

An illustration at the top of the page shows a busy school principal. On the left, a woman sits at a desk with a laptop and a clock. In the center, a man in a suit runs with a briefcase, looking stressed. On the right, another man in a suit sits at a desk with a laptop, looking thoughtful. The background is filled with icons of a clock, a calendar, a speech bubble, and a laptop. The text 'the education hub' is written in a stylized font on the right side of the illustration.

# Preventing burnout among principals

School resources

'There's so much pressure that there are times that I feel, gosh, it would be so much easier to just turn my back on this, but then it's the conscience that eats at you and the passion of why you actually wanted to do this in the first place and I always come back to that..., and I never have been able to let that go, so the battles, you still fight the battles, but it definitely is wearing me down. . . . I'm tired mentally and physically.... I knew it would be difficult. I didn't know that it would be devastating.'

School principal\*

People can burn out in any role. But principals face unique challenges: as the quotation above illustrates, these challenges can become all-consuming. In a [guide](#) to preventing burnout among teachers, burnout is defined as a state of emotional and physical exhaustion. It results from an accumulation of stress caused by an imbalance between the demands teachers face and the resources they have to meet them. That guide suggested ways principals can prevent teachers from burning out. This guide looks at burnout among principals, what causes it, and how can it be prevented.

## Why do principals burn out?

Just like teachers, principals risk burnout if they do not have the resources to meet the demands they face. Demands include anything principals have to do, and anything which consumes their attention: teacher development, strategic plans, individual conversations and late-night worries. Resources include anything that helps: their skill and experience, the support they receive, and their personal characteristics.

While the importance of this balance is the same for teachers and principals, principals face distinct pressures and must access resources differently. For example, one study found that a major contributor to principal burnout is role ambiguity and role overload. Principals had too much to do and had to juggle competing (and perhaps conflicting) roles: doing what's best for teachers, students, parents and the community, creating long-term strategies, and solving immediate challenges. These pressures made principals feel isolated, causing burnout. To meet these pressures, principals need the same resources, skill, support and a sense of purpose that teachers require. But principals must access these resources in different ways to their teachers. They may need to project more confidence than they feel, and may not be able to discuss confidential issues with any staff member in the school.

So, while principals must balance demands and resources, they must do so in distinct ways, which this guide seeks to set out. Principal burnout has attracted relatively limited attention from researchers. A handful of studies of the correlates and causes of principal burnout exist, on which this guide draws, alongside qualitative work seeking to understand the stresses, strains and responses of principals. To offer usable guidance on avoiding burnout, this guide also draws on more recent experimental research from other professions, such as medicine.

## Strategies for avoiding and addressing burnout

School leadership is a crucial ingredient to a school's success. This makes ensuring that principals are happy and healthy is essential. Principals – and those looking out for them – can help to prevent burnout

by ensuring they face manageable demands, and by putting in place the resources which make them manageable: feelings of success, peer support, time away, and if necessary, professional support.

### Share the load

Principals make it easier for themselves by being clear about their priorities, and by sharing the workload with others. The guide on burnout among teachers argues for the importance of focusing on the most important tasks and getting rid of less important ones. Principals need to manage the demands they face, being realistic about what they can prioritise – what matters most – and what may need to slip entirely. Sharing leadership tasks (and so, pressures), can help. One principal who was interviewed about how she coped with her tasks reported that making key decisions with the teachers' representative group had helped her make better decisions, but 'also helped me in that I wasn't drowning... I felt less alone, less drained, and more inspired to do this type of work'. Principals may feel less pressure if they clarify what matters most for themselves and their teachers, communicate it clearly, and share some of their responsibilities.

### Focus on what is meaningful

People are more motivated and more effective when they can see the meaning and value of their work, but one researcher has described principals experiencing a 'persistent sense of discouragement'. Some principals addressed this by ensuring that they spent at least some time each day on the tasks which mattered most to them (as opposed to the tasks which were most urgent). Research in other professions has shown that showing people the benefits of their work is highly motivating. Teachers experience small wins – a great answer, a positive conversation – every day. Principals may not have the same encouraging experiences as they work to make teachers' successes possible, and to deal with the most challenging issues in the school. Principals might consider making time to look for successes: for example, they might visit lessons simply to look for highlights, or they could ask teachers to forward positive feedback they receive from their students or parents. Teachers will benefit, but seeing their successes could be a powerful resource for principals too.

### Get help (from peers)

Principals need support as much as anyone, but it is harder for them to access it. Social belonging, connection and relationships are crucial ingredients to anyone's wellbeing. But principals' isolated and responsible position leaves them at risk of missing out on this. Principals may need practical support – guidance on how to solve a challenge, for example – or emotional support in the form of reassurance and encouragement. Colleagues in school may provide this, but principals will always face challenges they cannot discuss fully within the school. In medicine, researchers have found that regularly discussing current challenges in small groups can help. Principals might build on their existing professional contacts to create a small network with fellow principals – perhaps meeting together once a month over a meal or coffee – to talk through challenges and get support on a regular basis. Peer support is a crucial resource, and principals may need to take additional, deliberate steps to make sure they get it.

### Get away from it all

In interviews, principals described the benefits of making time and space for life outside school. Some exercised, volunteered, or focused on pleasures like music and cooking. Some took advantage of the privilege principals have to manage their time and activities. Autonomy in work can reduce pressure: one principal described how, once a month, she would 'put on my calendar "university" in the afternoon. What that means is if I get through that week and nothing huge has happened and I've got everything I need done, I'm going home that afternoon. I feel guilty about it, but not guilty enough not to do it'. Principals can only sustain themselves if they can keep their life in balance: time for themselves is an important resource that enables them to do so.

### Get help (from professionals)

In interviews, some principals described turning to coping behaviours such as working even longer hours or drinking too much. While these may appear to help in the short-term, they do not address the underlying problems. Burnout is closely associated with depression: principals who are suffering from burnout are likely to need professional help. They may recognise this themselves but, if not, their friends and colleagues may need to highlight the help available, encourage them to access it, and provide the support they need to recover. Burnout will not go away of its own accord: **principals must get the support they need**. Two good places to start are:

- The Health Promotion Agency's page on [depression](#), which offers useful guidance on diagnosis and treatment
- The Mental Health Foundation's [list](#) of helplines

\* All quotations from principals and references to interviews are from Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 221-258.

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