



# Workload Pressures of Principals: A Focus on Renewal, Support, and Mindfulness

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## Abstract

This study is designed to understand how principals perceive the common stressors associated with leading an educational enterprise and propose strategies for relief from job-related stressors. As such, the same survey results from principals in 2009 and 2012 are analyzed. The results indicated increases in the perceived state of stress with regard to personal stress and factors that have been associated with new legislative demands on principals. To that end, the authors identified sources of renewal for principals experiencing workplace stress that include mindfulness practice to help school leaders thrive at work.

## Keywords

principal workload, mindfulness, principal stress, thriving at work

The workload of principals continues to increase with new expectations for evaluation and supervision, changing legislative mandates, and mounting pressures for accountability (Wells, 2013a; West, Peck, Reitzug, & Crane, 2014). Several legislative acts have changed the course of the daily lives of building principals. The legislative act of *Race to the Top* of 2009 was enacted to assist in the innovation of state education reformers and develop the capacity to effectively implement the changes and innovation (McGuinn, 2012). The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* Public Law 107-110, with its detailed list of new accountability measures, sanctions, and rewards for schools, school districts, and states to address the requirements and expectations for

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student success and proficiency (Cray & Weiler, 2011; McCullers & Bozeman, 2010; Wells, 2013b), continues to transform these expectations for principals.

New principals experience a sense of “reality shock” as they assume roles that require near constant attention (Spillane & Lee, 2014). These and other legislative mandates have created new challenges to the already full list of directives with which principals must comply.

Principals are responding to expectations for increased student achievement and improved instruction to achieve these results (Glass & Franceshini, 2007; Hess & Kelly, 2007). As principals work to keep up with new demands for increased student success, their evaluations are also being tied to the levels of student proficiency (McGhee & Nelson, 2005).

This study was designed to review the differences in the perceived stress levels of principals from the original study by reviewing what was indicated 3 years later. But perhaps more important, the authors wanted to continue their line of inquiry about the reality of leading schools and suggest to principals possibilities that reduce stress and offer qualities that relate to effective school leadership such as mindfulness practice (Wells, in press). The ubiquitous nature of stress for principals has a glaring and unanswered second part of the equation that can be stated as follows: *Since stress for principals is widely known, what is being done to help these building leaders learn to reduce that stress and remain in the jobs they may otherwise leave?*

## **Conceptual Framework: Resonant Leadership**

The stress of educational leaders is well documented and understood (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cooley & Shen, 2003; Friedman, 2002; Griffith, 1999; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Petzko, 2008; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Wells, 2013a; Wells, Maxfield, & Klocko, 2011). The emotional turmoil from the stress levels in schools can manifest in physical or medical conditions, including anxiety, low productivity, increased absenteeism, high blood pressure, depression, or other problems (Sorenson, 2007). In the high-stakes environment of the increased visibility of current leadership roles, the discomfort can ruminate in thought and anguish (Murphy, 2011). In attempting to control the situational stress, leaders may begin a descent into further problems, referred to as “dissonance” in which leaders may respond to the chronic levels of stress by encountering health problems, personal relationship difficulties, or challenges within the work environment (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Many leaders do not see the risks coming, making them challenged to respond (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). The emotional stress of educational leaders, although documented, has little in the form of help, whether it is in state standards, licensure requirements, or university courses (Ginsberg, 2008).

Established leadership models from business literature offered information, research, and strategies that could be applied to school leaders. In this age of high visibility and increased expectations for student achievement and teaching improvements, it is highly unlikely that there will be a reduction in the expectations of principals. Therefore, the options that exist in the business world offered tangible possibilities for school leaders. Mindfulness practice is a powerful option to help school

leaders learn to more effectively work with and face the stress in their roles as leaders (Wells, 2015). Likewise, organizational literature such as resonant leadership, and emotional and social intelligence (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Goleman, 2000; Sogunro, 2012; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002), contains a foundation with implications for school leadership.

Resonant leadership offers a conceptual framework that can be applied to school leaders; it refers to the *resonance* that leaders can help produce when they work with the emotional side of the organization as primary (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Leaders with resonance are inspiring; demonstrate a positive, emotional tone of hope; are in touch with others; and demonstrate compassionate understanding (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). According to Boyatzis and McKee (2005), resonance is projected in contrast to dissonance, which can happen as leaders fail to respond appropriately to the stress levels at hand.

Boyatzis and McKee (2005) explained the cycle of stress in which effective leaders who give so much of themselves on the job while responding to threat and crisis may slip into what they referred to as the “sacrifice syndrome” encompassing ineffective leadership (p. 41). The sacrifice syndrome includes many defensive tendencies where leaders try to cope with problems; these behaviors may include overreacting, blaming others, or acting in ways that are not in character with one’s typical responses (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

When mild anxiety from work expectations or deadlines exists, a leader’s focus can be heightened, but chronic and serious levels of stress often detract from success at work and create more internal and external pressure (Goleman et al., 2002). It is understandable to see how principals could ruminate in chronic stress because of their inability to stop the assault of cascading issues.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) portrayed the dangers of leadership in which leaders often miss the problems in front of them, perhaps blaming people or the organization for myriad problems that exist. Heifetz and Linsky advocated for leaders to expect resistance to new ideas, be sensitive to the personal response to change, and to develop the skills to respond. School leaders might find themselves in similar situations with the increased expectations for performance, responsibility for implementing the many changes facing teachers in the schools, balancing the overwhelming nature of the job, and providing a skilled response for action (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Cooley & Shen, 2003; Kafka, 2009; Wells et al., 2011). Awareness of the importance of carefully ascertaining the political landscape of a building is important for principals, not scanning the environment for problems and ruminating on them, but knowing what is happening in the building and how people are responding takes on a different message of interest, care, and concern.

