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**Stress and Burnout of Principals Who Lead Historically  
Underperforming Schools**

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**Stress and Burnout of Principals Who Lead Historically  
Underperforming Schools**

**by**

**Angel S. Wilson**

**Treatise**

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## **Dedication**

This study is dedicated to my family, especially my beloved mother, Debora Ann Thomas Wilson. You were a fearless educator who advocated relentlessly for marginalized student communities. I am so blessed to have had the pleasure to be a student of yours in 10<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra II Honors class, but most importantly, I had a front row seat to learn from you every day of my childhood and teenage years. You helped me to find my voice. You introduced me to the faith. You taught me how to face my fears. Cancer may have invaded your body, but it could never quench your spirit. You loved me beyond your earthly years and although you are no longer physically here, your legacy lives on in all of us. Your favorite Bible verse (Proverbs 21:1) has carried me through. I defended my treatise on what would have been your 64<sup>th</sup> birthday. I hope you are proud of me because I am most certainly proud of you. I wish we had more time. Happy Birthday, mama. I love you to infinity and beyond – and longer if I can.

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To my sisters, Elan Fontenot and Elecia Faith, there are no words to convey the gift that mom gave us when she left us with each other as our sister’s keeper. We have

laughed together, cried together, prayed together, praised together, and committed to doing life together. God could not have given me a better pair of siblings to face this world with. We started this dissertation journey together and we ended this journey together. Thank you for your constant encouragement, homecooked meals, and unsolicited life coaching. Elecia, you and Elijah opened your doors to me when I first started the program that one long summer and you were there when I permanently moved to Austin three years later for the last and final stretch of this study. You have no idea the peace it brought me to have a familiar face in a new city. Elan, thank you for being a home away from home on the Houston weekend getaway trips and thank you for encouraging me to not attend events. You both have kept watch over me at your homes on many nights during this dissertation process to ensure that I finished and met deadlines. We did it!

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the COVID-19 pandemic, I know that our educational paths will cross again. I cannot wait to witness your accomplishments as we envision a better place for the children and communities we serve. What starts here changes the world.



## **Abstract**

# **Stress and Burnout of Principals Who Lead Historically Underperforming Schools**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2022

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Principals face high levels of insistent stress in the workplace. Consistent with the research, major principal stressors include the inability to control the day (Grady, 2004; Whan & Thomas, 1996), managing the needs and traumas of others (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Sprang et al., 2011), responding to pressures to perform with high stakes testing accountability (Boyland, 2011; Combs et al., 2009), balancing managerial duties (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Hallinger, 2003), and leading instructionally (Barkman, 2015; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Mahfouz, 2020). Aside from the teacher, the principal is one of the most influential factors for student academic outcomes and optimal success. Given the current academic state of many historically underperforming schools, there is a high demand for rapid, sustainable change on top of the already strained workload of the principal. Consequently, research trends reveal that principal turnover rates are exponentially high in chronically underperforming campuses (Armenta & Reno, 1997; Pounder & Merrill, 2011). With a growing number of exiting principals, specifically in turnaround schools, there is a dire need to retain and support principals. Principal effectiveness significantly impacts student achievement; therefore, it is critical for the field to understand best practices to sustain the role.

This study examined the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead historically underperforming schools. This study expanded on current research by identifying major stressors that principals face in the workplace and best practices for stress management. This study provided contributions to the literature by discovering the meaningful role that leadership teams play in helping the school principal to manage stress and burnout. This study also uncovered new principal stressors related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings of this study suggest that district leadership, secondary trauma, and state accountability pressures contribute significantly to the stress level of the principal. Findings indicate that principals can effectively mitigate stress and burnout through daily personal commitments. And finally, this study provides recommendations to school districts on how to best support the mental health and wellbeing of principals through strategic planning, redefining the principal supervisor role, and prioritization of social emotional competencies for principal professional development.

## Table of Contents

List of Appendices .....	16
List of Tables .....	17
List of Figures .....	18
<b>CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>19</b>
Conceptual Framework .....	20
Burnout .....	22
Secondary Trauma .....	23
Organizational Conditions .....	23
Statement of the Problem.....	24
Purpose of the Study .....	25
Research Questions.....	26
Study Design.....	26
Significance of the Study .....	27
Limitations and Delimitations of the Study .....	28
Definition of Terms .....	29
Summary .....	31
<b>CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>33</b>
Introduction.....	33
The Role of the Principal .....	34
Principal Stressors.....	37
Overload of Job Responsibilities .....	38
Trauma-Informed Leadership .....	40
Demands for Testing Accountability .....	41

Leading in Turnaround Schools.....	43
Leading During a Global Pandemic.....	45
Addressing Stress and Burnout in Principals.....	46
Coping with Stress.....	48
Regulation of Sleeping Habits, Nutrition and Exercise.....	49
Daily Prioritization of Goals, Purpose and Hobbies.....	50
Self-Monitoring and Self-Care .....	51
Mindfulness .....	52
Stress-Coping Tips for Principal Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic.....	53
Principal Support Structures .....	54
Conclusion and Implications .....	56
<b>CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>58</b>
Introduction.....	58
Theoretical/Epistemological Perspective.....	58
Research Design .....	62
Research Questions.....	65
Study Unit of Analysis and Sampling Techniques .....	65
Data Collection Procedures .....	67
Data Analysis Procedures .....	70
Consistency and Credibility.....	72
Positionality Statement .....	73
Summary .....	74
<b>CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>74</b>
Participant Information .....	74

Emergent Themes .....	75
Purpose Driven Leadership.....	76
Research Question 1 .....	79
Personal drive and commitment to student success.....	80
Never-ending job .....	81
Managing the stress of others .....	84
Research Question 2 .....	95
State accountability.....	96
Lack of funding and resources.....	99
District leadership .....	102
Research Question 3 .....	113
Faith and trusted support circles .....	114
Rest and exercise .....	116
Personal Systems .....	118
Research Question 4 .....	122
Campus systems.....	122
District systems.....	126
No systems to process.....	129
Consequences of stress and burnout .....	131
COVID-19 pandemic.....	139
Summary .....	142
<b>CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.....</b>	<b>144</b>
Summary of the Study .....	144
Summary of the Literature.....	144

Purpose of the Study .....	148
Research Questions.....	149
Summary of the Methods.....	150
Summary of Findings and Conclusions .....	152
Individual stressors experienced by principals .....	152
Organizational stressors experienced by principals.....	156
Strategies used by principals to mitigate stress .....	160
Systems to support mental health and wellbeing of principals.....	163
Consequences of stress .....	165
COVID-19 pandemic.....	167
Recommendations for Principals .....	169
Recommendation one .....	170
Recommendation two .....	170
Recommendation three .....	170
Recommendation four.....	171
Recommendation five .....	171
Recommendation six.....	172
Recommendation seven .....	172
Recommendations for School Districts .....	172
Recommendation one .....	173
Recommendation two .....	173
Recommendation three .....	174
Recommendation four.....	174
Recommendation five .....	175

Recommendations for Principal Preparation Programs.....	175
Reommendation one .....	175
Recommendation two .....	176
Implications for the Research .....	176
Conclusion .....	177
References .....	185

## **List of Appendices**

Appendix A.....	179
Appendix B.....	182
Appendix C.....	183



## List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Profile Sheet .....	75
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## List of Figures

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Study .....	3
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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Evidence abounds that the sheer magnitude of stress on Americans has become commonplace and inevitable. Results from the 2020 annual survey by the American Psychological Association, *Stress in America*, reveal that 49% of adults believe that their behavior has been negatively affected by the physical and emotional toll of increased stress (APA, 2020). These behaviors include unexpected mood changes, screaming and yelling at loved ones, restlessness, and an onset of depression. Detailed data points were collected from surveys completed by people from across the United States about the sources and magnitude of stress and how people respond to these stressors – both mentally and physically. According to the survey, multiple sources of stress and related symptoms now plague Americans, such as the coronavirus pandemic, health care, mass shootings, climate change, and uncertainty in our nation. One major highlight from the study shows that 64% of employed adults reported work as a major source of stress (APA, 2020).

Amidst the educational arena, present day principals face high levels of insistent stress in the workplace (Boyland, 2011; Catano & Stronge, 2006; Crawford & Early, 2011; Klocko & Wells, 2018). Extant research shows that principal stressors range in-depth from inability to control the everchanging daily demands of the principalship to other factors, such as high-stakes testing accountability, managerial duties, and human resource responsibilities (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Duke, 1988; Klocko & Wells, 2018; Martin & Willower, 1981; Petersen, 1982; Sytsma, 2009).

Additionally, the rise of high stakes testing accountability and national education reform efforts have caused an increase in demand for school accountability in the realm of national educational policy, ultimately impacting state, district, and school leadership. Over the past 40

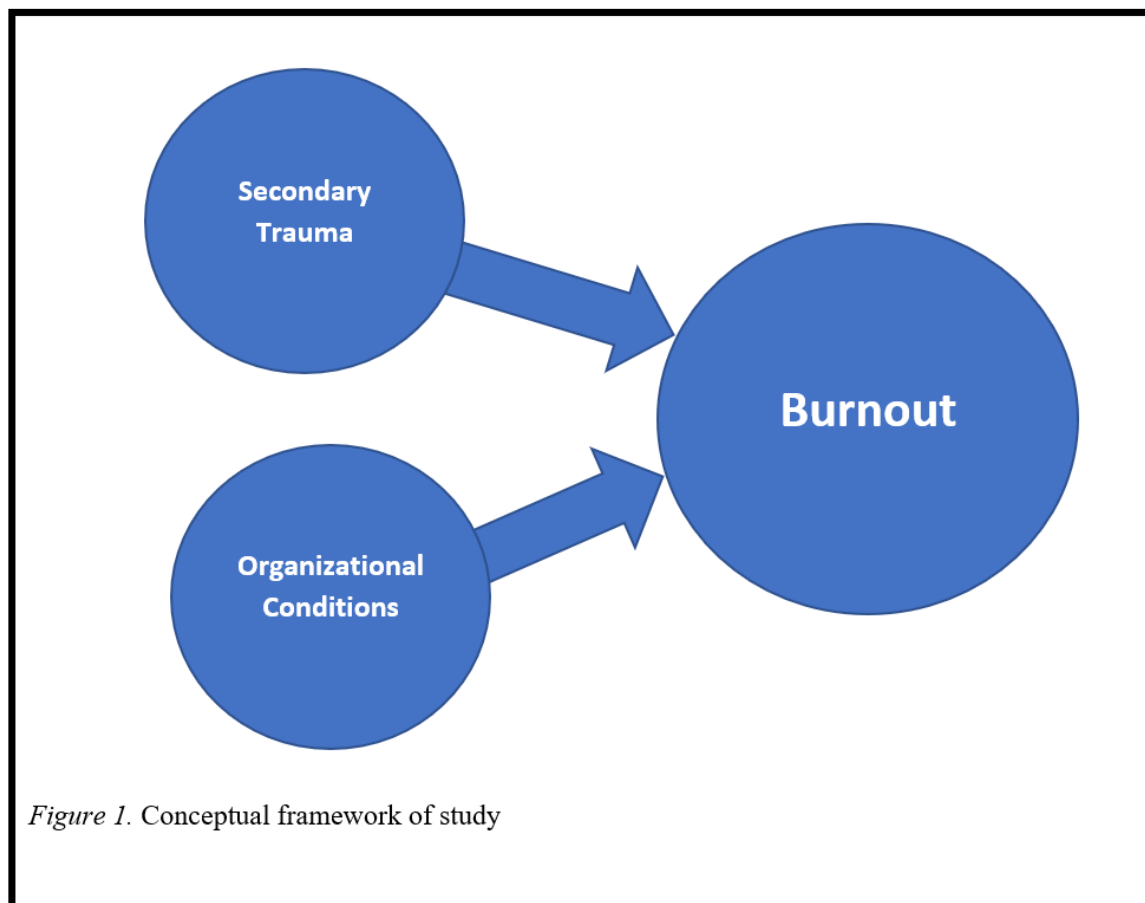
years, each decade has marked the enactment of major federal reform policies and initiatives, which have elicited a call to change. In 1983, the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*, followed by the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1995. Subsequently, the United States Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 (NCLB, 2002). In 2009, Race to the Top emerged and in 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into policy (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The passage of ESSA allowed some of the federal government's oversight of school improvement efforts to be transferred back to the states which has proved significantly challenging for many state education agencies to turn around their lowest performing schools (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). With each reform effort, new initiatives, roles, and student accountability expectations for school leaders have surfaced.

Consequently, the demand for rapid change in chronically underperforming campuses weighs heavily on the already strained workload of a principal (Boyland, 2011; Combs et al., 2009). The principal as the key lever for change in any school, especially turnaround schools, must balance all roles and responsibilities accordingly while persistently moving the needle for student academic achievement and success. In the role of school principal, stress and burnout looms heavily in the workplace.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Plenteous research sustains the concept that there are multiple constructs to consider when examining the impact of stress and burnout on the role of the principal. Principals are leaders of human-service oriented institutions who act in helping roles to both navigate the role of the principalship while also advocating on behalf of all school and community stakeholders (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; DeMatthews et al., 2021).

To facilitate the understanding of the influencing factors of stress and burnout on principals, this study follows a framework proposed by DeMatthews, Reyes, James, and Solis (2021) that focuses on burnout and the impact of secondary trauma and organizational conditions as contributing factors for burnout. Figure 1 depicts the relationship between burnout, secondary trauma, and organizational conditions.



D. E. DeMatthews, D. P. Reyes, L. James, & J. Solis, 2021

## **Burnout**

Burnout is defined as a “psychological syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy which is experienced in response to chronic job stressors” (Leiter & Maslach, 2003, p. 93). For years, the term burnout was viewed as a grassroots phenomenon grounded in the empirical realities of people’s work experiences rather than a scholarly recognized theory of practice. Recent work has allowed for a broadened multidimensional model of burnout to include any type of profession, not just human service-oriented and educational occupations (Leiter & Maslach, 2003). Work stress and burnout are related to the school context and also individual factors (Friedman, 2002). Leiter & Maslach (2003) identify and expound upon the three dimensions of burnout:

- **Exhaustion:** This is representative of the basic individual stress experience. Individuals generally feel overextended and depleted of necessary resources such as emotional and physical energy.
- **Cynicism:** This is representative of the interpersonal dimension of burnout, and it usually develops as a result of exhaustion overload. Cynicism can be detected through a negative or extremely detached response to different demands of the job. This detachment can lead to impracticality and the dehumanization of others.
- **Inefficacy:** This is representative of the self-evaluation dimension of burnout. Associated feelings in this dimension are incompetence, lack of achievement, and unproductivity in work. If insistent overwhelming demands are evident in the workplace, coupled with exhaustion and cynicism, it will invariably lead to a negative view of one’s overall effectiveness. While exhaustion and cynicism emerge from work overload and social conflict, inefficacy exists as a result of lack of resources.

Burnout is a “cumulative reaction to ongoing occupational stressors” (Leiter & Maslach, 2003, p. 93). The emphasis is more on the psychological effects of burnout as opposed to the physical ones.

### **Secondary Trauma**

Secondary trauma can be a major contributing factor to burnout. Secondary traumatic stress, or compassion fatigue, is defined as the emotional duress experienced by a person processing the trauma experienced by another; a person having close contact with a trauma survivor (Figley, 1983; Jenkins & Baird, 2002). People who work in human-service oriented roles such as the field of education are often expected to place the needs of those they serve before their own. They spend countless hours helping people to solve complex psychological, social, and physical problems that surface from past trauma (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

A major role of the school principal is to work with teachers, staff, students, parents, and related stakeholders to confront problems, seek a level of understanding in all situations, and address problems by posing viable solutions. The principal must be physically and emotionally present to resolve complex problems that arise. Individuals who experience secondary trauma over an extended period of time can become “stressed or desensitized to people’s feelings, lose a sense of hope and purpose, and be at risk of burnout” (DeMatthews et al., 2019, p. 682).

### **Organizational Conditions**

Researchers first conceptualized working conditions for principals within the realm of school context, such as “poverty level, proportion of students of color, school size, school location, and student achievement level, as well as instructional and administrative expenditure per student” (Yan, 2020, p. 94). Leiter and Maslach (2003) identified six key domains that are organizational correlates to burnout and stress:

- **Workload:** This is the most commonly discussed domain. It occurs when the demands of the job exceed human capability.
- **Control:** The employees' perceived capacity to influence decisions and exercise professional autonomy over factors affecting their work.
- **Reward:** Monetary, social, and intrinsic rewards must be consistent with expectations. Lack of recognition devalues the work and the worker and increases one's vulnerability to burnout.
- **Community:** The overall quality of social interaction at work. "People thrive in community and function best when they share praise, comfort, happiness, and humor with people they like and respect" (Leiter & Maslach, 2003, p. 98).
- **Fairness:** The degree by which decisions at work are viewed as being fair and people are treated with respect.
- **Values:** The heart of people's relationship with their work. This encompasses the ideals and motivations that initially fascinated them with the job.

Various research studies show a broad range of factors that constitute principal working conditions and several complexities that influence this within the context of the school (Fuller et al., 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2021). For this research study, the six aforementioned domains will serve as the framework for organizational conditions that contribute to workplace burnout and stress.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In today's educational workforce, the stakes are progressively high with principals assuming increasing responsibilities, conflicting pressures, weightier workloads, and public accountability. In public schools, principals are expected to be instructional leaders,



disciplinarians, culture cultivators, human resource managers, community partners, school resource allocators, child advocates and much more. Over the past two decades, the primary role of principal has shifted from managerial responsibilities to data-driven, instructional leadership (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Mahfouz, 2020; Hallinger, 2003).

In the accountability era, principals are tasked with the responsibility of a confounding number of priorities. Policies in Texas and in the United States place the principal at the forefront for school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2008). Research reveals that the principal, aside from the teacher, is one of the single most influential factors in determining student outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Supovitz et al., 2010). Principals, specifically those leading turnaround schools, are experiencing high levels of stress due to conflicting and often time-consuming job roles and responsibilities. Persistently high rates of principal turnover systematically plague low-performing schools (Loeb et al., 2010).

Mahfouz (2019) states, “Of all the professions in the helping fields, school administrators may have the highest stress and burnout rates” (p. 27). Principals become overwhelmed when the demands of their job exceed their capacity. Job stress can impair both health and work performance (Sauter & Murphy, 1995). Evidence abounds that today’s school principals face unrelenting pressure in stress-strained environments (Sogunro, 2012). Untreated, prolonged work-related stress can affect one’s physical and mental health, overall job satisfaction, and work productivity and effectiveness.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead in historically underperforming schools. Furthermore, this study sought to identify individual and organizational factors for stress and burnout as well as principal coping strategies.

By using qualitative research strategies, this study intended to amplify the voices of elementary, middle, and high school principals who lead in turnaround environments. The urgency of identifying these significant pressure points and principal coping mechanisms can provide opportunities for district leaders to look inward to build sustainable support structures for school principals.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions were designed to capture the intricacy of principal stress and burnout. Research questions were based on addressing the fundamental assumptions about the specificity of the role of principal and its relation to stress and burnout. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What individual stressors do principals in low-performing schools experience?
2. What organizational stressors do principals in low-performing schools experience?
3. How do principals cope with these stress factors?
4. What systems are in place to support the mental health and wellbeing of these principals?

### **Study Design**

This study comprehensively analyzed and interrogated the professional journey of ten principal participants – ranging from elementary to high school. By using a qualitative approach to inquiry, the research design mirrors an inductive style in which the focus is on individual meaning and the value given to reporting the complexity of a situation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research design honors the voices of the participants. The researcher is able to deeply analyze and understand the participants' feelings and experiences. Utilizing an interpretivist approach, one is able to process and understand the complex human and social realities of participants (Crotty, 1998). I selected Interpretivism as the theoretical framework due

to the importance given to the individual and the meanings and values of their actions and interactions with others. Through individual interviews and analysis, principal participants were able to provide firsthand experiences of the reality they face each day as they lead the work in turnaround school environments. Study data was analyzed through the lens of interpretivism within the context of the burnout conceptual framework model presented in Figure 1.

### **Significance of the Study**

Principals are facing unprecedented levels of accountability and pressure. Consequently, the complexity and intractability of the principal's role has resulted in high turnover rates (Loeb et al., 2010), low principal job satisfaction (West et al., 2014), and various health related issues – physical, social, psychological, and physiological (Sogunro, 2012). Moreover, a principal's inability to cope with stress undermines their effectiveness on the job (Sogunro, 2012). When principals make the decision to leave the profession due to stress, their skills, expertise, and experience leave with them (Wells & Klocko, 2018). After the principal leaves the school, it can take between five and seven years to return to a state of normalcy where meaningful change can be enacted (Fullan, 2002).

It becomes quite the arduous task to cope with stress when there are no resources available. Wells and Klocko (2018) suggest that principal stress may result from an imbalance between “the demands principals face and the resources available for dealing with those demands, rather than from the demands alone” (p. 161). It is of paramount importance to find and implement strategies to remedy principal burnout, educate principals on effective ways to cope with stress and burnout, and equip organizational structures to support principals in sustainable ways.

Although there is a myriad of research that explores the concept of principal burnout, the burden of confronting and coping with these complex realities is usually placed on the principal. Limited research exists with the function of outlining the role that school districts play in providing the proper supports necessary for principal mental health and emotional stability. DeMatthews, Carrola, Knight, and Izquierdo (2019) state, “The mental health needs of school principals have been consistently overlooked in the field of educational leadership and in the preparation and professional development of principals” (p. 681). Stress and burnout are a chronic phenomenon that principals face, yet little is done to help principals confront, cope, and prepare for this reality.

In the era of accountability, this study is invaluable in informing future practices for the preparation of principals prior to obtaining the seat and the need for solid support structures to sustain the emotional resilience of principals while in the role. This study provides guidance and direction to school districts in enhancing the quality of professional development programs and learning sessions for principals. Klocko and Wells (2018) suggest, “Preparing principals with coping strategies before they encounter setbacks with the challenges inherent in the job may increase novice or experienced principals’ workplace wellbeing” (p. 168). Furthermore, colleges and universities can benefit from this study to inform their practices for preparing quality leadership preparation programs for aspiring principals. Lastly, findings from this study can help shape the conversations for policymakers when enacting state and federal policy with education reform that adversely affect principals, specifically those who lead turnaround schools.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

The central limitation of this research study lies within the sample size selected. Ten principal participants were involved in this study. Although research supports the need for small

sample sizes when conducting qualitative research, more data would need to be captured from a larger sample of principals in order to determine if findings are able to be generalized to larger populations.

Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) explain another limitation of qualitative research, “The words we choose to document what we see and hear in the field can never be truly ‘objective;’ they can only be our interpretation of what we experience...and the influence of the researcher’s personal values, attitudes, and beliefs from and toward fieldwork is not unavoidable” (p. 11). The researcher fully acknowledges potential limitations and has placed valid measures in place, such as the use of a second rater to objectively and unequivocally approach the data from a non-biased lens void of individual interpretation and influence.

Delimitations of the study involve the sample selection of principals from various school districts in Texas and the research setting, which took place away from the campus. Delimitations were purposeful in order to gain insight from some of the most difficult campus turnaround environments to staff and lead. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, strict safety protocols were enforced. This resulted in all participants being interviewed via Zoom. Participants selected their own day and time to be interviewed to ensure that they were free from distractions and any possible interference. All participants were interviewed away from campus.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Burnout** – Burnout is defined as a “psychological syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy which is experienced in response to chronic job stressors” (Leiter & Maslach, 2003, p. 93). Simply put, burnout is a prolonged response to chronic, interpersonal job stressors.

**Central Office** – School district personnel that are responsible for supervising, providing support, and assisting with campus and district operating affairs for school leaders. Central office staff report to the district administration building or other district-designated buildings.

**High-Stakes Testing** – State-based, standardized testing used primarily to determine a student’s promotion or retention status and a school’s accountability rating. In this study, the principal participant sample resides and works in Texas; therefore, the State of Texas Assessment for Academic Readiness (STAAR) test is referenced.

**Improvement Required “IR”** – This is the label that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) gives to schools that fail to meet statewide accountability standards.

**Leadership Team** – Campus-based administrators that assist the principal with school-operating affairs such as instructional leadership, discipline management, teacher and staff professional development, teacher and staff appraisals, school events, and parent and community engagement. For the purpose of this study, school leadership teams consist of a combination of any of the following positions: Assistant Principal, Dean of Instruction, Dean of Students, Teacher Specialist, Literacy Coach, Magnet Coordinator, and Counselor.

**Low-Performing School** – For the purpose of this study, a low-performing school, or underperforming-school, is a school that did not meet the state requirements for student accountability; a school ranked with a letter grade of ‘D’ or ‘F’; a historically low-performing school or chronic underperformer that has consistently failed to meet state standards over the course of consecutive years.

**School Turnaround** – This refers to the rapid improvement of student achievement in low-performing schools (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). For the purpose of this study, school turnaround will be defined as campuses with ‘D’ or ‘F’ letter grades in accordance with the

Texas state accountability system that have improved their academic standing to a ‘C’ or higher in consecutive years.

**Stakeholders** – People or constituents who are closely connected to public education (i.e. teachers, students, parents, community members, school board trustees).

**Stress** – As a concept, stress is “used to describe the level of tension people feel is placed on their minds and souls by the demands of their jobs, relationships, and responsibilities in their personal lives” (Seaward, 2006, p. 5). Stress is “our response when we face a demand at work but do not feel we have sufficient resources to meet the demand” (Halbesleben, 2010).

**Turnaround School** – A turnaround school experiences “years of chronic failure resulting in a higher level of student need” (Kutash et al., 2010, p. 36).

**Wellbeing** – A highly prized hope in life often associated with satisfaction with life or happiness (Wells & Klocko, 2018).

## Summary

In summary, this chapter outlined the conceptual framework that will be used to examine the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead historically low-performing schools. This qualitative study follows a framework proposed by DeMatthews, Reyes, and Solis (2021) that focuses on burnout and the impact of secondary trauma and organizational conditions as contributing factors for burnout. Additionally, this chapter provides context for the purpose statement, research questions, problem statement, key terminology, limitations and delimitations, and significance of the study. Findings from this study will inform future practices for school district planning with professional development for principals and inform planning at the collegiate level for aspiring principal preparation programs. Principals can also benefit from

stress management strategies. Chapter II will provide the context for literature review pertaining to this study.



## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Present day principals face high levels of unrelenting stress in the workplace (Boyland, 2011; Catano & Stronge, 2006; Crawford & Early, 2011; Klocko & Wells, 2018; Sogunro, 2012). The stress and pressure that principals experience in schools stem from a wide array of causal factors and undercurrents within the campus, district, state, and national education reform and policy. Research abounds to show that many principal stressors derive from their inability to control the day-to-day events that arise with campus-level leadership, in addition to factors such as high-stakes testing accountability, managerial duties, and human resource responsibilities (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Duke, 1988; Klocko & Wells, 2018; Martin & Willower, 1981; Petersen, 1982; Sytsma, 2009).

Although stress in the workplace is inevitable, the daily constant buildup of untreated stress significantly impacts the professional and private life of the principal and those in their care (Sogunro, 2012). Principal-imposed stress has the potential to negatively affect parents, teachers, students, school-based administrators, and people within the principal's personal circle. Principal workload stress is invariably detrimental to their own mental health and wellbeing (Sogunro, 2012; Sorenson, 2007).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, research taken during the 2011-2012 school year shows that one in five principals left their school. Exit reasons include transferring to another school, retiring, or receiving a position elsewhere (Ottum & DeRoche, 2016). With many principals averaging five years of service or less, attrition and turnover has been linked to stress and pressure (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Due to burnout and untreated stress, many principals do not remain in their position for extended periods of time (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Pounder &

Merrill, 2011). Scant research provides context across a broader body of work for the exodus of principals; however, it is often linked to the mental strain of the job and ultimately burnout (Armenta & Reno, 1997; Whitaker, 1996).

Principal recruitment is a critical concern in the field (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). With an increase in job demands, there is a looming shortage of principals. The revolving door of principal leadership makes it difficult for schools to retain the skills, expertise, and experience that usually exit the building when the principal leaves (Klocko & Wells; 2018). Student achievement is directly linked to principal and teacher effectiveness. When principals remain in their positions for short periods of time, student achievement suffers (Mahfouz, 2020). The undue stress that principals experience unequivocally impacts the stability of the principalship across the country.

### **The Role of the Principal**

The primary function of a campus principal has evolved over the years from building manager to instructional leader (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Prior to the evolution of principal responsibilities and expectations, the role of a campus principal was likened to the job of a sole supervisor and disciplinarian (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Grady, 2004).

In the once popular American television sitcom “Saved by the Bell” that first aired in 1989, Mr. Belding embodies the perception of this role as principal. In this sitcom, Mr. Belding is regularly seen ushering students to class in the hallways, jokingly interacting with teachers and staff, investigating prankster mysteries, and enforcing consequences for chronic misbehaviors and campus disciplinary concerns. Although fictional, the daily interactions of Mr. Belding as principal of Bayside High School mirrored the cumbersome managerial tasks that occupied a vast majority of the day for principals in that time.

The past two decades have been marked by an increasing demand for the principal to act as chief instructional leader and change agent for student achievement and reform efforts (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Mahfouz, 2020; Hallinger, 2003). The perceived job of the principal is not as desirable as it once was (Catano & Stronge, 2006; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). With the rise of high stakes testing accountability and national education reform efforts, this pivotal paradigm shift surfaced. Modern day principals are tasked with the daily charge of being fiscally responsible for campus allocated funds, recruiting, retaining and growing human capital, and advocating for the needs of their unique school community (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Principals must also effectively manage student discipline and provide structured support and services that are representative of all student groups (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Rigby, 2014).

Amidst rampant school violence, principals are held to a high level of accountability with ensuring that students receive a quality education while also remaining safe (Harris, 2007; Sogunro, 2012). Principals are charged with the task of fostering healthy, positive-working relationships with students, staff, and community members in efforts to cultivate a campus climate conducive to academic learning and growth (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004; Catano & Stronge, 2006; Mahfouz, 2020). Principals must also mediate and bring resolve to intrapersonal conflicts that may arise within the school community (Crawford, 2007; Maxwell & Riley, 2017).

A principal's work schedule generally extends beyond the hours of the school day. They are expected to supervise afterschool activities as well as make community appearances at an endless number of events (Grady, 2004). The role of the principal often requires the physical and emotional availability of the school leader.

Despite the arduous and time-consuming tasks that may control the day, principals are now expected to be visionary campus leaders with a laser-like focus on instruction. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) identified twenty-one categories of behavior related to a school principal. These responsibilities include giving affirmation, managing discipline, being involved in curriculum, instruction and assessment, monitoring and evaluating school systems, optimizing challenges, building relationships, leveraging resources, being situationally aware, and being highly visible. They must be well versed with data analysis and strategic thinking and planning.

The most paramount priority for modern day principals is to deliver on the promise of a quality education to every child every day. A principal must lead the learning in best practices with curriculum, instruction, and assessment to fully equip teachers with the guidance and support they need to be successful (Barkman, 2015; Fullan, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005).

Student achievement is a major determinant in school accountability ratings, school district report card grades, teacher appraisal and development systems, teacher incentive pay programs, and school leader appraisals. The instructional leadership of the campus principal is significantly linked to student success and academic achievement (Grissom et al., 2013; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Rigby, 2014; Supovitz, et al., 2010). Present day principals must take full ownership and accountability of the effective delivery of instruction that should occur daily in every classroom.

A school principal is expected to significantly influence and enhance the instructional program of the campus. The principal is the primary instructional resource for their teachers and staff (Brolund, 2016). Principals must establish school-wide systems to effectively monitor the instructional progress of the campus. The prioritization of managing, monitoring, and facilitating the work as an instructional leader is a role that must be proportionally balanced with the many

other school-based factors that vie for the time and attention of the principal (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Hallinger, 2003; Pounder & Merrill, 2001). Principals are positioned at the center of the instructional framework of the campus.

### **Principal Stressors**

A review of the literature shows that principals often work in solidarity with limited structures in place to provide the proper social and emotional support necessary in order to sustain one's mental health in keeping with the increasing demands of the job (Friedman, 1995; Klocko & Wells, 2018; Mahfouz, 2019). As more demands for accountability and daily job expectations increase for principals, stressors also increase (Mahfouz, 2020). In due course, these workplace stressors lead to principal burnout.

Whan and Thomas (1996) cite a stream of job functions as major stressors for principals including time constraints, work overload, lack of control in decision-making, lack of appreciation, working in isolation, insufficient funding and resources, working with uncooperative parents in parent groups, and finding substitute teachers for daily absences. Other stressors involve the need for principals to investigate and respond to school criminal activities, attend staff meetings (especially with controversial issues), attend meetings outside of school hours, and supervise students outside of the school day due to extracurricular obligations.

A review of the literature over the past decade signifies no real change in principal stressors as cited by practitioners several decades earlier. Major stressors that present-day principals still experience include overload of job responsibilities, working in isolation, and lack of support with budget, resources, and training. New causes of principal stress that have surfaced over the past couple of decades include trauma-informed leadership (DeMatthews et al., 2018;

Sprang et al., 2011), pressures with testing and accountability (Boyland, 2011; Combs et al., 2009), and lack of support with social and emotional development (Mahfouz, 2019).

### **Overload of Job Responsibilities**

The role of the principal requires a leader who is readily able to meet the ever-changing needs of various stakeholders within the school community. Grubb and Flessa (2006) concisely describe the critical function of a principal as a job that is virtually impossible for one person to handle alone. Beyond the academic weight of accountability placed on the principal, “they are asked to respond to the expectations of numerous constituencies, resulting in a conflict for these burgeoning roles and the overload that ensues” (Catano & Stronge, 2006, p. 163).

The daily workload of a principal is ever-changing, fast-paced, and endless. Many principals attribute feelings of burnout to the overloading of job responsibilities (Systema, 2009). Principals face constant daily interruptions, make decisions on the spot, and are often blamed for things as a result of the decisions they make (Poirel & Yvon, 2014). In a state-wide study conducted on principals in a midwestern state in 2009, principals reported their highest levels of stress were a result of insufficient time to complete tasks, constant interruptions, email overload, work-life balance, and insufficient funding (Wells et al., 2011). As opposed to a teacher, the typical workday of a principal is sporadic with far more moments of infrequencies with appointments and tasks (Martin & Willower, 1981).

Many principals lack the clarity and consistency needed to perform their job efficiently and effectively. The complexity of the principal’s job is clouded by ambiguity of roles and responsibilities (Deituk & Savery, 1986; MacPherson, 1985). Whitaker (1996) denotes in her study that the increased demands and responsibilities of the obscure role create undue stress for

principals. Principals are in essence learning the job as they perform the job (Whitaker, 1996). The uncertainty of the role can inflict unwanted stress upon the principal.

Difficult parents and community members also add to the stress that a principal may encounter on the job. The principal must be readily available to listen and respond to the needs and often conflicting interests of various stakeholders. Principals must have strong interpersonal skills and collaborative leadership styles to foster positive, nurturing, collegial school climates in which all stakeholders feel valued and respected (Grady, 2004; Harris, 2007; Sogunro, 2012). The principal must be able to effectively create and maintain sustainable school-community partnerships.

Although there is limited literature dedicated solely to the research and study of principal burnout and stress, there are significant parallels between the stresses that principals face and those that managers in other professions face. Klocko and Wells (2018) liken the workload of a principal to that of a physician, being that both principals and physicians have extended workdays, subject themselves to backlash from constituents, and struggle to balance time for their personal life. Principals and physicians also risk facing legal threats, and it can become difficult for them to reach out for emotional support. It can also be a challenge for principals, like physicians, to set boundaries to protect their personal time (Wells, 2013; Klocko & Wells, 2018).

Several job-related tasks that are required of the principal are completed in isolation. Due to the nature of the job, many principals report feelings of isolation as problematic in the work environment (Cassavant & Cherkowski, 2001; Klocko & Wells, 2018; Welch et al., 1982). The isolation that principals face within their role affects their relationships with teachers and students (Welch et al., 1982). As a result, principals often become detached from stakeholders. Whitaker (1996) expresses that even at principals' meetings, principals rarely get the time to

converse with each other, reflect, and share problems and solutions candidly. This leaves many principals feeling “isolated and alone in a world of conflict” (Whitaker, 1996).

### **Trauma-Informed Leadership**

The field of education is a human-service institution in which principals act in helping roles to advocate on behalf of the health, safety, and wellbeing of others (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Principals help others to process the effects of trauma; thereby, resulting in principals experiencing secondary trauma. This direct exposure to secondary trauma carries serious emotional implications (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Sprang et al., 2011).

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), almost 1,770 children died at the hands of abuse and neglect in the United States of America in 2018. Statistics show that roughly 6.5 million children are referred to Child Protective Services annually, and one in seven children suffer at the hands of child abuse or neglect (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2020). Over time, principals who assist families with processing trauma can become “stressed or desensitized to people’s feelings, lose a sense of hope and purpose, and be at risk of burnout” (DeMatthews et al., 2019).

In the process of trying to heal the wounds of others, the school principal can be negligent of their own needs. Harris (2007) describes the emotional struggle that principals face thusly:

In schools in challenging circumstances, they may carry the emotional distress of parents, community, and staff who feel constantly threatened by poverty, unemployment, violence, or the threat of school closure. They may have to repress their own feelings in order to emotionally support colleagues, pupils, and parents in the event of a traumatic death or event. They may feel they have to be approachable, warm, and supportive even



though they feel lonely and unsupported, or they are suffering some distress in their own life. (p. 626)

The burden of the school principal requires them to constantly confront the trauma of others. The aftermath of secondhand trauma that principals face in educational leadership is an overlooked reality (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2018). Principals must work closely with staff members to act responsibly and promptly to problems that students face in their home-life. Principals can become overwhelmed with responding to trauma. The high levels of secondary trauma that principals are prone to process can eventually create stress-induced feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and burnout in their own lives (DeMatthews et al., 2019).

Principals not only have to cope with external sources of tension but must also learn to deal with their own emotions (Austefeld & Stanton, 2004). Many principals feel compelled to place the needs of everyone else before their own, even to the detriment of their own health and wellbeing. Figley (1995) describes second-hand stress as compassion fatigue. Principals who experience compassion fatigue internalize overwhelming feelings of empathy towards their staff and students. The obligatory need to process secondary trauma or second-hand stress further adds to the emotional labor of the principal.

### **Demands for Testing Accountability**

Policies in the United States place the principal as the primary change agent for school improvement (Crawford, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008). School reform initiatives have dominated the educational landscape in the country over the past few decades. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* was published by the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education. In 1995, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was signed by President Lyndon Baines Johnson, followed by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 under the leadership of

President George W. Bush. In 2009 Race to the Top emerged, and in 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into policy by President Barack Obama (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Federal legislation leaves degrees of school improvement to the responsibility of the states for oversight and implementation (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2019). The enactment of each federal policy signaled a wave of responses by states and school districts, ultimately impacting the workload of the school principal.

In the age of rigid accountability, school principals are held to steep standards with student academic achievement and progress. Chronic pressure and high expectations place school principals under inordinate stress as they respond to legislative and district mandates (Boyland, 2011; Combs et al., 2009; Klocko & Wells, 2015; Wells, 2016). Due to stress imposed by school performance accountability systems, the number of educators who aspire to be principals dwindle in number (Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2012; Starr, 2011). Current pressures with testing accountability and school reform policy implementation add to the weightiness of stress and burnout in the principalship.

The pendulum effect of an ever-changing accountability system, state-mandated testing, and new and revised state curricular standards dictate the role and influence of the principal (Boyland, 2011; Mahfouz, 2020; Rigby, 2014). As standards and testing increase in rigor and complexity, daily instruction in schools must transform also. The principal has the obligatory responsibility to stay abreast of current research-based best practices in education in order to effectively support and lead the campus to meeting annual academic goals.

Given the pressure of state-mandated testing with adequate yearly progress, the burden weighs heavily on the shoulders of a school principal. Harris (2007) argues “Little consideration has been given to the psychological impact on leaders and teachers of implementing an endless

stream of contradictory and sometimes competing policies” (p. 293). School leaders often neglect their own personal and familial needs in order to be readily available in service to others. Ultimately, the principal is held accountable for the success or failure of the school.

### **Leading in Turnaround Schools**

Many public-school principals in western countries are given the grave responsibility of leading historically underperforming campuses. Multi-year, improvement-required schools are often referred to as historically underperforming, low-performing, turnaround, transformation, or priority schools (Mette & Scribner, 2014; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019; Weiner & Woulfin, 2019). VanGronigen and Meyers (2019) define school turnaround as “the rapid improvement of student achievement in low-performing schools” (p. 423). A turnaround school experiences “years of chronic failure resulting in a higher level of student need” (Kutash et al., 2010, p. 36). According to Mette and Scribner (2014), the term “turnaround school” is usually attached to the highly politicized stigma, “mainly that schools with high levels of minority and low-socioeconomic status students correlate with producing academically low-achieving students” (p. 13).

Persistently low-achieving campuses across the United States are marked by comparable characteristics, generally serving students of color and limited English proficient students in areas populated with high-poverty rates (Papa, 2007). Schools with these characteristics tend to have a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students who typically suffer from low attendance rates, lack of parental involvement, and widened student learning gaps (Berliner, 2006; Duke, 2015).

In a study examining principal turnover in Texas, findings revealed that schools serving low-income students of color in rural and urban school districts had higher rates of principal

turnover which also contributed to increased rates of teacher turnover (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Stable school leadership is critical to improving organizational conditions such as quality teaching and learning which takes time. Consequently, principal retention is needed to stabilize the learning environment and positively and significantly impact student learning outcomes (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Extant research shows that high rates of principal turnover systemically exist on hard-to-staff, low-performing campuses with majority-minority student populations (Gates et al., 2006; Papa, 2007, DeMatthews et al., 2021). The schools most in need of stable principals are the schools least likely to have them (Fuller & Young, 2009). When a principal leaves a school, it often has negative effects on student and school outcomes (Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014; Loeb et al., 2010; Supovitz et al., 2010). It can take between five to seven years for a school to return to normalcy with meaningful change after a principal leaves a school (Fullan, 2002). Pendola and Fuller (2018) suggest that “student characteristics are often not the primary driver of instability, but the discord between internal and external expectations brought on by the profession” (p. 2).

Demands for effective school leadership and stability in turnaround environments are paramount to student success. Principals who lead schools in need of reform are tasked with transforming the current campus instructional program, developing and implementing state-required improvement plans, and equipping and supporting building leaders as well as teachers and support staff through observations, walkthroughs, and meaningful professional development. As with any turnaround plan, school leaders sacrifice countless hours in efforts to significantly close student achievement gaps within the scope of a single school year (Harris et al., 2006). Schools must implement aggressive action plans and show overnight success to stay afloat.

The principal is deemed “a key lever for change” in turnaround reform environments (Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). The demand for rapid change in chronically underperforming campuses further increases the already strained workload of a principal (Boyland, 2011; Combs et al., 2009). Turnaround school leaders must promote rapid, sustainable change that meet district and state expectations in short periods of time. They must meet the expectations that non-turnaround principals are expected to meet while also working rigorously towards the fulfillment of reform-initiatives and goals. These principals are expected to be superhuman with little to no regard for their own self-preservation.

### **Leading During a Global Pandemic**

In March 2020, principals across the United States of America entered a world of uncertainty as they were given the overnight responsibility to switch from face-to-face learning to virtual learning due to the massive COVID-19 deadly virus outbreak that spread rapidly across the country. Within a matter of minutes, brick-and-mortar buildings became obsolete and remote learning surfaced as the new normal.

Frost (2020) notes that principals have dedicated their time to months of planning with little or no break. The author further elaborates on principal leadership amidst the pandemic:

They are spending their summers scrambling to create back to school plans. This as state guidance changes often and repeatedly. They are burnt out, stressed out, and trying to run schools from home all while pleasing the stakeholders in the community and maintaining their own family lives amidst a pandemic... Their mental health during the pandemic planning may be suffering. (Frost, 2020)

Many principals have cancelled vacation time and traded in off days to develop plans for the health, safety, and instructional needs of their school community. Frost (2020) maintains that even while away from work, it is difficult for principals to fully detach themselves mentally due to local and national media outlets and daily conversations being pandemic centered.

Dr. Sarah Howling, international principal and coach to educational leaders, emphasizes that working remotely from home has created obscurity for principals with work-home life balance. Sixteen-hour days have become a normal practice for principals (Frost, 2020). Principals are experiencing high levels of anxiety and they are not as readily able to provide concrete solutions to the needs of parents and other constituents (Frost, 2020). Leading during a pandemic has caused principals to embrace a new normal. In essence, school plans and guidelines change rapidly overnight, and principals are given no choice but to build the plane while flying it.

### **Addressing Stress and Burnout in Principals**

Social and emotional dynamics in principals significantly impact their overall leadership effectiveness. Principals should develop healthy social and emotional competencies in order to effectively navigate the role of school leader (Mahfouz, 2019; O'Connor, 2004; Schmidt, 2010). The sustained emotional resilience of a principal is essential to the cultivation of a positive school climate. The way in which a principal chooses to respond to stress affects the entire campus. "If you are angry, they are angry. If you are pessimistic, they will be pessimistic. But if you are enthusiastic, positive and upbeat, their emotional response will be influenced by yours" (Harris, 2007).

The emotional temperament of the principal sets the tone for all stakeholders within the learning environment. The school principal must be constantly aware of their emotions, the way

in which they respond, and its effect on others (Harris, 2007). When principals experience workplace stress and burnout, it has the potential to impact the entire campus and community.

Mahfouz (2019) states that school administrators may have the highest levels of stress and burnout in comparison to other jobs in the helping fields. A school principal who experiences burnout on the job faces physical and emotional exhaustion, detachment from stakeholders, and feelings of anger or frustration that may result in him or her lashing out against those they lead (Friedman, 1995; Whitaker, 1996). Principals experiencing high levels of stress may also share feelings of depersonalization and low personal accomplishment (Whitaker, 1996). These unwanted feelings have the potential to negatively affect the job performance and work productivity of the principal, as well as job satisfaction of others in the workplace.

Modern day principals struggle to manage their own stress and mental health. Sogunro (2012) details the effects of unaddressed stress:

Unabated high stress levels have been known to predispose stresses (i.e. stress victims) to serious psychological, physiological, physical, and socioemotional problems, including nerve disorders, depression, cardiovascular diseases (e.g., high blood pressure and stroke), fatigue, migraine headaches, backaches, muscle pains, physical wear and tear, weight gain or loss, ulcers, upset stomach, insomnia or sleep deprivation, sleep apnea, frustration, outbursts of anger and panic attacks, unremitting tension and anxiety, high rates of alcoholism, confusion, helplessness, and lingering feelings of inadequacy. (p. 665)

Stress can ultimately lead to burnout, suicide, or even death (Sogunro, 2012). Many principals display deficit mindset thinking by normalizing the negative impact of work overload on their wellbeing (Walker, 2019). Principals may even feel a sense of guilt for acknowledging the stress

they are experiencing in the workplace. Principals often associate abnormal work hours and feelings of exhaustion with the common nature of the job. This mindset prohibits them from finding healthy ways to manage stress and burnout.

Although research shows that stress is a part of everyday life, excessive stress can negatively impact job performance and work effectiveness (Sogunro, 2012). The pulse of the campus is shaped by the wellbeing of the school leader. Principals must acknowledge that untreated workload stress can be a barrier to living a healthy life.

### **Coping with Stress**

Evidence abounds through this decade of research that principals report feelings of chronic stress; however, there is little to no assistance through programs or interventions to support them (Klocko & Wells, 2018). According to Grady (2004), principals must be consistently aware of the obscurity of stress and its effects, and they must structure their workload to combat it. Klocko and Wells (2018) argue that principal stress may result from an “imbalance between the demands principals face and the resources available for dealing with those demands rather than from the demands alone.” This conveys the notion that the ways in which principals choose to manage and cope with stress and burnout may be of far greater significance to principal survival than the act of attempting to eradicate the actual stress itself.

Sogunro (2012) conducted a study of 52 principals in Connecticut for approximately 2.5 years. Coping tips for principal stress, as supported by the literature, were categorized into five areas: behavioral modification cues, physical exercises, relaxation techniques, professional help, and medical care. Fourteen major stress-coping tips for principals emerged from the study.

Findings indicate that principals should regulate their sleeping habit, change routines, maintain a



healthy nutritional balance, nurture their passion, pursue hobbies, think positively, learn to say “no” to time-robbing tasks, and seek transfers or school reassignment when necessary.

Principals are encouraged to delegate leadership responsibilities and share leadership tasks with other leaders on the campus. Recent research introduces the concept of a leadership delegation plan and calendar (DeMatthews et al., 2021). This plan and calendar allows time for the principal to focus on addressing job-related stress and burnout during the workday or have non-business hours interruptions on designated dates and times. Principals can meet for 45 minutes with a colleague and have alternate points of contact for emergency purposes (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Principals should also self-monitor, enhance self-building capacities, evaluate leadership style, strengthen collaboration among staff and school-family-community partnerships, and use humor regularly. Sogunro (2012) asserts that principals should also seek socioemotional support to cope with stress.

### **Regulation of Sleeping Habits, Nutrition and Exercise**

Over 70% of the principals interviewed in the study reported irregular sleeping patterns from staying up late and waking up early. Emotional stress, the preoccupation with daily stressors, is the leading cause of insomnia (Sogunro, 2012). Maintaining boundaries with healthy, regular sleeping practices is critical to the mental health and stability of the school leader. Stress and nutrition are closely linked together. Gura (2007) asserts that a person is more susceptible to nutritional deficiencies when they are experiencing high levels of stress. A well-nourished person is more apt to cope effectively with stress than a poorly nourished person (Sogunro, 2012). By maintaining a healthy nutritional balance in meals and a consistent food schedule, principals are more equipped to manage stress.

Effective leaders recognize the unique relationship between their emotions and wellbeing (Harris, 2007). Physical self-care is paramount to a person's emotional state of being. Physical activities help to reduce stress. This form of release provides an outlet to principals away from the work and home environment (Grady, 2004). Principals should engage in physical activity daily. These exercises may include walking, frequenting the gym, or engaging in classes such as aerobics (Grady, 2004). By increasing the amount of daily physical activity, one also improves their physical health and mental wellbeing (Grady, 2004). Rooney (2000) suggests that principals calendar a time in their planner for exercise or other enjoyable activities. This time should be marked as sacred just as a principal would prioritize a staff meeting.

### **Daily Prioritization of Goals, Purpose and Hobbies**

Seaward (2006) describes time robbers as people or things that “steal your valuable time away from what really needs attention.” Principals must schedule their day despite the distractions that may arise. Grady (2004) states, “A principal without a plan will find that days seem to evaporate with little to show for hours of effort” (p. 3). Principals must put first things first by prioritizing daily tasks and creating concrete action plans to accomplish goals. A skilled principal recognizes the importance of consistency with daily planning and implementation of prioritized action items (Grady, 2004). The principal must take control of the day despite disruptions that may arise unexpectedly.

It is imperative for principals to remain focused on their passion for the job especially during stressful times. Principals must remember their purpose in wanting to transform the lives of the students they serve (Sogunro, 2012). School leaders are often encouraged to remember their “why” and focus on things that they can directly control. Becker (2019) encourages school

leaders to stay grounded in their purpose and to not lose sight of their “why.” In addition to intrinsic motivators, principals should also pursue hobbies and interests outside of the work field. This removes them from the daily strain of work obligations (Sogunro, 2012). This also gives the principal something to look forward to after work. Principals should annually plan for life-work balance through outside interests such as family vacationing. Vacations should not be reserved to just one week but evenly dispersed throughout the year (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

### **Self-Monitoring and Self-Care**

Self-monitoring requires the principal to be in tune with their inner being and trust their instinct. It is imperative for principals to self-monitor feelings of frustration or burnout with the workload and act in response to these feelings by taking a break or changing the behavior (Sogunro, 2012). Self-awareness of needs can aid in an appropriate response to emotions (Harris, 2007).

Principals should also exercise self-discipline with unhealthy habits that may stem from the inability to effectively manage stress, such as excessive alcohol intake, moodiness, and lashing out at others in anger (Sogunro, 2012). Anxiety and anger are two emotional reactions caused by stress (Palmer et al., 2003). Principals can address these issues by recognizing triggers and having an accountability partner to alert them of instances (Sogunro, 2012).

