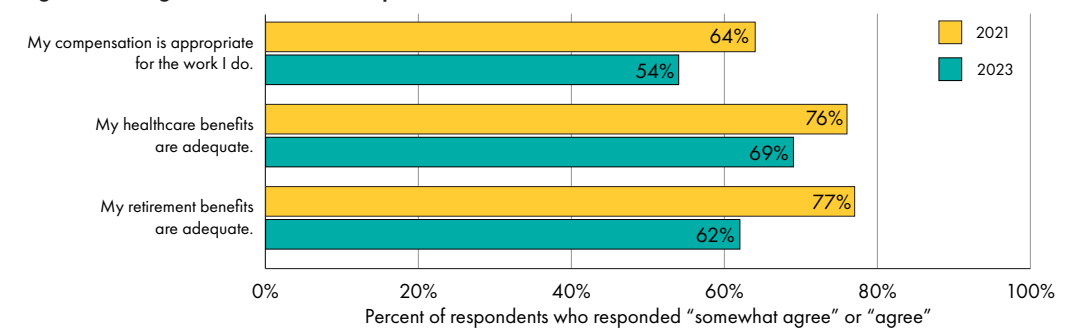


Figure 20. Out-of-Pocket School Expenses, 2023



Note. Excludes responses of \$0 ($n=23$)

Figure 21. Agreement with Compensation and Benefits Items, 2021 and 2023

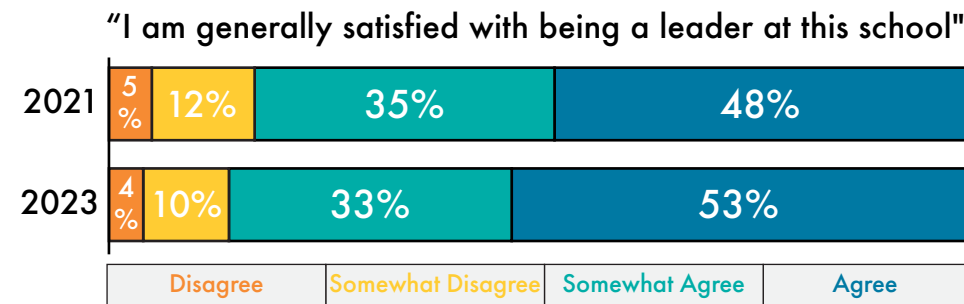


JOB SATISFACTION

Two survey items asked respondents about their general satisfaction with their jobs and the elements that most contributed to their satisfaction at work. First, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, *I am generally satisfied with being a leader at this school*, prompting them to think specifically about their experience over the past three months (roughly since the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year).

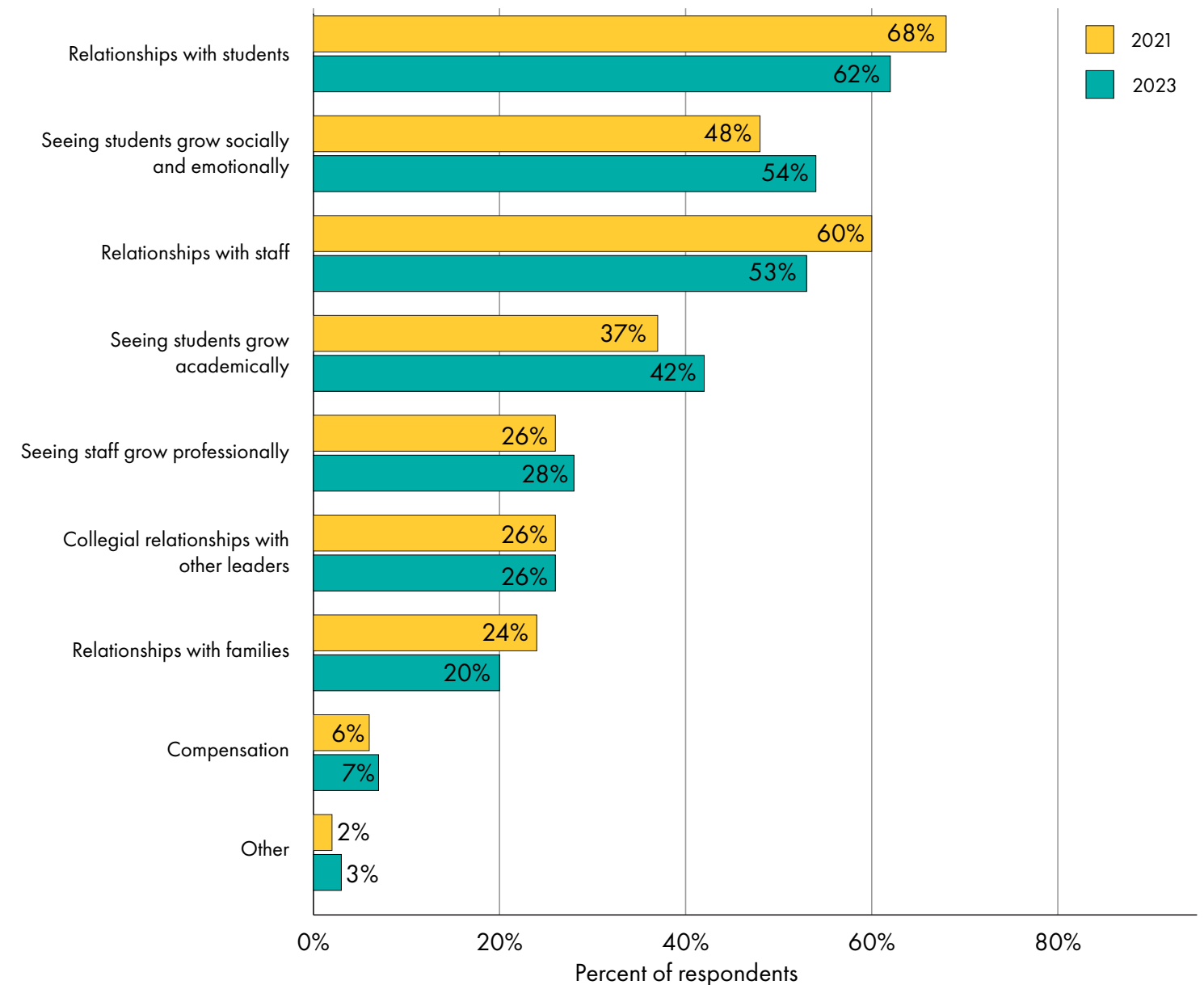
Figure 22 shows the breakdown of responses across all participants in both 2021 and 2023. In 2023, 86% of participants *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they were generally satisfied (compared to 83% in 2021), with over half of respondents (53%) selecting the top category, *agree*.

Figure 22.



Next, we asked participants to indicate which elements of their jobs most contributed to their satisfaction at work. Participants could select up to 3 elements from a list of 9 (including an *other* option with text entry). Figure 23 displays the response frequencies for each option in 2021 and 2023, ordered from most to least selected in 2023. Overall, 842 participants answered the question in 2023. Top responses included *relationships with students* (62%), *seeing students grow socially and emotionally* (54%), *relationships with staff* (53%), and *seeing students grow academically* (42%). Common *other* responses ($n=22$, or 3% of respondents) included having a positive impact on the school community, the opportunity to engage in meaningful work, and strong district and school board leadership.

Figure 23. Elements Most Contributing to Satisfaction at Work, 2021 and 2023



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

While all licensed K-12 principals are required to engage in 125 clock hours of professional learning to renew their license every 5 years, the types of professional development and impact of that professional development vary.

One section of the survey captured principals' experiences with and perceptions of their own professional development. We asked principals to indicate the kinds of professional development opportunities they had participated in during the previous year, the usefulness of those opportunities, and the barriers they faced to participating in professional development. In addition, we asked respondents to provide information about the access they have to employer-provided funding for professional development.

PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We asked all participants to indicate the kinds of professional development they had participated in during the 2022-23 school year from a list of 12 options. Participants could select as many options as applied to them. Figure 24 displays the response frequencies for each option in both 2021 and 2023, ordered from most to least selected in 2023. Overall, 953 participants answered the question in 2023. Top responses included presentations at scheduled school or district meetings (73% of respondents), networking with other educational leaders (65%), and other workshops or trainings (65%), the same top responses as in 2021.

USEFULNESS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We then asked survey respondents to rate the usefulness of each type of professional development they had participated in. Respondents could select one of four options: *not very useful*, *slightly useful*,

Figure 24. "What types of Professional Development did you participate in during the 2022-23 school year?"

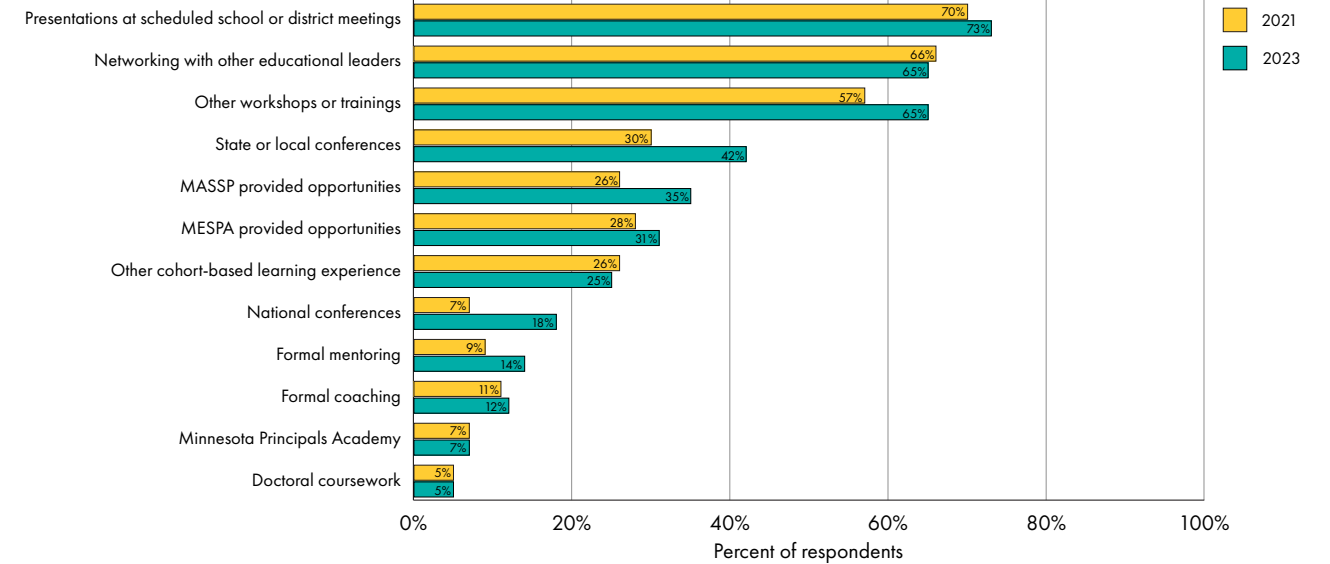
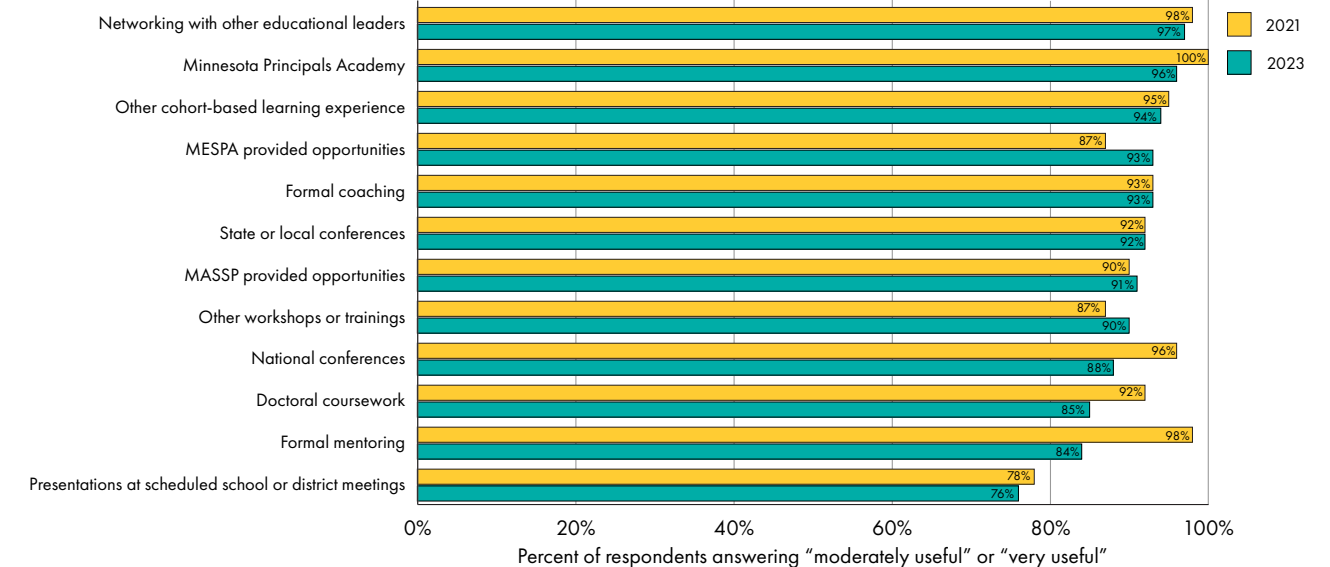


Figure 25. "How useful were each of the professional development opportunities you selected?"



moderately useful, or very useful. Figure 25, previous page, displays the percentage of respondents who selected *moderately useful* or *very useful* in 2021 and 2023 for all 12 professional development types, ordered from most to least useful in 2023.

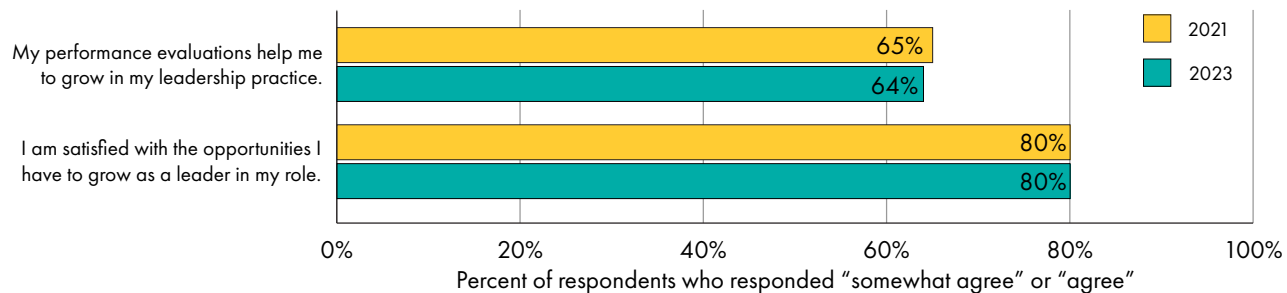
In 2023, principals reported that the following types of professional development were most useful: *networking with other educational leaders* (97% of participants rated as moderately or very useful), *Minnesota Principals Academy* (96%), and *other cohort-based learning experiences* (94%).

The professional development types that principals rated as least useful in 2023 included: *presentations at scheduled school or district meetings* (76% of participants rated as moderately or very useful), *formal mentoring* (84%), and *doctoral coursework* (85%). As in 2021, the professional development type with the lowest usefulness ratings—*presentations at scheduled school or district meetings*—is also the type participated in most.

Two additional survey items sought to understand school leaders' perceptions of their opportunities for professional growth. First, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, *My performance evaluations help me to grow in my leadership practice.* Second, respondents rated their agreement with the statement, *I am satisfied with the opportunities I have to grow as a leader in my role.*

Figure 26 compares participants' agreement with these items in 2021 and 2023. In 2023, 64% of respondents (*n*=837) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that their performance evaluations help them grow in their leadership practice. As in 2021, participants were more likely to report satisfaction with their opportunities to grow as a leader in their roles, with 80% of respondents (*n*=838) *somewhat agreeing* or *agreeing* that they are satisfied in 2023.

Figure 26. Agreement with Professional Growth Items, 2021 and 2023

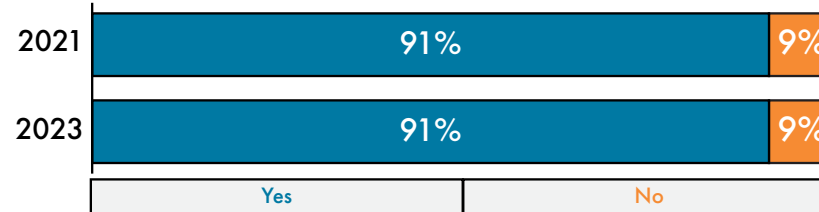


EMPLOYER CONTRIBUTIONS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To understand the prevalence of access to funds for professional development, we asked principals, *For the current contract year, do you have access to employer-provided money for your own professional development?* Figure 27 displays a breakdown of responses to this question in 2023, and to a similar (though not identical) question posed in 2021. In 2023, as in 2021, 91% of respondents reported having access to professional development funds from their employers and 9% reported no such access.

Figure 27.

“Do you have access to employer-provided money for your own professional development?”