In schools, principals may begin to accept the state of chronic stress as one that is outside of their control, given the new mandates and increased accountability in their world (Brock & Grady, 2002). Besides offering a descriptive analysis of the possible reactions from spiraling stress levels, the resonant leadership model offered a framework for responding to stress that would offer renewal at a personal level that would benefit the leader’s professional strengths.

## *Stress and Renewal*

The personal stressors of leaders often lead to feelings of exhaustion, frustration, unhappiness, and numerous physical symptoms (Sorenson, 2007). Leaders who are able to implement intentional, personal change to combat the sacrifice syndrome of many personal stressors become engaged in the process of renewal (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnston, 2008). Boyatzis and McKee (2005) defined the process of recovery as renewal, which includes three constructs: hope, compassion, and mindfulness.

Renewal involves leaning in to the problems instead of creating distance from them. Through renewal, principals become alert to the issues that are most challenging, and take these issues into sharp focus. This is a challenging, but essential act for leaders. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) referred to the essential action for leaders to get an accurate perspective of what is going on as a requisite for action; their reference is to get off the dance floor and on the balcony, a metaphor for seeing things more clearly from a distance rather than the embroiled action.

All leaders experience problems and incredible stress (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Murphy, 2011). Leadership is inherently a political process, and as such, school principals can expect to see challenges with the continual levels of change that is happening in the school. Being aware of the political climate and effectively responding are essential to the leader's job performance (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

Resilient people are able to recover from problems and setbacks, enduring significant pressure (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Brock & Grady, 2002). Boyatzis and McKee (2005) related, "Recent research show us that such people do not necessarily have special traits of characteristics, but they actively engage in various activities, including mindfulness and engaging hope and compassion, to renew themselves continually" (p. 72). These authors see mindfulness as "Being awake, aware, and attending to ourselves and world around us" (p. 73). Therefore, leaders who are aware, see problems for what they are, attending to the issues before the chronic state drains them of their energy and effectiveness. Leaders may cultivate reflective actions, seeing the whole, as opposed to only the parts on which the leader may want to focus. These leaders turn in or face these issues or problems as opposed to resisting or denying them.

Hope and compassion are other sources of renewal. Compassion involves being in touch with other people, to understand the concerns and then act on them to help the self and others. Compassion represents action, or a form of doing, and it can create renewal in leaders (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Compassion also involves the self, such as in self-compassion, where a leader may step back and reflect on all that is happening, seeing his/her own actions with compassionate understanding (Gilbert, 2009). School leaders will encounter problems; they will make mistakes. Self-compassion is a means for acknowledging the common human situations of mistakes or problems on the job.

Hope creates energy and excitement for a future that is possible. Hope enlivens people in the organization and helps move them forward. Leaders, who are able to create a sense of hope, can influence others in the organization. The leaders who reflect

compassion and hope build resonant relationships with people in the organization (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005), people who can then help provide answers to the problems at hand.

Hope and compassion, as qualities of renewal, can assist principals as leaders of their respective schools. These qualities can also assist in the optimism of the leader, helping bridge a path that helps with a stress response. Responding adaptively to stress is vitally important to the professional life of a principal, one that needs to be carefully articulated and understood. Decades of articles about the stress of principals have revealed a theme that paints a vivid portrait of chronic pressure; perhaps it will be the efforts and evidence from corporations that may provide new options in stress relief to support educational leaders. This important dialogue begins with a review of what is known about responding to stress. For this study, that meant looking deeply at the current reality of the principals' jobs and how they perceived their most critical problems at work.

The researchers were interested in knowing the following: *What are the resulting stressors that principals face in light of the new expectations for school improvements? And, has the level of stress that principals reported from 3 years prior to this study increased, decreased, or remained relatively stable during this time period?* These were the overarching questions that were foundational to this study.

## Background

In 2009, the researchers undertook a study designed to review the stressors that principals experienced at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, noting the stressors that principals faced, how teachers were utilized in their buildings with regard to leadership opportunities, and if they believed that teachers could alleviate some of that stress if the teachers completed specific tasks that principals associated as stressful. The original study was written in response to the literature base about the growing duties of building principals (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008), the concerns for the attrition rates of principals with potential shortages (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Owings, Kaplan, & Chappell, 2011), and the possibilities that existed for teacher leaders to provide some assistance to principals with expanded roles and responsibilities (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Despite the initial belief that principals were probably experiencing the highest levels of stress related to instructional demands for increased student achievement, professional task management issues, such as student discipline or parent complaints, or handling conflict, the researchers learned that principals were actually most concerned with the loss of revenues, followed by personal issues associated with their response to the overwhelming nature of their work (Wells et al., 2011). Wells et al. (2011) further learned that principals wanted stress relief by partnering with teachers to influence instruction in the school by implementing building-wide instructional practices, mentoring new teachers, providing staff professional development training, chairing school committees, analyzing test data, working with ineffective teachers and those resistant to change, and handling problems at the classroom level. While this study answered some questions, it raised others.