Sogunro (2012) urges principals to reframe the mind by thinking optimistically about the outcome. Laughter is encouraged in the workplace (Brock & Grady, 2002; Connors, 2000). Principals are able to lighten the mood and relieve stress when they release energy through laughing (Bultnick & Bush, 2009). Continual stress is the antecedent for illness (Grady, 2004; Sorenson, 2007). Principals should make regular visits to their physicians and seek medical care

from therapists, counselors, and other professional caregivers as needed (Grady, 2004; Sogunro, 2012).

Self-care is a term that is mostly associated with counseling or psychological fields as opposed to educational literature and research about school leaders (Klocko & Wells, 2018; Wise, Hersh, & Gibson, 2012). Self-care is defined in its simplest terms as an intentional focus on wellness; the focus of caring for the self and being fully present in the moment (Baer, 2003).

Harris (2007) asserts that self-care routines are the most beneficial when they are an integral part of daily life and not simply reserved for weekends and holidays. “The principal has to plan for self-renewal because the job is certain to tax the energy of even the most exuberant individual” (Grady, 2004). Other stress-managing tips for principals include engaging in activities with family and friends, networking with colleagues, having a clear understanding of their role, encouraging laughter in the workplace, being solution-oriented with conflicts, managing time effectively, fostering effective interpersonal skills, and focusing on issues that are within their control (Brock & Grady, 2002).

## **Mindfulness**

Self-care is vital to the emotional sustainability of the principal. Mahfouz (2019) encourages principals to practice mindfulness by “setting intentions, checking emotional elevators, mindful listening, mindful walking, centering, wait time, awareness of scripts, breathing, and self-compassion practices.” In practicing mindfulness, emphasis is placed on preventative measures whether than reactive measures. Principals must resist the urge to always jump into reactive mode. Harris (2007) explains the benefits of taking a two-minute centering break at least twice a day:

A combination of deepening the breath and focusing on the present moment are highly effective ways of giving the nervous system a break from the low-level persistent stresses of leadership... Emotional distress and physical symptoms are calls for action from the heart and brain.

Meditation and yoga are breathing exercises that help to restore balance to the mind and body (Harris, 2007). Mindfulness training allows people to “restore their emotional reserve” and build their resiliency (Wells & Klocko, 2018). Mindfulness practice among principals and school leaders is an area that has yet to be fully charted (Mahfouz, 2019). The consistent implementation of mindfulness strategies can be effective in reducing stress and increasing employee engagement and job performance (Brown and Ryan, 2003).

### **Stress-Coping Tips for Principal Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In “Have You Checked on Your Principal Lately? Pandemic Planning is Taking a Toll,” Frost (2020) shares several coping strategies for principals from experts in the field. The following are recommendations for principals from Dr. Sarah Howling:

- Focus on what you have direct influence over and do not waste energy on what you cannot control or change.
- Inhale and exhale deeply three times each day for three minutes at a time.
- Purposefully connect with those who add value to you and “nourish your spirit.”
- Find a coach or confidante to help “conquer the isolation.”

Frost (2020) also suggests that principals focus on the positive and avoid the fear of letting others down. Principals should create safe spaces with their colleagues and communicate with them regularly. Jennifer Tomko, clinical psychotherapist, recommends that principals carve out a time and space for themselves to do what brings them happiness (Frost, 2020). Principals are also

encouraged to utilize measures such as regular physical activity, conversation, and writing to release frustrations and verbalize stressors (Frost, 2020). It is critical for principals to establish a network of consistent communication and support with other principal colleagues.

School leadership in unprecedented times deeply impacts the already strained disposition of principals and it has detrimental effects on their mental health and wellbeing. Principals must intentionally carve out time for self-care and rejuvenation.

### **Principal Support Structures**

Stress management should be a top priority in educational leadership programs. Not many principal preparation programs focus on the social and emotional component for school leaders (Mahfouz, 2019; Sogunro, 2012). Colleges and universities should incorporate stress-coping skills in their principal preparation programs, and they should also allot for an extensive amount of time in the field to immerse aspiring principals into the realities of school administration (Sogunro, 2012).

Districts must be intentional in supporting the mental health and stability of principals (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Principal wellbeing should be as high ranked a priority as student achievement. Districts and principals lack guidance on how to reduce stress and burnout and engage in healthy, stress-coping practices (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Mahfouz (2020) states, “A call for professional development programmes aimed at school administrators that focus on social emotional competencies is urgent if we intend to retain school administrators and aid them in leading their schools effectively.” By equipping principals with the tools necessary to address emotions and manage stress, school districts can retain building leaders for longer periods of time. This positively impacts school culture and student achievement. The inclusion of

mindfulness practices in educational leadership training would be of great benefit to school leaders (Goldman-Schuyler, Skjei, & Sanzgeri, 2017; Klocko & Wells, 2018).

Principals should be trained with the effective use of coping strategies prior to facing challenges and setbacks as this may positively increase their workplace wellbeing (Klocko & Wells, 2018). Mahfouz (2019) emphasizes that educational leadership policies and program structures should have an element of self-care for principals. Professional development sessions and principals' meetings should be geared towards social and emotional learning (Mahfouz, 2020). Recent research reveals the need for school districts to invest in training for both principals and principal supervisors on strategies related to burnout and self-care and how to generate conversations around the topics (DeMatthews et al., 2021). It is also recommended that the role of the principal supervisor be revised to address supporting principals with stress-coping strategies related to burnout and self-care (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

With perceived mistrust in central office leadership by some principals, established collegial networks can provide principals with adequate systems of support and transparency (Whitaker, 1996). By meeting regularly with colleagues to collaborate and network, this could help to reduce the isolation of the principalship (Brock & Grady, 2002; Grady, 2004).

Abundant research shows the need for built-in principal support structures on the job (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Klocko & Wells, 2018; Mahfouz, 2019; Sogunro, 2012; Whitaker, 1996). There is a need for safe spaces in which principals, like counselors, can meet to “express their feelings, experience acceptance and empathy, and grow through their anxieties, hurts, and mistakes” (Harris, 2007). Tiered layers of support are essential to the endurance of the principal. Research has proven that principal workload stress is inevitable; however, coping with stress can be practical and manageable when substantiated by school districts and board policy.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

An extensive review of the literature indicates that principals face multiple stressors while managing their daily workload. Untreated burnout and stress can have negative implications for the principal's professional life, personal life, and health. Stress takes a toll on the personal and professional life of the principal and its long-term effects impact more than just the principal. Subsequently, there is limited longevity in the principalship due to the nature of the job and the added pressures that ensue.

Scant research exists that addresses the overall specificity of principal burnout. Even less research is representative of principals who are leading underperforming schools and the coping mechanisms they utilize to both manage stress and alleviate that stress. Based on the available literature, further study is needed to determine the impact of recently introduced self-coping strategies, such as exercising mindfulness and self-care in the role of the principal. Although these stress-relieving tips are mentioned in the literature, there is no specificity of its impact on the principalship. In the absence of concrete data and supporting research, the validity of these suggested practices loses credibility.

In addition to stress-relieving strategies, there is a vital need for research to uncover varied levels of support structures to aid the principal in stress reduction and management. Findings from my treatise will present future implications for education reform policy makers, superintendents, school boards, leadership development departments, principal supervisors, principals, and university administrator preparation programs. Undeniably, embedded supports are needed to sustain the role of principal. There is a dire need for school districts to practice intentionality with planning for the preservation of the invaluable role of school principal.



Therefore, my study will add to the limited body of research that examines principal burnout and the role that school districts play in providing the proper supports necessary for principal mental health and emotional stability. In the era of accountability, this study is invaluable for informing principals, aspiring principals, school district leaders, and policy makers on the need for solid support structures that sustain the emotional resilience of principals.

## **Chapter III: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the theoretical perspective used as a foundational framework for this study. The chapter is organized to detail the purpose of the study, research questions, research design, study population and sampling techniques, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and limitations. This study expanded on the limited body of current research in the field of principal burnout and stress.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead in historically underperforming schools. Furthermore, this study sought to identify causal factors for stress and burnout as well as principal coping strategies. By using qualitative research strategies, this study intended to amplify the voices of principals who lead in historically underperforming schools.

### **Theoretical/Epistemological Perspective**

In qualitative research, researchers use a theoretical lens which becomes a “transformative perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The theoretical perspective of this study is grounded in the framework of interpretivism. The philosophical stance behind this methodology can be traced back to the roots of hermeneutics and phenomenology (Chowdhury, 2014).

Interpretivist research supports the belief that objective reality is not something that is concretely captured because it is “guided by the researcher’s set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In the interpretivist paradigm, all knowledge is rooted in human experiences and actions (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005). Interpretivism rejects the methods of natural science as it distinguishes people's knowledge of reality as a mere social construct derived by humans (Eliaeson, 2002). The theoretical perspective of interpretivism arose in contradiction to positivism in efforts to "understand and explain human and social reality" (Bryman, 2012; Crotty, 1998). In essence, knowledge is constructed as humans interpret their experiences and the world around them.

Interpretivism is linked to the human sciences with the goal of understanding (Crotty, 1998). Weber, generally credited as the central influence, believed that our interest in the social world primarily focused on "those aspects that are unique, individual, and qualitative" (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivism centers around the individual and the meanings and values of their actions and interactions with others. Silverman (1990) explains that interpretivism "rests on the emphatic denial that we can understand cultural phenomena in causal terms." Interpretivism is anchored in the principles of understanding and interpretation. It fundamentally rejects the belief that "the social world (e.g., people, cultures, social practices, and social institutions) can be examined and understood through the assumptions and methodologies natural scientists use to examine the physical world" (Potrac et al., 2014).

Wilhelm Dilthey was also an influential thinker for the interpretivist paradigm due to the way in which he defined human beings. Counsell (2017) elaborates on the interpretivist ideas of Dilthey:

Humans are not just biological creatures; rather, they are beings that make meaningful things. Humans are defined by their subjectivity... Therefore, if we study those meaningful things, we can learn a lot about that subjectivity, about the meanings that make us human. (p. 396)

Dilthey believed that human action is overflowing with meaning and “making sense of that human action requires a special kind of understanding, and this is where interpretation comes in” (Counsell, 2017). He believed that the researcher could “identify patterns that shape how humans experience and make sense of the world” through the three main categories of purpose, meaning, and value (Counsell, 2017).

It is important to note that through the interpretivist theoretical framework, the researcher is interpreting a myriad of subjectivities through which a definitive meaning must be made.

Counsell (2017) explains in detail what enables the researcher to make these judgments:

Your humanness, the very thing you have in common with your object. If you were not human, you could not make sense out of the meanings made by other humans. So, the very thing that supposedly gets in the way – your subjective humanness and its inevitable perceptions, lens and biases – is also the very thing that allows you to reach across the distance and make meaning out of your object. (p. 396)

When most people hear the word ‘subjective’ they perceive it with a negative connotation; however, subjectivity plays a major role for the researcher in the quest to find meaning in the social world. “Subjectivity is all about meaning. Our words, actions, and other creations hold various meanings for each of us. Thoughts, feelings, and beliefs influence those meanings” (Counsell, 2017). This idea of subjectivity and its role and relevance in interpretivist research has its place. “Subjectivity is our object of study. When examining the social world and trying to understand it, we are trying to make sense of human subjectivity or the subjectivities of a group. But we, as researchers are exercising judgment and making meaning, too” (Counsell, 2017).

The researcher must be aware of their own influence and suspend judgment as they interpret the reality of the participants and make meaning of the world in which they live and

interact. Through the lens of interpretivism, we meet ourselves in research (Counsell, 2017). Critics of interpretivism argue that results can be compromised due to the validity, reliability, and generalizability (Eisenhardt, 1989; Kelliher, 2011; Perry, 1998).

Contrary to counter arguments for interpretive research, generalizations and widespread meanings and findings can emerge from interpretive studies. “Although the emphasis is on personal meaning-making, this does not reflect a call to take up an uncritical relativist cudgel, an ‘anything goes’ attitude” (Potrac et al., 2014). Interpretivism argues that social consensus can cultivate meaning and understanding (Potrac et al., 2014). The interpretivist approach looks for “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Kelliher, 2011).

At the heart of interpretive paradigm is the focus on the individual and how they interpret their experiences and actions (Bryman, 2012; Coe, 2012). Interpretivists believe that the process of ‘making meaning’ and sense of it all by individuals is not a fixed singularity as it is capable of evolving based on one’s own experiences and meaning-making abilities (Sparkes, 1992). In interpretivist research, the social world of human beings and their webs of meaning is critical to the researcher as they find understanding in it all. Through these complex realities, researchers and participants construct their own meanings within the context of social, political, and cultural settings (Potrac et al., 2014).

I selected interpretivism as the theoretical perspective for this study because the focus is on the individual and the uniqueness of a particular situation (Bryman, 2012; Coe, 2012; Myers, 1997). This provides a context for the process utilized to understand the impact of stress and burnout on the role of the principal and the mechanisms they use to cope with it. With the belief that reality is socially constructed and not objectively determined, authentic meaning can be

made through the lived experience of the principal within the context of their professional role. Through this framework, participants can convey their reality in ways that are meaningful and organic to them. Interpretivism supports the design of qualitative research in the quest for knowledge and it also values the contextual depth applied to the study (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994; Myers, 1997; Perry, 1998). Unlike other theoretical perspectives, interpretivism focuses on the isolation of the individual phenomenon within the context of social research. By using a humanistic approach, observing, and interviewing individuals within their natural setting, meaning and understanding can be found.

The focal point of my research was to understand the experiences of individual principals and how they deal with stress and burnout. The goal was to collect findings that would inform future practices and implications for school districts to utilize when planning for embedded principal support structures. The interpretivist paradigm was the framework that best supported this qualitative research study method as it amplified, valued, and validated the voices of research participants in a manner that yielded authentic, in-depth results.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research design was utilized for this study. This research design falls within the parameters of social science research. I chose to use a qualitative research design as my approach as opposed to a quantitative or mixed methods research design to deeply analyze and understand the participants' feelings and experiences. By using this approach to inquiry, the research design mirrors an inductive style in which the focus is on individual meaning and the value given to reporting the complexity of a situation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Denzin and Lincoln (2018) define qualitative research as a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world." As the researcher, I used an interpretive, naturalistic approach by

making sense of the experiences described by principal participants as they processed the world around them. This humanistic approach gave principals the freedom to intimately describe their experiences through the lens of their unique perspectives. Qualitative research involves complex, interpretive practices that emerge with the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative research design honors the voices of the participants. Creswell and Creswell (2018) further expound on the style and process of qualitative research:

Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants' setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (p. 4)

This study comprehensively analyzed the professional journey of ten principal participants. Participants were intensively interviewed on the extent to which stress and burnout impacted their role as campus leader. In qualitative research, the researcher identifies a problem to study, gives credence to the voices of the participants, outlines the complexity of the situation, and interprets the varied perspectives of those they study (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Qualitative research generally involves close contact with participants, a common feature, as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014): "Qualitative research is conducted through intense and/or prolonged contact with participants in a naturalistic setting to investigate the everyday and/or exceptional lives of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations (p. 9).

The researcher is the key instrument in the study. My ultimate challenge as the research instrument was to accurately convey the contributions of the research participants in a manner that captured their spoken reality. I carefully interpreted participants' experiences by processing

them through the lens of a researcher. Maxwell supports this notion of the researcher as the research instrument. Maxwell (2013) states, “Your eyes and ears are the tools you use to make sense of what is going on.” The goal of the researcher is to capture data on the perceptions of participants “from the inside through a process of deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding, and of suspending or bracketing preconceptions about the topics under discussion” (Miles et al., 2014). Chowdhury (2014) describes the researcher’s role as one who seeks to interpret perceived things from the perspective of human actors.

This research study is layered with many different dimensions that are indicative of qualitative research design. It allowed me to reveal the complexity of the nature of the workload as principal while also detailing multi-layered processes and systems (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Within this framework, the focus on the individual helped me to gain insight into a world that has not yet been expansively covered through education research.

The main goal of qualitative research is to convey the ways in which people in particular settings understand, interpret, and manage their daily situations (Miles et al., 2014). In a qualitative research design, participants help to shape the study (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The researcher also uses the literature in a manner that allows them to learn from the participant as opposed to only working with prescribed questions that need to be answered. Principal participants provided firsthand experiences of the reality they face each day as they lead the work in turnaround school environments. Through my interpretation of participant experiences, I aimed to bring clarity to the plight these principals face. My understanding of these experiences was nestled in the heart of the work with interpretive inquiry. Through individual interviews and analysis, my goal was to uplift the voices of these principals and their unique experiences in efforts to inform the future practices and support structures for district leaders.



## **Research Questions**

I designed research questions that would allow me to capture and study the intricacy of principal stress and burnout. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What individual stressors do principals in low-performing schools experience?
2. What organizational stressors do principals experience in low-performing schools?
3. How do principals cope with these stress factors?
4. What systems are in place to support the mental health and wellbeing of these principals?

It is through these questions that I intended to find fundamental assumptions about the specificity of the role of principal and its relation to stress and burnout.

## **Study Unit of Analysis and Sampling Techniques**

The study unit of analysis centered around current principals leading historically low-performing campuses; specifically 10 principal participants who were carefully identified through criterion sampling, housed under the larger category of purposive or purposeful sampling. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) describe purposive sampling as involving the selection of specific individuals that will provide the most information about the topic of research. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) advocate for this type of strategic sampling when the researcher is focused on a case's unique context. Determining a sample is dependent upon the research questions that the researcher seeks to answer (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) state, "The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (p. 185). For this research study, participants were not selected solely based on their role as principal. Participants were identified and recruited based on specific criterion. Purposeful sampling entails that the researcher selects participants who have

experienced the central phenomenon being explored (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Criteria utilized for the purpose of this research study were as follows:

1. Currently an elementary, middle or high school principal.
2. From a school district in Texas.
3. Has served in current role for at least two consecutive years on the same campus
4. Has served as principal of a historically underperforming campus for at least two years.

Principal participants were representative of each level of K-12 education. For this study, six elementary school principals, two middle school principals, and two high school principals were selected. Creswell and Clark (2018) emphasize the need for the qualitative researcher to study a few people deeply “because the larger the number of people, the less detail that typically can emerge from any one individual” (p. 176). Participants also represented various school districts.

Each participant served in the role of principal for at least two consecutive years at the same campus. Consistent with the research, it was quite the difficult task to find principals who remained in the role for three to five years or longer at their current campus. The selected principal participants were current leaders of schools that were considered historically underperforming, as measured by the most recent five years of standardized testing data in accordance with state accountability standards. The data indicated that these schools were labeled as either multi-year Improvement Required, IR, campuses or formerly IR campuses within the last five years. Many of the campuses also received a ‘D’ or ‘F’ state accountability rating in the most recent tested year.

I allowed my research questions and theoretical framework to set the foci and boundaries for sampling specifications. Sampling not only necessitates decisions about which people to interview but also decisions around settings, events, and social processes (Miles et al., 2014).

Maxwell (2013) emphasizes the importance of selecting participants with whom the researcher can create productive, working relationships within the context of the study as this is an efficient way to yield answers to the research questions. Although interviews were conducted via Zoom, I aimed to create a safe space within the videoconference setting where participants felt comfortable enough to expose their vulnerability and share their experiences. My former role as principal helped to shape the environment and form a close, trusting working relationship with each participant. This humanistic, trust-building approach allowed participants to yield honest, credible results that reflected their individual experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As also supported by Creswell, I as the researcher recognized my involvement in the sustained, intensive experience shared with principal participants.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

At the time of the research, we were amid a global crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected millions of people. This pandemic had a significant impact on general research procedures including data collection and organizational participation. School districts and school-based staff were forced to confront extreme levels of burnout as they transitioned to distance learning. In response to this need, district Institutional Review Boards restricted or indefinitely suspended research to shield participants from further burnout (DeMatthews et al, 2020).

I received UT Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before data collection for the study began. Once IRB approval was obtained, I contacted prospective participants via phone and email to gauge their interest and implore participation for the study. I also sent an IRB-approved recruitment letter to those who opted-in. As specified by the IRB, a signed consent form was not needed for participants. The recruitment letter provided participants with an

overview of the purpose of the study and their role in it. The letter also assured participants that their names and identity would not be revealed. Full disclosure of confidentiality was used throughout this study. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) support this ethical process of keeping personal data confidential by advising researchers to “assign various pseudonyms to different participants and/or settings and institutions and use those pseudonyms both during data collection and in the final research report” (p. 239). All participants were assigned pseudonyms for the purpose of collecting, analyzing, interpreting, reporting, and storing the data.

Creswell and Clark (2018) describe the collection of data in research as a systematic process in which information is collected and recorded in a way that it can be preserved and analyzed by any researcher. In the qualitative data collection process, detailed information is gathered from participants and then formed into categories or themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is the overarching process that guided my work around data collection.

A protocol based on the core research questions was developed and initially posed to principal participants during the interview stage. I designed open-ended questions for participants to answer in order to generate accurate responses void of any limitations. Creswell and Creswell (2018) affirm this practice by stating, “These [qualitative] interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants” (p. 187). Accordingly, interviews in a qualitative study should not be tightly prescribed and structured (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). I conducted semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with all participants. Individual follow-up interviews were not needed for this study. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to construct meaningful questions that are aligned with the research questions while also providing space for organic questions and discussions to arise based on participant responses (Giorgi, 1985).

I planned, created, and used an interview protocol for asking questions and recording answers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Clark, 2018). This protocol was prepared in advance, and it was also used consistently in all interviews. The interview protocol provides a level of organization for the researcher, and it also serves as a backup record of information in the event the recording device malfunctions (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that interviewers memorize the questions so that a rote reading of the interview protocol does not happen. I made an intentional effort to be as organic as possible with question delivery so that participants could speak candidly with free-flowing thoughts. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) describe the environment for interviews in a qualitative study as informal and friendly. They further explain, “Participants in a qualitative interview may feel as if they’re simply engaging in a friendly chat with the researcher, who is often someone they have come to know and trust” (p. 244). The setting that I cultivated allowed me to glean the most information out of participants.

During the interview process, I jotted down notes in a tablet while participants shared out. I also took the time to reflect after each interview. This helped me to deeply process the participants’ perspectives. Additionally, audiotapes were used to record interviews and participant responses. Predetermined categories were not used to collect the data. For the purpose of this study, I conducted a pilot test on two principals prior to launching the official round of interviews on the study participants. According to Prescott and Soeken (1989), a pilot study is a methodological test that involves “small scale versions of the planned study, trial runs of planned methods, or miniature versions of the anticipated research” (p. 60). The pilot study guided the development of the research plan and it also ensured that research questions were presented in a manner that would yield in-depth, thorough answers aligned to the nature of the study. The

principals used for the pilot study were not used as participants for the primary interview study. The pilot study allowed me to test audio equipment, practice scripting techniques, and rehearse interview questions to allow for questions to be presented in a non-scripted manner.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

In a qualitative study, the data is closely examined to find meanings that lie within them (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Qualitative research is emergent as data is unveiled and analyzed. The data that emerges is descriptive, primarily the participant's words (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data yield rich, vivid descriptions "nested in real context, with a ring of truth that has a strong impact on the reader" (Miles et al., 2014). Leedy and Ormrod (2019) describe the inductive reasoning processes that qualitative data analysis tends to rely on:

- The researcher observes a few specific situations or events.
- The researcher imposes specific meanings on them – often by coding them in some way.
- The researcher draws conclusions about a more general state of affairs. (p. 344)

Through the use of open-ended questions, I was able to capture the true feelings and experiences of participants in efforts to capture enough rich data to analyze and draw conclusions.

I used general strategies for organizing and analyzing qualitative data as outlined by Leedy and Ormrod (2019):

1. Convert the data into one or more forms that are easily organizable.
2. Organize the data in a preliminary way.
3. Identify preliminary categories that will be useful with coding the data.
4. Divide the data into meaningful units that will be individually coded.
5. Apply the initial coding scheme to a subset of the data.
6. Construct a final list of codes and subcodes.

7. Consider using two or more raters to code the data independently.
8. Identify noteworthy patterns and relationships among the codes.
9. Be alert for exceptions, tensions, and contradictions within the data set.
10. Interpret the data in light of your research problems and questions.

Once each interview concluded, I transcribed the full audio recording into a Microsoft Word document. Handwritten field notes were also placed into Word processing documents. After organizing the data, I utilized preliminary categories to help make sense of the data collected.

After a thorough review and analysis of the transcribed material, I began the process of coding. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) state, “Codes are primarily used to retrieve and categorize similar data chunks so the researcher can quickly find, pull out, and cluster the segments relating to a particular research question, hypothesis, construct, or theme” (p. 72). Coding, simply put, is analysis and categorization of information. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) stress the importance of subcategories, or subcodes, being used for some or even all of the codes. I anticipated the need for subcodes with most of my codes due to the depth and complexity of the data being analyzed. The data analysis process resulted in all codes having at least one subcode attached to it. Within this process, I analyzed words, or thick descriptions, provided by participants. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) explain, “The words can be assembled, subclustered, or broken into segments. They can be reorganized to permit the researcher to compare, contrast, analyze, and construct patterns out of them” (p. 9). Creswell and Creswell (2018) further explicated these patterns by stating, “Detailed information is formed into categories or themes... These themes are developed into broad patterns, theories, or generalizations that are then compared with personal experiences or with existing literature on the topic (p. 63).

The qualitative researcher's role is to interpret themes or patterns that emerge from the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I constructed certain themes and patterns from the coding of interview transcripts. I also used direct quotes from interview participants in my analysis and findings. These quotes helped to provide direct, vivid descriptions to the experiences that the participants shared.

### **Consistency and Credibility**

Lastly, I used a second rater to code the data independently. This helped to validate the credibility of all findings. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) explain this need for interrater reliability so that the coding of the data is not skewed by a single researcher's expectations and biases. The data was finally interpreted in light of the research questions and problem identified through the study. By interpreting the unique experiences of selected principal participants, this research study provided insight into the stressors that principals face and the coping strategies they utilize. Findings ultimately informed future planning and restructuring at district and campus levels to embed support structures for these leaders.

### **Positionality Statement**

The role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument "necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions and biases at the outset of the study" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). At the start of the study, I was a principal with five years of principalship experience and the last two of those years were spent leading a historically low-performing school. Prior to this, I spent two years as an assistant principal on formerly "Improvement Required" campuses. I acknowledged that my experience with leading turnaround work may bring biases to the research. Due to this reality, I made the conscious effort to self-monitor my perceptions and follow strict protocols to offset any biases.



