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# Principal Burnout: Addressing School Leadership Turnover in the El Paso Borderlands

The mental health needs of school principals have been overlooked in the field of educational leadership and in the preparation and professional development of principals. In this Center for Education Research and Policy Studies (CERPS) policy brief, we present the results of a multiple-methods study that analyzes rates of burnout and secondary trauma of principals in an urban school district along the U.S.-Mexico border.[i] We compare the level of burnout among principals to that of professionals working in other human service fields such as social workers and emergency first responders. We then identify principal characteristics associated with greater risk of burnout. Finally, we analyze data from interviews with two principals, who provide examples of experiences with burnout and secondary trauma.

The results of our study show that most principals report rates of burnout and secondary trauma similar to those found in other studies of teachers, mental health providers, social workers, and first responders. Follow-up interviews with two newer principals revealed significant exposure to trauma. We conclude this brief with discussion of how policymakers and practitioners can use these findings to address school leadership turnover and reform the training and preparation of school leaders.

## BACKGROUND

Principals and other school administrators work directly with students throughout the school year. These school leaders are responsible for safeguarding children and ensuring that students receive necessary supports. Principals can connect students to community organizations, non-profits, and governmental agencies, especially when students and families are not receiving the support they need. Principals are often knowledgeable about community resources and can take on the role of managing and engaging these networks to help students gain access to needed resources.

Principal preparation and professional development omits learning experiences related to self-care. Working with students experiencing trauma or other hardships can lead to burnout, given "the emotional nature of the work, the severity and complexity of [students'] cases, and the high levels of organizational demand and workload" (Salloum et al., 2015, p. 54).[ii] In contrast to school administrators, school mental health professionals (e.g., school counselors, psychologists, and social workers) are trained in self-care to protect against the effects of burnout and secondary trauma, which we define below.[iii]

Burnout is viewed as an occupational hazard that impacts one's personal and professional well-being. Burnout is more prevalent among professionals who work in helping professions. Individuals who experience burnout often report feelings of hopelessness that can impact one's ability to do their job. Burnout is a psychological phenomenon associated with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.[iv]

A contributor to burnout is compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress (or secondary trauma). Figley (1995) described compassion fatigue as

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"stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (p. 7). Secondary traumatic stress is described as "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the first-hand trauma experiences of another" (NCTSN, 2011, p. 1). Some scholars conceptualize secondary trauma within the parameters of post-traumatic stress disorder because symptoms are often parallel to those exposed to first-hand trauma.[v]

Emotions and stress are omnipresent in all human activity, but have been marginalized in discourse and research in the field of educational leadership. As Louder (1997) noted more than 20 years ago in a personal reflection of his principalship: "Leadership has its highs and lows, its successes and failures. Principals cry, laugh, dream and become suspicious. There are times when principals do want the fairy godmothers to come and save them" (p. 3). Principals are in a position that is filled with stress and a sense of immediate urgency to address pressing problems.[vi]

Unfortunately, few studies examine burnout or the effects of secondary trauma on principals. Sarros (1988) found that, on average, principals confronted lower levels of burnout in comparison to mental health professionals, but working conditions (e.g., work overload, lack of recognition, difficult interpersonal relationships) most likely contributed to burnout where it existed. Friedman (2002) surveyed 821 Israeli principals using a questionnaire developed from the Myers-Briggs Inventory to assess mental, cognitive, and physical fatigue, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. Principals reported pressures from parents and members of the community, unreasonable demands, overload from too many meetings and unrelenting job expectations, unsatisfactory or underperforming teachers, and uncooperative or incompetent administrative team and support staff.[vii] Pressures associated with teachers were most salient in predicting principal burnout.

## COMPARING PRINCIPAL BURNOUT IN EL PASO TO BURNOUT AMONG INDIVIDUALS IN OTHER SERVICE FIELDS

In this study, we measured principal burnout and other measures of principals' emotional conditions using the Professional Quality of Life survey. The survey is typically administered to professionals in human service fields outside of education including first responders, counselors, d and social workers. In a limited number of cases, the survey has been administered to teachers and principals. Given its wide use, results from the survey can be compared national norms to determine the extent to which the population under study differs from other groups nationally.

We find that principal burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion satisfaction in the district is roughly comparable to that of individuals in other service fields within and outside of education. The 86 principals in our sample, which included over 90% of principals in the district during the 2016-17 academic year, scored at approximately the 43rd, 44th, and 57th percentiles of these three constructs.[viii] In other words, the amount of burnout and secondary trauma experienced by principals is roughly similar to that of first responders, emergency room nurses, and other professionals working in high-stress environments.

## PREDICTORS OF PRINCIPAL BURNOUT

We examined the relationship between principal burnout, principal characteristics, and school characteristics. Surprisingly (given prior work on teacher burnout in high-poverty schools), we found no correlation between principal burnout and the percent of low-income or low-achieving students in the school.