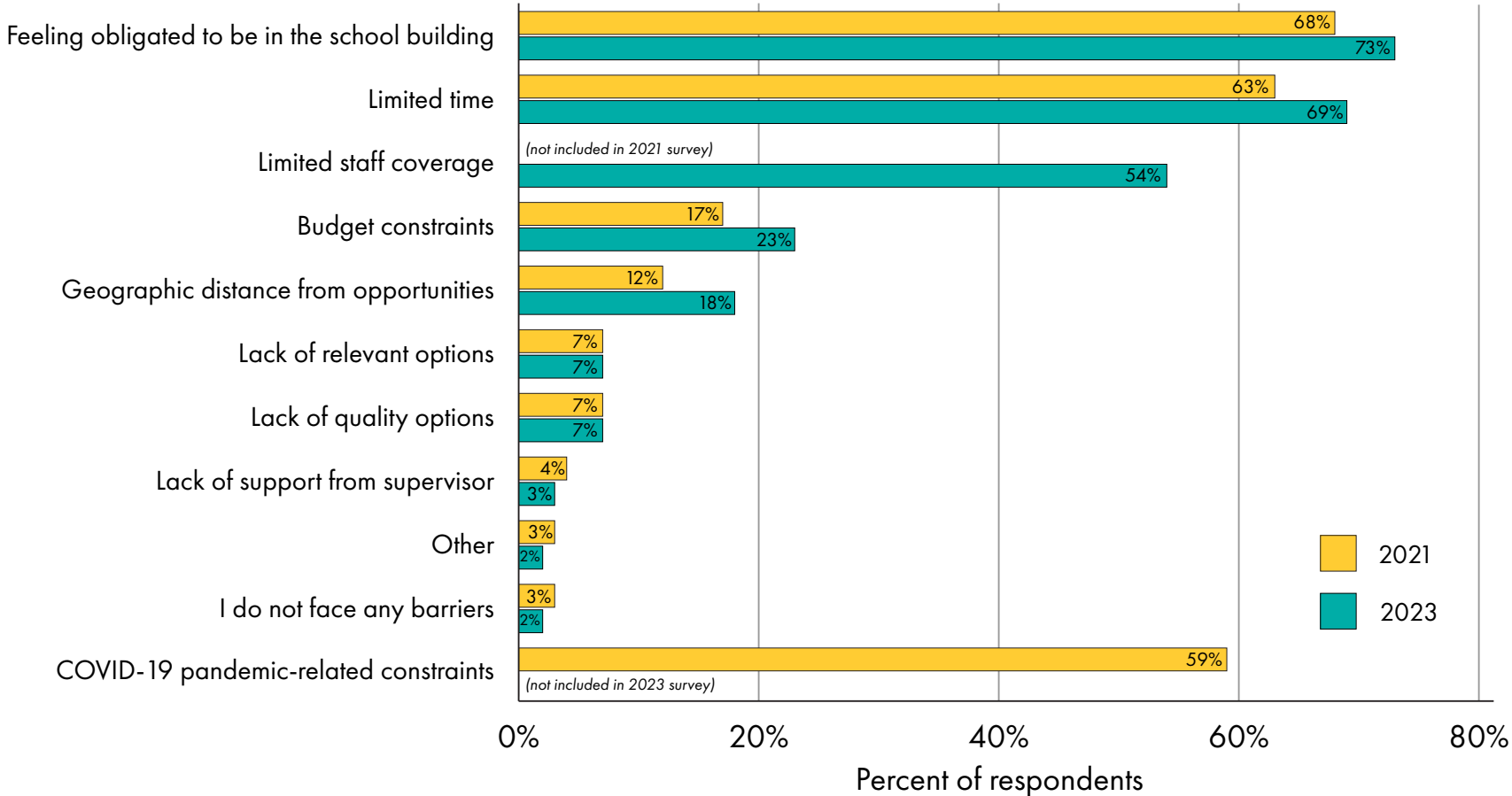


Note. For 2021, “No” response counts represent those who answered \$0 to the question, *For the current contract year, approximately how much employer-provided money do you have access to for your own professional development?* Yes response counts represent those who provided a non-zero amount in response to the same question. For 2023, Yes and No response counts correspond with answers to the question, *For the current contract year, do you have access to employer-provided money for your own professional development?* (not asked in 2021).

BARRIERS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We also asked survey respondents to select up to three barriers they confronted to participating in professional development opportunities from a list of 9 options, including an *other* option with text entry. Alternatively, they could select *I do not face any barriers*. Figure 28 displays the response frequencies for each option in 2021 and 2023, ordered from most to least selected in 2023. Overall, 960 participants answered the question in 2023. Top barriers in 2023 included *feeling obligated to be in the school building* (73% of respondents), *limited time* (69%), and *limited staff coverage* (54%). Two percent (2%) of respondents indicated that they faced no barriers. Among *other* responses ($n=23$; 2%), participants identified family obligations, being new to the role of school leader, lack of district support, and lack of job-embedded PD opportunities as common barriers.

Figure 28. Barriers to Professional Development Participation, 2021 and 2023



Note. A response option (*Limited staff coverage*) was added in 2023 in response to common *other* responses in 2021. One 2021 response option, *COVID-19 pandemic-related constraints* was removed in 2023 in light of reduced COVID-19 related restrictions since the 2021 survey administration.

LEADERSHIP SELF-EFFICACY AND NEEDED SUPPORTS

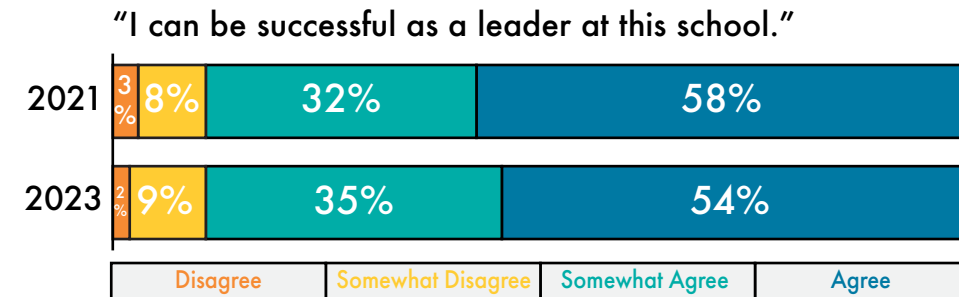
During the survey development process, constituents expressed a desire to capture and understand school leaders' self-efficacy, which refers to the extent to which an individual feels capable of carrying out a given course of action (Bandura, 1992). This was of interest to potential survey users given the importance of self-efficacy in motivating leaders to adopt effective practices (see, e.g., Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004; Khalifa, 2018). Constituents wondered: Do school leaders feel they can be successful in their roles? In what areas of school leadership do Minnesota principals feel they have the ability and capacity to be successful? In what areas do they lack such confidence?

Several sections of the survey were designed to answer these and related questions, the results of which are presented below. In particular, we highlight a marked decrease from 2021 in the percentage of principals who reported having sufficient confidence in 47 of 49 leadership activities.

GENERAL SELF-EFFICACY

One survey item assessed school leaders' overall self-efficacy in their roles. We asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, *I can be successful as a leader at this school*, in light of their work experience over the previous three months. Figure 29 compares participants' agreement with this item in 2021 and 2023. In 2023, 89% of respondents ($n=841$) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they can be successful, compared to 90% in 2021.

Figure 29.



SELF-EFFICACY ACROSS FOUR LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITY AREAS

One section of the survey measured leaders' domain-specific self-efficacy across four school leadership responsibility areas: **instructional leadership**, **school improvement**, **management and decision-making**, and **culture and climate**. For each of these areas, we asked participants to indicate their self-efficacy in specific leadership activities (between 6 and 16 individual activities per responsibility area; see Figure 30, next page) by responding to the following question: *In light of your capabilities and available resources, how much confidence do you have that you can effectively carry out each activity listed below?* Response options included *little to no confidence*, *insufficient confidence*, *sufficient confidence*, and *more than sufficient confidence*.

Figure 31 (page 37) compares participants' self-efficacy in these activities in 2021 and 2023. In 2023, across the 49 specific leadership activities, respondents reported the highest level of self-efficacy in the following five leadership activities: *explaining administrative decisions to staff* (94% reported having *sufficient* or *more than sufficient* confidence), *engaging staff in school-level decision-making* (92%), *facilitating decision-making in teams* (91%), *setting meaningful student learning goals* (91%), and *establishing discipline practices* (91%). Notably, all of these highest-rated activities fall into the **management and decision-making** area.

Respondents reported the lowest level of self-efficacy in the areas of *creating culturally responsive assessments* (34% reported having *sufficient* or *more than sufficient* confidence), *addressing staff mental health challenges* (39%), *engaging families in school-level decision-making* (44%), *addressing student mental health challenges* (45%), and *designing culturally responsive curriculum* (47%). Addressing mental health challenges and establishing culturally responsive practices are clear themes among these lowest-rated activities.

Figure 30. Activities Comprising Each Leadership Area

<p>School Improvement (6)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivating a majority of my staff to implement changes • Collaborating with staff to implement a school improvement plan • Implementing changes with fidelity • Monitoring changes to our practice over time • Analyzing data to identify areas needing improvement • Applying research-based approaches to school improvement planning 	<p>Management and Decision-Making (15)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explaining administrative decisions to staff • Facilitating decision-making in teams • Engaging staff in school-level decision-making • Establishing a vision for my school • Setting meaningful student learning goals • Establishing discipline practices • Hiring new teachers • Addressing staff performance concerns • Evaluating programs and initiatives • Explaining administrative decisions to families or community members • Deciding how the school budget will be spent • Managing multiple initiatives simultaneously • Leveraging research findings to inform decision-making • Engaging students in school-level decision-making • Engaging families in school-level decision-making
<p>Culture & Climate (16)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boosting staff morale • Critical self-reflection about my own identity, frame of reference, and biases • Ensuring all students' sense of belonging at school • Facilitating conflict resolution • Communicating about race, gender, and culture with families and community members • Ensuring all staff members' sense of belonging at school • Facilitating discussions with staff about race • Facilitating discussions with staff about gender identity • Analyzing perception data from staff about school climate • Facilitating discussions with staff about sexual orientation • Motivating teachers to take responsibility for school improvement • Motivating teachers to help each other improve instruction • Addressing staff mental health challenges • Analyzing perception data from students about school climate • Analyzing perception data from families about school climate • Addressing student mental health challenges 	<p>Instructional Leadership (12)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting culturally responsive pedagogy • Balancing our school's emphasis on academics and social and emotional learning (SEL) • Creating culturally responsive assessments • Designing culturally responsive curriculum • Facilitating professional development for teachers • Establishing a robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) • Evaluating teachers • Coaching teachers • Designing professional development for teachers • Gathering and analyzing student-level data to personalize instructional supports • Gathering and analyzing student-level data to personalize behavioral supports • Supporting instruction in all content areas taught at my school

Figure 32 (page 37) presents the percentage point change in the percentage of principals reporting having *sufficient* or *more than sufficient* confidence in the same 49 leadership activities between 2021 and 2023. **Remarkably, reported confidence decreased from 2021 to 2023 in 47 of 49 areas, with an average decrease of 7 percentage points in the percentage reporting sufficient confidence.** Especially troubling is the 17 percentage point drop in confidence in the areas of *engaging families in school-level decision-making* (which fell from 62% in 2021 to 44% in 2023) and *engaging students in school-level decision-making* (which fell from 75% in 2021 to 59% in 2023), suggesting that school leaders feel much less equipped than they did just two years ago to carry out these research-based practices for creating inclusive school communities (Allen et al., 2018; Mitra, 2004).

Figure 31. Percent of Respondents with Sufficient Confidence Across Leadership Activities, 2021 and 2023

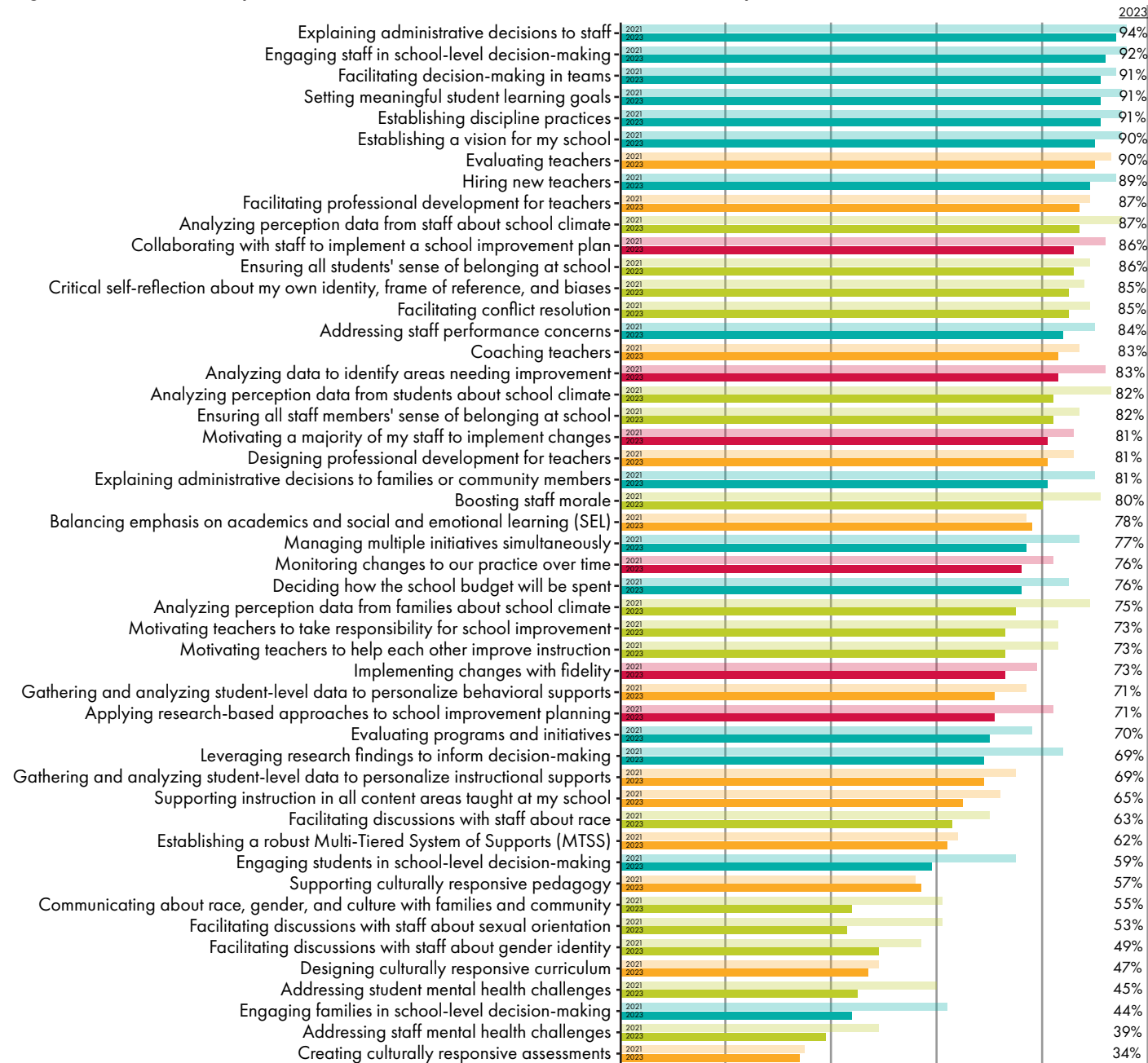


Figure 32. Change in Self-Efficacy Across Leadership Activities, 2021 to 2023



GREATEST CHALLENGES AND NEEDED SUPPORTS

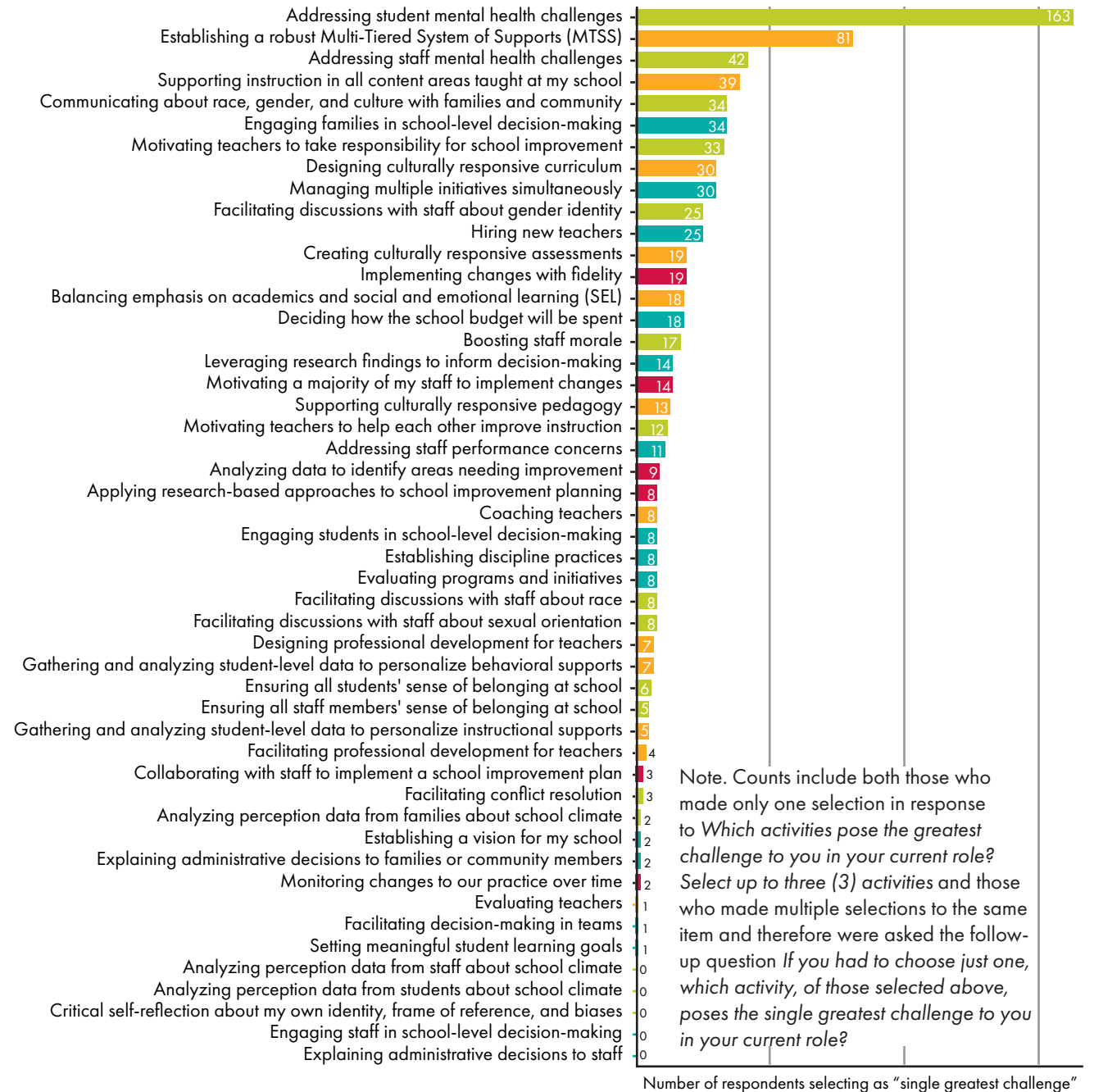
Any respondent who selected *little to no confidence* or *insufficient confidence* for any of the 49 leadership activities was subsequently prompted to select up to 3 activities that “pose the greatest challenge to you in your current role.” Then, of those 3 activities, respondents were asked to select a “single greatest challenge.” These prompts served to identify which leadership activities—of those rated lowest in terms of self-efficacy—school leaders actually find most challenging. Lastly, respondents were asked to provide open-ended responses to the question, *What would most help you to effectively carry out [their selected single greatest challenge].*¹¹

Figure 33 ranks the 49 leadership activities from most- to least-frequently selected as a “single greatest challenge.” Of all 49 leadership activities included on the survey, *addressing student mental health challenges* was the most frequently selected activity identified as posing the single greatest challenge to school leaders, by far, with 163 low self-efficacy respondents selecting this item.