Throughout the data collection and analysis process, qualitative researchers can incorporate several procedures that provide “checks and balances” to increase the credibility of the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Such protocols have been previously stated in detail, such as the use of a second rater for interrater reliability and the use of an interview protocol for objectiveness with questioning. I also utilized a peer debriefing protocol to add validity to the review and interpretation of findings (Creswell, 2018). The final protocol utilized was member checking, the process by which “a researcher asks participants to review interview transcripts in order to double-check their accuracy” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the methodology that I used to examine the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead in historically underperforming schools. This qualitative research study was filtered through the interpretivist lens to honor the voices and unique experiences of principal participants. Additionally, this chapter also provided context with study population and sampling techniques, data collection and analysis procedures, data validity procedures, and the researcher’s position statement. Chapter IV will provide results related to the specific research questions, school district profile, and comprehensive findings.

## **Chapter IV: Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead in historically underperforming schools. Specifically, this study was designed to identify individual and organizational factors for stress and burnout as well as principal coping strategies. The intent of this study was to amplify the voices of elementary, middle and high school principals who lead in turnaround environments. This study sought to answer four research questions:

1. What individual stressors do principals in low-performing schools experience?
2. What organizational stressors do principals in low-performing schools experience?
3. How do principals cope with these stress factors?
4. What systems are in place to support the mental health and wellbeing of these principals?

This chapter presents the profile of the participants followed by the findings, organized by major themes within each of the four research questions. Data collected will be presented.

### **Participant Information**

The 2018-2019 school year was the last year districts received detailed and comprehensive data for student performance. Schools were not rated by letter grades during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted in Table 1, principal participants represent diverse levels, educational backgrounds, and years of experience in the role. School accountability ratings were evaluated over the past five years to determine historical context with data. All ten schools were categorized as high priority schools within their school districts due to historical data, current context, and student groups served.

**Table 1***Participant Profile Sheet*

Principal (Pseudonym)	Campus Rating 18-19 SY	Campus Level	Years as Current Campus Principal	Total Years as Principal	Education Background	Other Roles Served
Addison Faith	F	Elementary School	3	3	Education Major	Assistant Principal
Charlotte	F	Elementary School	3	3	Alternative Certification	Instructional Specialist; AP
Dale	D	Elementary School	3	11	Teach for America	Assistant Principal
Debora Ann	B	Elementary School	7	7	Alternative Certification	Instructional Specialist
Elijah	F	Middle School	3	9	Alternative Certification	Assistant Principal
Elwood	D	High School	2	2	Education Major	Assistant Principal
Emory	D	Elementary School	3	3	Alternative Certification	Assistant Principal
Hayden	C	High School	2	3	Teach for America	Instructional Specialist; AP
Jaelan	F	Elementary School	2	2	Alternative Certification	Assistant Principal
Josephine	A	Middle School	3	13	Education Major	Teacher Aide; Assistant Principal

**Emergent Themes**

Data analysis included a thorough review of transcribed material and multiple rounds of coding with interview transcripts. Several themes emerged from the data analysis component particularly in the areas of identifying stressors and coping strategies. Most themes aligned specifically to the research questions; however, two overarching themes were not specifically aligned to any research question. The following section presents the findings of this study through qualitative data analysis.

## **Purpose Driven Leadership**

One theme presented itself as an underlying thread embedded in the very fabric of each participant's story. Purpose driven leadership emerged as the primary driver or motivational factor for participants. Extant research supports the belief that school leaders must remain centered in their purpose and always remember their "why" (Becker, 2019). Principals are often encouraged to focus on their purpose of wanting to transform the lives of the students they serve (Sogunro, 2012). Principals interviewed consistently communicated that their personal backgrounds, childhood experiences, and upbringing unsurprisingly led them to this work. Fifty percent of principals interviewed were able to explicitly connect their purpose to their childhood.

Debra Ann linked her decision to work in a turnaround environment to her background experiences. She remembered growing up in a similar community where the "adults were struggling and the kids were struggling," and she longed to make a difference. Similarly for Josephine, she sees herself in the students that she serves. Josephine recalled her high school mentor, Sergeant Major, waking her up and encouraging her to attend school each day. She referred to him as a father figure who even walked her down the aisle on her wedding day. In her words:

I didn't understand that school was the key to leave poverty. I didn't even know that we were poor. I didn't realize that we sold drugs and that was wrong. I didn't realize the things that we were doing in my household wasn't what everybody else was doing... I always remember my 'why.' And my 'why' is the way I grew up and how I don't want that for any other kids. And I want them to have choices. I want them to have dreams. I want them to see the world the way my [own] kids get to see the world. And I wouldn't

have that. My kids would not have had that opportunity without Sergeant Major. So, I want to be that for other people.

Hayden shared a similar intrinsic tie to his school community:

I don't think I would have it any other way. Growing up myself, I was low income. I was first generation and I was an immigrant, so English is my second language. I grew up in a Black community and attended low-income schools and so very early on, as I got older, I realized that I was the anomaly. It didn't have to turn out this way for me, you know what I mean. I was very fortunate to have a lot of good teachers in my corner early on who believed in me and who pushed me, and despite some of my community influences because growing up in a low-income community, you see a lot of things as a kid from drugs to gangs. And even aside from that, my family of five had an income of \$40,000 and so navigating society with that type of income is difficult. And so, when I got to high school, I realized like, okay, you know, what I want [is] to pursue teaching... Because of that, when I see kids in similar circumstances like mine, it makes me want to do it for a little bit longer.

Elwood described his fondness with the school community that he serves:

The school is located in the area of town where I actually was born in, the area of town where my parents actually graduated from high school, and one and a half miles from my campus. My sister graduated one mile north of my campus and my grandparents stay 3.4 miles away from my campus. So, I knew the neighborhood, I knew that area. What intrigued me was the opportunity to go back home. I knew the challenges that that area of town has had, not only for the charter schools but the public districts in that area as well. And so, when you look at schools that have struggled and have underperformed for a

period of time, you're like what spark can you add? What difference can you make? And for me, it was someone coming back home to help, I think is unique... I have students who I stayed across the street from their grandmother, and our grandmothers were friends. I'm serving my purpose with the people in the place that I need to be at, and it doesn't matter about the position or the pay that came with it because I'm where I need to be.

Another dimension of this commitment to leading these schools was the students themselves. One hundred percent of principals interviewed mentioned the students as the glue that holds everything together. Participants emphasized that their students gave them a strong sense of purpose. They were overwhelmingly driven by an innate desire for the students to succeed. The students' success and future potential inevitably was their "why." When asked what keeps them in the role, principal participants issued a resounding response, "The kids." Charlotte explained that if her students get into trouble, they "literally beg and cry for you not to suspend them" because they do not want to go home. Students enjoy coming to school because it is their "safe haven." They look to their teachers as mother and father figures. Charlotte continued, "...because if they don't have us, like, who do they have? I mean a lot of them they go home to broken families or broken homes, or lack of a real home... So, I think that's why I don't leave because I really do care about the students. I really do care about the future of my school."

Dale described an energy that "the kids bring into the building." She stated, "Knowing that we're providing them with some of the critical pieces of becoming good people that they may not be getting at home. That's what keeps me in it." Dale also noted that she enjoys working with teachers who enjoy working with kids. Emory shared that she became a principal to serve "underserved communities and give them a chance and an equitable education." Emory was

driven by an inherent desire to touch the lives of children. She expressed that in low-socioeconomic communities, like her current school community, it tends to not have “individuals that are vested in the wellbeing of the students.”

Hayden was excited about an email he recently received from a former student requesting a recommendation letter for college. This was both rewarding to him and a confirmation that he is making a difference. Hayden was equally proud of a current high school student working on his barber certificate and learning how to use social media to build his brand and mentioned that he connected this student with his own barber. Hayden remarked, “Even if kids don't go to college, we're responsible for teaching them about life, or teaching them how to be successful for developing into wonderful, contributing human beings who love and care for one another.”

The overarching theme of purpose driven leadership is interwoven into participants' responses throughout the interview data. The following section presents the findings of this study for each of the four research questions. Except for the first and last theme, corresponding themes accompany each research question.

### **Research Question 1: What Individual Stressors do Principals in Low-Performing Schools Experience?**

The first research question identified individual factors that cause stress for principal participants. For this research study, campus-level stressors have been categorized as individual stressors. It is important to note that participants were initially hesitant to speak about the stressors they experienced because many felt guilty about speaking of their role with students, staff, and community as “stressors.” A previous review of existing literature reveals that principals may feel a sense of guilt for acknowledging the stress that they experience in the workplace (Walker, 2019). Dale stated, “It's funny, I don't actually see the students as a stressor

because I kind of feel like they're kids, and so they do kid stuff. And so, I just kind of feel like we can take that as it comes.” When the question was rephrased to ask participants to reflect on some of the challenges they faced with students, staff and the community, Dale and all other participants freely listed the challenges. Naturally, they later acknowledged that these challenges were indeed stressors during the interview.

Extant research shows that major stressors for principals include time constraints, work overload, lack of control in decision-making, working in isolation, insufficient funding and resources, working with uncooperative parents, and finding substitute teachers for daily absences (Whan & Thomas, 1996). Three distinct themes emerged from the data that were specifically linked to individual stressors principals face in their respective environments. Those themes included personal drive and commitment to succeed, never-ending job, and managing the stress of others. These themes were also in alignment with the conceptual framework of the study that highlights secondary trauma and organizational conditions as contributing factors for burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

**Personal drive and commitment to student success.** Although participants believed that they were inherently driven to do the work, some principals recognized that their personal drive, ambition, and commitment to success was also a stressor. Principals attributed their own personal drive, ambition, and personality type as a major cause of their stress. Jaelan noted, “Yeah, I have a strong drive. It’s just, I’m very ambitious; it’s just who I am. I’ve always been like that. It’s hard to shut off.” Josephine shared that she would go crazy if she didn’t accomplish certain goals, such as receiving a TEA distinction. “And someone like me, I’m a perfectionist so, you know, if I didn’t earn a star, I think I’d go crazy.” Hayden explained why his personality would not allow him to find fulfillment or sustainability in the role:



Overall, what I just mentioned with all the stresses, I don't enjoy that part of it. So, because of that, and because of my personality and I think personality matters, too, I think certain people can deal with that stress a lot easier because they can let things go. I'm a perfectionist, and I want things to go very, very well, and so [it's] little things I can't let go. You know, if I see a teacher releasing class two minutes early at 2:38, but we dismiss at 2:40... That's a problem for me and I'm going to be thinking about that until I address it. My personality doesn't allow for me to be a principal long term.

Principals described a strong desire to want to see students succeed. Some principals spoke about being placed in priority groups based on test scores by their districts and being physically separated into groups at district meetings. Principals wanted to win not only for their students but for themselves.

**Never-ending job.** Principals detailed other individual stressors they faced, specifically the endless demands of the job. When asked specifically about the most significant causes of stress that are campus-related, all participants described the varying roles and responsibilities they hold in response to the day-to-day demands of the job, such as “working twelve-to-fourteen-hour days.” Hayden remarked, “And so this is not a 7:30 to 4:00 job. This is not an 8:00 to 4:00 job.” Josephine shared similar sentiments, “The work is hard. The work is every day. Every decision, every second there's something going on. It's nonstop [from] when you pull up to work at 7:15 in the morning till seven, eight o'clock at night. Sometimes I don't leave till 11'o clock, and that's still not enough time.”

Participants consistently spoke of the boundless time requirements and the constant need to be everywhere for everyone. Dale likened the role of principal to that of a mother, stating, “Everybody needs me every minute and sometimes I just need a minute, and it's hard to get. It's

like being a mommy of toddlers. Feeling like you got to be everywhere all at one time even though you know you can't." Dale admitted that she would be lying if she didn't say that she sometimes finds a place to "hide or what have you" in the bathroom to read for a while, or in her office with the door closed. Dale also mentioned sitting in empty classrooms after doing an observation "to escape."

Some participants referred to the unforeseen problems that may arise on campus as fires. Elijah stated, "And in every environment that I'm going into, it's a furlong fire. The campus is on fire, and we got to fix it in several different places. This creates a tremendous amount of stress." Emory further explained this concept of putting out fires and the unpredictability of the day:

As a principal, especially at a turnaround school, because that's all I know, you have to know how to juggle multiple things within the day, and some of the action items, some of the situations that come up, there are multiple fires going on. So, you have to juggle all of them at the same time. So how stressful is it? It just depends on the day to be honest.

Josephine explained that as principal it is necessary for her to show the same level of commitment to working late hours, on weekends, and on holidays that she expects of teachers and administrators. If teachers were being asked to work during Christmas Break, Thanksgiving Break, Spring Break, and every Saturday to help students earn credit recovery, then Josephine felt the obligatory need to be there in the trenches with them. She shared, "I think that when you're a principal you should be in the work. So, being in the work kind of adds to that stress because you're also there with them doing your work but also there with them." She spoke about feeling guilty if she left work prior to 7:00 p.m. each day:

As a principal, you're the end all be all. I don't know how to say it, like, I always feel like I could do more. I go to bed at night and I wonder, did I do everything I could do that

day. I could have done more, could have stayed later, and I always feel guilty when I leave work before seven because there's just so much work to get done.

Josephine added that she is widely known for being a hard worker and for working others hard:

And I think a lot of people will tell you that I am a hard worker. They would say, "I mean she is going to work you if you work for her. If you don't want to work till, like, seven o'clock, you better go choose another school because she is not the person to work for." And I think that's out there, you know, I'm probably some other names that goes along with that as well. And I'm going to be here till 9 o'clock at night if I need to because I'm in the game for the long haul. I made it because this is what I chose to do, whereas others might be like, "I'm done at four o'clock, deuce. I'm out." But there's definitely, I would say, high burnout, not just with me as a principal but with my admin team because I expect a lot. I expect us to come on Saturdays, I expect this. I mean, we'll have meetings until 11 o'clock at night sometimes.

Three participants spoke specifically about an endless stream of thoughts and ideas that race through their minds, even during their personal time. Charlotte describes this process:

The type of stress that I do take home with me is the workload. Just the amount of work that you have to be responsible for and managing, once you leave work, is intense and it never ends. And your brain is constantly thinking of new ideas, of ways you can fix things, and ways you can add or make an impact at your campus. And so, you literally are going to sleep thinking about how to make things better. So, for me, it's not so much that I'm stressed out about how I can make my campus better; it's more about just the amount of thinking you constantly have to do.

Hayden provided further context:

Even on vacation and stuff like that, I think about work; I dream about work sometimes, things that I have to do. If there's something that I dread doing, or if there's a difficult conversation that I have to have, I have to talk to myself about how I'm going to do it. I have to play out scenarios of what if this person says this and how you're gonna react, how are you going to frame it, and I dream about these things. I think about these things. So even after work hours at 7:30 and I'm having dinner, and I'm supposed to be talking to my mom, talking to my family, I'm still thinking about work.

Hayden believed that the only way to be successful as a principal in a turnaround environment was to work nonstop:

I talked about putting my career first, you know, not necessarily because I wanted to advance professionally, but because of the environment that I was working in. In the environment that we're working in, if you're going to be a successful leader and a successful principal, you have to do things like I did. I know many principals in these types of environments that do these types of things where they don't get to work in the office during the day, you know. We do that after school, before school. And so, it's already impacted me in a not so good way.

**Managing the stress of others.** Another individual stressor identified by participants was the burden of managing the stress of others. The extant literature highlights trauma-informed leadership. In the process of trying to remedy situations for others, the school principal may take on the burden and emotional distress of parents, community, and staff who are grappling with different challenges (Harris, 2007). Principal participants explained that a significant part of their role was comprised of them not only interacting with others but managing the stress of others. Principals described several contributing factors of this stress source, involving parents, teachers

and staffing, students, and the school community. Josephine expressed the isolation she felt in the role, “I think the principalship is probably one of the loneliest positions because we hold a lot of confidential information.” Debora Ann described the obligatory nature of being connected to others’ lives:

Basically, you take on the lives of the people that you are leading, like if something's happening in their life that affects their work. Just everything that the people who are working under you, you take on their lives with that stress and then being in a transformation setting where you're trying to basically close gaps and deficits can be stressful.

Hayden elaborately explained the concept of principals wearing the pressures of those they lead on their back:

Schools right now that are being successful in terms of staffing, it's in spite of what's taking place; it's not like they're set up for success. You have a principal there who is doing phenomenal, in terms of what I just told you. You have a principal that's doing well, in terms of just kind of being the mediator between all these different pressures, and making teachers feel valued because it's not like they're paying them more. They're just making them feel valued and they're being the liaison among all these external pressures, and they themselves are wearing it on their back. That's what those principals are doing. So, you still have a major issue. What you find is that really, really good principals are leading that human capital because they're really good at taking those external pressures off teachers, but that's what we have to fix in education.

Elwood emphasized the importance of ensuring that others around him are not as stressed as him in hopes that one day his own stress levels would decrease because of it:

Because in the principal role you learn, you wear many hats, and you have to be a lot of things to a lot of people a lot of the day. But I think for me, I've tried to focus on how do you mitigate that stress? How do you cope with that stress? How do you decrease that stress? And for me, it's also how do you make sure other folks around you are not as stressed as you? Because I always say, I'm paid for this. I was named to this. If you go to the website, I'm the one you see. Let me own that. If I can make your job a bit easier, I think in turn it will decrease my stress over time.

As evidenced in the data, one dimension of managing the stress of others was the school community. Participants addressed several stressors they faced within the school community, such as gentrification and economic factors, low expectations, lack of parental involvement, and student behaviors. Charlotte explained the dilemma with her community:

And the community that I serve, it's slowly dwindling in terms of the community itself, the area is not growing. A lot of people are leaving the area, and that most likely is a society issue. Because, you know, the government isn't necessarily trying to make the community better. They're not investing money into the community that I serve. The school is older; it's not being motivated. I think our school deserves a brand-new campus to be honest. And then we're surrounded by government homes. Can I say that, government homes? I don't want to say the projects.

Josephine discussed the daily battle within her community to make education a priority:

And so, for a lot of my community, school is not the first priority in their life. It's putting food on the table, it's making sure that they're safe at home, and then school might be the third or fourth or fifth thing on their plate that's important... And this community is low economics, and a lot of my kids don't get outside the community. They walk to school in

the rain, right. They're like soaking wet when they come to school in the morning because they don't have a car to get to school, so walking six blocks down, you know, or 10 blocks, 20 blocks to school. They're walking underneath the freeways that, you know...there's been many times where I'll pull over and pick them up and take them to school.

Forty percent of participants mentioned demographic changes due to gentrification. Debora Ann clarified:

So, our demographics are changing a little bit, like, for the first time this year I actually have a white population. It's always less than one, but this year it's like, a solid 2% because people are moving into the neighborhood. They have come in and are trusting us, and we're hoping that they continue to do that. So, I do think if the school survived the transition of gentrification, the environment in the school will change. The demographics will change.

Hayden spoke about demographic shifts within his school community:

So, in my particular community the demographics have very quickly shifted over the past 10 years. And so, one of the big stressors that I have is that the community used to be predominantly a white community, that supports the flagship high school in the district with the student body population being, you know, upwards of 90% white, but within the last 15 years or so that's shifted to where now that's the minority, 15% of the community where we live... As the demographics began to shift as the market, the housing market, you know, began to change in that particular community, we began to see a change in the school.

Hayden shared an experience that happened via email and in-person from some of his school community members where they told him, "You need to take the trash out." He continued, "You know what they're referring to, even though they don't explicitly state it. What I insinuate that they're saying is our black and brown kids. And so, we don't get community support from the alumni unless it's football."

Elijah hesitantly shared his experience of the school community having low expectations for the campus due to its historical data:

I don't want to say it this way, but I'm gonna say it. You know when you come into a historically low-performing campus, there is a lowered expectation in the community. So, the community has experienced success, or they've had bad experiences with that school. So, when they're coming to you, they're either frustrated or they don't have the faith in which you can provide to their kid or kids. Well, as the educational institution within an environment, it is your responsibility to partner with those parents and build that trust and create the environment where they have confidence that you're going to take that baby because their baby is the best thing that they have, that they're giving you, and you're going to cultivate their babies so that their baby can be successful.

Debra Ann mirrored this belief that school community expectations were lowered for low-performing schools. She stated that in some "lower level" or economically disadvantaged environments "people don't think the kids can learn at high levels, and that can cause stress when you're trying to make people understand that our children can learn at high levels."

Emory shared similar sentiments about community perception of the value of education:

Honestly, I would say education isn't valued in the community. It's, and I know that's a general statement because some of my families do value education; however, it just feels



with conversations with parents, there's no sense of urgency in getting our kids to school. There's no sense of urgency in making them attend tutorials. If the student does not do well on a test or doesn't meet mastery, calling the parent, sometimes the conversations are very vague. And they can go such as, "Oh, really, I want to talk to him" or, "You know, I'm a whip their bleep bleep." And that's just how it is. And you know, the reality is, sometimes you call a parent and they're high or drunk, and they don't care.

Addison Faith added to this concept:

Initially, like my first year, they're just trying to raise the level of importance of school. Because this was a campus that historically, kids just, if they didn't want to come, they didn't want to come. And if their parents wanted to pick them up at 11 o'clock in the middle of the day with nowhere to go, that's just kind of what they did.

Charlotte explained that community issues were not necessarily parental issues or district issues but deep societal and systemic issues:

And so, like the staff, the teachers, the administration team, we're, you know, we're stuck between a rock and a hard place because we want our kids to do better, but at the same time we also have to be realistic about the challenges that our community and our students face, and our families face. And those are things that the district, the district cannot solve alone. It's a society issue, and systemic racism, to be honest. And a lot of their parents may not even be necessarily educated, you know, so those factors alone, and then, yet you want our kids to perform at the level of a student that maybe is being raised in a home that has educated parents. They don't have to worry about starvation and poverty and things like that. And then on top of that, you know the community that I serve, those students lack a lot of just the necessities, like the bare necessities in order to

even survive, or they're being raised in single parent homes or being raised by the grandparents.

Although student discipline was mentioned by a couple of participants, it did not surface as a major subtheme for individual stressors. Josephine cited how her middle school students stole devices from the school laptop carts and their parents assisted them with selling the stolen merchandise to local pawnshops. Dale described some student behaviors:

Certainly, behavior is a huge challenge. You know, that doesn't go away. We've done a lot to improve our campus culture with regards to students and how they interact with one another with their teachers, etc. We have seen improvement, but it's an ongoing process, because our kids do bring with them their own stressors from their own environments. And so they bring those things that we have no control over into the building, and then they become part of our problem on the daily basis. So, managing the students in relation to their teachers and trying to find that balance between working with the individual kid and what the kid needs versus working with where that kid's challenges are impacting the class as a whole to the extent that it sometimes can take away from the time that I would like to spend working on instructional pieces. Then I guess that can be stressful.

Another dimension that emerged from managing the stress of others was teachers and staffing. Another individual stressor that emerged was teachers and staffing. Participants described challenges with coaching and building the instructional capacity of the teachers, finding coverage for daily absences, recruiting and staffing for vacancies, documenting ineffective teachers out, and retaining highly qualified staff. Responding to a question regarding stressors related to teachers and staff, Elijah described the reality he faced when he entered his second campus as principal. He recalled, "The teachers' instructional capacity was far beneath

what I had ever experienced.” Josephine expressed a similar viewpoint stating, “There's this stress with the ability of the staff and the level of human capacity needed to be effective.” Fifty percent of participants spoke specifically to the amount of time and level of intensity it takes to train and coach new teachers. According to Josephine, “A lot of my teachers are brand new teachers, and they just need so much coaching, so much coaching.”

Elwood expanded on the concept of new teacher coaching and support:

My campus has a lot of new teachers who do not necessarily understand pedagogy and may not have the level of content knowledge or the depth of knowledge that is needed. But also when you have newer teachers, I think it's a level of maturity that at times lacks. We always talk about the new generations, and the work ethic is different. “I'm not going to cover that class, because that's not my class.” I think sometimes people, they don't understand how some of these systems work. They don't always understand that, you know, even though the school is going to be open for a particular part of the day, sometimes work expands beyond those hours. I've had individuals that say, “Well I set boundaries.” Oh, that's cute, and I love it, but setting the boundaries that you don't check emails after four o'clock and school ended at 3:45. When you have some discord on those levels, it really slows down the progression, it slows down where you're really trying to go in and move your campus.

Josephine also shared her perception of work ethic by stating, “You got these millennials that want to go home at three o'clock every day, like they don't understand what the work looks like anymore.”

Addison Faith described a revolving door of new teachers due to turnaround work. She communicated that there was bound to be some form of teacher turnover in an underperforming

school. Addison Faith stated, “You're constantly having to deal with new teachers, some who get the program and understand what they've signed up for and then some who you just realize that they aren't cut out for turnaround work. And so, weeding out the ones who probably just aren't a good fit.”

Dale explained a divide on her campus with novice teachers and veteran teachers:

On my campus, I kind of have, like, two groups of teachers. I've got extremely experienced teachers who have their own ideas and thoughts about what kids need or what should be happening, or maybe things that worked for them when they started teaching 20 years ago, 30 years ago, some even more than that versus current pedagogy. Then we have brand new or newer teachers who just don't know much of anything about, like, they know maybe some of the current pedagogy, but they don't have the practice to match with that. So, we've got one group that's got all this practice and old pedagogy, and then you got this other group that's got all this pedagogy and no practice. And so trying to get them all on one accord to employ the best practices that are really going to move kids, especially our kids, forward instructionally, that's the biggest challenge. So, instructionally, making sure that the teachers who need the most instructional support are getting it, and that the students are actually getting the learning. So that's high stress as well.

Recruitment and retention of staff, mainly teachers, was stressed heavily among principal participants. Elijah noted, “I think the biggest stressor for me and my campus would be staff retention.” Josephine described the obstacles she encounters when attempting to recruit teachers to her campus:

We had a math opening and we might have had like five people to apply, as opposed to another school in the district that had a math opening and they had like 35 candidates, because I can go down the list and see other schools and how many people applied to their schools. And so, I'll go call people on their school list, instead of just my list because only one person applied for a position, English position. So, then I'm going to all these other middle schools and just calling candidates from those other schools, even though they didn't apply to my school, maybe I can persuade someone to come over to our school.