The researchers were curious about the personal issues confronting principals and wondered what specific assistance they could attain that might foster a hope for renewal and strength to complete the job at hand. The literature base about stress reduction programs did not include much information concerning educational leaders (Hawk & Martin, 2011; Sorenson, 2007; Whitaker, 1996). Beisser, Peters, and Thacker (2014) studied secondary principals in one state and concluded that the leaders who participated in the survey did not view living a healthy lifestyle as possible. Essentially, these authors noted that the various coping strategies employed by the principals were ones that they initiated, as opposed to a formal stress reduction plan.

The authors were also interested in knowing whether some of the tasks for which principals sought teacher assistance would remain constant in a follow-up study. The complexity of this second study ranged from reviewing the current state of administrative perceptions of workload stress, the view they had concerning teachers as partners and leaders in their schools, the perceptions they had for stress relief, and how all those issues might have changed over the course of 3 years. The authors also decided to look more closely at a wider range in the literature to discover what might reinforce principals who had a high degree of personal stress.

The authors are former school administrators and researchers of principal leadership. After the first study was completed, a compelling question arose that continues to inspire the authors: *Given that the principals chose personal stress as the highest group of issues of concern, what are educational leadership preparation programs doing to help them to deal effectively with those concerns?* The authors concluded that preparation programs were either not doing enough, or in many cases the most common stressors were not ones that could be alleviated by collaboration with teacher leaders. A new conceptual framework grounds the second phase of study, and offers hope for the personal crises that confront building leaders as well as the work of professors in the field.

The authors acknowledge the stress, having lived it first-hand and witnessing the stories aspiring and practicing graduate students of educational leadership programs bring to the classroom. The views of the practitioner, in addition to the results of the first study, fueled the passion to continue on this path of discovery.

## **Method of the Study**

In this quantitative study, the researchers systematically examined the beliefs of K-12 principals in a Midwestern state regarding their workload expectations and stressors. The authors conducted this time series design study in 2009 and repeated the same protocol in 2012 to measure differing trends, changed climates, and changed attitudes. Specifically, the researchers were interested in whether the state mandates and elevated standards had an impact on principals' perception of their workload stress and were seeking to identify long-term trends and irregular fluctuations (Jupp, 2006). After carefully determined the wording of the Likert-type scale, the researchers converted the data to an interval scale and treated these data as nominal. Consequently, the researchers were able to facilitate analysis by calculating numerical averages.

The data in the 2009 study supported the notion that the workload of the principal could be classified as *managerial* or *integrated* leadership. These factors were identified in both studies using a factor analysis to reduce the complexity of these data using principal component analysis and Varimax rotation. In the 2012 study, findings indicated that principal leadership could be classified similarly, with variables clustering around managerial or integrated leadership factors. Building on the premise that principals must develop relationships to effectively work with the instructional and managerial issues of the school, the researchers developed a list of tasks and behaviors that engage principals for purposes of identifying and clarifying which of those variables were stressful to the principals. Managerial or integrated leadership emerged as the two constructs to guide the investigation of this study and subsequently the authors developed variables from the literature that would fully define each of the constructs.

The *integrated leadership* variables related to instruction, curriculum, and the behaviors that a principal must navigate to successfully engage in transformational leadership. The *managerial* variables related to the roles traditionally associated with the workload of the principal and may include supervision, political or personal stressors.

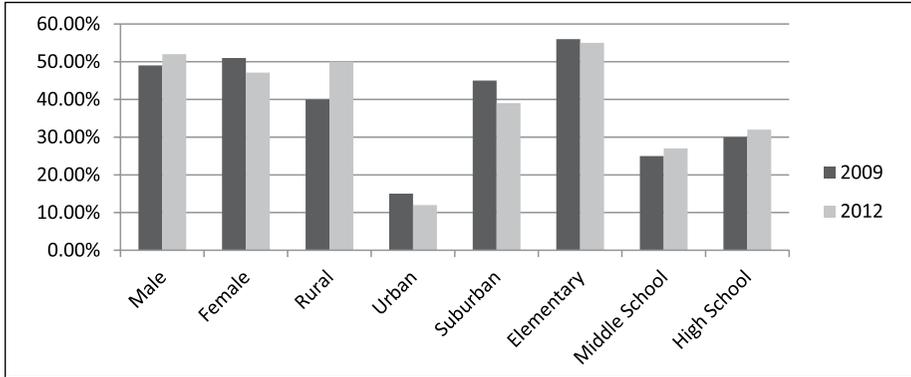
### Participants

An invitation to participate in this electronic survey was sent to all principals in a Midwestern state, using the same database used 3 years earlier for the previous study ( $n = 907$ ). Principals with interest ( $n = 708$ ) consented to participate and completed the online questionnaire administered through Survey Monkey®. The authors did not attempt to make this a longitudinal study and only sought to make generalizations based on the behaviors and attitudes of principals as a cohort, not principals as individuals through this time series design study (Jupp, 2006). The sample size supports a 99% confidence level as ascertained by the responses received by the researchers. Thus, the authors believe that a representative sample from both surveys to adequately make generalizations about the perceptions of principals in a Midwestern state regarding workload stress has been presented. The participation demographic comparison shown in Figure 1 demonstrates minimal categorical differences between the participant pools from the 2009 and the 2012 studies.