The next most frequently selected activities were: *establishing a robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)* ($n=81$), *addressing staff mental health challenges* ($n=42$), *supporting instruction in all content areas taught at my school* ($n=39$), *communicating about race, gender, and culture with families and community members* ($n=34$), and *engaging families in school-level decision-making* ($n=34$). Below, we describe themes emerging from open-ended responses to the question “What would **most** help you to effectively carry out [the selected single greatest challenge]” for each of these six most-frequently selected activities. All open-ended comments provided for each of the leadership activities identified as a “single greatest challenge” will be published as supplemental information on our landing page at <https://carei.umn.edu/mnps>.

11. In 2021, respondents were not asked to provide a single greatest challenge. Additionally, instead of providing open-ended responses detailing what would help, they were asked to select up to 3 supports from a predetermined list of 8-10 possible supports (e.g., “increasing my knowledge or skills,” “tools or frameworks”). In analyzing the 2021 data, our research team concluded that the responses to this closed-ended “what would help” item yielded very limited actionable insights for survey users; as such, we developed an open-ended “what would help” question in 2023 to learn more about principals’ needs.

Figure 33. Leadership Activities Posing the “Single Greatest Challenge,” 2023



Addressing Student Mental Health Challenges: What Would Help?

Among principals who selected addressing student mental health challenges as their single greatest challenge, many reported needing more mental health staff, better access to mental health resources, and mental health-related professional development.

Mental health staff. Leaders identified a need for more funding to hire on-site mental health professionals (e.g., social workers, counselors, and therapists). They indicated that current mental health staff to student ratios were insufficient for meeting student mental health needs. Some reported having one or two mental health staff for every thousand (or more) students. One leader stated, “We are running a K-12 school without a social worker or counselor.” Leaders also shared challenges of having only community-based partnerships for student mental health services, like limited access and long waiting lists. They reported that on-site mental health staff would be able to meet more regularly with students and respond to issues in “real time.” They also indicated that on-site mental health professionals would be able to team and problem solve with their staff.

“Students are mentally imploding the minute they get off the bus and we don’t have the staff on hand to deal with it.”

Access to mental health resources. Along with more mental health staff, leaders requested more mental health resources, including greater access to state and local resources for students, staff, and families. Many expressed concern about the impacts of trauma on students and noted that student mental health challenges exceeded school capacity to meet them. They also requested comprehensive and research-based strategies, interventions, curriculum (e.g., social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum), and implementation support structures to foster student well-being and learning. Lastly, some leaders reported a need for mental health resources but did not provide a description of the kind of resources needed.

“[I need to] understand available resources for our students and community. I feel like we are on our own.”

Training and professional development. Leaders also identified a need for ongoing professional development and coaching for themselves and for their staff on a range of mental health related issues. Topics of interest included ways to “initiate conversations about mental health” with staff, student behavior management, interventions (e.g., SEL interventions, trauma informed practices), and neurodivergence. One leader shared an interest in developmentally appropriate practices for elementary schools. Another leader suggested it would be helpful to “bring in speakers throughout the year to initiate conversations about mental health, then allowing [their] mentor/mentee program to piggyback off of those conversations.”

“We are in a post-pandemic mental health crisis with more needs than ever, with more students than ever and higher mental health needs than ever. We need more help and more training for all staff around how to best support our students.”

Establishing a Robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS): What Would Help?

For principals rating establishing a robust multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) as their single greatest challenge, themes among “what would help?” responses included guidance, support, and staff time to create and implement MTSS plans.

Guidance and support. Leaders identified a robust continuum of implementation needs for their Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Several indicated a desire to see examples of MTSS being implemented with fidelity. Many identified needs that were general and reflected early stages of implementation, like staff training on the MTSS framework, tiered interventions, data collection processes, and budgeting for staffing the interventions. Other needs identified were more specific and reflected active implementation of MTSS, such as practices to evaluate tier one instruction. One leader wanted to ensure that students were not being funneled into special education as a result of ineffective adult behaviors. Another leader requested screeners that could differentiate between COVID-19 pandemic related learning loss and learning disabilities. Other leaders requested more tier two and tier three intervention options, particularly for behavioral interventions. Finally, some reported a need for clearer guidance on when to refer students for special education assessment.

“I need practical (not philosophy or theory) advice on how to establish MTSS [with] limited staffing. Also of interest, what to do with kids who have been in multiple intervention cycles but continue to not make progress.”

Staff time. Leaders also reported a need for dedicated staff time to implement MTSS. Several reported a need for time to train staff and/or to plan with their site or district teams. One leader requested time to view MTSS implementation in other districts before customizing the model to their own. Other leaders were nonspecific in how they would use more time requested for MTSS implementation. Some leaders indicated a need for funds to hire additional support staff.

“What we do not have is the time to sit with teams and plan for each student, the funding to hire the adequate staff to execute the plan and provide the support needed, and the mindset (of some) that they are in charge of academic health, behavioral health, and SEL health.”

Addressing Staff Mental Health Challenges: What Would Help?

For school leaders who selected addressing staff mental health challenges as their single greatest challenge, themes among “what would help” responses again included guidance, support, and resources.

Guidance and support. Leaders requested ideas for improving staff morale and finding “answers” to improve the workday experience. One leader specifically requested the support of union leadership in improving morale. Leaders also requested ideas for helping staff to manage the “stress of new expectations,” and to support staff struggling with personal mental health issues. In addition, not all leaders could identify the kinds of guidance and support needed, or their role in supporting staff with mental health needs. Statements illustrating this perspective included, “I don’t even know what to ask for,” “I don’t even know where to begin,” “If I knew, it wouldn’t be a challenge,” and “If their happiness depends on me, as a leader, this problem will only grow.”

“I don’t know where to begin. Our systems are taxed and teachers feel the brunt when support networks are slim, student behaviors are extreme and gaps in learning are significant.”

More resources. Leaders also indicated that their staff needed more resources on an ongoing basis (e.g., certified mental health staff for staff), including outside resources, to manage school-related and non-school-related mental health stressors and to decompress. One leader indicated a need for resources to foster staff “self-awareness.” Another stated that without more resources, staff would continue to be negatively impacted by student mental health issues, creating a vicious mental health cycle for staff and students alike. Although many leaders were nonspecific regarding the kinds of resources needed, some requested more time. To these respondents, time would allow for more staff collaboration to support students’ changing needs and more frequent one-on-one meetings with individual staff to process “what is happening in their lives.”

“I need my staff to be in a good place with their mental health in order to be present and engaged with students. How can we help teachers with self-awareness and connect them to resources?”

Supporting Instruction in All Content Areas Taught at My School: What Would Help?

Among the nearly 40 principals who selected supporting instruction in all content areas taught at my school as their single greatest challenge, perspectives on what would most help coalesced around the themes of time, guidance, and support.

Time. Leaders reported that they did not have enough time to fulfill the academic functions of their role. Several indicated that more time was needed to become familiar with school curricula and academic standards and also to be in classrooms supporting teachers (e.g., conducting observations). Along with being in classrooms, one leader indicated a desire to better understand teacher conversations as they related to literacy. Another wanted to ensure that the curriculum was being implemented with fidelity. One wanted access to more substitute teachers so that their teachers would have more time to collaborate around instruction. Several leaders shared that much of their current time was being used to address student behavioral issues and indicated that they did not have the resources to hire additional staff or delegate these tasks. A few leaders even lamented that the principal role was becoming more complex, if not impossible.

“Being an instructional leader is what I want to do and I am prepared for, yet, our roles have largely become managerial. We do not have the supports and/or time to do what we should be doing. I wish that wasn’t the case, but mental health needs, lack of staff, and initiative/mandate overload have watered down the principalship from instructional leaders to building managers.”

Guidance and support. Leaders also reported a need for guidance and support in the forms of experts, research on effective practices in all content areas, and access to district curricular resources and district leadership support. They also indicated a need for more professional development and support with evaluation. One leader, more specifically, wanted assistance in how to “navigate informal conversations when staff come seeking assistance with their content area.”

“[I need] the ability to know and research best practice in all subject areas, recall those best practices and provide in-house PD... to enrich teachers’ ability to teach that specific subject.”

Communicating About Race, Gender, and Culture with Families and Community Members: What Would Help?

Principals selecting communicating about race, gender, and culture with families and community members as their single greatest challenge sought open-mindedness in their communities, communication tips or toolkits, and district support.

Open hearts and minds. Multiple principals expressed discomfort with engaging the public in conversations about these topics because of the cultural and/or political climates of their districts or because of the political orientations of board members. Some indicated that in order to have these communications, they would need to establish trust and a common understanding of the purpose of equity work with resistant community members. Some did not offer specific needs, but implied this work was difficult because community members were not open to equity-related conversations.

“With the political climate in this community, I don’t think people would be open to having discussions [about race, gender, and culture]. Many people in this community feel like these topics are being forced upon them.”

Communication tips or toolkits. Leaders reported a need for more guidance, tools, or toolkits to be able to effectively communicate about race, gender, and culture with families and community members. Some thought that learning from other administrators would be helpful, whereas others sought professional development to be able to have “courageous conversations.”

“Access to toolkits supporting effective communication about race, gender, and culture with families and community members would greatly benefit me. I recognize the potential for inadvertently causing offense due to unfamiliar customs and my ongoing quest to learn about various cultures. While committed to this learning process, I remain uncertain about having comprehensive knowledge. I would greatly appreciate guidance on effectively addressing these topics in communication.”

District support. Several school leaders wished that district leaders would play a bigger role in supporting their work to communicate about race, gender, and culture with families and community members. Respondents desired clear, consistent messaging surrounding district values and stances related to equity work, and assurance that principals’ work in these areas would be supported and validated by district leaders.

“We have several board members, and a loud community contingency who are opposed to any efforts focused on CRT [culturally responsive teaching], equity (especially racial), etc., so this work is met with great resistance and outcry. Having the unwavering support from our district leadership and colleagues would help me carry this out without the fear of repercussions.”

Engaging Families in School-Level Decision-Making: What Would Help?

For the principals who selected engaging families in school-level decision-making as their single greatest challenge, common themes among “what would help” responses included ideas or strategies, model practices from peer schools that have found success in this area, and time to engage families.

Ideas and strategies. Leaders reported wanting a range of ideas and strategies to effectively engage families in school-level decision-making. Inclusive decision-making frameworks and structures, roadmaps, and step-by-step guides were all cited as potentially useful resources. Several indicated a specific need for strategies for including the voices of families from marginalized communities, recognizing that these voices often went unheard.

“Learning effective strategies to gather voice from our marginalized students/families [would help].”

Model practices. Many school leaders wanted to see examples of successful family engagement efforts at other schools, especially schools that served a similar population of students. Seeing exemplar family engagement plans and engagement activities would be helpful.

“Seeing how a school of similar demographics has done so successfully [would help].”

Time. A few leaders simply needed more time to better engage families, including time to connect and build relationships.

“[I need] time to design opportunities for families to interact in these decisions.”

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

One section of the survey pertained specifically to school leaders' culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) practices. In their review of research on CRSL, Khalifa et al. (2016) identified four components of being a culturally responsive school leader: critical self-reflection, developing culturally responsive teachers, promoting culturally responsive/inclusive school environments, and engaging students, families, and communities (see Figure 34, right). We sought to understand how frequently principals engaged in practices aligned with each of these areas.

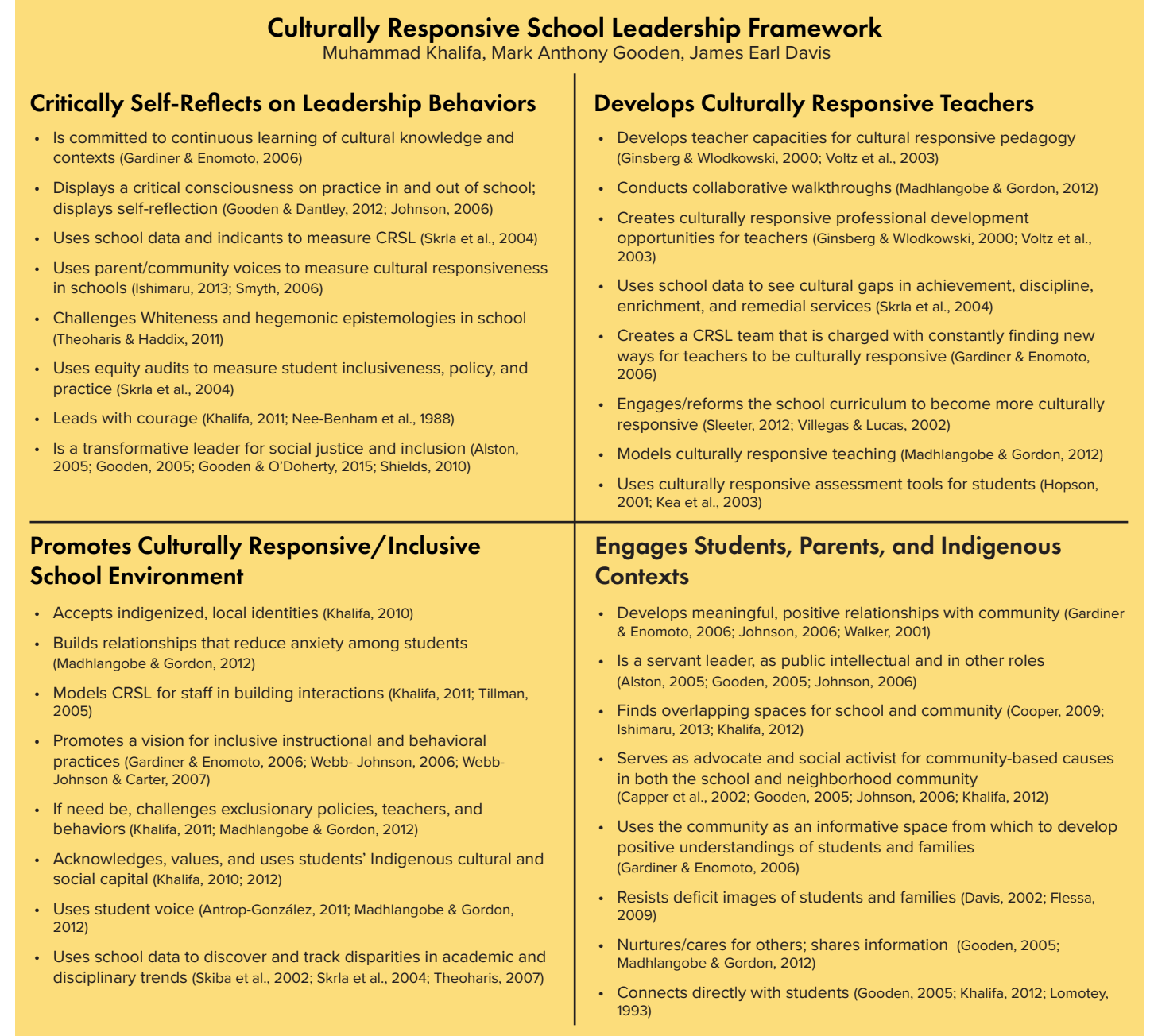
FREQUENCY OF ENGAGEMENT IN CRSL PRACTICES

To understand leaders' use of CRSL practices, respondents were asked to cite how often they engaged in 8 CRSL practices that align to the conceptual framework of Khalifa et al. (2016). Response options included: *never or almost never, annually, a few times per year, monthly, and weekly or more*. Figures 35-38 in the sections that follow display the breakdowns of responses to each of these items across all participants in both 2021 and 2023.

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Figure 34.



Critical Self-Reflection

Two items on the 2023 MnPS gauged principals' frequency of engagement in **critical self-reflection practices**, which correspond with quadrant 1 of the CRSL framework. Figure 35 displays the response distribution for these items.

In 2023, 63% of all respondents indicated that they engaged in *critical self-reflection about my own identity, frame of reference, and biases at least on a monthly basis* (compared to 69% in 2021). Furthermore, 61% of respondents reported engaging in *critical analysis of how my school or district may disadvantage marginalized students* (a new item in 2023) on a monthly or more frequent basis.

Development of Culturally Responsive Teachers

Another two items gauged principals' engagement in practices associated with the **development of culturally responsive teachers**, quadrant 2 of the CRSL framework. Figure 36 displays the response frequencies for these items.

In 2023, 41% of respondents reported engaging in *development of culturally responsive teachers* at least monthly, down from 50% in 2021. Over half (55%) of 2023 respondents indicated having engaged in *analysis of student data to identify disparities in academic and disciplinary outcomes* on a monthly or more frequent basis, up from 49% in 2021.