Hayden referenced nationwide issues with teacher retention:

And right now, nationwide, we're seeing that teachers don't want to be in the classroom.

Why am I going to be in the classroom when I can go make more as a bartender and work less and get told thank you a lot more? And so, I think that that's something that we really, really have to work on as a country; we have to address that problem. Why?

In addition to recruiting, hiring and retaining staff, principals also indicated the need to observe, coach, support and, at times, document and exit out ineffective teachers. Upon entering his first campus as principal, Elijah was given a directive by his supervisor to “clean house.” He mentioned this was not the best way to start:

And so, the expectation coming in was that I needed to clean up. So, my first walk on that campus involved me having to write up staff members. So of course, that attributed to a negative culture, and it just put forth a negative perception, but it was my first job and I would just come in and just do what I was told to do, unfortunately. I think the first month or two, I spent most of my time observing teachers, writing teachers up, and

referring them to human resources so that we could possibly not renew them. So, it was a very stressful environment; that was the most stress.

Josephine further explained the time constraints and paperwork that is required to document and recommend an ineffective teacher for nonrenewal of contract or termination:

But you're still having to make sure the scores are performing so you're in that ineffective teacher's classroom 24/7, basically to make sure kids get instruction and you're giving constant, constant feedback. Well, that memo has to happen at some point. You're watching them for 45 minutes and then you gotta do a two-hour memo to document, and then you're watching the next bad teacher and then if you got like twenty of them, you know, that's a lot of directives and I think there's just a disconnect of what it takes to really fire an ineffective teacher. We shouldn't have to go through the tremendous 52 pages of paperwork to get rid of these people, these ineffective teachers who are in front of kids, and we know statistically it takes three years of a highly effective teacher to correct that ineffective teacher. I don't think I mentioned that earlier, but the disconnect between the firing or dismissing [of] ineffective teachers.

Participants also spoke about staff vacancies and the constant need to find coverage for classes.

Jaelan shared her current reality with teaching fourth grade:

I started when we got back from Winter Break, so January 3, and it'll probably be at least the full month of January, that's what I foresee. And while it stresses the heck out of me, I'd rather eat that stress than have a month go by and kids sit there in overcrowded rooms and get nothing. And I know if I can get you in front of me for a solid month, I know we're going to be good. So that's what I'm presently doing is I'm teaching fourth grade at

the same time [as being a principal]. I'm teaching it the way I know how to teach, and I know it's going to have an immediate impact.

This section provided context for the five major themes that emerged from the data regarding individual stressors that principal participants face. The next section unveils organizational stressors faced by principals who lead in turnaround environments.

### **Research Question 2: What Organizational Stressors do Principals Experience in Low-Performing Schools?**

The second research question identified organizational factors that cause stress for principal participants. Particularly, this research question was crafted to uncover sources of stress that stem from the district and state level. During this segment of the interview process, it was clearly noticeable that principal participants were well versed in instructional leadership best practices. Research upholds this shift from managerial leadership to instructional leadership. The principal is expected to lead the learning in best practices with curriculum, instruction, and assessment to fully equip teachers with the guidance and support that they need to be successful (Barkman, 2015; Fullan, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005).

An overwhelming number of responses for this section were geared toward state accountability and district leadership. Current research indicates that chronic pressure and high expectations place principals under inordinate stress as they respond to legislative and district mandates (Boyland, 2011; Combs et al., 2009; Klocho & Wells, 2015; Wells, 2016). These understandings surfaced in the data bank of participant responses.

Three diverse themes emerged from a deep-dive data analysis. These themes were specifically linked to organizational stressors as identified by principal participants. The three themes involved: state accountability, lack of funding and resources, and district leadership.

**State accountability.** Principals identified the state accountability system as a major organizational stressor. Turnaround leaders are expected to promote rapid, sustainable change that meet district and state expectations in short periods of time. Woulfin and Weiner (2019) deem the principal as “a key lever for change” in turnaround reform environments. As research maintains, ninety percent of principals interviewed listed state accountability as a major source of stress in their role. Principals talked about the pressure to perform. Josephine stated, “There’s still a lot of pressure to perform. There is the accountability and there’s this immense pressure.” Jaelan shared, “I’m serving an F campus that’s been carrying an F rating since 2019 and there’s been no accountability since that year, you know, officially. So there’s obviously an immense pressure to get the school out of an F rating, and quickly.” Addison Faith elaborated on state pressures for quick turnaround:

And then another piece of it is they want the turnaround to be quick. Even though it may have, you know, taken some time to go in IR status. It could have taken years to get there and then all of a sudden it needs to happen overnight, immediately. The state is interested in the bottom line, which is the numbers, but there’s a lot of cultural work that needs to be done in order to get the school where they need to be academically.

Some principals wrestled with their own views of standardized testing and state accountability.

Josephine stressed her belief about the accountability system being flawed:

I don't believe in the accountability system. I think that it's flawed. I think every time our brown and black kids meet that threshold, they change it, and I truly believe in my heart of heart as a principal, as an educator for 23 years, Angel, I believe, every time Black and Hispanic kids meet that threshold, they make it higher. You know, it's like, you know, they



want us to fail. They want brown and black kids to fail. And you know the fact that TEA, the state, the federal government, they don't set the measurement goals until after we take the test. Josephine also expressed her disapproval of the state spending billions of dollars on testing. When asked about specific state pressures that he faces, Hayden described the need for job security with test scores:

And so for me, as a principal, you know, the stressor from the state is that I know that if I push kids to succeed on this state exam, I know I can do that, but I also know that I do it at the expense of me spending time to talk to kids about the importance of finance because financial literacy is not a class in high school... Because you know that at the end of the day, at the end of the year, you're not going to be measured, if John's mom was happy with a particular result, you're not going to be measured if a teacher was upset because you moved them from second grade to third grade or whatever the case may be. You're going to be measured on whether or not you moved the school in the direction, you know, in a positive direction as it relates to state accountability.

Emory explained her frustration with state accountability:

Accountability, accountability. Definitely. And that's probably one of my biggest frustrations over everything because we have people at the state level, who have no idea what's going on in schools. They're so out of touch with schools, who've never been in education but they're making policies and accountability factors that affect our students, and sometimes some of the goals are very hard to reach. So, we could go on and on about the state, but I feel that there needs to be a complete revamp of accountability within the state because one test does not determine whether a student is able to perform on grade level. There are various other assessments and performance tasks that could be assessed

to truly measure a student's academic achievement... We know the current reality because we're in the school every day, and we see how hard not only our teachers and students work but the leadership teams work.

Dale expounded on the stress that she faces with state accountability:

Yeah, I'm absolutely more stressed at this campus than I was in my previous two principalships. The stakes are higher in terms of accountability and expectations. The campus as a historically underachieving campus is expected to make this huge turnaround really quickly. And it sometimes doesn't feel realistic as the person who's in it at the time. So that's really stressful in terms of kind of dealing with the reality versus the ideal, if that makes sense. You know, this idea that, you know, you can just take a perpetually failing campus and just turn it around and fix everything and have it flying in a year or two, that's very stressful because it's a little unrealistic.

Three principals spoke specifically about Target Improvement Plans (TIPs) imposed on them by the state. Elijah explained:

So, you know, my campus, because we are F-rated, we have a target improvement plan. I have a target improvement plan, so I have a TEA representative that I have to meet with every 45 days to go over my goals. And on the call is the TEA representative. And then my district is an F-rated district, so there are procedures or policies that they're having to adhere to.

Charlotte explained her current reality with a TIP:

Yes, I have been on the TIP plan since 2019. We have to get out of enough and not from an F to D, but we have to go from an F to a C or else if it's anything less we're not going to get rated. For the end, it's going to stay like that for the next two years. So, like we

don't have a choice but to get out. Meanwhile, they're making the test more difficult in the coming year. Um, what I don't have autonomy over are the expectations that TEA has set forth, basically. And so, TEA has raised the bar, therefore, the district has raised the bar in terms of the expectations that they set for my campus, in particular, because we are an F-rated campus. The expectations are very high.

Thirty percent of participants made mention of at least one house bill when asked about significant pressures they face from the state. Dale explained the impact of each House Bill:

Um, all these House Bills. And if taken separately, it's like they make perfect sense like, House Bill 3, it makes perfect sense. Yes, we need to improve literacy. Absolutely. Yeah. Got it. House Bill 4545. Yes, we got it. Like these kids, they missed so much. They need acceleration. But in terms of reality, in real practice, combined with everything that we've already got to do, it's like add, add, add and take nothing away. And so how are these things supposed to realistically work in a real-life school setting with real life children, as opposed to in a written document that somebody who hasn't been inside of a classroom in God knows how long has this idea that they've conceived? That's extremely stressful. And again, nothing we can do about it. It's just as they come.

**Lack of funding and resources.** Participants spoke about lack of funding and how this directly correlates to insufficient resources and instructional materials. They also connected funding deficits to decreased bandwidth in human capital with teachers and leaders. Some participants identified low student enrollment as a primary cause for insufficient campus funding. Charlotte explained:

We have a consistent reduction of student enrollment of course, lends itself to the reduction in our school budget and those are things that I never had to deal with versus

the campus where I came from. Money was never an issue. My staff has more work because I don't have a big leadership team compared to the campus where I was coming from. There were like, five or six leaders at my campus; it's just me and two other leaders here. And again, that all has to do with funding which is tied to student enrollment.

Debora Ann explained that the decline in their student enrollment caused a considerable reduction in school funding. She expressed that it can be very stressful because low numbers can equate to campus closure. Debora Ann explained, "That affects your budget, when it affects your budget, it affects who you can have on the campus and the support that you can have." Debora Ann also mentioned the need for sustainable supports even once the campus gets an acceptable rating:

I do feel like the state causes me stress when it comes to my budget, and I am not getting the funds that I used to get because now I'm a campus that's out of trouble. So, when you're in trouble, you're getting all of these funds, all this money, all these things and then you get out of trouble and all of those things are taken away. That can be very stressful, because you're still dealing with the same community that you were dealing with when you were in trouble.

Elijah recalled spending the first few months as a new principal addressing inequities caused by his predecessor:

And then the most important piece was there was a misappropriation of funds, so you're given autonomy to govern your budget, and just make sure that there are certain, you know, avenues in the monies being able to be spent. So, I had to make sure that I address all of the discrepancies with that as well. I had all these things that I was having to address that you learn about in school, but you don't have to step into it. And I had to be

very strategic, how I addressed it, because it was a lot. The first three, four months was a lot.

Josephine expounded on her experiences with inadequate funding and resources:

There's a lot of weight that falls on the principal because you don't always get funding to pay all the extra people so you're having to show up for an event to open the building or helping to close the building and make sure everyone's there. So that's another disconnect when you're taking away people's stipends or, or when you're asking people to work during Christmas and Thanksgiving, and winter, and you're not paying them because they're 12 months... And then, lack of resources, them [district] really not understanding what resources you need.

Hayden explained that everyone at every level is stressed. He remarked that the biggest resource a school needs is a “manageable class size.” Hayden further clarified:

And so as a principal, our biggest stressor is just how do we fund our schools appropriately for the core of the work, the most important work to happen effectively? I don't want to blame it on the district because the district then comes back and says, “Well, these are the funds that were allotted based on what the state is funding.” And so I think that that is the biggest thing that we as educators have to focus in on was just how do we start funding our schools appropriately so that we can remove a lot of these not necessary stressors, right? Because it's difficult to build the capacity. How do we realistically if teachers are in class sizes of 40 or 45? How do I relate? And even if they're ineffective, how do I realistically, even though I do this, I feel like a hypocrite, right, because I'm sitting here having a coach a conversation with this teacher, about things that they can do to improve their instructional practice to be able to effectively teach these

kids. And I feel like a hypocrite because I know, in the back of my head, this teacher is not set up for success, and there's nothing I can do about it. How is the teacher going to be set up for success so they have 15-18 kids in the class so that they can realistically pull small groups from a data standpoint?

Participants regarded adequate funding as an invaluable resource for successful school turnaround efforts.

**District leadership.** During the interview process, it was quite apparent that participants attributed a great deal of their stress to organizational factors, specifically district stressors that they deemed out of their control. Participants, although representing varying school districts, consistently spoke about inefficiencies and inconsistencies with district structures ranging from lack of organizational clarity and cohesiveness to leadership instability. I reviewed the literature and there was no evidence to show how school districts contribute to the stress of principals, specifically those leading in turnaround schools. There was evidence to show that principal supervision efforts lacked a focus on addressing principal burnout and self-care (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Participants spoke about the disconnect between central office and campus level leadership as well as a perceived district sense of urgency with unrealistic deadlines for principals. Josephine expressed, “It's the level of disconnect from central office to the schools because that's where you get the most stress from.” Addison Faith elaborated on this concept, “I think that the disconnect between district level support and inconsistency is one of them. I don't know that all district level people even know how to support us, if that makes sense. Like, it's something that sounds good and looks good on paper.”

Addison Faith shared that district deadlines are “unrealistic”, and the support is “inconsistent.” Jaelan further explained how last-minute deadlines can cause stress:

The other thing I would say is when it comes to organization management. So, if I'm getting messages last minute on compliance, or things of that nature, that stresses me out. Um, it's just like, why couldn't this have been shared sooner. I don't like to wait to the last minute. I mean I procrastinate here and there personally but, I mean, when it comes to work, no that's my job. I need to get things done, and I'd rather do it with as minimal stress as possible. But I would say that those are the big things, the recruiting and retaining and then last-minute messages, conflicting messages, that just contributes to the stress level.

Emory described the sense of urgency that she feels is pushed from the top down:

There's such a sense of urgency with no focus. So, we get directives from the top down, and on top of the fires that we have to juggle on our day-to-day operations, we now have to juggle fires that don't need to be fires, if that makes sense. So, it comes to you as a sense of urgency and that it needs to be done immediately, whereas that can be put on the back burner because it's not a sense of urgency.

Debra Ann shared that a previous supervisor attempted to have her removed from the campus due to unrealistic expectations for a quick turnaround:

So here you are in this transformational setting. You're not moving as fast as the district wants you to. The district comes to you very nicely and says, “Well, maybe we need to put you somewhere else.” And a lot of times people say, “Okay, I'll go somewhere else.” So, when that was addressed to me, I said no because of the promise that I made to them. So, I promised the community that I will stay at least five years and I'm not going to back

off of the promise that I made to this community. So, do whatever you have to do but I'm staying. I fought back and I had to get my community support to fight back against the district. And I think sometimes it's about the choices that you make.

Josephine further expounded on the pressure to perform:

There's too much stress at the top coming down to us and threatening that we'll get fired if we don't perform. And so, you know, they walk the campus, and they expect that you grow, like, automatically, and I think that sometimes our district can be a little distant from the work because anyone who's done the work knows that it usually takes two to three years to turn around a school. But sometimes they expect it in a year, or they always expect it in a year.

Participants shared frustration over district instability. Emory addressed the constant turnover with her district leadership. She observed, "There's no consistency in leadership within the district, and every time somebody new comes in there's a new vision and there's a new sense of urgency. There are new protocols and guidelines and so you just have to constantly adjust to that." Elwood explained that institutional knowledge leaves when district leaders leave:

Individuals have come but not necessarily stayed with the organization a long period of time. And so that institutional knowledge is constantly leaving. So, what you find [is] you have a lot of new people that just don't know it yet. And a lot of the folks that have been around that have made some decisions have left, and those decisions and knowledge have gone with them. And so that kind of greatly impacts your work. It can create stress because you ask a question and some folks will say, "Oh, no. Well, we're going to have to meet about that. We're going to have to make a new decision because the person that



made it before is gone and we don't remember how they got to that point.” So those are some of the things that can add some challenges and stress.

Josephine shared that her direct superior is her eighth principal supervisor. Elijah mentioned that the supervisor who hired him left the district one month later. Dale also noted, “I've had three different leaders, I guess over the three years that I've been on this campus, and each one of them has definitely contributed to my stress level, whether it be positively or negatively.”

Additionally, participants shared varying degrees of support they received from their current supervisors. After a thorough analysis of the data, I noticed a direct correlation between principals' perceived levels of stress and the perceived supports or lack thereof they receive from their supervisors. Participants who felt extremely supported by their supervisors also reported the lowest instances of stress, fatigue, and burnout as evidenced by the data collected.

Many participants did not feel adequately supported in the role. Some participants said that their supervisors lacked the experience within a turnaround setting to properly lead them.

Debora Ann explained:

And so, I think that's the level of support and the type of support because if you've never done transformation work, don't come telling me that I'm not doing the right thing. If you can't tell me what the right thing is to do, don't come telling me I'm not doing the right thing. So, what is the right thing to do? What did you do? So that bothers me, like, what kind of support are we giving people who are in a turnaround situation, and has the [supervisor] support that we are getting been through that? So, have you transformed a school that looks like mine? Do you know what this is like? Have you had the pressure from the district? And I deeply believe that you have to hold people accountable, but sometimes that supervisor role can add to the stress and burnout of a principal.

Debora Ann also explained that principal supervisor support should be differentiated:

I also think that needs to be differentiated. I think that our supervisor has to learn my school and learn my community, just like you have to learn someone else's community, like learn it, so that when you address me or talk to me you understand what I'm actually going through. I've had some supervisors who understood that, and I had some who did not understand my community.

Josephine also cited the inexperience of her current supervisor and other district leaders:

There are a lot of leaders who are leading leaders who I run circles around. My boss and my chief, you know, I mean like I could run circles around them. They couldn't lead my school. In fact, my chief was once my direct supervisor, and he could not run the school. And we have people who are leading our schools who have never been principals. We have people in high positions in the district office who have never been a principal or an assistant principal before. They have never led the work, and you have a lot of principals who do turnaround work, or just good principals who are leaving to other districts because we're tired; there's only so much, you know, where you can kind of see the writing on the wall.

Jaelan viewed the principal supervisor position as a compliance role instead of a support role:

I don't see that role in that way. It's more of, like, a compliance, "Did you do this? Did you do that? Okay. Have a good weekend, but don't forget this is due." And I don't know, I think that all of a sudden now that their offices are going into a different, I guess, under new leadership and a different transition is when I've started to hear and feel more like, just try your best. Just do what you need to do and just kind of like, almost an acceptance of the change is about to come and so, um, it's easier for me because I don't feel, like, that

pressure as much. It's just my own pressure. But before it was very just, "Hey look, we gotta step it up... Are you doing this? Are you doing that?" Just 1000 questions.

Hayden expounded on this compliance concept:

I think a lot of the conversations that principals have with their supervisors is strictly business related: What are your next steps for this? What are your next steps for that?

When we come back from the break, even meetings before the break, the message is not taking time to be with yourself, your family, do things you like. The message is when we come back, we have STAAR testing, we have this, we have this intervention. I'm going to come and observe on this day. So, the conversations are really different, you know, in these types of environments just because of the nature of everything hanging in the balance from year to year. If we take the foot off the gas, I wish that this, and I'm not saying that my immediate supervisor is not coming from a place of understanding or empathy, but sometimes it doesn't feel that way.

Dale expressed frustration with her supervisor and pressure to work while at home. She stated:

A huge way that I deal with stress is to come home and not work. So, when I come home and I don't work, and my boss is not also making me work, then that's helpful. But if I come home and I'm trying not to work, but my boss is constantly asking me to do work, but I'm not trying to do work... Then I'm doing work, and I'm stressed at home.

Charlotte acknowledged that principal supervisors have their own workload, which comes with their own stress. She did not view their role as one that should help manage her stress or burnout:

There's no role for them to play to help me manage stress. Their job is basically, you know, I go to them for advice if I need to make any tough executive decisions that I can't decide upon, and then they ask me if I need anything and what do I need. And most of the

time, I don't really have an answer because most of the time, I pretty much can handle it by myself. Only time I ever go to them about something is if I just don't have an answer for something like, "Hey, what do I do? Where do I go for this? Or who do I talk to about that?" That's it. You know, but they have their own stress that they have to manage themselves because they have a workload too, I'm sure. And it's all coming from the top down.

One principal, Elijah, felt extremely supported by his immediate supervisor. He described the support he receives by his supervisor whenever he calls her:

She asks questions. She kind of like just says, "Are you okay? Go ahead." She's been in education for like fifty years, I mean, she's a well-seasoned educator. So, I mean, she can read and she can pretty much, you know, notice that there's something going on. That's good. And we have a policy if we have something going on, she'll say, "Okay. Yeah, so this is no big deal." Goes back to the old autonomy piece that I talked about, like she trusted me. So, you know, it's not really a situation where I don't feel like, you know, she has my best interest at heart, but she does. My superintendent has a pretty good emotional intelligence when it comes to us as well. So, we have an open-door policy where we can go; we can talk to her as well.

Participants echoed the need for internal system coherence and clarity between departments in their districts, primarily with the Office of Academics and Curriculum and Instruction departments. Dale conveyed her dissatisfaction with certain departments:

Just general lack of organization and lack of common purpose, lack of evidence of there being a common purpose. I think the words are there; all the right words are there to say we all have the same purpose, but when you look at the practice and what everybody is

doing... Is everybody doing the things that are going to lead everybody to the common purpose? There's very much individual departments that have their own agendas and all of those agendas aren't pointing towards one particular common goal, so that makes it very difficult at the campus level when we are singularly focused on getting these numbers for these groups of kids, period. You know, the literacy department saying this and the math department saying that and multilingual saying this and, instead of saying that...everybody's kind of got their own little agenda going on on the side. That is very challenging.

Emory accepted the reality that the curriculum department was beyond her control and scope of influence. She stated, "There are people in positions who do not have the expertise and they're responsible for writing the curriculum, writing formative assessments. And to be honest, some of it is misaligned and it's just something that you have to deal with."

Elijah described his experiences with central departments in his district:

The biggest barrier in my district, I will be honest, is the capacity level of the other departments. So, we have different departments, we have our academic department, we have our Sped department, and we have our ESL department. We have various departments as any other district would have. Well, some of the individuals in those departments don't have the capacity level to address certain phenomenon that transpired. Okay, so let me give you another one. So, our academics department, we have a lot of specialists that are creating the curriculum and there's no formal vetting system of the curriculum. So, for example, in the second grade, there was a unit that taught dictionary skills. Well, if, you know, dictionary skills are supporting standards [then] that's not a readiness standard. So, you have a whole three weeks that they're learning about the

dictionary, and they can connect it to text. That's a frustration. So, you have those curriculum things sometimes that you have to make sure. And as a principal, I don't have the time to go in and scour through the curriculum, because we're expecting the curriculum to be comprehensive and organized in a way that's gonna lead the kids to mastery for STAAR. We've had to learn how to look at the curriculum, look at the TEKS, look at the units, and if that unit is not going to get us there, we supplement.

Jaelan perceived the district curriculum as “very deep and overbearing.” She would prefer they stick to the basics at “priority schools.” Dale also viewed curriculum as a major stressor:

Curriculum in and of itself is another major stressor. In my district, they are not on the same page at all. The curriculum materials that are produced for teachers to utilize, or that are supposed to support teachers, are often times more problematic than they are helpful. Just kind of errors being made, and then not found until a teacher finds them while they're teaching students, those kinds of things. And so that's very stressful in terms of feeling like I'm trying to support teachers. We're trying to make sure we've got quality planning happening, but then the planning materials aren't quality, and you don't know it until you actually dig into it. And then you've wasted a lot of time, so then of course, then that's stressful because I don't have time to waste.

Among one of the district organizational stressors was the concept of autonomy.

Principals perceived their level of given autonomy as a decision ultimately made by the district.

When asked if participants had total autonomy over the decisions they made, sixty percent of principals interviewed felt they had no autonomy. Debora Ann explained the role of politics in this process:

I think there's a lot of politics as a principal that you learn how to navigate and still meet the best interests of your campus. When people make decisions for your campus, who don't know your campus, right. So, at the district level, we're making these decisions but are these decisions... Are you thinking specifically about my campus? No, you're thinking about the district as a whole, but we have to remember that each campus is different in these different things. So, I think sometimes decisions can be made at a higher level that can bring additional challenges to a campus if the decisions that are being made do not benefit or may not understand the specific details on the campus, which is basically differentiation. And sometimes it's difficult for district people to differentiate for campuses because they don't know the ins and outs of every single campus. And then how do you deal with that? How do you process that when decisions are made? I do what's best for kids for my kids.

Hayden spoke about his inability to make curricular decisions for his campus:

I don't get to make curriculum or instructional resources decisions around what my school is going to support. The district kind of makes those decisions, and then I have to learn about whatever curriculum or instructional program we're gonna adopt and then be able to roll that out effectively whether I believe in it or not. As opposed to my other school district where I can vet programs, curriculum, and then make the best decision for my kids on my campus.

Twenty percent of principals interviewed felt they had total autonomy over the decisions they made; however, Elwood explained that having this autonomy can cause stress as well:

And so that can add stress, even though you have that autonomy, it adds stress because it comes down to...I always have to figure something out. And I'm always having to

internalize what was shared because it was shared so late, and it wasn't broken down as well as it could have been. Well now let me read this before I break it down to my staff.

Let me do this. So, it does add a level of stress. You're much more hands on with it.

Twenty percent of principals interviewed believed that the autonomy given to them was contingent on certain factors. Emory stated, "At turnaround schools, we do not have full autonomy." Debora Ann explained that autonomy is based on student achievement data:

...but there was a time where we were in trouble, that there were a lot of decisions being made for our campus. And then when the decisions are made for your campus in terms of, like, budgeting, staffing, curriculum, intervention, everything, staffing, "Who are you hiring? What programs do you have? What extracurricular things are you doing that may keep you from reaching your accountability that you need?" Everything.

Jaelan shared that the level of autonomy she has as a principal depends on who her boss is:

I feel like I have some room and some flexibility to do what needs to be done. I would say, it honestly depends on who's my boss...who I answer to and who they answer to. I would say this first semester I felt very pigeonholed, more so than in the past and, you know, there was obviously some difficult conversations there but this semester I'm, like, "No, I'm putting my foot down." I'm like, I'm putting my foot down, this is what we're going to do, and that's what we've been doing, and finally I feel like I have some more breathing room to do what needs to be done. But you know for me, fortunately, it worked out at least for right now putting my foot down because I, at the end of the day, I need to do what's best for the kids.



This section gave insight to the four major themes that emerged from the data regarding organizational stressors that principal participants face. The next section uncovers coping strategies and ways that principals attempt to mitigate stress and burnout.

