The State of the Principalship

Five key takeaways from the Minnesota Principals Survey

By Dr. Katie Pekel, Executive Director of Educational Leadership, University of Minnesota

What is the state of the principalship in Minnesota?

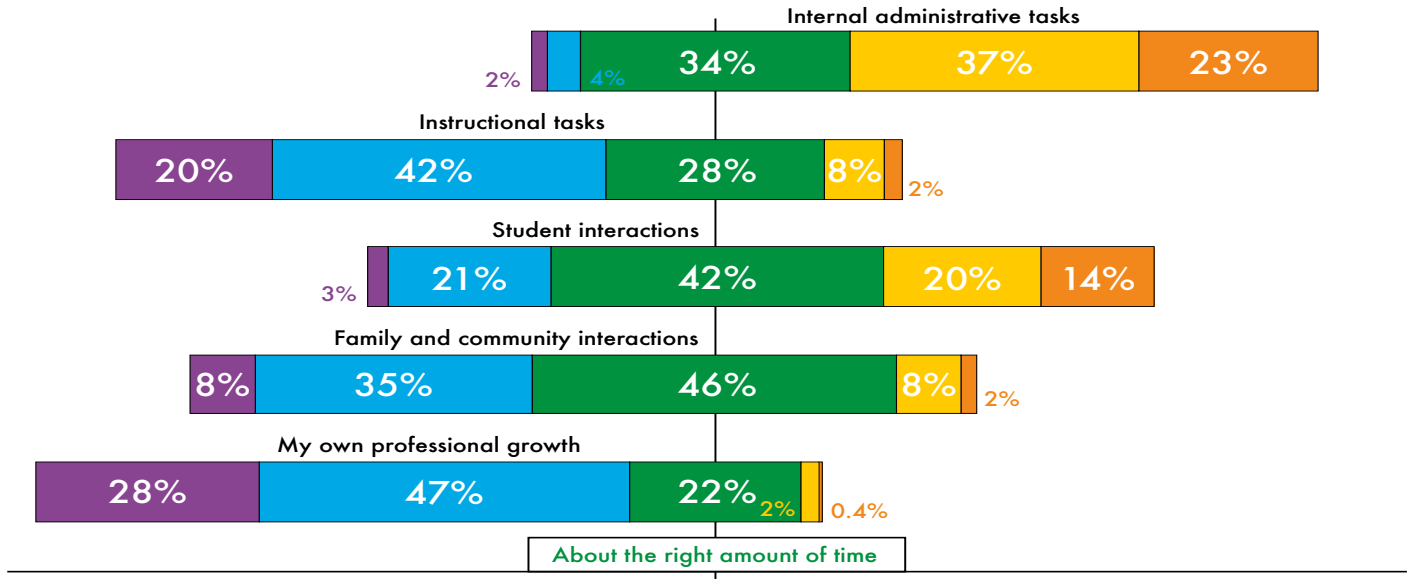
As a result of generous funding from The Minneapolis Foundation and the Joyce Foundation, we can begin to answer that question. In late fall 2023, nearly 1,000 principals, assistant principals, and charter school leaders from across the state responded to the most recent Minnesota Principals Survey (MnPS). This is the second time this robust survey has been conducted (the first was in fall 2021), so we can now compare results over time.

The MnPS asks 130 close-ended questions that allow for comparisons across many variables — where principals serve in terms of level or geography, years of experience, and demographic information such as gender and race, to name a few. To be sure we can attempt to understand our respondents, we also ask six open-ended questions where they can tell us their thoughts. This year, those open-ended responses totaled nearly 200 pages of text that our research team reviewed, categorized, and summarized.

If I had to choose one quote from a principal that best summarizes the open-ended response data, it would be this one:

"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."

Time spent on various leadership tasks, 2023 Minnesota Principals Survey



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



Katie Pekel

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. A full summary of our findings can be found at carei.umn.edu/mnps; this article is intended to give school board members a high-level summary of five key takeaways from this most recent MnPS:

(1.) Lack of time to do all that is needed. Consistent with 2021 survey findings, principals told us that their job responsibilities far exceed the time they have available to fulfill them. This leads to stress, burnout, and, in some cases, intentions of leaving the principalship. Specifically, they don't have enough time for instructional and community-engaged leadership. Principals shared they must sacrifice time they would like and are expected to spend on *Instructional leadership* and *Community engagement* in order to attend to administrative tasks (e.g., filling staffing shortages) and responding to urgent needs like student dysregulation and behavior. Additionally, they reported engaging less frequently in some culturally responsive school leadership practices than they did in 2021. For example, a smaller percentage of principals [41% in 2023 vs 50% in 2021] reported engaging in *Developing culturally responsive teachers.*

(2.) A loss of 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 (see accompanying graphic for list). The percentage of principals who reported having sufficient confidence decreased for 47 out of those 49 leadership activities between 2021 and 2023.

The largest decreases were in *Addressing student mental health, Leveraging research findings to inform decision-making,* and *Engaging students and families in school decision making.* They gained confidence only in *Supporting culturally responsive pedagogy.* From 2021 to 2023, there was an overall average decrease in the percentage reporting *sufficient* or *more than sufficient* confidence by 7 percentage points.

This lack of reported confidence would seem to warrant an emphasis on access to high quality professional development for principals; however, 75% of principals reported that they are spending less time than they would like on their own professional growth, citing *Feeling obligated to be in the building, Limited time,* and *Limited staff coverage* as barriers.

Change from 2021 to 2023 in percentage of respondents reporting *sufficent 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

(3.) Student mental health remains their single greatest challenge. We asked principals to tell us which of those 49 leadership areas in the figure referenced above posed the single greatest challenge to them in their work. Overwhelmingly, *Addressing student mental health challenges* ranked first out of 49, with twice as many principals selecting it than any other option. Furthermore, 94% of respondents *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 witness are primarily caused by *First hand trauma, Social*

media engagement, and the *Mental health challenges of caregivers.* Additionally, only 45% of respondents *agreed* that *their school or district is able to provide adequate support to students experiencing mental health challenges.*

(4.) Concerns with capacity (resources, skills, time) to implement legislation exacerbated by a perceived lack of state guidance. Many principals felt that the perspectives of school leaders were not heard during the last legislative session. A total of 76% report *wanting to have greater influence over state policy,* yet the barriers they cited were *Lack of time,* and *Feeling their voice would not be heard.*

> *"[I need] clear direction from MDE on how we implement the legislation. I'm afraid to make decisions for fear of doing the wrong thing and being disciplined, sued, or fired. These are classic examples of not being listened to as principal input was largely ignored by legislators."*

A prevailing theme respondents shared was that the sheer number of legislative changes and mandates coming out of the 2023 session was overwhelming. They expressed frustration that new regulations required significant staff time to implement and said that without commensurate increases in funding for staffing, and extended time to implement them, they were unsure how it would all be accomplished. Furthermore, they reported needing timely and clear guidance from MDE on how to implement new policies, such as the READ Act and legislation around non-exclusionary discipline.

(5.) Dedication to the job despite the challenges. While this sentiment was not universal, the fact 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."

I want to reiterate that this survey was designed to elevate principal voice, but we did so with policy and decision makers in mind. We hope the findings can help inform policymaking at the legislature, at your local school board meetings, and in the decisions of those who educate, hire, and support principals.

I will end with a "thank you" from the voice of a principal:

"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."

Dr. Katie Pekel is the Executive Director of Educational Leadership at the University of Minnesota. Contact Dr. Pekel about this article at kpekel@umn.edu.