Promoting a Culturally Responsive and Inclusive School Environment

We asked principals to estimate the frequency with which they engage in two practices aligned with **promoting a culturally responsive and inclusive school environment**, quadrant 3 of the CRSL framework. Figure 37 displays the response distributions for these items in 2021 and 2023.

In 2023, 57% of principals reported *modeling of culturally responsive practices for staff* on a monthly or more frequent basis, compared to 60% in 2021. About one-third of principals (34%) reported *seeking student perspectives to ensure an inclusive school environment* (a new item in 2023) at least monthly.

Engaging Students, Families, and Communities

Lastly, two items gauged the frequency of principals' practice in the area of **engaging students, families, and communities**, quadrant 4 of the CRSL framework. See Figure 38 for the distribution of responses to these items in 2021 and 2023.

As in 2021, the CRSL practice with the lowest overall frequency of reported engagement in 2023 was *inclusion of the families of marginalized students in school-level decisions*, with only 18% of principals reporting engaging in this practice on a monthly or more frequent basis. Concerningly, this represents a marked decrease in the frequency of engagement since 2021, when 27% reported engaging in the same practice monthly or more often.

With respect to *engaging community organizations to help meet students' needs* (a new item in 2023), 30% of principals reported engaging in the practice on a monthly or more frequent basis in 2023.

Figures 35-38. Approximately how often do you engage in the following culturally responsive school leadership practices?

never / almost never annually a few times per year monthly weekly or more

Figure 35

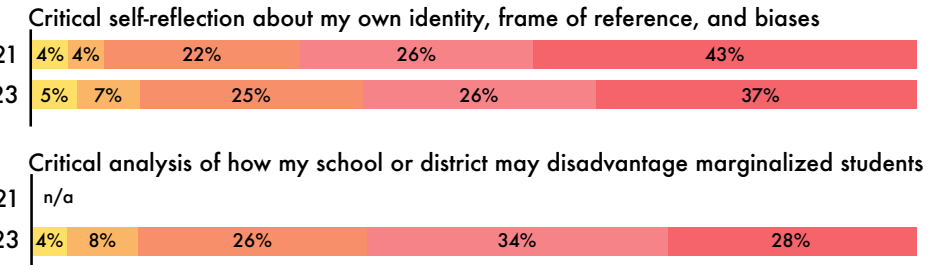


Figure 36

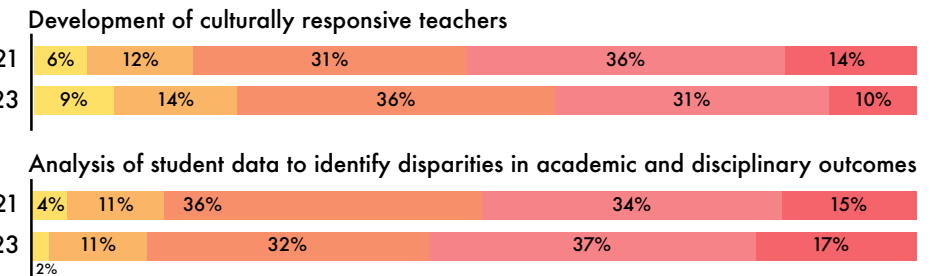


Figure 37

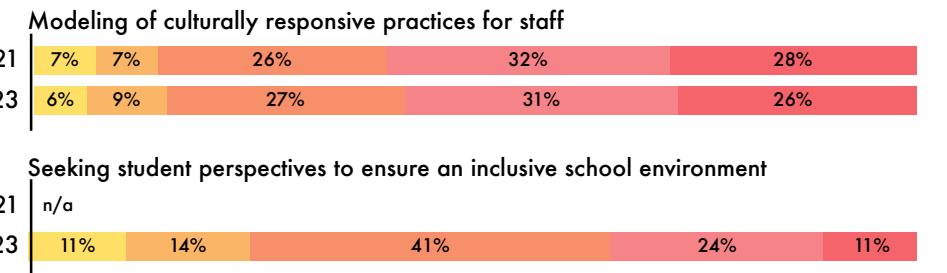
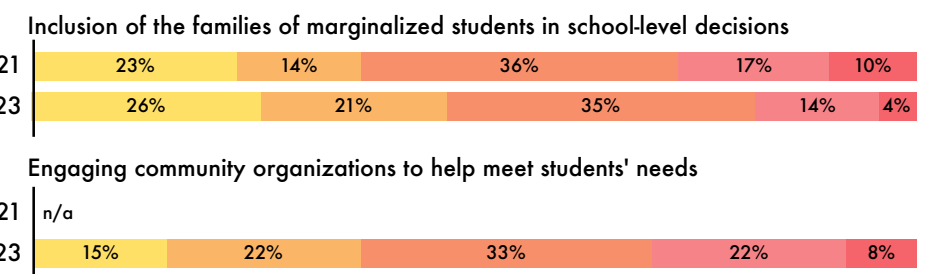


Figure 38

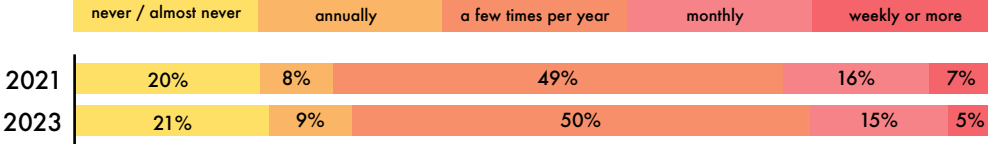


ATTENDANCE AT COMMUNITY EVENTS

To capture the extent to which Minnesota school leaders connect and engage with students and families beyond the walls of the school building, we asked respondents, *approximately how often do you attend community events NOT sponsored by your school or district that students from your school and/or their families also attend (e.g., community forums, public gatherings)?* Again, respondents could choose from five response options: *never or almost never, annually, a few times per year, monthly, and weekly or more.*

The breakdown of responses to this item is shown in Figure 39 for both 2021 and 2023. As in 2021, half (50%) of respondents reported attending community events with students and their families *a few times per year* (compared to 49% in 2021), with about one in five indicating they did so *monthly or more* (21%, compared to 23% in 2021).

Figure 39.
Approximately how often do you attend community events NOT sponsored by your school or district that students from your school and/or their families also attend?



STATE AND DISTRICT POLICY AND SUPPORTS

One section of the survey pertained to principals' perceptions of, and experiences with, accountability, support, and policy at both state and district levels.

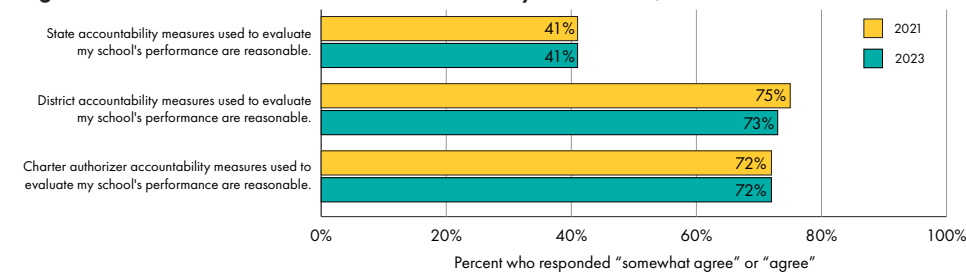
ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT

We asked principals a series of closed-ended questions designed to understand their perceptions of current state and local accountability systems as well as the support they experience from district-level leaders. Principals working in district schools were given district-specific items, whereas leaders working in charter schools were given charter-specific items.

Reasonableness of Accountability Measures

Three survey items asked respondents to gauge the reasonableness of the state and local accountability measures used to evaluate their schools' performance. Figure 40 displays the percentage agreement with these items across all participants in both 2021 and 2023. In 2023, as in 2021, 41% of respondents ($n=853$) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *State accountability measures used to evaluate my school's performance are reasonable*. In contrast, about three-fourths of respondents (73%, $n=788$) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with *District accountability measures used to evaluate my school's performance are reasonable* (district respondents only; compared to 75% in 2021). Among 2023 charter respondents ($n=64$), 72% *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, *Charter authorizer accountability measures used to evaluate my school's performance are reasonable* (same percentage as in 2021). These findings suggest that school leaders continue to view local accountability measures as more reasonable than those of the state.

Figure 40. Reasonableness of Accountability Measures, 2021 and 2023

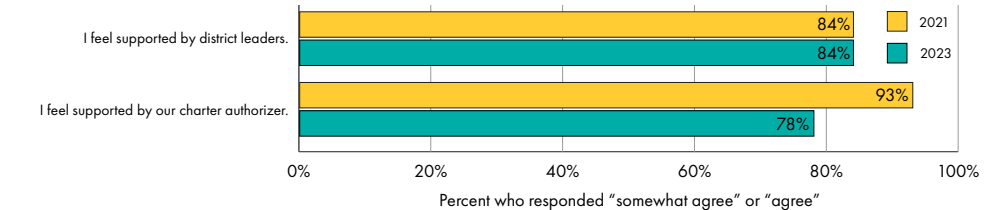


Perceptions of Local Support

Two survey questions gauged principals' perceptions of the support they receive from district or charter leadership. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with one of two statements: *I feel supported by district leaders*

or *I feel supported by our charter authorizer*, intended for district and charter respondents, respectively. Figure 41 compares principals' agreement with these items between 2021 and 2023. In 2023, as in 2021, 84% of district respondents ($n=788$) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they feel supported by district leaders. Among charter respondents ($n=64$), 78% *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they feel supported by their charter authorizers. This represents a 15 percentage point decrease from charter respondents' agreement in 2021, when 93% *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the same statement.

Figure 41. Perceptions of Local Support, 2021 and 2023



POLICY INFLUENCE

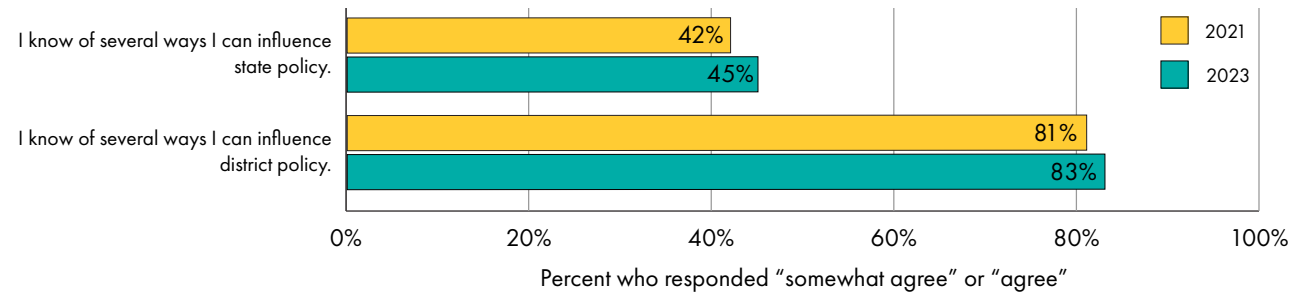
Eight survey items were included to gauge school leaders' knowledge of opportunities to influence state and district policy, desire for policy influence, engagement in state and district policy influence, and barriers to engaging in policy influence. Response data for each topic is summarized in turn in the sections that follow.

Knowledge of Opportunities to Influence Policy

As in 2021, principals continue to report being more familiar with opportunities to influence local as opposed to state-level policy in 2023. We asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with two statements: *I know of several ways I can influence state policy*, and *I know of several ways I can influence district policy*.¹² Figure 42, next page, compares respondents' agreement with these items between 2021 and 2023. In 2023, less than half of respondents (45%; $n=852$) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they knew of several ways they could influence state policy, compared to 42% in 2021. In contrast, nearly twice the proportion of 2023 respondents (83%; $n=787$) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* that they knew of several ways they could influence district policy (compared to 81% in 2021).

12. Only respondents working in district schools were shown this item.

Figure 42. Knowledge of Opportunities to Influence Policy, 2021 and 2023



Desire for Policy Influence

We then asked school leaders to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with two statements about their desire for greater policy influence: *I want to have greater influence over state policy*, and *I want to have greater influence over district policy*.¹³ The percentage agreement with these two items for both 2021 and 2023 is shown in Figure 43, above. As in 2021, a majority of 2023 respondents *somewhat agreed or agreed* with both items. In 2023, 76% of respondents (*n*=853) *somewhat agreed or agreed* that they wanted to have greater influence over state policy, up from 70% in 2021. The percentage of respondents wanting greater influence over district policy remained consistent from 2021 to 2023, with 79% of 2023 respondents (*n*=787) desiring more influence, compared to 78% in 2021.

Engagement in Policy Influence

In 2021, we collected baseline data about the ways in which Minnesota school leaders have previously engaged in policy influence so that, over time, we could gauge how their influence has changed. This section compares 2021 and 2023 responses to two questions about state and local policy engagement.

State policy engagement. First, we asked respondents, *in which ways, if any, have you sought to influence state policy in the past two years?*¹⁴ Respondents could select all response options that applied to

them from a list of 11 options (including an *other option* with text entry). Alternatively, respondents could select, *I have not sought to influence state policy*. Figure 44, next page, displays response frequencies for 2021 and 2023 in order from most to least selected in 2023. Overall, 811 participants answered the question in 2023, with approximately one-third (32%) indicating they had not sought to influence state policy (compared to 34% in 2021). Top ways of influencing state policy included *sent written communication to legislators* (48% of respondents), *met with (a) legislator(s)* (30%), and *met with Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) staff about a policy issue* (16%). *Other* responses (*n*=46, or 6% of respondents) included participating in a professional association (e.g., MESPA, MASSP), communicating with elected officials, staying informed on policy issues, and voting.

District policy engagement. Second, we asked respondents, *in which ways, if any, have you sought to influence district policy in the past two years?*¹⁵ Again, respondents could select all response options that applied to them, in this case from a list of 6 options (including an *other option* with text entry). Alternatively, respondents could select, *I have not sought to influence district policy*. Figure 45, next page, displays response frequencies for both 2021 and 2023 in order from most to least selected in 2023. Overall, 783 participants answered the question. In contrast to the corresponding state-level item, only 5% of respondents (*n*=43) indicated that they had not sought to influence district policy. Top ways of influencing district policy included *contributed*

13. Only respondents working in district schools were shown this item.

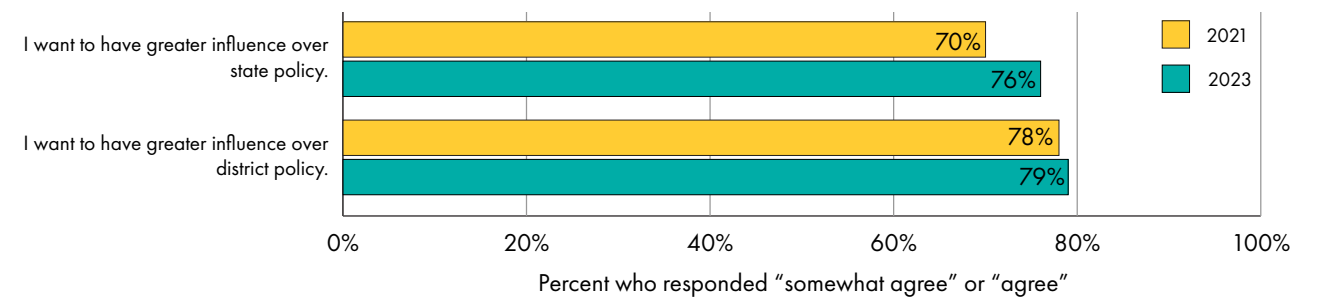
14. In 2021, the question read, “In which ways, if any, have you sought to influence state policy?”

15. In 2021, the question read, “In which ways, if any, have you sought to influence district policy?”

16. In 2021, we posed only one question for both state and district policy: “What barriers do you face, if any, in influencing state or district policy?” In 2023, we decided to split this question into two—one for state, one for district—to distinguish between leaders’ experiences at each level of policymaking.

17. 2021 data is not included because the corresponding 2021 question included state and district policy.

Figure 43. Desire to Influence Policy, 2021 and 2023



as a member of a district-level committee (82% of respondents) and *met with the Superintendent* (77%). About half of respondents had also *met with School Board members* (50%) and *spoken at a School Board meeting* (49%). *Other* responses (*n*=25, or 3%) included attending district meetings and providing feedback to district administrators on proposed policy changes.

Barriers to Policy Influence

As a follow-up to the two questions above about engagement in policy influence activities, we asked respondents, *What barriers do you face, if any, in influencing state policy?* and, *What barriers do you face, if any, in influencing district policy?*¹⁶ Respondents could select any options that applied to them from a list of 7 options (including an *other option* with text entry) for each of the two questions. Alternatively, respondents could select either one of the following exclusive options: *I have not faced any barriers*, or *Not applicable; I do not view influencing state/district policy as part of my role*.