### **Research Question 3: How do Principals Cope with These Stress Factors?**

This research question unpacks the strategies that principals use to mitigate stress and burnout. The purpose of this question was in part to assess participants' awareness of the coping strategies they utilized. This question was also designed to unpack the strategies and their effectiveness. According to Grady (2004), principals must be consistently aware of the obscurity of stress and its effects, and they must structure their workload to combat it. As supported by the literature, coping tips for managing principal stress exist in five areas: behavioral modification cues, physical exercises, relaxation techniques, professional help, and medical care (Sogunro, 2012).

Principal participants shared personal strategies that they used to help mitigate stress and burnout. Except for one, these strategies were initiated by participants and not regulated or monitored by the school district or any district-related organization. Throughout the course of this interview segment, I noticed that participants could quickly name all the strategies that they knew they should be using in theory; however, there was clear evidence of inconsistency with the actual application of these strategies in practice. For instance, many participants named exercise as a personal strategy used to help them manage stress and burnout; however, they continued their statement by saying that they do not exercise regularly; many only exercising during the holiday break. Present research supports the notion that self-care routines cannot be exclusively reserved for weekends and holidays; they must be integrated into the daily routine of life (Harris, 2007).

Three distinct practices emerged from the data to support personal systems employed by principals to alleviate stress and burnout. These practices were faith and trusted support circles, rest and exercise, and personal systems. This section explores these areas.

**Faith and trusted support circles.** When asked if any personal strategies were utilized to help principal participants manage stress and burnout related to the role, seven out of ten principals spoke about trusted support circles. It is important to note that although many of these support circles are comprised of other principal colleagues, six out of seven of these internal networks were self-initiated by the principals themselves, void of any district instrumentation.

Dale shared that she uses her principal group of colleagues to “vent to, to hash things out, and problem solve.” Hayden spoke about the need to vent to trusted colleagues and to build connections and relationships with people outside of the building “because we have to vent a lot and we have to relay a lot, some of the challenges and some of the problems that we're experiencing, to people that understand them.” Hayden also emphasized the importance of surrounding himself with likeminded principals who have a positive outlook on the principal role and challenges faced:

You know, I think a big thing too is just making sure that you're connected with people who give you, like, a positive outlook... and so for me, I found that being with people who are optimistic about the future is helpful because I don't want to de-stress with people who are distressing, you know. It's a pity party, that where you basically just complain about things and the circumstances that we cannot change, right? I like to de-stress with people who say, “Hey, let's talk about the challenges that we're facing. Let's talk about the things that we're going through together, and then talk about how we can make them better.” I think that's the ultimate de-stressor, knowing that there's a light at

the end of the tunnel if we continue to do or move in a certain direction that we're moving in. That, for me has been helpful.

Current research supports the belief of principals focusing on the positive and intentionally surrounding themselves with those who add value to them by “nourishing their spirit” (Frost, 2020). Elwood stressed that the principal seat can be lonely. He battles this loneliness by being a part of a nationwide principal cohort through his district for novice principals. He acknowledged that although principals within the cohort speak freely about their challenges, everyone’s challenge is different and unique. He explained that each principal has a different skill set and leadership style, which makes it hard to give or receive advice. In his words, “Not everybody’s advice is going to help your situation.” Elwood noted that he finds the most joy in visiting other campuses within his district and learning from those leaders. Campus visits help him to mitigate some of the stress:

I love seeing other campuses. I love seeing how other folks are doing things. That helps keep me grounded. And it's important. I'm like, this is another school with another leader with another set of challenges. But we all still find a way to win the day. And that, that helps.

Participants also found great value in familial circles with loved ones and friends. Jaelan shared that she keeps a tightknit circle of family and friends. Josephine explained that she enjoys using family time to watch movies, work on puzzles, and partake in arts and crafts with her kids. Elijah mentioned having mentors as a novice principal, and now he serves as a mentor to other campus leaders.

Some principals credited their faith and prayer life as ways to lessen the stress. Debora Ann shared that her secret to managing stress and burnout was through prayer and Bible Study time:

At the end of the day... I hang out with my husband because we're empty nesters. My spiritual life really helps me... prayer time and Bible Study time. My husband and I are part of an empty nesters Bible Study group that we meet, like every two weeks, that helps a lot because they pray for us. They know what we're going through with our campuses. So that is a really big help.

While interviewing Elwood on a Sunday, he mentioned that a virtual principals meeting was conducted earlier that morning as he was leaving church. Much to his surprise, he noticed that no one on the call appeared to have gone to church that morning. Elwood stated, "We always want to ground our work in something, I have to ground myself in the Word. And so that's what helps mitigate that stress." Elwood added that friendships, partnerships, networks, church organizations, fraternity commitments, and increased travel helped him to "stay busy in multiple ways."

**Rest and exercise.** When asked about ways they decompress at the end of the day, fifty percent of participants mentioned some form of exercise. Participants recognized that rest and exercise were critical components of managing stress and burnout; however, only one participant had established a true daily routine of exercising. Elijah described his routine of leaving work every day at 4:30 p.m. to go to the park and run. He attributed his many years of experience as a principal at different campuses to the valuable lessons he has learned about his body. He asserted, "I've learned that if I don't have a consistent regimen, even if I don't eat, I'm going to gain weight because that's how my body reacts to the stress."

Charlotte conceded that she values rest and exercise, but she is not able to work out until the holiday breaks. Hayden echoed Charlotte's inconsistent routine noting that he exercises "sporadically during the break." Hayden mentioned that he was currently on winter break, and he had exercised each day so far. He stated that he has to "pick and choose the moments in time" when he wants to "go to the gym and do all these extra things." Jaelan described ways she destresses:

I have this meditation app, it's called Insight, and I use that pretty, pretty frequently especially at night when I'm unwinding, and that just kind of helps me. There's different little exercises, but sometimes I just put it on as, you know, I knock out. Some days it's just literally sitting and doing nothing, watching TV and I'm like, oh I'm going to regret this later but, you know what, in that moment I need to sit and do nothing... I wanted to try yoga, but since I'm still recovering from my ankle injury surgery, it was kind of difficult to get back. Now, I would say pre-ankle break, working out was a huge thing. So, I loved running, and that's obviously been difficult to be able to do it, but little by little get it back, but I would say yoga is something that I've wanted to try. I don't know; it just catches my attention.

Jaelan also shared that working on her doctoral studies helped her to de-stress:

Now, I will say the one thing that did help me shut it off was actually my research. I had to focus on that, and the topic was so important to me that anytime I would work on that, not the dumb classwork but on my research, that was de-stressing for me. It let me just focus on something and, and I'm like, "Oh my goodness, is my purpose actually in another area?" And that's how I would decompress. Walks, too. Going on walks after trying to recover from my personal injury.

Josephine spoke about resting and reading books; however, she acknowledged that the books that interest her are typically educational books. She referenced, “Dare to Lead” by Brene Brown and another book that she is currently reading on differentiating instruction. Josephine admitted, “I’m always reading on leadership... I’m always trying to keep myself updated with the current literature around leaders, but I’m that Haberman principal who doesn’t believe that there are like [work] hours. I believe that we do whatever it takes, however it takes, and I think that’s probably why it leads to the stress and the burnout at some point.”

**Personal systems.** As participants shared the personal systems that they utilize to mitigate stress and burnout, I instantly spotted a commonality with responses. All participants spoke about adaptations they made to help manage stress and burnout. These adaptations ranged from setting time boundaries to adjusting mindsets. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, one hundred percent of the principal participants adapted areas of their personal or professional lives to fulfill the role of principal. Elijah made it clear that he establishes a cutoff point for not doing anything work related on Saturdays:

I have at least one day a week where I don't think about work. On Saturdays I don't do anything work related. If it happens after 4:30 and it's nothing that's a full-on fire, I can't do anything about it in the night anyway. So, I'll wait to the morning. There are certain things that you can't...like if you read a report or you see something with a kid in the middle of the night, I don't know why you would look at it. You can't call a parent, you can't call the kid, you can't call the teachers; it has to wait until the morning. So, you just kind of put that on your back burner, and you just deal with it in the morning when you get there... I've had to learn that it's a cutoff point. Every day I cut off and I have to work out, and that's how, sometimes when I'm running, I'm processing. On the weekends, I

don't call my staff, they don't call me unless it's an emergency, and we just have those healthy boundaries.

Josephine explained that Sundays are her nonwork day unless it is Sunday night. She deemed Saturdays as her workday but recognized that she does check emails and prepare the weekly newsletter on Sunday evenings. Addison Faith shared that she hardly ever works late at home because she designates a maximum of two times per week to stay late at school. Addison Faith viewed "late" as staying on campus until 7:30 or 8:00 p.m. She explained, "When I get home, I'm not pulling my computer out, like I usually get home and actually do stuff with the kids. Um, yeah, disconnecting, I'm gonna say. And you know, maybe answering a couple of emails from my phone or something like that, but not full throttle, like pulling my computer out and falling asleep on the couch."

Dale resolved that if she must work on the weekend, then she makes a commitment to go to the office on Saturday for a few hours, but no work can be brought home with her. In her words:

I need that separation. You can just get started working at home and just working on a Saturday and you end up working the whole day. Well, I'm not likely to do that if I'm at the office, like I'm going to go in there if it's something I want to get done or a certain number of hours I said I was going to work. Once I get there and I've worked my three hours or I've worked my four hours, and I've gotten through this pile of whatever it was, then I'm going to go home. Whereas, if I bring all that stuff home and it ends up being more than three or four hours of work then the temptation is going to be to sit there and continue doing it, and then not go to the movies with my husband and then not go out with friends and then not do those other things that provide me with the stress relief that I

get from separating myself, so I just try not to bring it home. And so, one of the big things that I do for me is that I do very little work at home. I won't say I never work at home, but when I get home in the evening, for the most part, I am not working. I sometimes will get up early before work to do some work, but almost never in the evening.

Current research emphasizes the need for principals to focus on what they have direct influence over and to steer clear of circumstances out of their control (Frost, 2020). Seventy percent of participants spoke about the mindset they must possess to minimize their stress levels. Participants highlighted the importance of focusing on what you can control. Charlotte stated that you must realize that “you can only control what you can control and those outside things are not under your control by any means.” Elijah’s response mirrored this mantra, “Certain things I’ve learned you can’t control it. Just do your best.” Jaelan explained how her compartmentalization skills help her to remain focused on things within her realm of influence:

I'm good at compartmentalizing. I just have to stay focused, honestly. It takes a lot of discipline just to keep focused on what's important, like instruction, building relationships, and making sure that you know teachers are secure in their role, so that way they can really nourish the students. I'm always focused on, “How do I develop teacher capacity to improve student achievement? How do I get them to accelerate the students learning?” That's a very difficult skill. There's a lot of stuff that goes on, but I only focus on what I can control. So, I only worry myself on, “Okay what has an immediate impact? Is this significant or is this just drama in the neighborhood? Is this just something that I can step aside and not, you know, address, or do I need to step in and address this or that



situation?” But I guess I'm good at categorizing things like, “Okay, this requires my immediate attention and this doesn't.”

Participants shared that they choose to not spend time stressing over problems but rather finding solutions to problems. Debora Ann explained that you must solve for the challenges that you face, then move on to the next problem, “ultimately keeping in mind that you want your scholars to leave your campus highly knowledgeable, and you want the school that's going to get them to be thankful that they're coming from your campus.” In line with this mindset, Elwood provided insight into his thought process when faced with challenges:

We're going to find a way to win the day. And that's usually my motto all the time. If I'm praising somebody that like has gone over and beyond, ‘You have continuously found a way to win the day.’ How are you going to get it done? Either you're going to find a way or make a way. And that's just my mindset. I'm not going to be defeated. I'm not going to say, “Woe is me.” I signed up for this and let's get it done. That mindset helps rally people behind you... If I don't have autonomy over it, it's okay. What do we got to do to get this done? I leave it at that. I try not to get into throwing stuff at the wall; it does not help. Sitting up and talking about it doesn't help. Let me sit down, let me internalize ‘the ask.’ Let me figure out the how and when, and let's get it done; the things that I do not have control of. I do have control over the way that I frame how we're going to go about this. Guys, we got to do this, but this is how we're going to do it.

This section explored three major themes that emerged from the data regarding personal systems that principals employ to manage stress and burnout. The next section examines the systems in place at different organizational levels to support principals.

#### **Research Question 4: What Systems are in Place to Support the Mental Health and Wellbeing of These Principals?**

The fourth research question was designed to uncover systems at the campus and district level that support the mental health and wellbeing of principals. Recent research emphasizes the need for districts to intentionally prioritize and support the mental health and stability of principals (DeMatthews et al., 2019). A gap in the literature exists for principal preparation programs and school districts to support and foster this social and emotional component for school leaders (Mahfouz, 2019; Sogunro, 2012). This question was crafted to intentionally identify specific organizational support structures that are available to principals.

When asked about systems at the campus level to help manage principal stress and burnout, participants unanimously spoke about their leadership teams and campus internal structures and systems; however, they could not specifically identify any district systems to support the wellbeing of the principal. Although a few participants mentioned employee support programs, they acknowledged that they had never tried them. After careful analysis of the data, I concluded that principals inadvertently relied heavily on their direct superior, or principal supervisor, to assist with stress management, although only one participant could clearly articulate an established system for this.

Three broad brackets of systems emerged from the data that outlined organizational supports or lack thereof for helping principals to manage stress and burnout. These systems were categorized as campus systems, district systems, and no systems to process. This section explores those areas.

**Campus systems.** Participants consistently referred to their leadership teams when speaking about campus structures. They credited these administrators with helping them to do

the heavy lifting with school affairs that in turn helps them to manage their own levels of stress.

Addison Faith explained her model of distributive leadership:

Delegation. I will say that I personally have been very fortunate to have a leadership team and teacher leaders who I can now release some items to, and I don't have to worry about creating something myself or implementing something myself. Even when we have these academic camps and I think that's very helpful for stress when you can say, "Hey, you know, we need a plan for this," or "Hey, we need coaching for this." So that's my stress relief... But I think after some staff turnaround, getting some positive, consistent systems in place, I think that my stress level isn't as high now as it was the first year I was there.

Elwood extended this idea of shared leadership by describing how he splits all decision-making responsibilities with his two Academic Deans. When speaking about both Deans, he stated, "They're literally my right hand. Some people call them the favorite. I don't think they're my favorite. They're just the most knowledgeable. There's not a decision that's made on the campus that one of them or usually both isn't aware of." Elwood also described shared autonomy with other campus leaders:

Ah, yes, we have a level of autonomy, but the level of autonomy that I've given my shared leaders on campus helps. I do not try to control it all. I give people their power and tell them to possess it and grow in it. That has worked very well because the people around me know that they can make decisions. I've always said, "If you keep coming to me and asking me a question, and I have to keep thinking and answering it, I probably don't need you and I can save that budget line item. And so either you learn to figure it out or you want to move out of the way." And most of the time, they choose to figure it out. What works with that, also, [is] I love building capacity and so, instead of me giving

you the instructions and telling you what to do, and then you go and do it, how about this, you just sit back, and you make those decisions. And if you fall short, I can talk to you about it. I can coach you up on that.

Elwood built on this concept by providing an example of teacher appraisal processes that he implements as a leader:

This year, I found a way to stay ahead of it. I actually made my own campus Coaching Calendar. Each week I email my coaches and when I say coaches, maybe assistant principals. I will email my assistant principals and say, each one of you, I want you to go and see these three teachers. I name the teachers and then what indicators on the rubric I want them to look for and I want that input by Friday at five o'clock. At first, I was like everyone says I'm micromanaging this idea, but everybody has praised it. They're like, "Elwood, this is what kept us on track. This has helped to narrow our focus."

For participants, the concept of shared leadership also extended to teacher leaders. Dale explained:

I also try to pay attention to who I've got...to the talent that I have in my building and utilize that most effectively. So, if I know that I've got teachers who want to be future teacher leaders, future leaders, then, you know, how can I leverage them or where they have ideas that are going to assist in a certain area. You know, kind of letting people have the autonomy to run with it, because I know that that's something they can do. Same with my leadership team, for me the worst thing that I can do for the growth and development of my team members is to micromanage them. I think everybody has to find their own way to do their work and so, I'm really trying to give people the freedom to attack

problems or attack challenges in the way that they see fit as opposed to trying to keep my fingers in everything. That would be even more stressful than it already is.

Participants also spoke about other solid systems being in place at the campus level.

Elijah commented that everything on his campus “has a system tied to it.” He also mentioned that he gives his teachers and leadership team “a lot of autonomy.” Josephine acknowledged that she would not be successful if she did not have systems. She remarked, “I think having good systems for attendance, good systems for social emotional wraparound work, systems for academics, good systems for discipline, you have to have systems in place, and everybody needs to know what that system looks like.” Elijah also prioritized the need to build relationships with all stakeholders:

Most of the systems that I learned the hard way during my first tenure as a principal I refined them, and I've taken them to different campuses. So now, I kind of understand, and the most important thing that I've learned in this profession is you have to build relationships with your staff, with your students, with the community, and more importantly, with those in central office who you're going to be collaborating with, because they're going to be assisting you with resources and training and just different things to help your campus. So, it's all about building a relationship.

Some participants even established systems of accountability for leaving work daily. Elijah mentioned that his administrative assistant and leadership team members come to his office each day at 4:30 p.m. to end the day and leave together. Jaelan described a similar routine, “I would say the admin team and I are pretty good at holding each other accountable. Like this year we said, ‘Nope, we're leaving by a certain time,’ and they pop into the room, they find me. We're good at holding each other accountable in that way.” The importance of leadership teams and the vital role

they hold in stress management for principals is absent from the literature. Findings and evidence collected from this study will help to contribute to the literature in this area.

**District systems.** When asked about any systems in place at the district and central office level to help manage principal stress and burnout, principal participants immediately resorted to talking about social and emotional learning (SEL) supports for student and staff wellbeing. After redirection to the original question, forty percent of participants referred to their district's employee support program although each acknowledged they had never used the services. Jaelan stated that she has the number to her employee support program, but "finding time in the day to go schedule a session" is a difficult task. Charlotte echoed this sentiment about finding time for employee support services:

Yeah, they're available for any district employees. It's just... You don't have the time to reach out to them. And then if you reach out to them, it's just someone to talk to. I don't know if there's anything more that any person can do to help you manage your stress other than you just handling it yourself, or medication. Well, there is a social and emotional department that you can always reach out to but who has time for that?

Hayden was aware of free counseling for employees through a district online service. He shared that his district's employee support program sponsored teacher appreciation giveaways "to make people feel valued and stuff." Hayden added that aside from this, "there is not, like, a system per se" for employee supports to help with the management of principal stress and burnout. After careful reflection, Dale could not think of any specific district support systems:

I guess the district has, you know, taken steps, I guess, to at least put in writing that everyone needs to take time for self-care. That does come up. It's not like there's no

necessarily structured time provided for it, but there is at least acknowledgement of the need for it to be available.

Addison Faith also could not pinpoint any specific district systems to help support principal stress and burnout. She stated, “The only thing that I can think of is, like, when you're on a break, they're not allowed to reach out to you, and you can only reach out to them. Okay, but other than that, I can't think of nothing else they do to help you de-stress.”

During this portion of the interview with each candidate, it was apparent that principal perceived supports for managing stress and burnout at the district-level were nonexistent, and it was ultimately dependent on who their direct superior was. Fifty percent of principals expressed gratitude that their current supervisor was a thought partner as they acknowledged that this has not always been the case for themselves or their colleagues. Debora Ann was appreciative of the fact that her current supervisor tries to help her manage her workload and she also encourages her to go home. Emory expressed similar appreciation for having a supervisor who was a calming voice:

I will say, my current supervisor does a good job of bringing things into perspective and really talking me through my frustrations when I have frustrations. She does a really good job of, “Okay, let's come on back. Can you control this? Is it within your control? It's not within your control? Why are you worrying about it? Why are you letting this stress you?” And just knowing that she supports me, and she knows that I'm capable to lead my campus, but just really being that calming voice. That is not typical in our district.

Dale reflected on her past three supervisors and the support they provided:

I've had two, for example, that have been extremely supportive of the need for us to have time to take care of ourselves and for the recognition that we have lives outside of the

work, and one that was not so much. And so, there's a dramatic difference when you have your own leader who has an understanding that you are a person who comes to the school to do the principal job as opposed to this person who's just around the clock always thinking about work. Of course, that has a lot to do with the perspective that my leader brings to the work. So, she's there for me to bounce ideas off of, but she's not one who tells me what to do. She will ask probing questions, she will, you know, she will do things, she'll push the thinking a bit. She'll sometimes present another side. But ultimately, it is my decision.

One participant was able to detail a structured weekly support provided to him by his supervisor.

Elwood described:

So, we meet weekly; ours is actually Monday morning. And so, I walk into each week knowing that I've talked to my boss, first thing Monday morning, typically around 8:30. We'll walk a couple of classrooms. We'll talk about what we saw in those classrooms. She will ask what is the high leverage move that I would make to improve instruction in that classroom right now. And then we go back, look at the data not only for, like, any key data points that we want to look at. We will do it at that time. If there's an issue, like there's an agenda, but then at the end, it's whatever you want, whatever questions you have. She asks, 'Is there anything that you want me to take back to central office,' and she's very good about it. 'If something's going on, let us know if there's something that we need to reconsider.' And so I do appreciate that about my job... We have a weekly report, a weekly portfolio call. With that weekly portfolio call it gives us an opportunity to come together in a shared space to be able to hash out and share whatever may be on



our mind. If we have any questions about district-level decisions, we can lift them up at that time.

**No systems to process.** Seventy percent of principals interviewed acknowledged that they have no clear or consistent systems to mitigate their own stress and burnout. Some participants came to this revelation mid-interview. Hayden conveyed that it is very difficult for him to manage stress, admitting that he doesn't "manage stress well," if at all. Addison Faith believed that stress and burnout were inevitable as a leader of a low-performing school, noting the only way to alleviate the stress was to leave the school and principal position altogether. She elaborates:

Maybe it's just my mindset, but I do believe that when you have a school that is underperforming, that's what comes with the job. So, I don't know that I ever thought like, "Oh, what can I do to not be stressed?" because I believe the only thing that I think about that doesn't cause you that kind of stress is leaving. You are not stressed because you don't work there anymore. I guess that's the only other strategy that I haven't tried. I just think you have to leave. Oh, no, that's just my truth.

Elwood also believed that stress just comes with the territory, "because if you go to any other job you're still going to have to deal with something." He stated that the "good days outweigh the bad days," so "just chunk it up and keep moving." Charlotte shared, "I don't know how other people are, but I think it just comes with a job. And I don't know if that's good for me to say that it just comes with a job, because then that becomes your norm and you're supposed to be okay with it, or we're kind of groomed to be okay with that, versus it's really normal." Josephine explained in detail her struggle with establishing healthy boundaries and routines to alleviate stress and burnout:

I haven't figured that balance out yet, but when you figure it out, you let me know because I'm always interested in knowing what other people do to turn it off. I mean we're here on a Saturday working. I'm just saying you haven't turned it off either. I'm really bad, Angel. You can put that for the record. I have really great strategies for my campus and instructional and academic and operational strategies for my campus, but when it comes to me, I'm bad. I don't set firm boundaries; like, I let my teachers call me 24 hours a day. You know they have my cell number, and my teachers and parents call me. Some parents who I might have high concern, high-needs parents, I might give them my cell number, but I'm pretty much reachable 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I try to make myself available unless I'm in church or something, but I don't have a lot of strategies because you can't... The work doesn't stop. And so, so you take a lot of that home, but I'm probably, Angel, not the best. I'm not the best to disconnect. I know that is an area that I have to grow in as a principal, and I've been doing it for 13 years, and I have a hard time disconnecting. I have a hard time because there's so much work that needs to get done and I just feel like if I don't do it, who's going to do it?

Participants consistently spoke of the need to recognize that challenges will always exist and focus on overcoming that obstacle to move to the next obstacle. Dale described her approach as reactive because you have to “deal with challenges as they come.” Charlotte described a similar approach:

I don't know, take it one day at a time and just roll with the punches. And so how do you know, we don't know how... We just deal with it. So, you can't stress over those things because you know they exist and they're not going anywhere. And you kind of make the best of the situation, and what you have and the people that you have. Really process it? I

don't really process it. I just know it exists and I just take it day by day with the daily tasks that I have to do each day for the campus, because you can't get overwhelmed by all the challenges. You just acknowledge it, and you move on, and go from there.

Emory also described a process that involved rolling with the punches:

You roll with the punches. And I think it is such a norm to me. I don't know if I de-stress to be honest, and I think that some people have different activities that they do. They'll go work out or wind down with a glass of wine, but I can't tell you that I honestly de-stress. I'm sitting here rubbing my shoulder right now because I have a tension migraine that has gone down to my shoulders. I know that is due to today's stress. I just, I just don't have a normal pattern of shutting off work and de-stressing.

This section highlighted three main themes that surfaced from the data specifically linked to organizational systems that help principals manage stress and burnout. The final two themes are not linked to any specific research question. Both themes surfaced heavily in the data across multiple research questions. The next section examines the consequences of stress and burnout.

**Consequences of stress and burnout.** There was no research question specifically designed to address the consequences of principal stress and burnout; however, this was a common theme that surfaced in multiple areas of the data and at various points in the interview transcripts. A previous review of the literature shows that the effects of unaddressed stress can lead to serious psychological, physical, and socioemotional problems. Effects of unaddressed stress may surface as health and medically related issues, alcoholism, burnout, suicide, or even death (Sogunro, 2012).

Participants consistently spoke about the positive and negative consequences of stress. Jaelan mentioned that she manages stress very well and that she thrives under pressure,

otherwise she wouldn't be working at a campus like the one she is in currently. Hayden had a similar experience and described the resilience he developed:

And I'm not saying that this is all negative. The positive impact is that I have developed tremendously in my ability to lead. Like, I really have these working conditions and just me being able to understand, being able to really slow down and listen to various stakeholders and really, truly try to understand from their lens. So, it's not all negative. I've developed very thick skin as a result of it. You know, I used to be very, very conscious. I don't want to say scared of what people thought, but I refuse to really care about it now. For your mental stability, and your own personal mental wellbeing, regardless, if you're a principal or not, right, like this is something that I wish every adult had, whatever it is that they're doing. And so that's positive, and I develop that through this role. So, I'm very grateful for that because whatever I do next, I know that I'm gonna have the mental fortitude to be successful.