The type of school district (rural, urban, or suburban) was the only category that showed greater than minimal response size differences between the two studies.

### Data Collection

The researchers used the identical survey protocol for collection of data in 2009 and in 2012 to gather perceptions of principal workload stress by study participants and compare data over a length of time with one well-planned, timeless survey. Timelessness refers to questions that do not rely on a particular event or activity, nor are they time bound to a specific context (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2004). Accordingly, the researchers developed a 12-item, 10-minute self-administered electronic questionnaire



**Figure 1.** Demographic comparison of study participants, 2009 and 2012.

to elicit relevant data on principal workload stress as shown in appendix . Principals were asked about their backgrounds in education and demographic information about their school and district. The authors also asked principals to indicate how often they experience stress associated with 26 identified stressors with response choices of *almost never* (1), *sometimes* (2), *often* (3), and *almost daily* (4).

### Validity

In designing the questionnaire, the researchers sought to measure principals' perceptions of their workload stress and their attitude about having teachers provide assistance to alleviate that stress. In the initial study, content validity was established by using recognized subject matter experts to evaluate whether test items appropriately reflected the referent knowledge and skills associated with the principalship. Additionally, a pilot test of the survey instrument was conducted with a group of seven principals in 2009 with satisfactory results.

In order to establish construct validity of this survey, the researchers aligned the variables in the survey with the research base of instructional and transformational leadership, the stress of the workload of principals as defined in the literature, and the descriptors based on the experiences of the authors as researchers and former building principals. In the judgment of the researchers, the instrument appeared to measure the theoretical constructs for which it was designed to measure—principals' beliefs regarding their workload and the extent to which teacher leaders can alleviate the associated stress.

### Data Analysis

In the data analysis, the researchers initially analyzed frequencies and means to identify systematic patterns, examining the workplace stressors identified by principals. In order to determine whether principal workload stress had been affected by numerous and arduous state and federal educational mandates, the authors tested data from each

study individually and both studies collectively. Gottman, McFall, and Barnett (1969) concurred that a time-series design can provide a descriptive function by furnishing a continuous record of fluctuations in variables. Additionally, this methodology provides a heuristic function by providing feedback regarding consequences and effectiveness of decisions (Velicer & Fava, 2003).

Thus, the researchers performed factor analyses to examine common views of principals, testing the theoretical constructs against empirical responses and chose factor analysis as a technique to reduce the number of disparate variables without a loss of information (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Through the factor analyses, variables were grouped together to determine relationships and meaning. In the 2009 study, the authors ascertained four variables with common factors: *personal task management*, *instructional demands*, *professional task management*, and *handling conflict* (as shown in Table 1).

In the 2012 study, five variables were determined with common factors: *personal task management*, *instructional demands*, *professional task management*, *stakeholder accountability*, and *handling conflict* (as shown in Table 2).

The authors entered the survey data into a customized data management system to analyze and match the 2009 and 2012 surveys, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 20. After reviewing the means and frequencies associated with each study individually, *t* tests and analyses of variance were performed to determine significant differences between the responses provided by principals in 2009 and again in 2012.

Analyses were conducted by the researchers on the study's baseline data to examine the scales' internal consistencies and reliabilities based on Cronbach alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). The Cronbach alpha for the combined comparison study of the stressors experienced by principals had an excellent internal consistency rating ( $\alpha = .959$ ). Based on these results, there is a high degree of reliability of the combined scales.

## Results of the Study

The final reporting of these data is presented as a descriptive narrative. While generalizable findings may appear, this research is not seeking universals that exist free of context. The results of this study identified as findings three major variances between the 2009 and 2012 survey responses, all directly associated with work-associated stress:

1. The principal's perceptions of work-associated occurrences that principals identified as stressors increased significantly in the 2012 study.
2. Principals perceived that time, constant interruptions, and the volume of paperwork were the primary work-associated stresses of the principalship in 2012; in 2009, the primary work-associated stress involved financial constraints, followed by all personal issues relating to the job.
3. The key stressors identified by principals inferred individual responsibility and resultant stress that could not be alleviated through distributed leadership.