Figure 46 (next page) displays response frequencies for both state and district questions, ordered from the most- to least-frequently selected barrier to state policy influence.¹⁷ Overall, 846 participants answered the question about barriers to state policy influence. Top barriers to influencing state policy included *lack of time* (70% of respondents), *feeling my voice will not be heard* (41%), and *lack of understanding of policy-making processes* (30%). Themes among *other* responses (*n*=58,

Figure 44. Engagement in State Policy Influence, 2021 and 2023

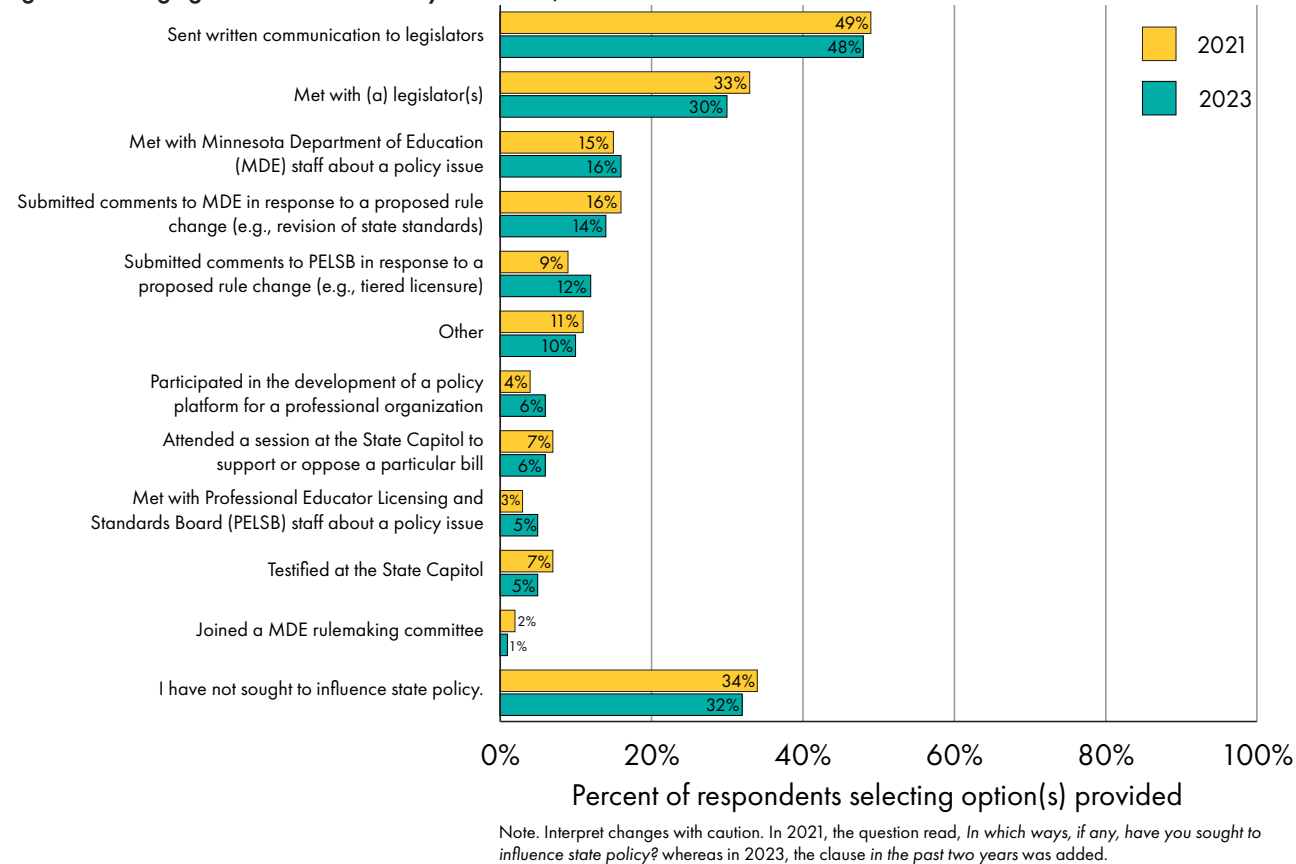


Figure 45. Engagement in District Policy Influence, 2021 and 2023

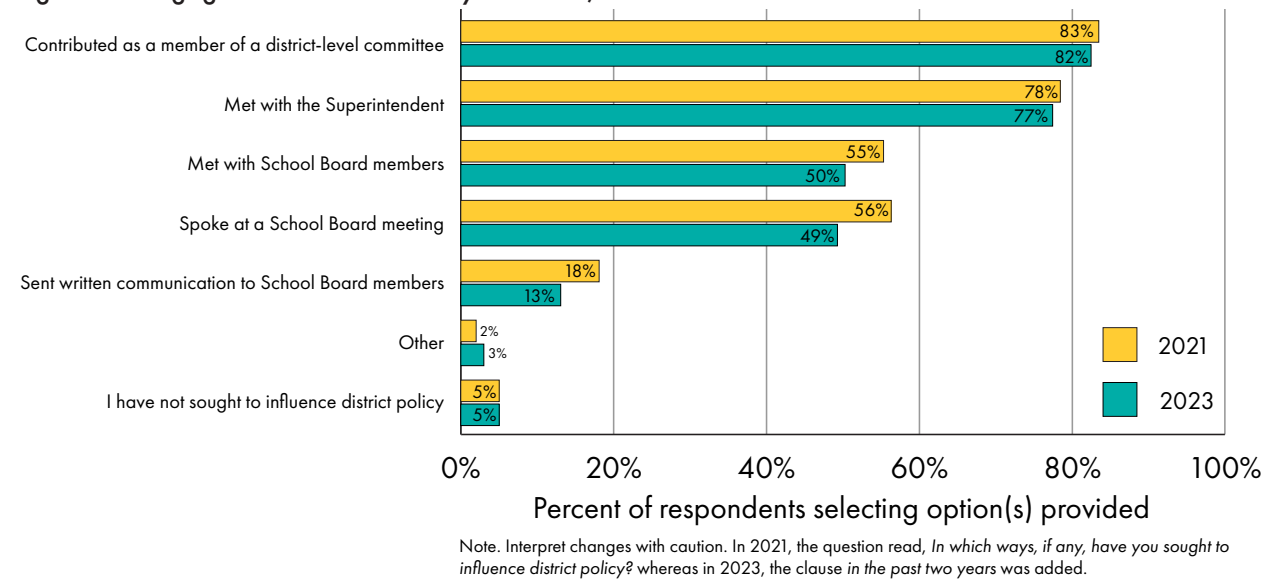


Figure 46. Barriers to State and District Policy Influence, 2023

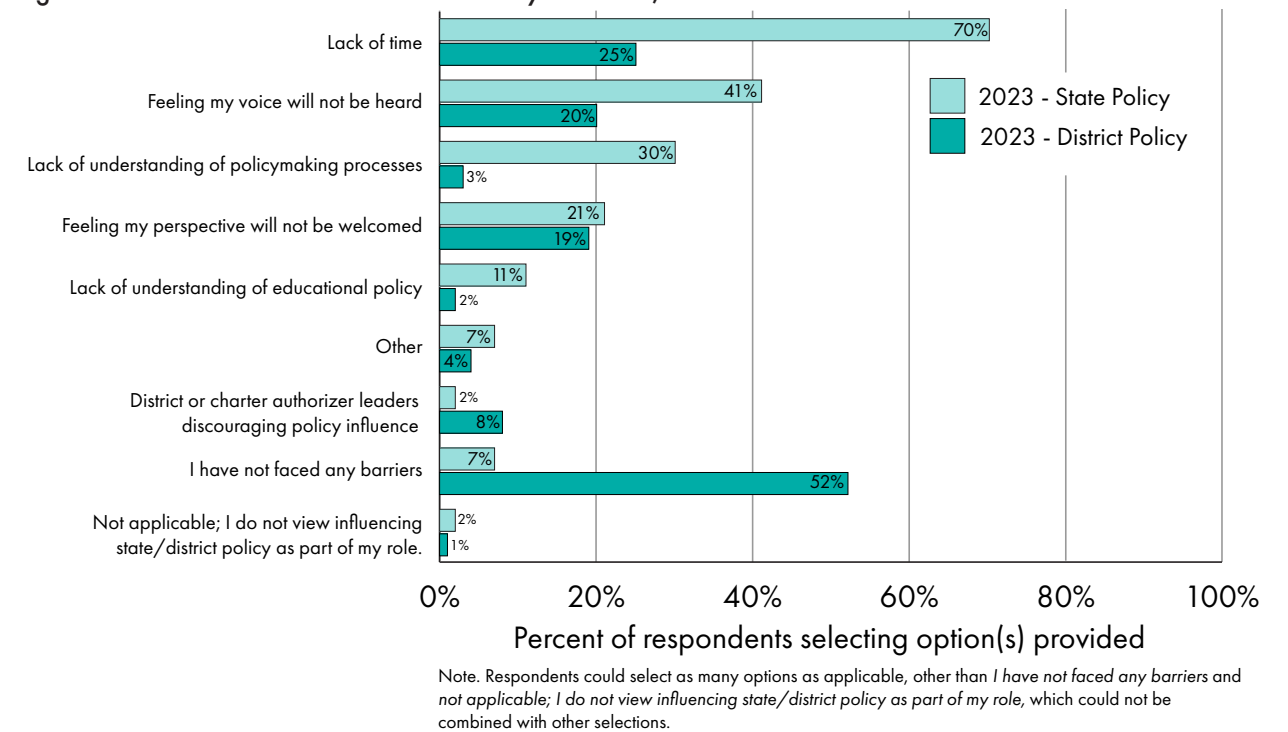


Table 4. Ten Focal Policy Changes, 2023 Minnesota Legislative Session

Policy area	Description
The READ Act	Requirement that districts and charter schools provide evidence-based reading instruction by the 2026-27 school year with funding appropriations for curriculum and professional development.
Non-exclusionary discipline	Requirement that schools attempt to use non-exclusionary disciplinary practices before dismissal proceedings or pupil withdrawal agreements except in certain circumstances.
K-3 suspension	Prohibition of dismissal (suspension or expulsion) of K-3 students unless non-exclusionary discipline measures have been exhausted and ongoing safety threats remain.
Recess detention	Limitation of the use of recess detention and requirement that districts and charter schools notify a parent within 24 hours of using recess detention.
Prone restraint and physical holds	Prohibition of the use of prone restraint and certain other physical holds by district employees or agents.
Pupil withdrawal agreements	Limitation of pupil withdrawal agreements, defined as a verbal or written agreement between school and parent to withdraw a student to avoid expulsion or exclusion dismissal proceedings, to limitation of 12 months.
Ethnic studies	Requirement that high schools offer an ethnic studies course aligned with state social studies standards by the 2026-27 school year, and that ethnic studies instruction be provided in elementary and middle schools by the 2027-28 school year.
American Indian culture and language	Requirement that districts or schools with American Indian education programs offer an American Indian Culture and Language course, effective immediately.
Personal finance graduation requirement	Requirement that students beginning 9th grade in 2024-25 and later successfully complete a course in personal finance to graduate from high school.
Government and citizenship graduation requirement	Requirement that students beginning 9th grade in 2024-25 and later successfully complete a course in government and citizenship to graduate from high school.

or 7% of respondents) included negative past experiences attempting to influence legislators, prioritizing work at the school site, geographic distance from the capital, and not feeling confident or safe enough to participate. Seven percent (7%) of respondents indicated they had not faced any barriers to influencing state policy ($n=59$), and 2% did not view influencing state policy as part of their roles ($n=18$).

A total of 772 participants answered the question about **barriers to district policy influence**.¹⁸ Interestingly, over half of respondents (52%) indicated they had not faced any barriers to district policy influence, a far greater percentage than those reporting no barriers to influencing state policy. Among barriers to district policy influence reported, top barriers included *lack of time* (25% of respondents), *feeling my voice will not be heard* (20%), and *feeling my perspective will not be welcomed* (19%). Themes among *other* responses ($n=28$, or 4% of respondents) included district cultural norms precluding principal influence, fear of retaliation, and being new to the role of school leader. Just 1% of respondents did not view influencing district policy as part of their roles ($n=6$).

Understanding of funding allocation. Constituents engaged in the survey development process expressed an interest in knowing whether school leaders generally understood how their building budgets were determined. As such, we asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, *I understand how funding for my school is allocated*. In 2023, 84% of 853 total respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* (compared to 85% in 2021), suggesting that funding allocation processes were well-understood by most school leaders.

RECENT LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

The 2023 legislative session in Minnesota was unusual in terms of the number and scope of legislative changes made in the K-12 education arena. We added several survey questions in 2023 to understand principals' familiarity with, responsibility for, and confidence to implement 10 specific policy changes. These specific changes were selected because each of these policies require direct principal involvement in their implementation at the building level.

18. Respondents to the question about barriers to district policy influence excluded those working in charter schools.

19. Denominator excludes those who answered not applicable to my role or context.

20. Readers will be able to explore elementary and secondary breakdowns of 2023 MnPS data, as well as breakdowns by other variables, using our Tableau data visualization platform. We anticipate launching the 2023 MnPS data in Tableau in Spring 2024.

We also sought to understand what principals would need in order to implement these changes. A brief description of each of these 10 focal policy changes is provided in Table 4, left.

Familiarity

First, we hoped to gauge the extent to which principals were familiar with the recent policy changes in the hopes that resulting information could support state and local efforts to communicate about the policy provisions with those who would be implementing them. We asked, *How familiar are you with each of the recent policy changes summarized below?* Participants could select *not at all familiar*, *a little familiar*, *moderately familiar*, *very familiar*, or *not applicable to my role or context* for each of the 10 focal policy changes.

Respondents were most familiar with policy changes relating to **non-exclusionary discipline** and **prone restraint and physical holds**, with 97% and 95% of respondents reporting that they were *moderately* or *very familiar* with these changes, respectively.

Respondents were least familiar with policy changes relating to **Ethnic Studies** and **American Indian culture and language**, with 59% of respondents indicating that they were *moderately* or *very familiar* with each. Additionally, only 63% of respondents were *moderately* or *very familiar* with the **government and citizenship graduation requirement** and the **personal finance graduation requirement** (see Figure 47, next page, for percentages for all ten policy areas). Subsequent analyses revealed that elementary principals were far less likely to report familiarity in these areas than secondary principals, substantially decreasing the proportion of *moderately* or *very familiar* responses overall for those areas.²⁰

Responsibility

Next, we asked principals to indicate whether they anticipated being *primarily responsible*, *partly responsible*, or *not responsible* for implementing each policy change with which they had reported some familiarity (i.e., excluding those who answered *not at all familiar* or *not applicable to my role or context* in response to the familiarity question). Principals could also choose *don't know* as a response option.

STATE AND DISTRICT POLICY AND SUPPORTS

Respondents were most likely to report being *primarily or partly responsible* for implementing policy changes in the areas of **non-exclusionary discipline** and **prone restraint and physical holds**, with 99% and 95% of respondents indicating that they were at least partly responsible for these areas, respectively.²¹

Respondents were least likely to indicate they were primarily or partly responsible for implementing changes in the areas of **personal finance graduation requirement** and **government and citizenship graduation requirement**. For both of these areas, 48% of respondents reported that they were at least partly responsible (see Figure 48), for percentages for all ten policy areas). As with policy familiarity, elementary principals were much less likely to report being responsible for implementing these areas, decreasing the overall percentage of respondents selecting *primarily or partly responsible* for these areas.

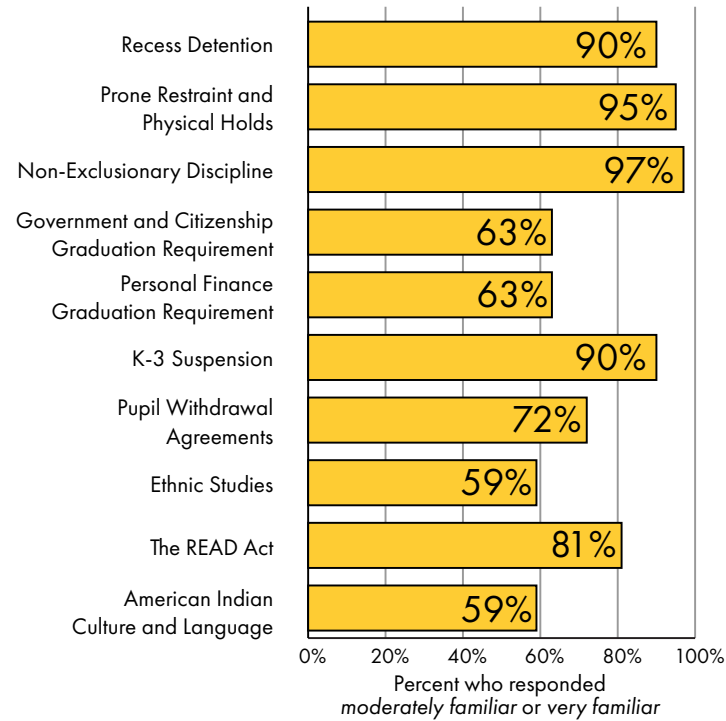
Self-Efficacy

To understand principals' self-efficacy in implementing recent policy changes, we then asked, *In light of your capabilities and available resources, how much confidence do you have that you can effectively implement each of these policy changes in your school?* Only principals who reported being at least partly responsible for implementing any one of the 10 policy changes were shown this question. Response options included *little to no confidence*, *insufficient confidence*, *sufficient confidence*, and *more than sufficient confidence*.

Across all 10 policy areas, principals reported relatively high levels of self-efficacy, with the proportion reporting having *sufficient or more than sufficient* confidence ranging from 72% to 94%. Overall, principals reported having the greatest self-efficacy to implement **recess detention** and **prone restraint and physical holds**, with 94% and 92% of respondents selecting *sufficient or more than sufficient* confidence for these areas, respectively.

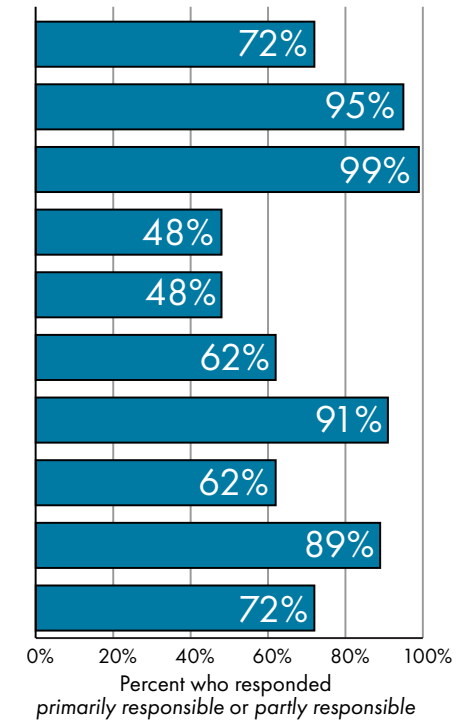
In contrast, principals reported the lowest self-efficacy to implement policy changes relating to **American Indian culture and language** and **The READ Act**, with 72% and 73% of respondents selecting *sufficient or more than sufficient* confidence for these areas, respectively (see Figure 49 for percentages for all ten policy areas).