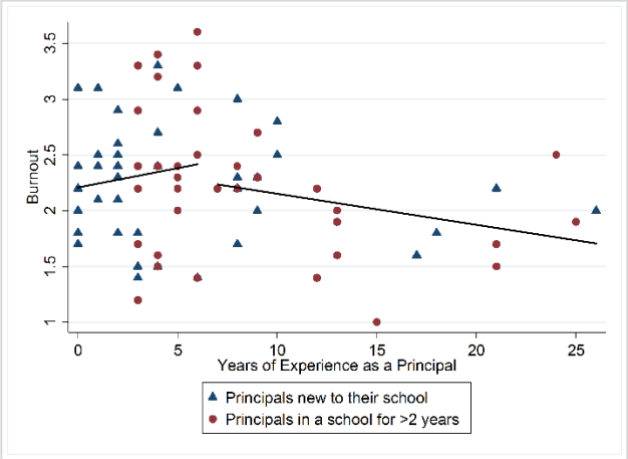
However, several principal characteristics are associated with burnout. Principal experience is negatively correlated with burnout, implying that

more experienced principals reported lower rates of burnout. Importantly, this relationship is largely driven by lower levels of burnout among the most experienced principals in our sample.

In contrast, early career principals exhibited far greater variation in burnout. On average burnout tended to increase across experience levels among early career principals, but decrease over increasing experience levels for later career principal (exhibiting an inverted U-shaped relationship). This relationship is shown in Figure 1. The pattern likely reflects attrition of principals with the highest levels of burnout. Veteran principals may be more resilient, and therefore remain in the profession and report lower levels of burnout later in their careers.

FIGURE 1

*The relationship between principal experience and burnout*




*Note*. Each triangle or dot represents a principal (n=86).

## PRINCIPAL INTERVIEWS

Our qualitative findings come from interviews with two principals and were used to provide a snapshot of principal feelings and experiences. Their feelings and experiences, while not generalizable, highlight some of the stress and emotions associated with the principalship. Both principals noted that they struggled to manage their family life with their work commitments, but yet they remained focused and found ways to persist. These findings are in line with prior research, especially for women in school leadership positions.[ix] These principals both described persisting in their efforts despite the physical and emotional toll it took. While this study is focused on burnout and secondary trauma, it is clear that the two principals demonstrated a heartfelt commitment to addressing social justice issues in their school and community and maintained an ability to endure despite a lack of resources and support.

Previous research has documented the notion of the "wounded leader" and how critical events shape the emotional experiences of principals.[x] The two principals we interviewed for this study continually learned about the first-hand traumatic experiences of their students. One principal shared past experiences with a 3rd grade student who had been assaulted. The principal also shared experiences with a 4th grade student struggling with the aftermath of a family member being murdered in Mexico. These incidents were painful for the principals because they did not have easy answers or solutions, but they also gained satisfaction in trying to help others and extend the school's impact beyond test scores. Few studies consider how such harsh realities affect principals or empower them to continuing trying to act on behalf of students and families.

In summary, the mixed-method design of our study – drawing on both interview and survey data – allowed us to quantify principals' exposure to secondary trauma and burnout and describe some of the actual cases principals confront. Our findings revealed how the border region adds complexity to some of the forms and persistence of trauma in the lives of students, which caused frustration and a sense of powerlessness. A more detailed report of this study is published in the journal *Leadership and Policy in Schools*.[xi]

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Based on the results of this study, we recommend that school districts take a proactive approach to supporting the mental health needs of principals. The surveys utilized in this study are easily accessible and can quickly be completed by principals during a staff meeting. Survey results could immediately trigger a response from the district, especially if principals are showing signs of burnout.

University-based principal preparation programs should reconsider their curriculum given the extent to which principals are exposed to secondary trauma. Universities and districts can partner to engage in such efforts that address curriculum and also professional development collaborations. Research on best-practices within principal preparation programs consistently highlights the importance of district-university partnerships. These relationships are necessary for providing pre-service training on mental health issues.

Districts can also encourage increased collaborations between principals and school counselors to address burnout and secondary trauma through professional development trainings. Our findings suggest that early career principals may be particularly vulnerable to burnout. At the same time, principals may become burned out in a variety of school settings. Despite the diversity of average family income levels and student demographics across the district, we found little correlation between principal burnout and school characteristics.

Lastly, the findings suggest that state and national associations should consider developing professional standards, research symposiums that draw attention to the mental health needs of principals.

### KEY FINDINGS

- When principals in El Paso meet one-on-one with students, they often learn about traumatic events in students' lives. Learning about these events causes a phenomenon known as secondary trauma which contributes to burnout.
- Principals in El Paso experience significant secondary trauma and burnout through their work with students who have been directly traumatized.
- Early career principals report greater levels of burnout, while more experienced principals reported lower levels of burnout. This may result from attrition of mid-career principals who leave their job in response to burnout and secondary trauma.
- Principal burnout likely contributes to turnover, given the U-shaped relationship between burnout and principal experience.
- There are limited resources or trainings to assist principals and other school leaders to address negative feelings of burnout and secondary trauma.
- To reduce principal burnout among early career principals, districts could consider encouraging greater collaboration between principals and school counselors.
- Districts can also consider partnering with university-based principal preparation programs to enhance training and professional development around self-care.

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## Endnotes

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