**Table 1.** Workplace Stressors Identified Through Principal Component Analysis, 2009.

	Component matrix	Mean	SD
<b>Personal task management</b>			
Feelings of being overwhelmed with job demands	.768	2.90	0.970
Job expectations of the principalship	.752	2.98	0.966
Loss of personal time	.741	3.02	0.962
Work-life balance	.740	3.03	0.966
Insufficient time to get the job done	.736	3.29	0.847
Constant interruptions	.706	3.18	0.957
Personal goals and expectations to excel in this job	.697	2.88	0.964
My own ability to manage time efficiently	.686	2.50	0.999
Knowing how to prioritize tasks	.668	2.30	0.997
Keeping up with email communications	.662	3.04	1.022
Concerns regarding personal health and fitness	.650	2.63	1.062
General loss of joy in doing this work	.598	2.12	1.046
<b>Instructional demands</b>			
Providing instructional leadership for faculty	.814	2.64	0.968
Providing a vision for school improvement	.787	2.39	0.962
Planning quality professional development activities.	.754	2.53	0.815
Responding to new demands of the curriculum	.718	2.78	0.872
Responding to student test score results	.715	2.48	0.858
Conducting teacher evaluations	.682	2.53	0.883
Sharing leadership with teachers	.653	1.95	0.902
<b>Professional task management</b>			
Dealing with parent complaints	.730	2.59	0.916
Student discipline	.720	2.65	1.008
Lunchroom and building supervision	.718	2.65	1.062
Volume of paperwork	.678	3.21	0.863
Dealing with changing demographics	.677	2.19	0.961
Working with parent groups such as PTA	.654	1.92	0.866
Evening and weekend responsibilities	.648	2.62	0.943
Increased performance expectations from cent. office	.636	2.71	0.966
<b>Handling conflict</b>			
Dealing with staff disputes	.809	1.82	0.861
Conflict within the staff	.808	1.81	0.870
Teachers' resistance to change	.749	2.61	0.931
Issues with unions	.748	1.95	0.899
Working with ineffective or struggling teachers	.690	2.38	0.917

Note. 4 = *Almost daily*; 3 = *Often*; 2 = *Sometimes*; 1 = *Rarely*.

### *Work-Associated Stressors*

The results of this second study affirm what is general wisdom among practitioners in the field: the world of work of the building principal is one that is fraught with stress

**Table 2.** Workplace Stressors Identified Through Principal Component Analysis, 2012.

	Component matrix	Mean	SD
<b>Personal task management</b>			
Work-life balance	.781	3.19	0.955
Loss of personal time	.741	3.09	0.990
Insufficient time to “get the job done”	.719	3.34	0.866
Feelings of being overwhelmed with job demands	.718	3.03	0.961
Job expectations of the principalship	.671	3.09	0.945
Concerns regarding personal health and fitness	.618	2.72	1.122
General loss of joy in doing this work	.593	2.24	1.152
Constant interruptions	.555	3.22	0.935
My own ability to manage time efficiently	.519	2.51	1.015
Keeping up with email communications	.433	3.12	1.000
<b>Instructional demands</b>			
Planning quality professional development activities	.673	2.58	0.843
Providing instructional leadership for faculty	.672	2.69	0.978
Providing a vision for school improvement	.638	2.43	0.924
Responding to student test score results	.552	2.68	0.877
Responding to new demands of the curriculum	.531	2.87	0.893
Conducting teacher evaluations	.514	3.09	0.860
Personal goals and expectations to excel in this job	.513	2.95	0.980
Increased expectations from central office	.422	2.81	0.959
<b>Stakeholder accountability</b>			
Reports to district, state	.729	2.84	0.779
Diminished revenues	.603	3.08	0.933
Volume of paperwork	.520	3.21	0.836
Evening and weekend responsibilities	.508	2.61	1.000
Being called away from the building for meetings	.502	2.68	0.860
Dealing with changing demographics	.412	2.12	1.009
<b>Professional task management</b>			
Lunchroom and building supervision	.603	2.68	1.105
Student discipline	.590	2.63	1.020
Dealing with parent complaints	.561	2.61	0.905
Working with parent groups such as PTA	.556	1.94	0.914
Knowing how to prioritize tasks	.490	2.31	1.012
Sharing leadership with teachers	.489	1.94	0.953
Board of Education presentations	.460	1.72	0.789
<b>Handling conflict</b>			
Dealing with staff disputes	.753	1.84	0.885
Conflict within the staff	.749	1.81	0.868
Teachers’ resistance to change	.700	2.55	0.973
Issues with unions	.696	1.76	0.901
Working with ineffective or struggling teachers	.587	2.32	0.930

Note. 4 = Almost daily; 3 = Often; 2 = Sometimes; 1 = Rarely.

**Table 3.** Key Stressor Mean Comparison With Significance (2009 and 2012).

As a building principal, how often do you feel stress regarding the following issues?	2009 (n = 907)		2012 (n = 708)		Sig. difference <sup>a</sup>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Diminished revenues	3.32	0.84	3.08	0.93	Sig
Insufficient time to get the job done	3.30	0.85	3.34	0.86	NS
Volume of paperwork	3.22	0.86	3.21	0.83	NS
Constant interruptions	3.19	0.96	3.22	0.93	NS
Keeping up with email correspondence	3.04	1.03	3.12	1.00	NS
Work-life balance	3.03	0.97	3.19	0.95	Sig
Loss of personal time	3.02	0.96	3.10	0.99	Sig
Job expectations of the principalship	2.98 <sup>b</sup>	0.98	3.09	0.95	Sig
Feelings of being overwhelmed with job demands	2.89 <sup>b</sup>	0.99	3.03	0.96	Sig
Conducting teacher evaluations	2.51 <sup>b</sup>	0.91	3.09	0.86	Sig

Note. 4 = *Almost daily*; 3 = *Often*; 2 = *Sometimes*; 1 = *Rarely*.

<sup>a</sup>Significant at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup>Mean scores were below 3.0 in the 2009 study.