Participants shared ways in which they have grown and developed as leaders due to the school environments they lead in. Elijah described his ability to adapt and evolve as a leader:

I think as a leader, you have to evolve, and I think the only way that there's evolution is if you have a problem, or if you have a phenomenon, and you figure out how to address it because that gives you the toolkit. That gives you the experience. So, I just think in the next few years, I mean, right now, we're in unprecedented times with COVID and things like that. So, I think that the one thing I can say about educators, however, is that we are very resilient, and we can adapt. And there's always an opportunity for you to grow or develop someone. So, you have to look at things half full rather than half empty. Now, I don't walk around aimless, you know, thoughts in my mind, I'm very realistic. You have

to always be positive. It's never as good or as bad as you think unless it's something that deals with kids' safety.

Elwood explained his appreciation for also being able to evolve as a leader:

So, at least deal with something that you're learning and evolve and how to deal with the new challenges. And if you can lead in a pandemic, if you can lead schools with what we're facing, if you can lead schools in the aftermath and catastrophic storms, if you can rebuild school communities and families, if you can support people at this time, it just opens so many doors of possibilities for what may come in that next season.

In response to varied questions, participants described the negative consequences of stress and its impact on their physical and mental health, personal lives, and sustainability of their role. Elijah labeled his first year as a principal in a turnaround environment as “hellacious.” This resulted in him gaining thirty pounds within months. He explained that his doctor was concerned about his cholesterol and “levels being off.” This was a huge shock to Elijah because he described himself as a star athlete who remained fit and in shape his entire life. Similarly, Josephine shared that campus stress grew so intense for her to the point where she was forced to have surgery, leave her principal position, and go to central office. She has now returned to the principalship and is considering resignation. Hayden also detailed some of the consequences of stress that he faces:

Even though I find fulfillment in the work, I just don't think that it's something that is beneficial for myself physically and mentally. If we talk about my health, right, like I used to be able... I was running marathons before, and I was going to the gym before. I can do two miles without getting tired now. And then if I go to the gym or I do something else for myself, then I'm going to sleep late, so I don't get enough sleep. I always find that

at the end of a workday because I'm so busy during the day, I find that I binge eat. Like, just reflecting, I find that that just happens, unfortunately like two, three nights out of the week. I'm, like, grabbing a drink. Unfortunately, even though I find fulfillment in [my job], it's just not going to happen for me even though I love the kids and I know I'm doing a great job. I have to think about my health, and I have to think about my long-term wellbeing as well. I'm slowly but surely hurting myself because of what I'm doing to move the school forward.

Debora Ann recognized the role that regular exercise plays in reducing stress, but she stated that her daily battle is with staying at school late, leaving work when it is dark outside, and then being too tired to drive to the gym. Emory echoed this struggle, “To be honest, you have the mindset to work out but when you get home, you're so tired. And I know working out will give you energy, but it's just more mind over matter and pushing yourself to engage in physical activity.”

During the interview process, I noted that some participants spoke about the daily personal sacrifices they made to fulfill the demands of the job. This often meant placing valuable family time on the backburner. Josephine believed that she must devote herself fully to the work even if it meant not attending church or missing out on irreplaceable moments with her own kids and husband. Hayden reflected on the fact that he is the only one out of his friendship circle that is not married and has no kids. He resolved, “I had to put my career first to be successful and not necessarily to advance to just be successful. Because of the personality that I have, I don't put meeting people or even when I've been in relationships... I've put work first and I think that's hurt me.” Hayden added:

These last two weeks [winter break], every single day I thought about work, even if I did nothing related to work it's been in the back of my head. I'm literally having dinner with my significant other, or I could be having a drink with a friend, and something pops into my head... I just take out my phone and I text it to myself because I don't want to forget it, because it's something that I need to do. When I get home, I watch TV, I try to just not do anything related to work, but again it's very difficult, like, you're always thinking about it; it's not something you can just turn off, especially if you had a bad day. I mean, I've tried things. Like I've tried reading, but I tend to read about work, you know, leadership. I tend to read about how to improve teaching and learning, how to improve culture, how to get people bought into vision. And so, because I care so much about the work that we're doing, I find that things that I do, like reading or learning, sometimes are related to what I'm supposed to get away from... Thinking long term this is not something that I can continue to do for the good of someone else. I have to, at some point, think about myself.

Conclusively, when asked what impact the current stressors they face may have on the principal role in five years, ninety percent of participants indicated that the role was not sustainable. It was quite apparent that some principals were already considering other career options. Jaelan questioned her place in education, "I don't see it getting better. I don't see the principalship getting better. I don't see, honestly, many things in education getting better. Even just finishing up two years, I question if this is actually what I want. So, it's unfortunate but it's just, I think, the way I perceive our field right now." In response to the same question, Hayden emphasized:

I can't. I just can't. I have to start putting myself first at some point. Although I love... Let me take that back, I don't love the role of the principal but there are moments when I find fulfillment. But in five years, you know, I hope to not be in this line of work. I hope to be supporting schools in some way and supporting kids in some way. In this particular role that I'm in with communities that I love and care for, it's just something that I can't do long term. I have to think about my long-term wellbeing as well, for myself, which again, long term is not something that's healthy for me. I wish I had the strength to do it for a longer period of time, but at some point I have to say I've done enough and take care of myself.

Dale candidly reflected on how much longer she could remain a principal:

Well, I mean, it's already got me thinking about how much longer I can do it. But, you know, the thought of going for the next five years is going to be a challenge for me just because of how much stress there is and getting older and having to deal with that kind of stress. So, I think that's definitely going to impact whether if I'm still in education in five years [and] whether or not I'll still be in this type of role, because in the current situation, the current set of circumstances, it's not really sustainable. And that is one of the reasons why we're seeing so much burnout and early retirement and whatnot, in general; not just in school leaders, but just in terms of school employees. If this is how it's going to stay for the next five years, it will definitely be pushing me out of this work, if I'm not already.

Debra Ann expressed her thoughts on the sustainability of the role:

I don't think you can stay in a transformational setting forever. I do think it's necessary, like the consistency is necessary. But this is a job that is difficult to stay in long term.



And when I say long term, I mean, like 10 plus years because I do think you need to stay at least five years in a transformational setting, because you can't transform something and then in, like, a year expect it to stay transformed if you have people constantly coming in and out. You need consistency, where the systems are set, where people are strong, and everyone is ready for a transition. Seven years now is a long time. You have to get your campus to a level of where it can perform well. And then you make decisions about whether you're going to stay at the campus or move to another position or do something else.

Emory shared her fear of burnout:

Honestly, my fear is burnout. I'm burned out, I'm tired, I want something new, and that's one of my biggest fears. One of my thoughts that I have because I love what I do and I love the students and the community that I serve, however, it can be taxing on you. And so, although I could not see myself in another environment, in a more affluent area, I feel like sometimes it can be too much. And so, I see a lot of people exiting the career field at the end of each year, and it's just scary to see some of the people that are entering the roles and are just so out of touch with what really goes on, and the expectations and the responsibility of being a principal.

Addison Faith clarified that she has not burnt out from the principalship; however, she is burnt out from turnaround work. She remarked that if she is experiencing the same level of stress in five years with her school, then “it leads to you not wanting to continue in a position that you initially loved.” Addison Faith added, “Burning out leads to you not wanting to fulfill your purpose. You go on to do something else. It makes you desire another role.” Josephine remarked that turnover is already high. She stated that 60% of principals in her district are new principals

this year. Josephine added, “It's already hard to find a turnaround principal, and one who will stay more than a year or two.” Charlotte did not anticipate things getting better, but she also did not anticipate them getting worse. She mentioned that things seem like they are getting worse because of the new COVID variants that are more contagious. Charlotte vowed to make the most of the principalship, “although it is not sustainable,” by taking it one day at a time and “rolling with the punches.”

Some principals spoke about future career aspirations and professional goals. Elijah shared that his goal is to ultimately be a superintendent, and he anticipates transitioning into a principal supervisory role soon. Elijah explained that he hopes to someday support principals with mitigating stress:

Well, in my role, hopefully, I hope to transfer into a role, whereas I can frontload all of those things to my principals and to my staff so that they can be comfortable in the stress, because the stress is going to be there. You just have to have that strategy because sometimes they don't know what they don't know. They don't know what to look for. But at least you can be there to support them and guide them so they can make that decision. So that's my goal in the next five years, you know, the way it works, if I am still a principal. I mean, I'm a man of faith that this is what God wants me to do, so I'm okay with either way.

Elwood reflected on the current state of education and his dream job as principal:

What's strange and scary is that we're not quite working in typical times. And what I keep seeing is the research, especially in the state of Texas where you have superintendents that are leaving in droves, you have principals that are leaving in droves. And I don't want to sit there and say, well, they're not built for it. I don't think I can make that

statement because everyone has their own set of challenges, and everyone has that pain threshold that you get to unleash, like you know, I can't take it anymore. And I've shared this with my boss who said, I'm not going anywhere. I said, I'm still happy. While this might stress me out, I still know how to get happy. I know how to make myself happy. So, I think I believe I can still do this for another five years because like I say, 'This is my, my dream job.' When people say, what do you want to do next, I haven't went back to sleep long enough to dream a new dream. I'm still on my first dream, the same one I've had since the seventh grade. But while I still have this season right now, I'm going to enjoy it.

In closing out the interview, one principal posed a reflective statement that lingered with me. Dale contemplated, "I wonder if anyone really gives much thought to the people who actually succumb to the stress." She continued, "Yeah, just a thought of how many quality educators we've lost in the profession because no one has stopped to acknowledge the stress or done anything about it. I guess I just wonder about it. It's probably an unanswerable question." I hope to provide answers to this profound wondering in the next chapter.

**COVID-19 pandemic.** At the time of this research, we were in the second year of a global pandemic. The COVID-19 virus swept across the country disproportionately impacting Black and Latinx communities (DeMatthews et al., 2020). The pandemic caused many schools to physically close to approximately 50 million school-aged children (DeMatthews et al., 2020). At the onset of the pandemic, districts shifted from face-to-face learning to virtual learning overnight. Teachers and principals addressed the challenges by pivoting into a world of unknowns. These unprecedented times called for drastic measures in which principals managed to embrace a new normal. Findings from a study analyzing principal perceptions of the distance

learning transition during the pandemic reveal that most principals reported being unprepared for the pandemic, the switch to distance learning, and supporting struggling learners (DeMatthews et al., 2021). It is no surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic was a recurring subject of importance in each interview. Eighty percent of participants specifically linked certain challenges they faced to the COVID-19 pandemic. Dale shared, “Well, given the current climate, certainly staff absences, right now are significant stressors. Trying to navigate every single morning, who's going to be out, who's going to cover, how we're going to make sure that some sort of instruction is happening. Are we keeping the kids safe? We can't load up the class.” Debora Ann described the daily dilemma she faces with teacher attendance:

I think this year, one of the biggest stressors is having attendance of teachers because of COVID. Teachers have to go out and when you don't have the right teacher in the classroom, that can become very stressful because you know that the kids are not getting the correct information. Or the level of instruction that they could get if their teacher was here. So that is, to me, that's a huge, huge stressor. Even right now getting ready to go back on Monday, we have people who have COVID, we have people who will not be returning on Monday, we have to wait. So, you have to figure out what are we going to do, while at the same time making sure that we are giving our kids the instruction that they need and deserve because we still are held accountable.

Emory questioned the integrity of the COVID-19 absence reporting process for staff members:

I will say some staff members take advantage of the COVID leave policy. And they're not attending work, I question, “Are you really not attending work because you do have symptoms? So you're feeling ill?” Because they can take advantage of this and take a minute break.

Being a principal of a PreK-8 campus, Elijah explained how student daily absences can quickly multiply due to COVID-19. He communicated, “When you have a Pre-K through 8th school, you have, I have like one family that has 10 kids at my campus. They have kids in every grade level. So, if one kid is exposed to COVID, that's my entire- that's ten kids that's out that day.”

Principals referred to several pandemic challenges that negatively impacted students in terms of academic achievement, social and emotional well-being, motivation, and behaviors. Charlotte stated, “Our students already came with huge learning gaps, and with the pandemic, it's even widened because of it.” Hayden shared that he and his staff faced the challenge of needing to “re-socialize students back into the school setting.” Charlotte expounded on the social and emotional needs of students that stemmed from the pandemic:

You had half of the students learning virtually last year and having them to transition back into the classrooms, and we're noticing a high number of adolescent kids- I want to say like from PreK through Second Grade who are- How do I say this? Behaviorally and socially, they're lacking. They're lacking social and behavior skills They don't know how to listen, like they don't know anything regarding routines and procedures, and even teaching. Trying to teach them that from a teacher standpoint is really difficult and they're not adjusting very well in in terms of how to socialize with other students. Because of that one and a half years that they were not in the classroom physically, it's definitely affected them.

Participants also listed student motivation as a major challenge in the pandemic. Elwood explained the effects of student complacency:

And if they're not used to this pandemic, they're used to a tropical storm or hurricane. They're used to catastrophic changes that have impacted their educational experience that have made allowances for them to still get by, in spite of a lack of work or, you know,

“You don't have to do all of this. We're going to get you covered.” While we push and preach resiliency, that has caused them to be more reluctant to actually try to earn it themselves because they know that much like Wall Street, we will just bail you out because it's too big to fail. The education system is too big; we have too many kids, we can't fail everybody. We can't let everyone drop out. We can't let everyone not graduate. That causes stress for myself and others when we see students not giving their all. And so when you're looking at GPAs, and trying to explain to students the importance, and they're like, “So.” That causes stress.

Emory questioned, “How do you keep the students motivated to believe in themselves and see hope? Addison Faith elaborated on the topic of student motivation:

But I think another cause is like, student motivation, I don't know if anyone has ever touched on that. But just this new generation of kids, you have to be very, like strategic about what gets them motivated to learn. We don't have a bunch of kids and I don't know if it's because of their situations that they're put into, but we have to constantly be creative.

### **Summary**

This chapter detailed the data analysis components of the study and presented findings. Findings were organized by each of the four research questions apart from two overarching themes. Data collected revealed that principals who lead in turnaround environments face a myriad of stressors within their role. Data revealed that principals were driven by their own background experiences and an innate drive to want to see students within their school community succeed. Principals clearly identified individual stressors and organizational stressors with major themes emerging for each. Within the realm of individual stressors, principals

consistently spoke about frustrations with staffing and managing the day-to-day roles of a never-ending job. Principals addressed pressures faced with state accountability, district leadership, and the COVID-19 pandemic when identifying organizational stressors. Principals identified systems and strategies to mitigate stress. Data revealed that there were very few systems in-place at the district levels to help principals mitigate stress and burnout. A majority of principals had no consistent routines or personal strategies to manage stress. Principals identified positive and negative consequences of stress. Data collected from the study shows that principals are constantly interfacing with the human side of the organization when dealing with people daily. Due to this, principals experience secondary trauma. The impact of secondary trauma and its relation to burnout will be presented in the next chapter through specific conceptual framework connections. In chapter five, findings presented in this study will be connected to the current literature and conceptual framework. A brief overview of the study, conclusions, and implications for practice and research will also be presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter V: Summary, Conclusions and Implications**

### **Summary of the Study**

Extensive research maintains the principal as a critical component to the school community. The instructional leadership of the campus principal is significantly linked to student success and academic achievement (Grissom et al., 2013; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Rigby, 2014; Supovitz et al., 2010). In chronically underperforming campuses, the demand for rapid change adds to the weighty workload of a principal (Boyland, 2011; Combs et al., 2009). Consequently, when principals leave their campus, the skills, talent, expertise, and experience usually leave the building with them (Klocko & Wells, 2018). Principal talent retention is critical to school stability, student success, and community growth and development. Furthermore, school districts should prioritize the need to support principals with sustainability in the role.

This final chapter presents a summary of the first three chapters including a restatement of the purpose of the study, research questions, and a summary of the methods. This chapter also includes a summary of findings organized by research question with specific connections to the conceptual framework and aligned literature. Conclusions, implications, and recommendations follow.

### **Summary of the Literature**

Over the past two decades, the primary role of principal has shifted from strictly managerial responsibilities to data-driven, instructional leadership (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Mahfouz, 2020; Hallinger, 2003). Prior to the evolution of principal responsibilities and expectations, the role of a campus principal was likened to the job of a sole supervisor and disciplinarian (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Grady, 2004).



Principals are tasked with an overload of job responsibilities and the constant need to often respond to the conflicting demands of various stakeholders. Grubb and Flessa (2006) concisely describe the critical function of a principal as a job that is virtually impossible for one person to handle alone. Beyond the academic weight of accountability placed on the principal, “they are asked to respond to the expectations of numerous constituencies, resulting in a conflict for these burgeoning roles and the overload that ensues” (Catano & Stronge, 2006, p. 163). Principals often work in solidarity with limited structures in place to provide the proper social and emotional support necessary to sustain one’s mental health in keeping with the increasing demands of the job (Friedman, 1995; Klocko & Wells, 2018; Mahfouz, 2019).

A review of the literature over the past decade signifies no real change in principal stressors as cited by practitioners several decades earlier. Major stressors that current principals still experience include overload of job responsibilities, working in isolation, and lack of support with budget, resources, and training. New causes of principal stress that have surfaced over the past couple of decades include trauma-informed leadership (DeMatthews et al., 2018; Sprang et al., 2011), pressures with testing and accountability (Boyland, 2011; Combs et al., 2009), and lack of support with social and emotional development (Mahfouz, 2019). Present day principals face high levels of unyielding stress in the workplace. Many principals lack the clarity and consistency needed to perform their job efficiently and effectively. The complexity of the principal’s job is clouded by ambiguity of roles and responsibilities (Deituk & Savery, 1986; MacPherson, 1985).

In the accountability era, principals are tasked with the responsibility of a confounding number of priorities. Research reveals that the principal, aside from the teacher, is one of the single most influential factors in determining student outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008;

Marzano et al., 2005; Supovitz et al., 2010). As standards and testing increase in rigor and complexity, so must daily instruction in schools transform. Given the pressure of state-mandated testing with adequate yearly progress, the burden weighs heavily on the shoulders of a school principal.

Demands for effective school leadership and stability in turnaround environments are paramount to student success. Multi-year Improvement Required schools are often referred to as historically underperforming, low-performing, turnaround, transformation, or priority schools (Mette & Scribner, 2014; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019; Weiner & Woulfin, 2019).

VanGronigen and Meyers (2019) define school turnaround as “the rapid improvement of student achievement in low-performing schools” (p. 423).

A turnaround school experiences “years of chronic failure resulting in a higher level of student need” (Kutash et al., 2010, p. 36). High rates of principal turnover are systematically apparent in low-performing schools (Loeb et al., 2010). Principal recruitment is a critical concern in the field (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). With an increase in job demands, there is a looming shortage of principals. Scant research provides context across a broader body of work for the exodus of principals; however, it is often linked to the mental strain of the job and ultimately burnout (Armenta & Reno, 1997; Whitaker, 1996).

The field of education is a human-service institution in which principals act in helping roles to advocate on behalf of the health, safety, and wellbeing of others (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The burden of the school principal requires them to constantly confront the trauma of others. The aftermath of secondhand trauma that principals face in educational leadership is an overlooked reality (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2018). In the process of trying to heal the wounds of others, the school principal can be self-negligent of their own needs. The high levels of

secondary trauma that principals are prone to process can eventually create stress-induced feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and burnout in their own lives (DeMatthews et al., 2019).

In March 2020, principals across the country began leading in unprecedented times with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Frost (2020) concluded that even while away from work, it is difficult for principals to fully detach themselves mentally due to local and national media outlets and daily conversations being pandemic centered. With the pandemic, a new set of challenges emerged overnight forcing principals to essentially build the plane while flying. Principals were faced with the daily burden of contact tracing, finding coverage for teacher and staff absences, implementing and monitoring virtual learning platforms, and ultimately addressing academic learning gaps and student social emotional needs as a result of the pandemic.

Modern day principals struggle to manage their own stresses and burnout while attempting to normalize the negative impact of work overload on their wellbeing (Walker, 2019). Although stress in the workplace is inevitable, untreated burnout and stress can have negative implications for the principal's professional life, personal life, and health. Modern day principals struggle to manage their own stress and mental health. Negative effects of unaddressed stress include "serious psychological, physiological, physical, and socioemotional problems, including nerve disorders, depression, cardiovascular diseases, fatigue, migraine headaches, weight gain or loss, ulcers, upset stomach, insomnia or sleep deprivation, outbursts of anger and panic attacks, unremitting tension and anxiety, high rates of alcoholism, confusion, helplessness, and lingering feelings of inadequacy" (Sogunro, 2012). Stress can ultimately lead to burnout or even death.

Social and emotional dynamics in principals significantly impact their overall leadership effectiveness. Principals should develop healthy social and emotional competencies to

effectively navigate the role of school leader (Mahfouz, 2019; O'Connor, 2004; Schmidt, 2010). The way in which a principal chooses to respond to stress affects the entire campus. Sogunro (2012) recommends that principals should regulate their sleeping habit, change routines, maintain a healthy nutritional balance, nurture their passion, pursue hobbies, think positively, learn to say “no” to time-robbing tasks, and seek transfers or school reassignment when necessary. Other stress-managing tips for principals include engaging in activities with family and friends, networking with colleagues, having a clear understanding of their role, encouraging laughter in the workplace, being solution-oriented with conflicts, managing time effectively, fostering effective interpersonal skills, and focusing on issues that are within their control (Brock & Grady, 2002). Principals should strive for life-work balance through annual planning of vacations that are not limited to a week; instead dispersed evenly throughout the year (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Principals become overwhelmed when the demands of their job exceed their capacity. Mahfouz (2019) states, “Of all the professions in the helping fields, school administrators may have the highest stress and burnout rates” (p. 27). Untreated, prolonged work-related stress can affect one’s physical health, mental health, overall job satisfaction and work productivity and effectiveness. Districts and principals lack guidance on how to reduce stress and burnout and engage in healthy, stress-coping practices (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Districts must be intentional in supporting the mental health and stability of principals (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Principal wellbeing should be as high ranked a priority as student achievement.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Stress and burnout are chronic phenomenon plaguing many school principals today. Evidence abounds that the modern-day principal faces unrelenting pressure in stress-strained

environments (Sogunro, 2012). With the need for rapid school reform, the stakes are progressively high with principals assuming increasing responsibilities, conflicting pressures, weightier workloads, and public accountability. In public schools, principals are expected to be instructional leaders, disciplinarians, culture cultivators, human resource managers, community partners, school resource allocators, child advocates and much more.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead in historically underperforming schools. Furthermore, this study seeks to identify individual and organizational factors for stress and burnout as well as principal coping strategies. By using qualitative research strategies, this study intends to amplify the voices of elementary, middle, and high school principals who lead in turnaround environments. The urgency of identifying these significant pressure points and principal coping mechanisms can provide opportunities for district leaders to look inward to build sustainable support structures for school principals.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions were designed to address the fundamental assumptions about the specificity of the role of principal and its relation to stress and burnout. Specifically, the research questions sought to foster an understanding of the stressors that principals in low-performing schools experience as well as principal-coping strategies and district supports. In particular, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What individual stressors do principals in low-performing schools experience?
2. What organizational stressors do principals in low-performing schools experience?
3. How do principals cope with these stress factors?

4. What systems are in place to support the mental health and wellbeing of these principals?

### **Summary of the Methods**

This study relied on a qualitative research design rooted in the theoretical perspective of interpretivism. In the interpretivist paradigm, all knowledge is rooted in human experiences and actions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The focal point of my research was to understand the experiences of individual principals and how they mitigate stress and burnout. The interpretivist paradigm best supported this qualitative research study method, as it allowed for the voices of the research participants to be amplified, valued, and validated in a manner that would yield authentic results.

This study comprehensively analyzed the professional journey of ten principal participants, specifically on the extent to which stress and burnout impacted their role as campus leaders. The research questions and theoretical framework set the foci and boundaries for sampling specifications. Principal participants were representative of each level of K-12 education. Six elementary principals, two middle school principals, and two high school principals were interviewed. This sample selection is supported by current research. Creswell and Clark (2018) emphasize the need for the qualitative researcher to study a few people deeply “because the larger the number of people, the less detail that typically can emerge from any one individual” (p. 176).

Participants were representative of various school districts within the state of Texas. Each participant was a current principal of a historically underperforming school who served in the role of principal for at least two years on their campus. The state accountability data indicated

that these schools were labeled as multi-year Improvement Required campuses, formerly IR campuses or D or F-rated campuses within the last five years. These campuses also serve majority-minority student populations with at least 90 percent of the total student enrollment classified as economically disadvantaged. Maxwell (2013) emphasizes the importance of selecting participants in whom the researcher can create productive, working relationships within the context of the study as this is an efficient way to yield answers to the research questions. This humanistic, trust-building approach enables participants to yield honest, credible results that support their individual experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were recruited and selected to participate in the research study based on the criteria identified.

Data were collected in semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one recorded interviews with all participants. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to construct meaningful questions that are aligned with the research questions while also providing space for organic questions and discussion to arise based on participant responses (Giorgi, 1985). An interview protocol specifically designed around the core research questions was used. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, contactless safety protocols were followed which resulted in all interviews being recorded and conducted via Zoom, an online videoconferencing platform.

The first round of interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 120 minutes, with the average time being 60 minutes. Participants consented to the audio-recorded interviews in advance, and handwritten notes were recorded to capture words and phrases that resonated with the researcher. All interview questions allowed for open-ended responses, and introductory questions fostered a safe and welcoming atmosphere that encouraged participants to organically connect themselves to the study experience.

All interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. Handwritten field notes were also transferred to Word processing documents. The data analysis process consisted of three rounds of coding. Preliminary categories were used to interpret the data collected. Due to the depth and complexity of the data being analyzed, each round of coding consisted of at least one subcode being assigned to every code. In vivo coding was used for the first cycle of coding. I specifically relied on commonly used words and phrases, and rich, thick descriptions provided by participants to understand and bring clarity to the data. As supported by Creswell and Creswell (2018), I noted patterns that emerged from the coded data and formed them into themes. These themes were then developed into broad theories or generalizations to make sense of the data and research in its applied context to the literature, research questions, and participants' firsthand experiences.