Figure 47. Familiarity with policy



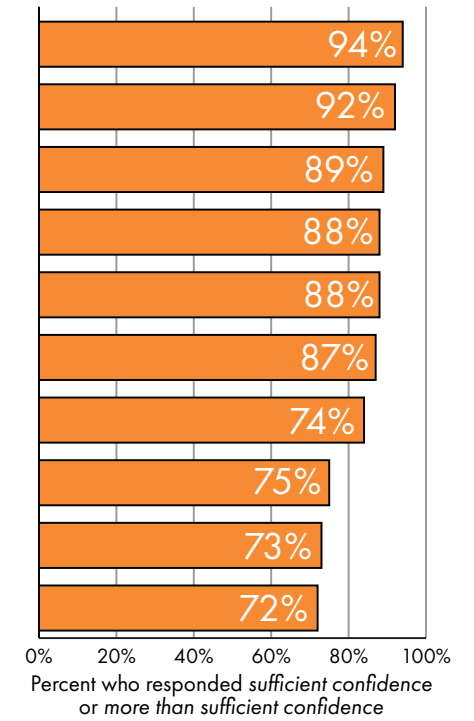
Note. Denominator excludes respondents who answered *not applicable to my role or context*.

Figure 48. Responsibility for implementing



Note. Denominator excludes respondents who answered *don't know*. Respondents answering *not at all familiar* or *not applicable* to the familiarity question were not given the responsibility question for corresponding policy changes.

Figure 49. Confidence to implement



Note. Respondents answering *not responsible* or *don't know* for a given policy change were not given the corresponding confidence item.

21. Denominators exclude those who answered *don't know*.

NEEDS

Following the familiarity, responsibility, and self-efficacy rating scale questions, we posed an open-ended question to better understand what principals most need in order for their schools to comply with recent legislative changes such as the 10 listed in Table 4. Response themes overall, and those related to the 10 specific policies, are provided below.

Overall themes

Across policy areas, a major theme was that principals needed **information, guidance, and support** to comply with recent legislation. They also needed **time** to plan, train their staffs, and make necessary adjustments to local policies and practices. Many leaders reported needing **funding**, especially to fund staff that could support policy implementation. And finally, many respondents noted **frustration** with new mandates, especially those that did not come with additional funds.

The READ Act

Leaders overwhelmingly reported that **guidance and support** were needed in order to comply with the READ Act. The types of guidance and support identified reflected a wide range of needs including basic information about the READ Act and its requirements, specific implementation strategies, curricular resources, support for implementing with secondary students and multilingual learners, and other resources, like money and time to hire and train staff. Leaders also reported unease with being able to comply with all of the requirements in a timely manner, especially if lacking financial resources.

“The READ Act is terrifying. I understand the principles, and believe they have positive intent and are working in the best interests of students. However, the managerial piece of fulfilling requirements is daunting.”

Many leaders reported a need for **professional development/training** for themselves, their teachers, and their paraprofessionals; options for professional development/training, like [LETRS](#); professional development/training at the elementary, middle, and high school levels; flexibility with professional development/training options; and coaching. They also requested support with coordinating the professional development/training, paying for it, and paying staff to complete it.

“The READ Act was introduced abruptly to schools. There was a lack of time and preparation for districts to implement this process.”

Many leaders also reported a need for **curriculum and assessment resources** to comply with the READ Act. Specifically, they needed the list of MDE-approved curricula, and ideas for reading interventions. There was an expressed need for resources at the secondary level. In addition, some leaders reported needing clarity regarding the types of screeners and assessment tools to use and how to monitor student progress.

“The READ Act: [We need] resources to address the needs of secondary students still reading at an elementary level. This includes research based curriculum and interventionists.”

Non-exclusionary discipline

Many leaders who commented specifically on non-exclusionary discipline sought **guidance and support**. To comply with legislation, leaders reported a need for information about non-exclusionary discipline processes and procedures, such as those related to behavior monitoring, documentation, and the involvement of families. One leader specifically asked for language about non-exclusionary discipline to include in a handbook. Several leaders wanted to see clear and/or developmentally appropriate examples of non-exclusionary discipline because they did not have many current options and/or they had exhausted those options. In addition, leaders requested a list of proactive and reactive non-exclusionary discipline strategies and sought clarity regarding the use of restorative practices like circles.

To be in compliance with the legislation, leaders reported a need for **professional development/training** and coaching for their staff. Although many leaders were non-specific regarding the kind of professional development/training they needed, several identified a need for more knowledge about best practices for integrating non-exclusionary discipline within their schools, restorative practices, non-exclusionary discipline practices for behavior escalation in students not receiving special education services, and an understanding of the “why” behind non-exclusionary discipline. Concern was expressed about staff not being prepared to address student mental health and behavior needs.

“We do not have the people or the funding to support what is necessary in order to appropriately implement non-exclusionary discipline. We believe in it and want to do it, but have a large building with very little social/emotional, behavioral, and mental health support. Those roles are critical to being able to implement true non-exclusionary discipline.”

Lastly, leaders reported needing **additional staffing**, or funds to hire staff, to comply with non-exclusionary discipline legislation. Desired staffing roles included social workers, deans, counselors, assistant principals, behavior interventionists, and student support specialists. Leaders reasoned that additional staff would support the implementation of their MTSS systems and specifically their tier two interventions. One leader shared that non-exclusionary discipline required “[more] of my time and effort to effectively respond to students and families” than exclusionary discipline.

“We need more resources to support students who are dysregulated. The non-exclusionary discipline plans and lack of suspension options require extra staff to support students.”

K-3 suspension

Leaders requested **guidance and support** to be able to comply with the new K-3 suspension legislation, which presented a significant challenge to many respondents. They were concerned about their ability to provide behavior interventions while ensuring the safety of students and staff. Leaders requested information and training that would help them integrate the K-3 suspension changes with other legislative changes focused on student behavior management, like non-exclusionary discipline and recess detention. They also requested tools and guidance to address the behaviors of dysregulated students. In addition, leaders identified a need for parent support, especially when students presented “extreme behaviors.” Not all leaders agreed with the legislative change and some felt that suspensions were, at times, an appropriate option.

Leaders also reported a need for **additional staffing** and/or the funds to be able to hire more staff. Several indicated that with current staffing, they were not able to provide effective behavior interventions. One leader reported that in order to comply with the legislative change, instructional paraprofessionals were being used for discipline, thus preventing them from providing student academic support. Another leader indicated a need for more mental health staff to proactively support students by teaching them skills to regulate their behaviors.

“The K-3 suspension [policy] is difficult without additional funding for staff. I completely agree that suspensions actually make the situation worse. However, a change like this should have been connected to an increase in funds for mental health professionals in schools to help proactively support students.”

Recess detention

As with other policy changes, principals sought **guidance and support** to be able to comply with recent recess detention legislation. Leaders reported a need to better understand the rationale for prohibiting recess detention and requested clarity regarding appropriate responses to managing student discipline within the scope of the legislation. Leaders wanted more options for managing student behavior. Several leaders either associated this legislative change with both the change prohibiting K-3 suspension and the change requiring the use of non-exclusionary discipline, or they requested information, resources, training, and behavior support to comply with the three legislative changes collectively, acknowledging their interrelatedness. Not all leaders agreed with legislative change. One leader thought that recess needed to be taken away if a significant behavior issue occurred during recess. Another leader indicated that recess detention was a more developmentally appropriate option for students in grades 4 or 5 than suspension. Leaders also requested more staff to teach prosocial behaviors and to support students when they are in crisis.

“I mostly need those that are making the recommendations to understand what it’s like to be an elementary principal on a Tuesday. Some of the changes feel unrealistic at times, and the recommendations given thus far are so broad and vague that it’s more frustrating than helpful (mostly around NED, Recess Detention and K-3 suspensions).”

Prone restraint and physical holds

Few leaders provided comments about the legislative changes prohibiting prone restraints and certain physical holds, but those that did comment reported a need for more clarity regarding the policy’s language. They also sought **clarity** for both schools and law enforcement (i.e., school resource officers, police departments) to support the use of restorative justice practices and to prevent students from entering the juvenile justice system.

“[We need] clarification for schools and police departments around the prone restraint and physical holds legislation. [Lack of clarity] is hindering our ability to make restorative justice decisions and build relationships with students rather than ticketing and adding kids to the juvenile justice system.”

Pupil withdrawal agreements

Few leaders provided comments about the legislative changes limiting pupil withdrawal from school, but those that did reported a need for more **information and training** to effectively implement the changes or more **clarity** regarding the policy’s language and intent. For instance, one leader wanted to know the number of “reasonable steps” to pupil withdrawal. Another questioned why pupil withdrawal needed to be limited. In addition, several leaders associated pupil withdrawal agreements with prone restraint and physical holds and reported a need for clarity on both laws.

“I feel I need a better understanding of why Pupil Withdrawal Agreements are to be limited. I am not clear whether it is to promote the furthering of expulsion hearings or to lessen withdrawal and expulsion consideration.”

Ethnic studies

Leaders reported a need for **clarity, guidance, and support** in order to offer ethnic studies as a required course. More specifically, leaders identified a need to access curriculum, curriculum guides, implementation strategies, and support in writing a job description for an ethnic studies teacher. Several leaders indicated that they lacked clarity on what an ethnic studies course entailed. Leaders also identified a need for professional development to support the implementation of ethnic studies.

“I need to learn more about Ethnic Studies and how it impacts elementary.”

American Indian culture and language

Leaders reported a need for **clarity, guidance, resources, and support** in order to offer American Indian Culture and Language as a required course. More specifically, leaders identified a need for teachers, access to curriculum (e.g. curriculum approved by American Indian leaders), implementation requirements and timelines, classroom space, and professional development. Several leaders indicated that they did not understand the requirements or expectations for offering an American Indian Culture and Language course.

“I would like to grow our knowledge base and resources to implement American Indian Culture and Language at our site.”

Personal finance graduation requirement

Leaders reported a need for **clarity, guidance, resources, and support** in order to support high school students in meeting the personal finance graduation requirement. More specifically, they indicated a need for assistance in differentiating this new requirement from the existing personal finance standards. They also indicated a need for assistance in differentiating the personal finance courses taught in Career and Technical Education (CTE) and the courses meeting the requirement at the “regular high school” so as not to compete with CTE. In addition, leaders reported a need for curriculum options for fulfilling the graduation requirement, curriculum writing time to adapt their curriculum, professional development, and classroom space. One leader reported that the graduation requirement would reduce the number of elective classes available to students at their school.

“For the Personal Finance and Government [graduation requirements], how is this different from the required standards in these areas that are already in existence? Having clarity around these things will be helpful.”

Government and citizenship graduation requirement

Few leaders provided specific comments about the government and citizenship graduation requirement. Of those that did, comments indicated a need for **guidance and support**. Specifically, principals reported needing curriculum, staff, classroom space, and clarity regarding how the government and citizenship graduation requirement is different from the existing standards.

MENTAL HEALTH

In the development of the first MnPS, the Working Group decided to include a topical section designed to change with each iteration of the survey. Including an “insert” section each year—determined by the Working Group and Advisory Council—would not only motivate prior respondents to retake the survey, thus affording the collection of longitudinal data, but it would also allow us to include timely survey topics without adding to the survey’s overall length.

In the 2023 MnPS, the topic of the insert section was **mental health**. Student and staff mental health emerged from 2021 MnPS data as a major challenge for principals (Pekel et al., 2022), and follow-up focus groups reaffirmed the topic’s relevance to school leadership, and its impact on teaching and learning (Brogan et al., 2023).

In the sections that follow, we present findings from the 2023 insert section on mental health, beginning with questions about student mental health challenges, then turning to staff mental health challenges, and concluding with questions about principal wellbeing.

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

That young people are experiencing unprecedented challenges with mental health, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, has been widely reported, both in Minnesota and nationally (Minnesota Department of Health, 2022; Stone, 2023). As described above, principals selected *addressing student mental health challenges* as the leadership activity posing the “single greatest challenge” to them more than any other activity in 2023. Here, we relay findings from the 2023 insert section relating to student mental health, focusing on principals’ perceptions of:

- the impact of student mental health challenges on student learning,
- the degree to which school systems are equipped to support students experiencing mental health challenges, and
- root causes of student mental health challenges.

We close the section by summarizing respondents’ suggested policy and practice changes to address what they believe to be the most likely root causes of these challenges.

Impact on Student Learning

We asked principals to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement, *Student mental health challenges represent a major barrier to student learning at my school*. Alarming, 94% *somewhat agreed* or *agreed*, suggesting that student mental health challenges are not only pervasive across

the state, but are—from principals’ vantage points—significantly interfering with young peoples’ learning (see Figure 50).

Figure 50. Agreement with Student Mental Health Items, 2023



“Student mental health challenges represent a major barrier to student learning at my school.”



1%

“My school or district is able to provide adequate support for students experiencing mental health challenges.”



Adequacy of School or District Support

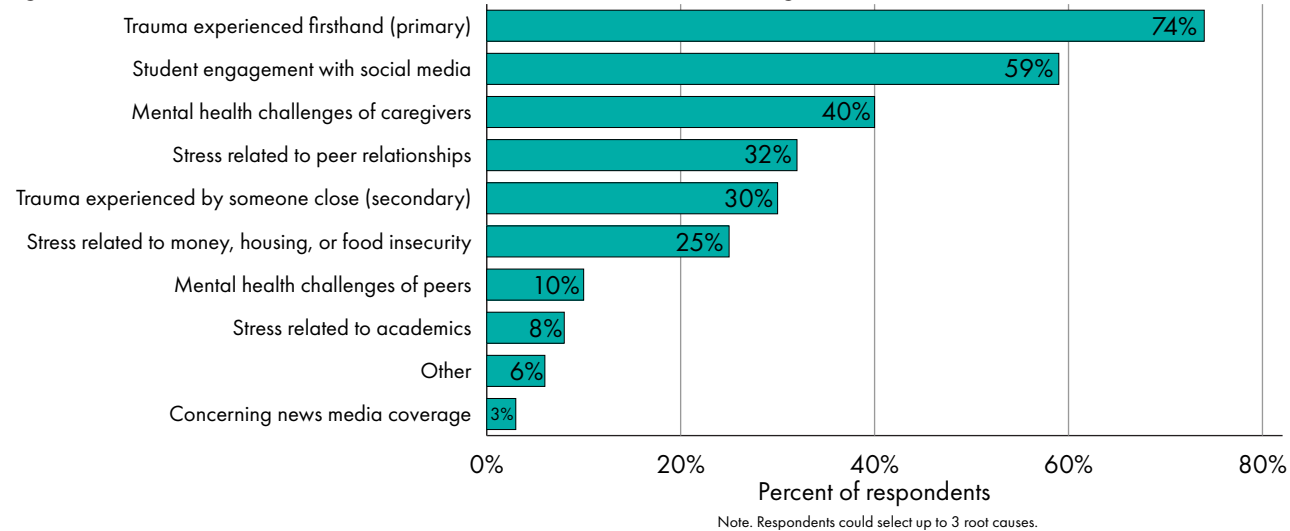
We then asked principals to report their agreement with the statement, *My school or district is able to provide adequate support for students experiencing mental health challenges*. Fewer than half (45%) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed*, with a majority of respondents indicating that the available supports are insufficient (see Figure 50).

Perceived Root Causes of Student Mental Health Challenges

In Summer 2022, the MnPS research team conducted a series of focus groups designed to enrich our understanding of findings from the 2021 survey. We asked focus group participants to share their perspectives on what they viewed to be the major causes of student mental health challenges (see Brogan et al., 2023). However, we wanted to understand the extent to which focus group participants’ perspectives were widely shared by the broader population of Minnesota principals. We asked 2023 survey participants what they think are the most likely root causes of the student mental health challenges they have witnessed in the past year, using focus group themes as potential response options. Figure 51, next page, displays the breakdown of responses to this question.

The three most-selected root causes were: *trauma experienced firsthand (primary trauma)* (74% of respondents selected this option), *student*

Figure 51. Perceived Root Causes of Student Mental Health Challenges, 2023



engagement with social media (59%), and *mental health challenges of caregivers* (40%). Among *other* responses ($n=52$, 6%), common root causes included lack of structure or parental presence within the home, lack of socialization and high anxiety resulting from COVID, too much screen time, substance use and addiction (among students and families), and societal or parental stress to measure up to an unrealistic ideal. Some principals stated that identifying root causes is challenging because students' mental health needs vary considerably, but mental health challenges are pervasive and require action.

Desired Policy and Practice Changes

For one of their selected root causes of student mental health challenges, participants were invited to provide open-ended responses to the question: *What policy or practice change(s) would likely help to improve affected students' mental health?* Themes for each of the three most-frequently selected root causes are described below; additional themes pertaining to other perceived root causes will be provided in the 2023 MnPS supplemental information posted to our landing page at <https://carei.umn.edu/mnps>.

Root cause 1: Trauma experienced firsthand (primary trauma). By far, the most common need identified by principals relative to primary trauma is regular, adequate, and **equitable access to mental health providers** such as therapists, counselors, and social workers. Some principals called for increased permanent state funding to support these positions, highlighting that current staff to student ratios are inadequate, and also acknowledging an insufficient candidate pool. Others hoped to increase the number of culturally responsive and trauma-informed licensed personnel who are located in school buildings, whether as in-house providers or on-site community partners. In either case, principals felt these changes would reduce wait time and increase consistency of care for students who need trauma-informed support.

In addition to mental health providers, principals sought additional **community resources** to support students and families. Highlighting that schools are not resourced to shoulder the burden of supporting students experiencing trauma alone, principals sought partnership and support from county and other community organizations. Access at school to community resources in the areas of (for example) addiction, poverty, trauma, physical health, and family health would help students and their families. Proposals for community school models and increased on-site community-based services reflect principals' hope for a collective approach to addressing student trauma so that schools do not "go it alone."