(Wells et al., 2011). The stressors with highest means scores identified in the 2009 study fell clearly into the managerial realm of responsibility, identified by factor analysis and labeled personal task management and professional task management and do not translate into opportunities for teacher leaders to actively support the principal. Respondents identified the top stressor as *diminished revenues* (3.33). *Insufficient time to "get the job done"* (3.30), *Volume of paperwork* (3.22), and *Constant interruptions* (3.19), *keeping up with email communications* (3.04), *work-life balance* (3.03), and *loss of personal time* (3.02) were all key stressors identified by the 2009 cohort indicating that they experienced stress between *Often* (3) and *Almost Daily* (4) as shown in Table 1.

In 2012, *Insufficient Time to Get the Job Done* replaced *Diminished Revenues* as the paramount stressor for these respondents, with the mean scores for 2009 and 2012 being nearly identical with 3.33 in 2009 and 3.34 in 2012. However, *Diminished Revenues* showed a significant reduction from 3.33 in 2009 to 3.08 in 2012. While the precise reasons behind the reduction in the mean score of diminished resources are unknown, possibilities of other variables taking a more primary consideration are certainly possible (see Table 3).

On examining these differences, the authors tested these samples using a *t* test for Equality of Means. There were 11 variables that showed significant differences between the 2009 and 2012 samples, indicating that further examination was necessary to understand these differences. *Loss of personal time*, *Feelings of being overwhelmed with job demands*, *Conducting teacher evaluations*, *Reports to the district and state*, *Diminished revenues*, *General loss of joy in doing this work*, *Increased*

*performance expectations from central office, Issues with unions, Job expectations of the principalship, Work-life balance, and Responding to student test score results* all showed significant differences. Of these, only two were significant in that that means scores had diminished, *Issues with unions* and *Diminished revenues*. Both of these can be attributed to external influences and legislative mandates.

There are several limitations to the generalizability of this study. Since it is not discernable whether respondents were the same principals in each study, study is represented as cross-sectional with the intent of generalizing from a sample to a population. The principals were not asked to explain or verify their answers to ascertain if the level of stress indicated in their response was aligned with the long-term actual roles they were performing in their respective districts. Instead, it was a one-time assessment of what was happening; hence, the means reported from principals only indicate causal interpretations that can be derived from these data. However, this study identifies profound implications regarding the work of the principal in today's challenging environment.

## Implications

As the researchers reviewed the results of the most recent study they looked for an understanding of how principals perceived their stressors relative to the first study that was conducted in 2009; although the respondents are not identical, the job titles are the same. In trying to make sense of what principals feel about their stress at work, the authors observed significant differences in higher mean scores in the following areas: *Loss of personal time, Feelings of being overwhelmed with job demands, Conducting teacher evaluations, Reports to the district and state, General loss of joy in doing this work, Increased performance expectations from central office, Job expectations of the principalship, Work-life balance, and Responding to student test score results.*

What changed from the first to the second study was in the three stressors making a significant increase in the instructional demands of the principal and the one stressor related to professional task management in the reporting to the district and state. The personal task management stressors still dominated the stress of the principal, but now, in addition, the expectations for instructional supervision, increased particularly when paired with requirements for reporting to the district or state. McGhee and Nelson (2005) posited that there is now a culture of fear that exists for principals who may be removed from their job because of diminished test scores. McGhee and Nelson expressed concerns for the high degree of vulnerability for principals and the resulting lack of support they face while trying to lead schools through dramatic changes in an age of accountability. Sorenson (2007) listed that the culture of high expectations has created stress and anxiety for the leaders.

These differences are important to understanding how principals feel and the type of support that principals need to conduct their work. Principals who are trying to enact change in their schools encounter resistance, which results in stress (Starr, 2011). Hawk and Martin (2011) reported that districts typically do not have stress management programs for superintendents; there was nothing in the literature to support the

fact that school districts have stress reduction programs for their leaders, instead, leaving them to find their own means of responding to and managing stress.

### *Responding to Stress*

Given the reported levels of stress that principals experience, the authors were interested in what makes the difference in how these principals relate to the pressures of accountability and high visibility on the job. Stress can be chronic or acute. The information from principals indicated that they were experiencing chronic levels of stress as their workdays were filled with constant interruptions and problems that surfaced, particularly with the feeling that there was not enough time to complete the work that needed their attention. When people experience chronic levels of stress they may enter a state of “hyperarousal, characterized by a great deal of muscle tension and strong reactions, which may vary from terror, fright, or anxiety to rage and anger” (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 251).

The reactions to chronic stress may involve a reactionary phase where people feel threatened, afraid, or resentful. Because principals are on public display they may try and suppress these feelings, with reactions that then become internal. People encountering stressful situations may display adaptive or healthy responses or maladaptive reactions in attempts to cope. The maladaptive reactions continue to cause havoc for people. Physical and emotional symptoms may result from chronic levels of stress (Sorenson, 2007). The dysregulation of chronic stress may also lead to elevated blood pressure, problems with sleep, anxiety, headaches or backaches, or state of continued hyperarousal (Kabat-Zinn, 2009).

Instead of reacting to stress, there is another way—that of responding, a means of stepping back, observing, and letting them be as they are, all without reacting. That way is mindfulness, which allows for an adaptive means of dealing with pressure. Mindfulness allows for a purposeful attention to the present moment, one that allows principals to connect with a deeper level of calm, that may otherwise be escaping them in the moment of a stressful encounter.