Principals also shared that **more expansive therapy options** for students and families would better meet their mental health needs. For example, principals felt that mental health care must be available both during and beyond the school day, and that family counseling, classes for caregivers, and support groups should be more widely available. Some principals even hoped to be able to provide universal mental health counseling to students, including an option to provide therapy without initial parent permission to reduce delays in care.

Lastly, principals desired more robust **trauma-informed care training and implementation** for all staff. They hoped to be able to build their staffs' knowledge of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their impact on student learning, as well as other evidence-based practices. Some principals felt ill-equipped to provide such training themselves, though it often fell on their shoulders and reduced their available time for instructional leadership tasks. Therefore, some suggested these trainings be offered centrally, with Continuing Education Units provided.

Root cause 2: Student engagement with social media. Among principals who selected student engagement with social media as a root cause of student mental health challenges, about half of those who offered policy or practice solutions called for either **cell phone bans or limited use policies in schools**. Principals desired clear policies and expectations with respect to student cell phone use in schools. Decreasing 1:1 access to devices and technical solutions for limiting access to personal devices (e.g., Yondr Pouches) were several of the ideas proposed. Principals acknowledge that even with cell phone bans or limited use policies at school, students' use of social media outside the school day has a negative impact on their social and learning experiences at school.

"[We need] no phones between 8:30 and 3:30."

"[We need a] statewide ban of cell phones in schools. End the distractions in schools."

Another prominent theme in principals' ideas was **parent/caregiver education and involvement**. Many principals see parents/caregivers as essential partners in mitigating the harms of social media use, and believe a community-conscious, community-involved approach is warranted. Specifically, leaders proposed trainings for families to highlight the dangers of social media, as well as clear guidance on how and to what extent to set boundaries around screen time and social media use at home. Some suggested that state public health initiatives (e.g., public service announcements) would be effective in educating families. In some cases, leaders hoped to hold families accountable for setting those boundaries, though some acknowledged that not all

families have the time or resources to closely monitor students' device usage.

"[We need] comprehensive family and student education regarding the brain science behind addiction to social media, impact of social media and screen time, knowledge about the applications students utilize, etc."

Relatedly, many principals suggested that **curriculum on the negative impacts of social media use** would support students in making healthy decisions about their engagement in social media. Some suggested such curriculum could be paired with existing SEL curriculum and should start in elementary school. Others called for a technology literacy requirement for high school students.

Lastly, some principals felt that addressing social media misuse by students would require **legal action** against social media and technology companies, or **state legislation** to prohibit companies from targeting youth with addictive online content.

Root cause 3: Mental health challenges of caregivers. Of the principals who viewed the mental health challenges of caregivers as a leading cause of the student mental health crisis, most suggested **increasing caregivers' access to mental health services** as a necessary change. Specifically, principals felt that current mental health care options for families are insufficient, and that counties and community organizations must play a lead role in increasing the availability of counseling services. Many acknowledged that doing so will require incentives for individuals to go into mental health careers, given the current lack of providers.

Another theme among principals' suggested changes was the need for **wrap-around services at schools**, such as those that are typically made available in full service community schools.²²

STAFF MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

As described above, *addressing staff mental health challenges* was the third most-selected leadership activity posing the "single greatest challenge" to principals out of 49 possible activities, only after *addressing student mental health challenges* and *establishing a robust Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)*. Similar to the above section on student mental health, the following paragraphs summarize 2023 survey findings pertaining to staff mental health, focusing on principals' perceptions of:

- the impact of staff mental health challenges on student learning,
- the degree to which school systems are equipped to support staff members experiencing mental health challenges, and
- root causes of staff mental health challenges.

Again, we conclude the section by summarizing respondents' suggested policy and practice changes to address what they believe to be the most likely root causes of staff mental health challenges.

22. For resources related to full service community schools in Minnesota, visit <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/fullserve/PROD083142>.

Impact on Student Learning

We asked principals to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement, *Staff mental health challenges represent a major barrier to student learning at my school*. Figure 52 displays the breakdown of participants' responses. A clear majority (70%) *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with the statement, highlighting the prevalence of staff mental health challenges in Minnesota schools as well as its consequences for teaching and learning.

Adequacy of School or District Support

We also asked principals to indicate their agreement with the statement, *My school or district is able to provide adequate support for staff experiencing mental health challenges*. About the same proportion (43%) of school leaders *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* with this statement as they did with the

comparable student-level item, implying that schools need more support to address both student and staff mental health challenges (see Figure 52).

Perceived Root Causes of Staff Mental Health Challenges

To better understand the factors leading to staff mental health challenges, we asked participants to select from a list of 8 options (including an *other* response with text entry) what they think are the most likely root causes. Figure 53, next page, displays the breakdown of responses, ordered from most- to least-frequently selected. Overall, *challenging student behavior* (e.g., *disengagement, threats, verbal or physical attacks*) was the most frequently selected root cause, with 4 out of 5 principals (81%) selecting this option. The next most frequent responses were *inadequate time to fulfill work responsibilities* (65%) and *staffing shortages* (63%). Top themes from *other* responses ($n=62$, 7%) included the negative public narrative surrounding teachers and education, increasing work expectations (e.g., more meetings without commensurate reductions in teaching loads), and personal factors. Some also named challenging relationships with parents and insufficient compensation as other root causes.

Desired Policy and Practice Changes

Again, we wanted to know what principals thought would be likely to help address challenges related to staff

Figure 52. Agreement with Staff Mental Health Items, 2023

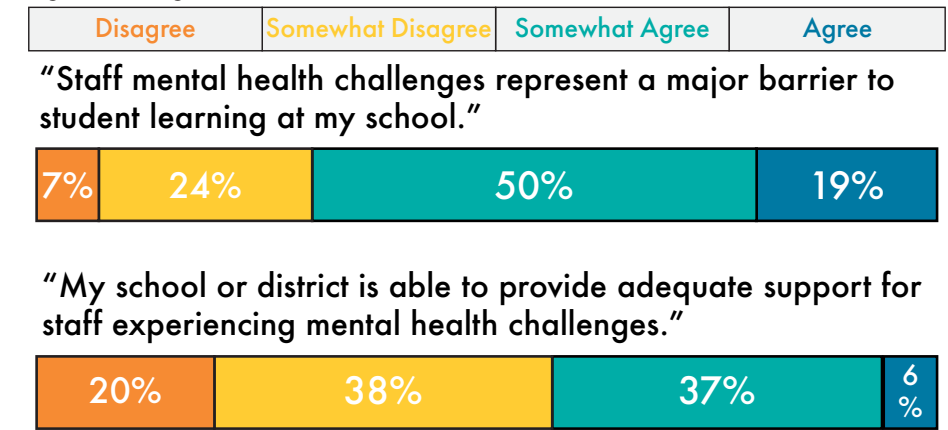
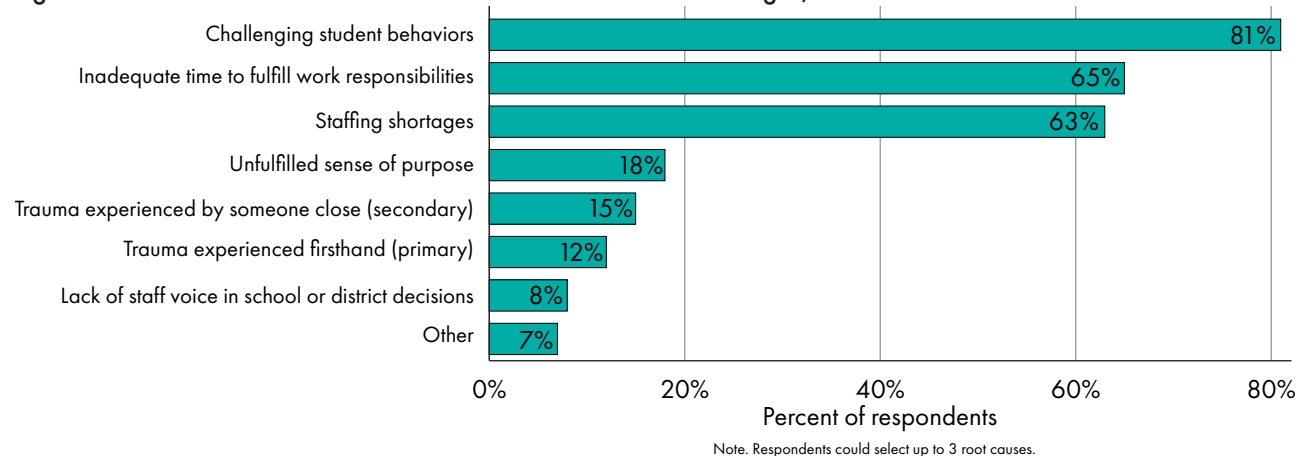


Figure 53. Perceived Root Causes of Staff Mental Health Challenges, 2023



mental health. For one of their selected root causes, participants were asked to provide ideas on the policy or practice changes that would likely help improve affected staff members' mental health. Themes for each of the three most-frequently selected root causes are described below; additional themes pertaining to other perceived root causes will be provided in the 2023 MnPS supplemental information posted to our landing page at <https://carei.umn.edu/mnps>.

Root cause 1: Challenging student behavior (e.g., disengagement, threats, verbal or physical attacks).

The most prominent theme among principals' suggestions to address challenging student behavior was the need for **more staff** to support students. Leaders report needing more behavior specialists, counselors, social workers, and educational assistants to respond to students who are disregulated or who are disrupting the learning of others. Additionally, respondents shared that lowering the student to staff ratio and reducing class sizes in general would also help.

Many principals also called on legislators to **revisit the non-exclusionary discipline policy**. Principals reported frustration with not having suspension as an option when students are consistently disruptive or unsafe, especially in the absence of additional staff. They also sought clarity and guidance on allowable and realistic alternatives to exclusionary discipline.

"Non-exclusionary discipline is good in theory, when there is SEL support to teach alternate behaviors. We do not have the staff (too many students in need for our current staffing) or funds to provide the necessary support."

Lastly, principals called for **more funding to support staff and student learning and development** in responding to challenging student behavior. Specifically, principals suggested funding to improve staff understanding of ACEs and trauma, their knowledge of de-escalation strategies, and their ability to build positive relationships with students. Additionally, principals sought funding for student materials to guide their

learning about healthy responses to threats, verbal conflict, and physical attacks, and to teach strategies to promote healthy conflict resolution. Principals reported feeling that teachers do not have useful content to deliver in a consistent, comprehensive, and evidenced based way at this current time.

In the majority of cases, principals' suggestions related to student behaviors including threats and verbal or physical attacks. Student disengagement, though listed in parentheses as part of the "challenging student behavior" response option, was not directly addressed among respondents' proposed policy and practice changes.

Root cause 2: Inadequate time to fulfill work responsibilities. Among principals who indicated that inadequate time to fulfill work responsibilities was a primary root cause of staff mental health challenges, many advocated for **increased staff time** for professional development, team collaboration, and team data analysis. Currently, educators' workloads preclude them from engaging in the evidence-based practices of reflection, collaboration with colleagues to address student learning gaps, and evaluation of student work. Principals also felt that teachers would benefit from more time to lesson plan and appropriately respond to students' SEL needs.

"I feel that workload continues to come up for staff as a major barrier. I think it could be helpful to gather information on time spent by teachers to analyze actual time spent on workload to see what we can do to support. I think it would provide information on how much is put on teachers with initiatives."

"[We need] a teacher contract that provides additional time to fulfill work responsibilities before and after school hours."

Having more dedicated time for these important practices would require a **reorganization of the school day and year**, according to many principals. Some suggested adjusting the length of the school day, shifting to a four-day student week, or extending contract hours without student supervision. Leaders also suggested reorganizing the year by building in mental health days, reducing the number of "initiatives" that demand staff time throughout the year, compensating summer work, and generally reducing teachers' work expectations.

"[We need to] restructure the school day/year so that there is adequate time for professional development, reflection, and collaboration."

"[We need] more professional learning days for staff. [We need] school calendars and minutes required revisited."

An implication of the aforementioned proposed changes is, of course, **more funding**. Whether for hiring new staff to supervise students during the school day or for paying existing staff for extended days or summer work, funds are needed, and could go a long way in compensating teachers and staff appropriately for their work.

“[We need to] increase funding to schools to increase FTE in order to re-think the amount of time teachers spend with students (hours taught) to increase the amount of time for planning; developing curriculum/common assessments; collecting, analyzing, and responding to data; professional learning (coaching/reading/observing peers/etc.) so that the work we prioritize can be completed in a manageable amount of time (work day).”

Root cause 3: Staffing shortages. Principals who felt that staff mental health challenges were due in large part to staffing shortages had many ideas for alleviating those shortages. A common theme among these ideas was **increased pay for teachers.** Principals reported that a significant increase in teachers’ salaries would help considerably to keep teachers in the classroom by appropriately compensating their work. More competitive benefits were also named by multiple principals as an important approach to reducing staffing shortages.

Other principals advocated for **increased pay for paraprofessionals and substitute teachers.** These individuals are critical members of the school team who are frequently tapped to fill staff shortages, often on a last-minute basis. Paying paraprofessionals and substitutes in ways that reflect their value to the school community, and providing them with a competitive benefits package, would help to retain these individuals and ensure that students and staff alike have the support they need, according to principals.

Another idea offered by many principals was to **expand pathways and opportunities for teacher licensure.** Establishing pathways for non-licensed staff to become teachers, paying for licensure programs, and paying student teachers were specific suggestions provided for ensuring an adequate pool of licensed educators and fully staffed schools.

Relatedly, principals offered suggestions for **alleviating substitute shortages.** One idea offered was to create pathways for paraprofessionals to substitute when a licensed teacher is out, on the grounds that staff members who already know students and school/classroom expectations will be better prepared to guide students’ learning than someone who does not know the students or school. Another idea was to fund full-time building substitutes. Finally, principals did not see teachers using their prep time to cover their colleagues’ classes as a viable solution, which they viewed as having a direct negative impact on staff mental health.

“Less staff throughout the building is tough because more is expected from each staff member. We now expect teachers to be teachers, counselors, psychologists, mental health advocates, etc., and it is hard work. Not only that, but with the cost of living increases continuing to outpace salary/benefits increases, we continue to have less and less applicants for all positions.”

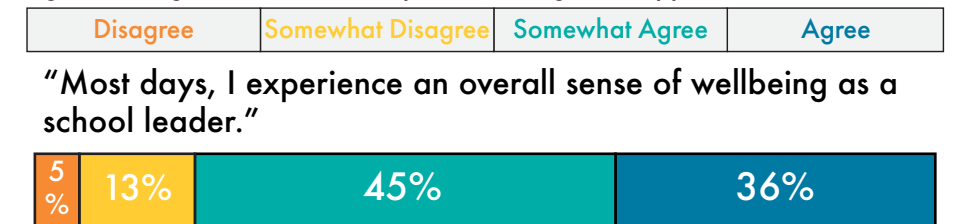
“[We need] more compensation, more proactive measures to cultivate pathways for non-licensed [staff] to become licensed.”

PRINCIPAL WELLBEING

In 2021, when asked what support would be most helpful at that stage in the COVID-19 pandemic, one in ten MnPS respondents reported needing mental health resources for themselves (Pekel et al., 2022). In 2023, we followed up with principals to understand their current sense of wellbeing, factors that detract from their wellbeing, and their perceptions of the adequacy of district-level support for school leader mental health.

We asked principals to rate their agreement with the statement, *Most days, I experience an overall sense of wellbeing as a school leader.* Figure 54 displays the breakdown of responses to this item. Overall, 81% *somewhat agreed* or *agreed*. However, 19% *somewhat disagreed* or *disagreed* with this statement, with 5% selecting the lowest response option of *disagree*. While most principals are experiencing wellbeing in their roles, many are not, with implications not only for those leaders’ likely career trajectories, but also for the leadership they are able to offer to their school communities.

Figure 54. Agreement with Principal Wellbeing and Support Items, 2023



“Most days, I experience an overall sense of wellbeing as a school leader.”

Factors that Detract from Wellbeing

To understand what may be most challenging to principals with regard to their own mental health, we asked principals, *What school- or district-level factors most detract from your own wellbeing as a school leader?* Principals could select up to three options from a list of 11, including an *other* response option with text entry. We present principals’ responses in Figure 55, next page. Tied for the most-frequently selected factors were *inadequate time to fulfill work responsibilities* and *staffing shortages*, with 58% of respondents selecting both options, followed closely by *challenging student behaviors (e.g., disengagement, threats, verbal or physical attacks)* (51%). Themes from *other* responses (n=96, 12%) included challenging staff behaviors and adult conflict, frustration with unfunded state mandates, and the increasingly complex demands facing school leaders.

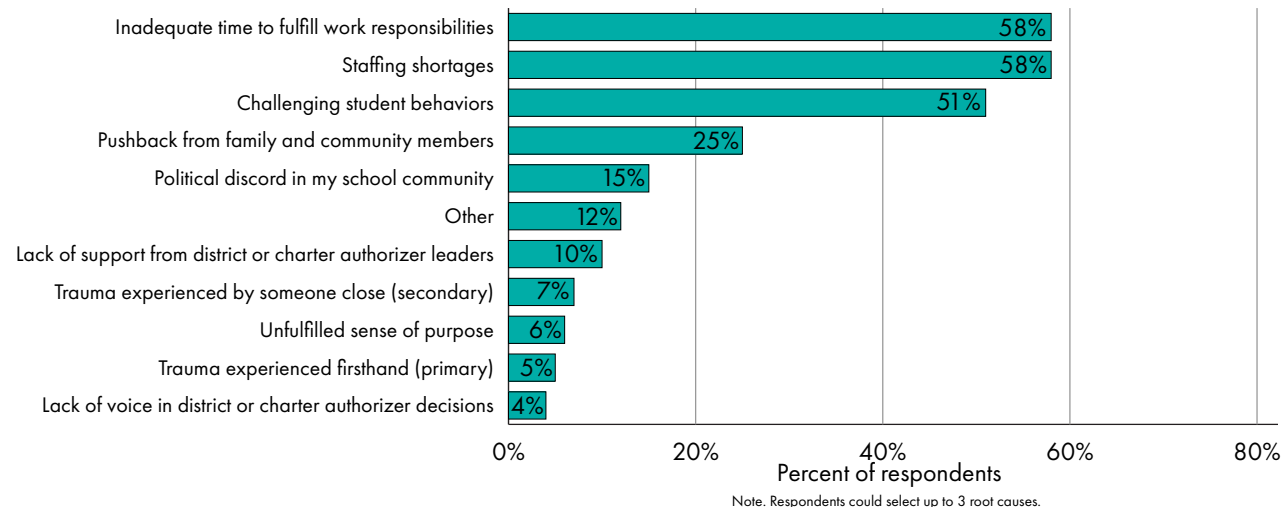
“My district is able to provide adequate support for school leaders experiencing mental health challenges.”