### *Mindfulness as a Means for Thriving on the Job*

Mindfulness, as explained by Boyatzis and McKee (2005), involves being aware of what is happening before issues become large problems and to attend to the pressures during difficult times acting in accordance with one’s own values. Rather than withdrawing from the heat of the problem, entering a cycle of anger or dismissing what is occurring, a productive cycle of renewal helps ground the leader and serve as a form of recovery. It is important to note that these actions do not remove the stressors; instead they allow for a means of effectively dealing with the stressors that arise.

Murphy (2011) referred to the turning around of uncomfortable and painful problems as learning how to thrive while experiencing those problems. He extolled the definition of Jon Kabat-Zinn, as the one who pioneered the efforts of bringing mindfulness as a practice to reduce stress. Kabat-Zinn (2003) described mindfulness as a

form of meditation, one that relies on sitting in stillness and observing and noticing the present moment without judgment or criticism.

Hölzel et al. (2011) related, “The cultivation of mindfulness, the nonjudgmental awareness of experiences in the present moment, produces beneficial effects on well-being and ameliorates psychiatric and stress-related symptoms” (p. 537). It is the stress-related symptoms created from the tensions that building principals face in the schools; mindfulness may be part of the recovery or renewal that offers a viable practice designed to address those issues.

In mindfulness, people can stop the train of thoughts or emotions and step back to just observe, be with, and listen with intention and nonjudgment. Mindfulness can be experienced by sitting in stillness in meditation where the focus is on the present moment, with attention to something like the breath, observing it as it enters and leaves the body. A meditation can occur in minutes or longer sessions, depending on what is available to the principal at that moment. Mindfulness practice allows for educational leaders to learn how to pause during problems, step back, and bring space and calm to the challenge. Mindfulness can also be observed in the school leader who stops to listen carefully and mindfully to what is occurring in the moment.

Mindfulness can be experienced as a school leader takes an ordinary situation and approaches it with intention and focus. It may include a mindful moment in which the principal pauses to allow whatever is in the moment take center stage, simple issues such as taking a walk down a hallway, drinking a cup of tea or coffee, taking a moment to focus on something as ordinary as washing hands during the day. The intent with a mindful moment is to slow down the preoccupation and distracted world and allowing the present to take center stage of observation. A mindful moment also allows for some distance between the rapid fire of events happening in the school and the time, even if for the briefest of moments, for a pause or chance to respond rather than react to the events at hand. Mindful moments are possible throughout the day and they can be restorative and calming (Wells, in press).

Because of the focus on the present moment, without judgment or criticism, the principals engaged in mindfulness practice learn to create some space or distance between what is happening and the response, learning to develop patience, listening, and compassion—qualities important to principal effectiveness.

**Benefits of Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is associated with numerous health and emotional benefits that include the reduction of anxiety, depression, blood pressure, and the increase in optimism and self-regulation (Boyce, 2012; Carmody & Baer, 2007; Greeson, 2009; Smalley & Winston, 2010), all areas that are important to the health of the principal. The practice of mindfulness is also associated with developing a way of being and interacting with others that are indicators of social and emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2002). Although less reported in the literature for school leaders, mindfulness programs are flourishing in the corporate and medical worlds.

Mindfulness is widely practiced in corporate institutions such as Aetna, Google, Target, General Mills, Facebook, Eileen Fisher, Ford Motor Company (Gelles, 2015; Hunter, 2013). These corporations provide training and support for their leaders to

apply stress reduction principles of mindfulness to their world of leading. Medical schools also provide training in mindfulness for medical students (Gable, 2014; Rosenzweig, Keibel, Greeson, Brainard, & Hojat, 2009); there are programs for practicing physicians to work with mindfulness (Krasner et al., 2009). There are also examples of schools that are offering training in mindfulness for teachers, designed to work with level of stress and burnout (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015).

Mindfulness is a source for the renewal of principals, one that relates to the pressures that they face, while offering a realistic, and portable response that is always available to them—the focus on breathing, the detached observation of what is happening, and the nonjudgment, nonreactive approach to what is happening. Mindfulness practice can offer a change of pace in the often preoccupied, distracted, and fragmented schedule that is chronic in the life of a principal.

### *Understanding the Life of a Principal as Opportunities for Thriving*

The identified implications in this study raise questions about the need for the support and training in areas of personal stress reduction and instructional leadership for school principals. The authors further contend that this support could mitigate the high attrition rate of school leaders, and the challenges in attracting teachers who would be willing to step into the role as building leader (Howley, Andrianaivo, & Perry, 2005). There is a dearth of information on actually dealing with the stress reduction for school leaders, although information on instructional leadership strategies for principals is readily available (Fullan, 2014). The authors are envisioning a deeper look into how stress reduction techniques such as mindfulness may present an intervening variable that could intersect with the work of instructional leadership. In 2003, DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran called for assistance for principals to meet the additional expectations that now define their work, including the restructuring of the work roles of principals; the authors ask: *What has changed in over one decade to increase the pressures of the principal?* And importantly, *How have school districts, university preparation programs, and professional organizations changed to adapt to these additional pressures?*

One of the original questions from the first study was structured around stress and how the work of teacher leaders might reduce that stress for building principals. The authors are now presented with another thread for study and that is how principals perceive the stress in leading schools in an age of accountability and the possibilities that exist for their leadership preparation and support while on the job. Additionally, with mean scores of stress higher as evidenced in the second study, and more frequent indicators for personal issues affecting the stress levels of principals, the authors will continue with that thread of inquiry. Of central interest is whether the personal issues of the principalship are primary or related to the new legislative changes that mandate an intensified instructional leadership agenda.

Finally, it is the authors' intention to look deeply at the types of training and preparation that are essential for principals who are working in stress-related environments.

While technical skills are foundational for completing the expectations of the instructional leader, the results of our research studies clearly demonstrate that additional support is needed to help leaders thrive, not just cope with the current demands of building leadership. It is the personal stressors that are causing significant issues for principals, thus requiring support for principals that can help them address the personal stressors that they feel while leading. Specifically, there are rich and myriad benefits of mindfulness that may offer new possibilities to help school leaders learn to thrive on the job. Additionally, university professors may offer continued partnerships with principals by providing support in the field with research, training at the university level, and academies, workshops, or retreats that focus on mindfulness, providing a place for school leaders to “unplug” and reduce stress.

## Appendix

### *A Study of Principal Perceptions of Workload Issues*

#### *Leadership Profile*

1. What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
2. How many years have you served as a principal?
  - More than 20 years
  - 15-19 years
  - 10-14 years
  - 5-9 years
  - Fewer than 5 years
3. What level best describes the students in your building? (Check all that apply)
  - Elementary
  - Middle School
  - High School
4. Describe your school district:
  - Rural
  - Urban
  - Suburban
5. What is the approximate size of your school district?
  - More than 20,000 students
  - 8,000 to 19,999 students
  - 4,000 to 7,999 students
  - 1,000 to 3,999 students
  - Fewer than 1000 students

*Roles of Teachers*

6. At our school teachers:

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	Almost DAILY (4)	Often (3)	Sometimes (2)	Rarely (1)	N/A
Handle building security issues					
Assist with master scheduling					
Make presentations to the Board of Education					
Participate in budget and purchasing decision-making					
Work with other teachers to develop curriculum					
Handle communications with media					
Provide peer feedback for teacher evaluations					
Mentor new teachers					
Supervise evening and weekend events					
Develop action plans for changing demographics					
Engage in formal processes to resolve teacher disputes					
Assign consequences for student misbehavior					
Create a vision for school improvement					
Provide instructional leadership for the staff					
Resolve disputes within the staff					
Analyze and apply test score data to improve teaching and learning					
Coach other teachers					
Influence grading and instructional practices					
Resolve parent complaints					
Chair school improvement committees					
Serve as liaisons to stakeholder groups such as PTA or Band Boosters					
Hold formal leadership positions in this school					
Hold formal leadership positions in our district					
Plan and present professional development					
Observe teaching and give feedback to other teachers					

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*Workload of the Principal*

7. As a building principal, how often do you feel stress regarding the following issues:

	Almost daily (4)	Often (3)	Sometimes (2)	Rarely (1)	N/A
My own ability to manage time efficiently					
Evening and weekend responsibilities					
Constant interruptions					
Sharing leadership with teachers					
Work-life balance					
Being called away from the building for meetings					
Working with parent groups such as PTA, Band Boosters, etc.					
Diminished revenues					
Concerns regarding personal health and fitness					
Providing instructional leadership faculty					
Providing a vision for school improvement					
General loss of joy in doing this work					
Job expectations of the principalship					
Planning quality professional development activities					
Teachers' resistance to change					
Knowing how to prioritize tasks					
Board of education presentations					
Conflict within the staff					
Feelings of being overwhelmed with job demands					
Student discipline					
Loss of personal time					
Issues with unions					
Insufficient time to "get the job done"					
Working with ineffective or struggling teachers					
Volume of paperwork					
Dealing with parent complaints					
Lunchroom and building supervision					
Responding to student test score results					
Reports to district, state					
Responding to new demands of the curriculum					
Personal goals and expectations to excel in this job					
Dealing with changing demographics					
Keeping up with email communications					
Dealing with staff disputes					
Increased performance expectations from central office					
Conducting teacher evaluations					

9. What do you see as the most realistic solution to the workload pressures you face?

*Teacher Participation*

10. I would feel less stress as a principal if teachers performed these functions:

	Strongly agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)	N/A
Assigning consequences for student misbehavior					
Working with teacher teams to develop curriculum					
Working with teachers who are resistant to change					
Chairing school committees					
Handling issues regarding building security other than classroom discipline					
Serving as liaisons to stakeholder groups such as PTA or Band Boosters, etc.					
Holding formal or assigned leadership positions in this school					
Conducting peer teaching evaluations					
Completing reports for the district, state					
Handling communications with media					
Providing instructional leadership for the staff					
Influencing building-wide instructional practices					
Supervising evening and weekend events					
Developing plans of action for changing demographics					
Mentoring new teachers					
Presenting to the Board of Education					
Providing professional development training for teachers in this school					
Holding formal or assigned leadership positions in our district					
Analyzing test score data to improve instructional practice					
Resolving parent complaints and concerns					
Resolving problems at the classroom level					
Participating in budget and purchasing decision-making					
Participating in a formal process to resolve staff disputes					
Creating a vision for school improvement					
Working with ineffective, struggling teachers					

11. How can teachers provide support to you as principal?
12. What changes would be required in schools to allow teachers to provide support to you as principal?

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