Adequacy of Support

Lastly, similar to items above relating to student and staff mental health, principals rated their agreement with the statement, *My district is able to provide adequate support for school leaders experiencing mental health challenges.* Approximately half of respondents *somewhat agreed* or *agreed* (52%) that their districts provide adequate support, while the other half (48%) *somewhat disagreed* or *disagreed*, suggesting that the mental health support available to principals varies widely across Minnesota districts (see Figure 54, above).

Figure 55. Factors Detracting from Principal Wellbeing, 2023



FOSTERING WELLBEING IN SCHOOLS: LESSONS LEARNED

The final question in the Mental Health section of the survey pertained to principals’ work to foster wellbeing in their schools. Specifically, we asked the open-ended question: *What lessons have you learned as a school leader about fostering wellbeing in your school community? In other words, what has worked to foster the wellbeing of your students, staff, and even yourself?*

Principals overwhelmingly reported that they learned it was important to take a human-centered approach to fostering wellbeing. They emphasized the following three interrelated actions: building relationships, listening and responding to needs, and leading through positive messaging and modeling. They also reported a need to attend to schoolwide programming and practices to support wellbeing in their schools. These themes are described below along with quotations that exemplify them.

Building relationships. Principals reported that taking time to build relationships was critically important to foster wellbeing in their schools. Several principals indicated that an emphasis on relationship-building was necessary for developing trust and for increasing a sense of belonging among students, staff, and families. They also reported that relationship-building was key to creating a positive school culture. Some principals specifically shared that “relationships built between staff and families were crucial to the wellbeing of [their] students.” Principals also felt that students and staff experienced better relationships with one another as a result of schoolwide relationship-building efforts.

“It’s all about establishing trusting relationships with all stakeholders. If you have that you can work through all other things.”

Listening and responding to needs. Several principals reported that listening to students and staff and responding to their needs were key to fostering wellbeing in their schools. Many principals shared the importance of having processes in place for soliciting feedback on an ongoing basis through more formal practices like weekly check-ins and listening sessions and less formal ones like day-to-day conversations. Some principals, more specifically, reported that listening allowed them to “slow down the decision making process,” to understand and include student and staff perspectives, and/or to seek solutions to challenges. In addition, principals felt that they needed to be present and available to serve the members of their school community.

“Get to know people. Listen to their stories. Trust them. Take that information to heart and utilize it to shape the school community.”

Positive messaging and modeling. Principals reported that leading with positivity, modeling self-care, and modeling care for others were important for fostering wellbeing in their schools. Also as part of building positive school cultures, several principals specifically reported that it was their responsibility to model transparency, authenticity, vulnerability, and/or empathy in their communications with students, families, and staff. In addition, many principals reported that practicing gratitude was key to their leadership. Other principal behaviors or actions reported for fostering schoolwide wellbeing included inspiring “hope for the future,” celebrating and empowering staff, creating safe learning environments, and having fun.

“I remind myself daily that I am the thermostat of this building. I must display positivity and kindness; that everything will be alright.”

Schoolwide programming and practices. Principals reported implementing schoolwide programs for fostering wellbeing in their schools such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and Restorative Practices (RP). They also reported other efforts to support student and staff wellness. Examples of these efforts included facilitating staff book studies, facilitating conversations about race and culture, having one-minute or weekly check-ins, and providing opportunities for students to participate in after-school activities.

“My goal is to always provide a place for students to belong and have a place to be that is safe and available for them to be themselves. I try to add clubs and activities that would best fit our students.”

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS FROM EXPERIENCES AS A SCHOOL LEADER

In the final question of the survey, we intended to collect additional thoughts by asking leaders, *Is there anything else about your experience as a school leader that may be helpful for various education stakeholders to know—including local and state-level decision-makers?* Participants could use up to 500 characters to respond. In total, there were 294 leaders who responded to this question. Their responses primarily aligned with 7 major themes, which are summarized below in order of prevalence in the data. Responses that did not align with at least one of these themes were grouped into a category labeled other and are also described below.

THEME 1: UNSUSTAINABLE CONDITIONS FOR TEACHING, LEARNING, AND LEADING

Consistent with open-ended comments from 2021, the most prevalent theme among open-ended comments was the perspective that the current conditions under which teaching, learning, and leading are taking place are not sustainable and require urgent action to improve. Many such comments focused specifically on the principals' role. Leaders reported that their jobs required too much of them, leading to burnout and consideration of early retirement or career changes.

"I am an extremely passionate educator who wants to be in this profession and make a difference but something has to give. I am barely surviving day to day operations and I know I can't keep this up. It's extremely disappointing because I know that education is where I always wanted to be and believe I thrive, but something has to give. It's an impossible profession."

Leaders cited staff shortages, student behavior, and lack of trust from families and community members as contributing to their jobs having become significantly more challenging in recent years.

Many principals viewed the societal devaluation of teachers as an important contributor to the challenges they faced. Principals viewed their teachers as having more and more responsibilities without commensurate increases in their pay or autonomy. Increasing workloads—especially fueled by student behavioral and mental health challenges—are leading to heightened stress and burnout among teachers, as well as staff absences and turnover. Disturbingly, multiple leaders described the current situation as urgent and dire, as in the following examples:

"Education is calling for myself and most of the leaders I know. But current trends and society are pushing out the good people who are in this job for the right reasons. If change does not happen soon—immediately—we are going to lose the best, and that is a tragedy for students, families, and future society. We need a new plan of action and we need to move quickly."

"We are drowning. Educators are not well. Without significant support, the system will implode."

In addition to valuing and compensating teachers better, suggestions for improving unsustainable working and learning conditions in schools included increasing teachers' prep and professional development time as well as significantly increasing investments in mental health for both students and their families.

THEME 2: FRUSTRATION WITH LEGISLATIVE PROCESS AND OUTCOMES

The second-most prominent theme in open-ended responses to the final survey question was a sense of frustration with the 2023 legislative session. Numerous principals cited frustration with what they viewed as unfunded, unclear, or unrealistic mandates. One principal wrote, for example: "The people making laws aren't at the ground level seeing how the changes affect schools. Making decisions in theory vs. practice are two VERY different things. More unfunded/underfunded mandates create stress and push people out of education."

Principals' frustration was especially high with regard to policy changes related to non-exclusionary discipline, which leaders viewed as well-intentioned but impractical or even detrimental to school safety. According to one leader:

"State legislation has made this job more difficult in the last few years. Legislators passed bills without looking at the impact on schools. We need alternatives for students who are in school truant or consistently violent in buildings. Having students stay in the buildings for us to babysit them isn't the answer. We are burning out teachers and admin."

Principals reported frustration not only with the outcomes of the session in terms of the policy changes made, but also with the process—namely in terms of their perspectives being largely ignored. One principal explained:

"I live and raised my family in the community for which I am a principal. I am actively involved in school and community groups. The last legislative session was the first in my 32 years in education where I do not feel represented. I am very disappointed. The follow up from the legislation from MDE was very disappointing. Obviously principals play a key role leading our schools and community. Our state legislature can do a better job of listening to principals in the field."

Another concern raised by some principals was that a one-size-fits-all, statewide approach to educational policy-making is often not appropriate. Principals from Greater Minnesota, for example, perceived some policy changes as Twin Cities-centric:

"Stop pushing initiatives for the benefit of the population of the 7 county metro area that are enacted statewide."

Additionally, several charter school leaders felt that state level policy did not take into account charter schools' particular contexts (e.g., small student body, credit recovery focus) when making decisions relating to funding and accountability.

In addition to calling on state leaders to reduce or eliminate unfunded mandates, many leaders pleaded with legislators and state officials to trust them to make decisions in the interest of their particular school communities.

"Trust principals to make decisions about discipline and instructional approaches. Quit micromanaging and mandating coming out of a pandemic when we are rebuilding and always short staffed."

THEME 3: POSITIVE OUTLOOK OR PERSPECTIVE

While most open-ended comments revealed frustration, disappointment, and/or burnout with the current conditions facing Minnesota schools, a sizable minority of leaders conveyed a positive outlook or perspective on their jobs or on public education, generally. This was also true in 2021. Many expressed that, despite its challenges, the principalship is a fulfilling job. Below are several representative quotes conveying an overall sense of satisfaction and positivity among principals:

"Public education is a worthy endeavor that needs to be a cherished value in our society. The more excellence we generate for each child from any background, the more valuable we become to the citizenry. I have so much excitement for being able to change the heart of our nation through our schools."

"Being a principal is a fulfilling role that I thoroughly enjoy, embracing the daily challenges it brings. However, I acknowledge the toll these challenges can take on my well-being, potentially affecting my capacity to make [a] meaningful impact. Despite these difficulties, I am committed to staying in education. As challenging as this work can be, I have a heart for this work and continue to strive to make an impact!"

"This is an amazing profession that impacts the lives of so many students and families. Anyone in the position is blessed with opportunity, relationships, and an impact far greater than they know."

THEME 4: NEED FOR FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN EDUCATION

The next most prominent theme among open-ended responses to the final survey question was a need expressed among principals for fundamental change in our public education system. In many ways, principals related this need to the challenges described in association with Theme 1: Unsustainable Conditions for Teaching, Learning, and Leading. Leaders used words and phrases such as "crisis," "pivotal point," "uncharted territory," "underlying stress," and "fundamental problem" to describe the urgency and gravity of their situations and why fundamental change is necessary. They also used words like "reinvent," "reimagine," "rethink," "reorganize," "overhaul," and "shift paradigms" to highlight that the changes they seek are not incremental but dramatic.

Often, principals' calls for change were vague in nature. Some indicated that "something" should or would change, without naming what that something was. For example, one principal shared,

"I think public education as we know it is about to fundamentally change. I don't know when, why, or how but there's an underlying stress that is about to break loose and we (as a state and perhaps even a nation) are going to have to make some big decisions if this thing we value is going to continue to exist."

Others had more specific changes in mind. For example, several principals bemoaned one-size-fits-all grade level requirements and learning pathways on the grounds that they disengaged students and failed to take into account their skills and interests. Several others sought fundamental change to the prevailing power structures governing the work of schools, viewing student voice and teacher professionalism as a key next step. One leader, for instance, commented:

"We are at a pivotal point when it comes to educational reform. Educational systems need to shift their paradigms from power and control to empowering students by giving them voice, choice and [a sense of] belonging at our schools and in our communities. We need to empower teachers, principals and leaders with job embedded PD and coaching to support implementation."

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS

Other leaders called for a complete overhaul of how schools are organized, with varying degrees of optimism that such an overhaul would take place. This leader shared one of the more pessimistic viewpoints, suggesting that education leaders must “go upstream” to find solutions:

“My job as principal (PK-5, 500 students) has taken over my life for the past 12 years and I'll be leaving it after this year (I'm 56). I sense no interest in my district at looking at the fundamental problem of how schools are organized, and the unreasonable demands that are placed on everyone in the system. We need to go "upstream" and start reorganizing based on what we know about change, learning, trauma, and organizations. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like we'll go there. I'm not hopeful.”

THEME 5: FEEDBACK FOR DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

Approximately two dozen respondents provided comments about their own school districts and the support they receive from district administrators. In some cases, principals spoke highly of district support, noting how critical it was to their ability to do their jobs well. In other cases, they noted frustrations with district leadership, including superintendents and school boards. Frustrations included: increased demands on school leaders from district administration without commensurate support, ineffective district-provided professional development, being required to attend “insignificant meetings,” lack of effective principal and superintendent mentoring opportunities, supervision by individuals without building-level leadership experience, a perception of having limited power or voice as a “middle manager,” lack of trust from district administration to make school-level decisions, and increased district-level administrative positions without noticeable impacts on schools and students.

Several respondents expressed disappointment in district leadership for not providing adequate support for principals from historically marginalized communities, including principals of color, female principals, and LGBTQ+ principals. For instance, one principal noted,

“Being a Black leader in [a] mostly white community and among a white staff requires district leadership to understand how those racial dynamics impact mental health and create many barriers that are both passively and aggressively placed in the way by colleagues and the community. The leadership can't believe their sympathy or empathy is enough, they have to act and they have to have a strategic plan to support, recruit and retain other Black leaders.”

Another wrote, simply,

“Need more support for LGBTQ+ school leaders.”

Comments such as these emphasize that principal identity matters, and that principals from minoritized communities need differentiated supports from district leadership that go beyond “sympathy or empathy.”

THEME 6: GRATITUDE FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE INPUT

As in 2021, respondents shared gratitude for the opportunity to provide their perceptions of the principalship via the Minnesota Principals Survey. Some individuals were simply grateful to be able to share their perspectives, while others expressed excitement and enthusiasm about how the findings might be used. For example, one respondent wrote,

“Thank you for the survey. I appreciate the opportunity to share my experiences, and look forward to the survey results and what can be done to support school leaders in the future.”

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THEME 7: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL REFLECTIONS

A final theme from open-ended responses was the expression of personal or professional reflections regarding the principalship. These reflections included lessons learned about school leadership, core beliefs about work in education, and advice for others in school leadership positions. Illustrative quotes include the following:

“I've learned that you must be true to yourself, who you are, and what you stand for, or if you lose sight of your purpose, you will be burnt out fighting for a cause you don't believe in.”

“Just understand that there are enough good things that happen in a day that make you want to keep coming back. Take care of yourself and know that the work you are doing does make an impact.”

OTHER COMMENTS

Some respondents provided comments that did not fit neatly into one of the major themes described above. A handful of principals offered suggestions for improving principal preparation and professional development. Four principals provided feedback on the survey itself. Two participants advocated specifically for increasing the number and proportion of principals of color to better reflect the student population. Other comments not reflected above pertained to the following broad topics: advocacy for specific programs, suggestions for teacher preparation, tension between community and administration in response to new social studies standards, frustration with toxic staff culture, concerns about student drug and alcohol use, dissatisfaction with state testing, school board dysfunction, unintended consequences of the state's free lunch program, and ideas to leverage the skills and experience of retiring administrators.

CONCLUSION

In this second statewide survey of school principals, the MnPS provides data as to how principals are experiencing their work, how confident they are in carrying out their various responsibilities, and what additional support they may need. When the inaugural survey data from 2021 was shared, oftentimes audiences would understandably ask, “Is this due to the pandemic?” Meaning, were the results of the survey influenced by the tremendous workload and incredible circumstances of the pandemic? The 2023 data illustrates that, in fact, the 2021 results were not just a result of the pandemic. While principals’ satisfaction and workload sustainability slightly increased from 2021 to 2023, they continue to report their time is being spent on tasks they wish it were not (internal administrative tasks) at the expense of things they wish it could be (instructional tasks, family and community interactions, and their own professional growth). Additionally, principals’ confidence across 49 areas of leadership responsibilities fell an average of 7 percentage points while their engagement in culturally responsive school leadership activities decreased in all but one area that appeared in the 2021 survey.

Overwhelmingly, principals tell us they continue to be incredibly concerned about both student and staff mental health and well being. In the 2023 survey, we learned more about the specific kinds of support they need: more staff, collaborations with families and community organizations, and more money to fund professional development for staff.

New in 2023 were questions about recently-enacted legislation that directly impacts the day to day work of school leaders. In those questions the closed-ended questions regarding familiarity with and confidence to implement the policies masks the frustration evident among the 619 open-ended comments about barriers to compliance with the legislative changes. One such comment sums up the overarching sentiment well:

“We cannot have legislation without support for implementation.”

Principals want legislators to understand their daily work and what is currently being asked of school staff, to genuinely consult with them as they are developing new policies, and to adequately fund the time it will take to implement those policies. Additionally, principals overwhelmingly report a need for the Minnesota Department of Education to provide clear and timely guidance “... on the enormous task of interpreting the legislative changes and sharing [those interpretations] with schools.”

While two years of data does not yet establish a clear trend, it is apparent to any reviewer of this data that principals view their jobs as challenging in many

ways. Principals also shared concrete examples of what they most need in their many open-ended comments. It is this research team’s hope that the results of this survey, especially the careful coding and synthesis of those open-ended comments, will be heard, acknowledged, and acted upon.

As shared above in our reporting on principals’ greatest challenges and needed supports, one principal’s words bear repeating:

“Being an instructional leader is what I want to do and I am prepared for, yet, our roles have largely become managerial. We do not have the support and/or time to do what we should be doing. I wish that wasn’t the case, but mental health needs, lack of staff, and initiative/mandate overload have watered down the principalship from instructional leaders to building managers.”

This sentiment could be a summary statement for much of the data contained in this report. Principals want to engage in those aspects of the job they know will have the greatest impact on student learning, yet they are struggling to find the time and space to do so. As Olson-Skog (2022) identified in his research in Minnesota school districts, co-creation of the role, duties, and support provided to principals is one way for district office leaders to begin to engage the findings found in this report and explore their relevance to the building leaders in their own districts.

NEXT STEPS

The MnPS data will be widely disseminated, follow-up focus groups will be conducted to further understand key findings, and additional policy and practice briefs will be published in early 2025. At the time of this report, The Minneapolis Foundation is pursuing state legislation to fund this work moving forward.

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