### **Summary of Findings and Conclusions**

Findings from this study were consistent with the existing body of research, specifically with stressors that principals who lead turnaround schools face, and the strategies they use to cope. Results from this study also confirm concerns highlighted in the literature in the areas of principal wellbeing, dealing with the consequences of unaddressed stress, and sustainability of the principal role. This section presents a summary of findings and conclusions by each research question. Literature is provided to substantiate findings, negate findings, or reveal gaps in the research. This section also highlights opportunities for contributions to the literature.

Connections to the conceptual framework are referenced as well.

**Individual stressors experienced by principals.** Principals believed that they were inherently driven to do this work. Principals attributed their childhood and background experiences to their purpose (50%) and all principals (100%) shared that their personal drive and



commitment to student success was the primary motivating factor for them. Principals were overwhelmingly determined to positively impact the lives of students within their school community. Due to the strong conviction of their own purpose being intrinsically connected to student success, most principals (70%) believed that this sustained them in the role. In essence, they believed that the ends justified the means even if the same factors that defined their purpose also caused them stress. Participants attributed their personal drive and commitment to student success as a balancing construct to stress; however, I found that this deep desire and commitment of wanting to serve others contributed to increased stress levels.

Consistent with the literature, Becker (2019) encourages school leaders to stay grounded in their purpose and not lose sight of their why. Sogunro (2012) emphasized that principals should not forget their main goal of enhancing the lives of their students. What the literature does not show are the effects of principals centering their purpose at the expense of their wellbeing. Findings from this study clearly indicate that remembering your why is not enough to sustain the role of the principalship, and the stress and burnout that ensues.

Most principals (80%) agreed that the job required boundless time commitments, which forced them to work around the clock. Principals described the constant need to put out fires by solving problems, addressing conflicts and unscheduled demands, working late, and responding with a sense of urgency to the daily, ever-changing expectations of district leaders. Most principals (80%) shared that they frequently worked late on campus during the weekday, on weekends, and designated holidays. Principals consistently communicated that the role of the principal is a never-ending job. Principals revealed that job-related thoughts constantly surface in their head even while spending time with loved ones, exploring hobbies, vacationing or sleeping.

A review of the literature confirms the intensely complicated role of the principal. Grubb and Flessa (2006) concisely describe the critical function of a principal as a job that is virtually impossible for one person to handle alone. The daily workload of a principal is ever changing, fast-paced, and endless. Many principals attribute feelings of burnout to the overloading of job responsibilities (Systema, 2009). Principals face constant daily interruptions, make decisions on the spot, and are often blamed for things because of the decisions they make (Poirel & Yvon, 2014).

Principals felt that a significant part of their role involved managing the stress of others. They embodied the notion of taking on the lives of those they lead. Principals described the pressures of managing challenges faced by students, teachers and staff, parents, and community members. Participants expounded on stressors they faced from their school community with low parental support, low expectations for student success, and dealing with student behaviors and traumas. Participants also described stressors related to teachers and staffing. Principals expressed that a great deal of their time was spent coaching, developing, and increasing the instructional capacity of their teachers. Participants shared that they dedicated a significant portion of time to the revolving door of recruiting, hiring, and retaining teachers and staff while also finding daily coverages for staff vacancies.

Principals felt the incessant need to be everything to everybody every day. Participants reiterated that they constantly live with these pressures as they problem solve through challenges. In essence, they carry the burdens of others with them daily. Catano and Stronge (2006) state that principals are asked to respond to the “expectations of numerous constituencies, resulting in a conflict for these burgeoning roles and the overload that ensues” (p. 163). Literature from the study spotlights trauma informed leadership. Principals act in helping roles to assist others with

processing their trauma. This generally results in principals experiencing secondary trauma, or compassion fatigue, which carries serious emotional implications (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Sprang et al., 2011). The burden of the school principal requires them to constantly confront the trauma of others. The effect of secondhand trauma that principals face in educational leadership is an overlooked reality (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2018).

Based on the evidence collected from major themes within research question one, it is safe to conclude that principals overextend themselves in the workplace because they are ultimately driven by student outcomes. Principals believe that their day-to-day work is directly tied to the academic, social, emotional, and college and career success of their students. They view themselves as the lifeline for the students they serve, and this makes it extremely difficult to step away from the work at times. Although principals viewed their commitment to students as a balancing construct to stress, it proved to be a gateway to increased stress levels. I also concluded that principals experience continuous cycles of secondary trauma. Principals are unaware in most cases that secondary trauma exists within their scope of work and are oblivious of the need to process. Principals need support with processing this trauma as it greatly impacts their work.

Drawing from the findings, application of literature, and conclusions for research question one, there are specific connections to the conceptual framework of this study. A major individual stressor identified by principals was the burden of managing the stress of others. Principals described specific instances of dealing with the challenges of teachers and staff, students, parents, and community members. Principals explained how they help others to problem-solve through their challenges, yet they seldom have the time or energy to process their own trauma.

The principal must be physically and emotionally present to manage the pressures of the job. This study follows a conceptual framework proposed by DeMatthews, Reyes, James, and Solis (2021) that focuses on burnout and the impact of secondary trauma and organizational conditions as contributing factors for burnout. Data collected from the study highlights the impact of secondary trauma on principals and the burnout that follows. As noted in the conceptual framework, workload is an organizational correlate to burnout and stress (Leiter & Maslach, 2003). Workload occurs when the demands of the job exceed human capability. Evidence from the study proves that principal workload is a driving factor within organizational conditions that radically influences burnout.

**Organizational stressors experienced by principals.** After close examination of consistent trends in the data aligned to research question two, three key organizational stressors experienced by principals were state accountability, funding and resources, and district leadership. An overwhelming number of principals (90%) explicitly stated that state accountability, specifically the STAAR test, was a major source of stress in their role. Principals shared about the daily pressures they face for students to perform at the desired proficiency level for state examinations. More than half of the principals interviewed (60%) believed they were at an unfair advantage with unrealistic turnaround expectations, misaligned state target goals for student groups, significant student learning gaps, and poverty-stricken communities.

Principals felt that the Texas Education Agency (TEA) was too far removed from the current realities of the schools they governed. All principals were aware of their A-F academic standing with the state as measured by the 2018-2019 STAAR test. Principals also viewed Target Improvement Plans and recently passed House Bills as significant state stressors. In agreement with the literature, policies in the United States place the principal as the primary change agent

for school improvement (Crawford, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008). Chronic pressure and high expectations from legislative and district mandates add to the already strained workload of the principal (Boyland, 2011; Combs et al., 2009; Klocko & Wells, 2015; Wells, 2016). Principals must respond to the demands for rapid yet consistent improvement in student achievement in short periods of time. Ultimately, the principal is held accountable for the success or failure of the school.

Principals deemed adequate funding as a vital resource for turnaround environments. More than half of principals (60%) believe that inadequate funding is a major challenge they face from the state. Principals indicated student daily attendance and student enrollment as key factors that significantly affect school funding. They associated these stressors with requirements from the state in which many felt were out of their direct control. Principals explained how funding deficits substantially impact their ability to purchase instructional materials and secure the human capital necessary to appropriately staff their school. Principals also described recent demographic changes to their school community and how these economic factors influenced student enrollment and ultimately funding. According to previous research, Whan and Thomas (1996) cite insufficient funding and resources as a major source of stress for principals. Persistently low-achieving campuses, or turnaround schools, typically have students who suffer from low attendance rates (Berlinger, 2006; Duke, 2015; Papa, 2007). Research substantiated the financial stressors that principals experienced.

Another organizational stressor identified by participants was district leadership. Research confirms that districts and principals lack guidance on how to reduce stress and burnout and engage in healthy, stress-coping practices (DeMatthews et al., 2021). All participants acknowledged the importance of district leadership and the essential role they play in supporting

principals and helping them to achieve their goals. Mostly all participants (90%) expressed frustrations with overall organizational clarity and cohesiveness, inefficiencies with district processes, and inconsistencies with leaders and the supports provided. Principals felt a disconnect between central office and campus level leadership and described the uneasiness they felt when pressured to approach everything with a sense of urgency, especially the frequent requests to meet last minute deadlines and what they perceived as unrealistic student achievement expectations imposed on them by the district. More than half of participants (60%) mutually shared dissatisfaction with their district-level curriculum departments. They explained that the curriculum department was either inconsistent with support, incapable of operating at the desired level of instructional capacity, misaligned with curricular resources, or disconnected from the current reality of the classroom. I noticed that many participants had instructional backgrounds in leadership prior to taking the seat as principal. As noted in Table 1 in Chapter IV, most principals (90%) had served as assistant principals and some (30%) as instructional specialists before becoming a principal. This instructional background allowed them to have a streamlined focus on the academic supports needed to encode success for teachers and students.

Participants (70%) frequently mentioned principal supervisors as being organizational stressors, as well. They noted that instability in district leadership was a source of stress because they were forced to constantly adapt to ever-changing expectations and strategic priorities as set forth by each new leader. Most principals felt that their supervisor was ill equipped to lead them or their school due to their own inexperience in turnaround environments. Principals did not regard their supervisors as capable or qualified of leading them because many did not have a proven track record of experience or effectiveness as a turnaround principal. Most principals considered the principal supervisor role a compliance role. They did not think that their

supervisor helped them to manage stress and burnout. Participants could not specify supports provided to deal with challenges.

The literature is mute in identifying curriculum and instruction departments and principal supervisors as major sources of stress for principals. Aside from state accountability, findings from this study show that curriculum departments and principal supervisors were the top organizational stressors identified by principals, although they are absent in the literature. Recent literature acknowledges the absence of principal supervisor supports for coping with stress and burnout and promoting self-care for principals due to lack of training or adequate time to creatively problem-solve with principals (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Previous research traces the shift in roles of the principal from primarily managerial leadership to instructional leadership. Principals now act as chief instructional leaders and change agents for student achievement and reform efforts (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Mahfouz, 2020; Hallinger, 2003). With school achievement being a major determinant in school accountability ratings, the school principal must lead the learning in best practices with curriculum, instruction, and assessment to fully equip teachers with the guidance and support they need to be successful (Barkman, 2015; Fullan, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005). Literature emphasizes that the principal is the primary instructional resource for their teachers and staff (Brolund, 2016). A school principal is expected to significantly influence and enhance the instructional program of the campus. There is a critical need to bridge the gap in the literature between the principal as instructional leader and the stress that arises from lack of district instructional supports to sustain the principal.

Based on the evidence that I collected from data trends within research question two, I can conclude that principals, specifically those who lead in turnaround environments, face inordinate stress as they work to meet the demands for testing and accountability. Research

abounds in high stakes testing and accountability and the pressures that these principals face. A second conclusion that can be drawn from this section is that central office administrators contribute significantly to the stress level of principals. Principals are experiencing stress from those designated to lead and support them.

Lastly, as principals deepen their capacity in instructional leadership, they set higher expectations for those who support them. When the instructional knowledge base and leadership experience of the principal exceeds those who lead them, this creates undue stress and eventual burnout. This conclusion stems from data collected in alignment with the research questions of the study. Specific connections to the conceptual framework within this section show the impact of organizational conditions on burnout. Three key domains influence organizational conditions under research question two: workload, control, and community. Principals do not feel as if they have total control or influence over decisions; many principals perceive autonomy as nonexistent.

**Strategies used by principals to mitigate stress.** Principals identified strategies they used to mitigate stress. Participants consistently referred to faith and trusted support circles (70%), rest and exercise (50%), and personal systems (100%) as strategies to cope with stress and burnout. Principals found comfort and support in small groups of trustworthy principal colleagues. They clarified that they used these support circles to vent and problem-solve through challenges with likeminded people. Some principals found that support circles of colleagues added to the stress level when faced with individuals who are constantly negative and vent with no intent to find a solution to the challenges posed. Consequently, principals expressed the need to be around positive people, both in circles of colleagues and with friends and loved ones. The existing literature posits that there is a need for safe spaces in which principals can meet to



“express their feelings, experience acceptance and empathy, and grow through their anxieties, hurts, and mistakes” (Harris, 2007). Established collegial networks of principal colleagues that meet regularly to collaborate could provide principals with adequate systems of support and transparency while also reducing the isolation of the principalship (Brock & Grady, 2002; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Grady, 2004; Whitaker, 1996).

Some principals attributed their faith, prayer life, and Bible Study small groups as ways to manage stress and burnout. There was no literature to support the notion of faith and prayer being used as a strategy to ease stress and burnout; however, there was plentiful evidence in more recent research for meditation. Half of participants noted exercise or meditation as a stress-relieving strategy; however, very few (20%) could describe a consistent routine of this daily practice. Participants rationalized by explaining that they prioritize rest and exercise over the weekends and holiday breaks. On the contrary, participants also shared that they work on some weekends and holiday breaks. I found it difficult to concretize any definitive statements for consistent rest and exercise among most participants. Previous research upholds that physical self-care is paramount to a person’s emotional state of being as physical activities help to reduce stress (Grady, 2004). Principals should engage in physical activity daily and they should also maintain boundaries with healthy, regular sleeping practices.

Research also encourages mindfulness, yoga, meditation, and other self-care routines as ways to support the emotional sustainability of the principal. Mahfouz (2019) encourages principals to practice mindfulness by “setting intentions, checking emotional elevators, mindful listening, mindful walking, centering, wait time, awareness of scripts, breathing, and self-compassion practices.” In practicing mindfulness, emphasis is placed on preventative measures

whether than reactive measures. Harris (2007) explains the benefits of taking a two-minute centering break at least twice a day:

A combination of deepening the breath and focusing on the present moment are highly effective ways of giving the nervous system a break from the low-level persistent stresses of leadership... Emotional distress and physical symptoms are calls for action from the heart and brain.

Mahfouz (2019) asserts that mindfulness practice among principals and school leaders is an area that has yet to be fully explored. Data collected from this study validates the research.

All participants described personal systems they used to address stress and burnout. They leveraged various supports by embedding their own structures for coping. Principals established cutoff hours for leaving work, identified a certain number of late days per week to stay at work, and set boundaries with working at home or on weekends. In most cases, other school leaders within the building helped to hold the principal accountable to their commitment. Principals also consistently spoke of a shared mindset and the need to focus only on what they can control.

It was quite evident that all participants adapted areas of their personal or professional lives to fulfill the role of principal. Current research affirms the mindset that principals exhibited in the study. Principals should focus on issues that are within their control (Brock & Grady, 2002; Frost, 2020). Principals should also think positively and frequently release energy through laughter (Brock & Grady, 2002; Bultnick & Bush, 2009; Connors, 2000; Sogunro, 2012). There is a gap in the literature with many of the personal systems that participants identified as stress-coping strategies. This study provides evidence and context for future research with establishing personal boundaries in the workplace and at home.

Based on the evidence presented for the third research question, a major conclusion that can be drawn from this section is that principals rely heavily on smaller networks of principal colleagues to manage stress and burnout. Principals initiate these support structures devoid of any district involvement. Principals should be cautious when using venting as a coping strategy as it may cause unwanted stress in the absence of likeminded, solutions-oriented, colleagues. I also conclude that irregular patterns of physical activity and sleeping routines heighten the level of stress that principals face. Principals must establish a healthy rhythm by engaging in physical activity daily despite the pressures of the job.

**Systems to support mental health and wellbeing of principals.** In response to the fourth research question, participants identified campus systems that are in place to help manage principal stress and burnout. Participants regarded their leadership team and teacher leaders as internal support structures that helped to alleviate stress and burnout in the role. Principals acknowledged that they could not do this work alone. They communicated that their campus administrators were a critical component of leveraging leadership with shared roles and responsibilities.

Principals consistently spoke of various systems at the campus level, such as attendance monitoring systems, instructional planning systems, and behavior management systems. Principals view these campus systems as lifelines. Most participants (60%) could not identify any district systems to support the wellbeing of the principal. Participants struggled to answer questions related to supports that are in place at the district or central office level to help principals manage stress and burnout.

Some participants (40%) identified district employee support programs but made it clear that they had never tried them. Principals explained that they did not have the time to use the

district services that are provided to them. Half of the participants recognized their supervisor as a district support. Principals considered them a thought partner, although they acknowledged the inconsistencies with different principal supervisors in their district. Some principals described the sharp contrast with past supervisors and felt lucky to have their current supervisor, as this had not always been the case. In the absence of research to validate this evidence, findings from the study offer contributions to the literature with campus systems and supports used to manage stress and burnout.

Most participants (70%) communicated that they have no specific systems to mitigate their own stress and burnout. They resolved that stress would always be a part of the job because it comes with the territory. Many participants even echoed the same words when speaking of the absence of systems; they emphasized the need to just roll with the punches. In agreement with the literature, research shows that stress is inevitable; however, the daily constant buildup of stress is detrimental to one's health and wellbeing (Sogunro, 2012). Excessive stress can negatively impact job performance and work effectiveness. Existing literature confirms that principals often normalize the negative effects of work overload on their wellbeing (Walker, 2019). Principals struggle to find healthy ways to manage stress and burnout because they associate abnormal work hours and feelings of exhaustion with the common nature of the job.

One major conclusion drawn from this section is that principals depend greatly on their leadership team to help provide necessary campus supports, which in turn alleviates stress for the principal. Campus-level administrators and leaders are vital to the sustainability of the principal. Based on the evidence presented from the data, I can also conclude that the role of the principal supervisor is inconsistent with supports provided even within the same school district. Principals need clarity and targeted support from their supervisors. Principals consider their supervisors to

be their first line of defense with helping them to manage stress and burnout. The third conclusion that can be drawn is that principals do not recognize the importance of managing stress and burnout because they believe that stress is simply embedded in the job that they signed up for. Principals will not work to alleviate something that they consider to be inescapable. Principals have made a resolve to live with the stress and handle it as it comes. I also conclude that districts lack vital supports needed to sustain the emotional resilience of the principal. Consequently, principals are working in isolation and internalizing the stress on their own. I can also conclude that many principals do not utilize district resources to mitigate stress due to mistrust, mainly with their principal supervisor. There are significant barriers and challenges that may arise with exposing vulnerability and expressing sincere emotions with someone who serves in an evaluative, executive leadership role. The principal supervisor can make hiring and firing decisions, and this can impede the social emotional support needed to sustain the role of the principal.

**Consequences of stress.** There was no research question to specifically explore the consequences of stress; however, participants persistently addressed this throughout the interview process. When identifying common stressors and coping mechanisms, participants made it a point to highlight that there were positive consequences of stress. Principals noted that they developed resiliency and learned to persevere through challenges as a leader. Some participants shared that they thrive well under pressure. Participants felt that their current role was training grounds for their next role. They insisted that they were well prepared to take on anything because they had developed the skill set necessary to succeed.

Participants also detailed some of the negative consequences of stress and burnout. Participants made daily personal sacrifices to meet the demands of the job. Principals often

traded intimate moments with their family and loved ones to fulfill the expectations of the role. Some principals missed spending time with their own children and developed irregular patterns for attending church on Sundays. Participants reflected on their personal lives and noted that their job is the reason why they have not secured a partner or procreated.

When asked to reflect on the impact that the current stressors would have on their role within the next five years, most all principals (90%) asserted that the role was not sustainable. Principals expressed the need to put themselves first. They believed that there was no other way to be successful in the role if they did not overextend themselves and make sacrifices. More than half of participants (60%) acknowledged that they were already burnt out. Many of these participants were principals who had been in the role for three years or less. It was evident that some principals were already considering other options.

Some participants aspired to be principal supervisors or superintendents while others wished to continue in their role as principal, but not in a turnaround environment. Some contemplated pursuing a role in higher education while others processed the idea of exploring retirement options. Participants even questioned their place in education. Existing literature proves that principal instability, specifically in historically underperforming schools, is detrimental to the school in its entirety.

High rates of principal turnover systemically exist on hard-to-staff, low-performing campuses with majority-minority student populations (Gates et al., 2006; Papa, 2007). Teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members are forced to adapt and adjust to frequent changes that occur with the revolving door of principal leadership. When a principal leaves a school, it often has negative effects on student and school outcomes (Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014; Loeb et al., 2010; Supovitz et al., 2010). It can take between five to seven years for a

school to return to normalcy with meaningful change after a principal leaves a school (Fullan, 2002). Principal instability is a major disruption in turnaround environments especially with the need for rapid change in student achievement.

Research abounds to substantiate the negative consequences of stress. Mahfouz (2019) affirms that school administrators may have the highest levels of stress and burnout in comparison to other jobs in the helping fields. Principals experiencing burnout may face physical and emotional exhaustion, detachment from stakeholders, and feelings of anger or frustration that may result in him or her lashing out against those they lead (Friedman, 1995; Whitaker, 1996). Principals experiencing high levels of stress may also share feelings of depersonalization and low personal accomplishment (Whitaker, 1996). These unwanted feelings have the potential to negatively affect the job performance and work productivity of the principal, as well as job satisfaction of others in the workplace.

When principals are stressed, it impacts the entire school community. The literature is nonexistent in identifying positive consequences of stress. Although stress is not a desirable outcome, this study provides insight into other effects of stress that may help to build the principal's character. Based on the evidence and findings presented in this section, I can draw two major conclusions. Given the current supports provided, the role of the principal in a turnaround school is not sustainable. Many principals will leave their seat after just three short years at a turnaround campus. Principals who remain will experience high levels of stress and burnout. Principals need systematic sustainable supports to do their job effectively without having to choose between the job demands and self-care or family priorities.

**COVID-19 pandemic.** The COVID-19 pandemic was a recurring phenomenon throughout the entire study. Principals, along with the rest of the world, entered this global

pandemic in March 2020, which caused a lot of change in schools. Teaching, learning and leadership, as educators once knew it, became obsolete in so many areas. This posed a huge learning curve for everyone, including superintendents, principals, teachers, students, parents, school nurses, and community members. It is important to note that some principals have only experienced leadership during the pandemic while others remembered how the principalship was pre-pandemic in comparison to current times. Frost (2020) described principals' current reality when the pandemic first began, "They are burnt out, stressed out, and trying to run schools from home all while pleasing the stakeholders in the community and maintaining their own family lives amidst a pandemic... Their mental health during the pandemic planning may be suffering."

Leading amid a global pandemic forced principals to embrace a new normal overnight. Most participants (80%) identified certain challenges and stressors they faced as specifically pandemic-related. Principals described their daily dilemma with navigating staff and student absences. Principals strategized ways to find coverage for classes because they did not want to risk the students losing out on valuable instructional time. Principals also shared that they taught classes themselves in the absence of teachers and staff members. Most participants (70%) reiterated that student learning gaps have since widened during the pandemic; however, expectations for student achievement and accountability have not changed in response to this.

Participants addressed the lack of student motivation to complete assignments or remain engaged in classroom lessons and activities. They also explained that students have become accustomed to being passed along to the next grade without any true sign of academic progress due to setbacks with the pandemic. Participants remarked that students, parents, and even some teachers lacked the motivational drive to persist through challenges and work towards success, and repeatedly referenced social-emotional supports needed for students. Principal participants



also described how time was dedicated to re-acclimating students back into the school building after virtual learning options ended. For some principals, student behaviors and traumas peaked after reentering the building.

The participants shared that teachers are in high demand due to nationwide teacher shortages and vacancies, and that viable candidates are presented with many options. It has become difficult to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers in persistently low-performing schools. Within every research question, principals shared experiences and stressors that were a direct result of the global pandemic. Previous research upholds many of the pandemic stressors identified by participants. Principals face challenges with widened student learning gaps (Berliner, 2006; Duke, 2015), managing student discipline (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Rigby, 2014; Waters & McNulty, 2005), and navigating teacher absences daily (Whan & Thomas, 1996). Although it can be proven that these stressors existed pre-pandemic, findings from this study show how the identified stressors have magnified since the onset of the pandemic. This study will help contribute to those findings.

### **Recommendations for Principals**

After a comprehensive analysis of the data, findings and conclusions, specific recommendations have been developed for principals, school districts, and principal preparation programs. These recommendations were developed in response to major challenges and stressors faced by principals. Findings from the study reveal that principals experience high levels of stress and burnout and lack the resources necessary to mitigate stress and burnout. They fail to establish consistent routines in the implementation of preventative strategies for stress. Principals must prioritize their physical and emotional health and wellbeing to sustain themselves in the role. Following are recommendations that have been made for principals.

**Recommendation one.** Principals feel a sense of guilt when identifying stressors related to the role. They justify feelings of exhaustion, stress, and burnout by describing how their actions and behaviors positively impact student achievement. It is recommended that principals acknowledge the stress they endure and identify the specific causes of the stress. In the absence of acknowledgement, principal stress levels will increase. Principals must recognize that choosing to acknowledge and address stress and burnout does not mean they are undermining the students they serve but are, in essence, becoming better for the students they serve. Principals must come to a resolve that untreated work-related stress can prevent them from living a healthy life.

**Recommendation two.** Principals are aware of effective strategies to mitigate stress and burnout, yet they do not implement them due to workload and time constraints. It is recommended that principals establish personal and professional boundaries. Based on the evidence collected from the data, some principals have set a daily end time at work and designate someone to hold them accountable. Principals must define parameters around arriving at work, leaving campus, checking emails and text messages outside of work, fielding phone calls, completing work at home, and working on weekends and holidays. Once principals establish these boundaries and stick to them, daily commitments to family and self-care can be fulfilled.

**Recommendation three.** In agreement with the literature, it is recommended that principals engage in daily physical activity and exercise, establish a regular sleeping pattern, maintain a healthy diet and lifestyle, and pursue a hobby. Principals should find passions and interests that make them happy outside of work (Grady, 2004; Harris, 2007; Sogunro, 2012). Findings from this study indicate that principals are too tired to participate in physical activity after work. It must be acknowledged that balancing the demands of work and personal self-care

routines is extremely difficult and can add to the already heightened stress level of the principal. Setting aside time to exercise and pursue outside passions and interests is in fact more work that requires additional time and energy. However, it is critical for principals to understand that establishing consistent routines of daily physical activity helps to replenish their energy and maintain their physical health. Rest and exercise cannot be reserved for only weekends and holidays. Failure to establish a regular pattern of healthy living is to the unfortunate detriment of the principal.

**Recommendation four.** To manage stress and burnout on the job, it is recommended that principals leverage the support of their leadership team (other campus administrators and leaders). This increases leadership effectiveness by placing the principal in a position to monitor the system without having to be the system. Principals in this study provided an abundance of evidence to support distributive leadership models in both campus administrators and teacher leaders. The strength and talent of the leadership team is an invaluable resource and support structure for the sustainability of the principal. Principals should cultivate and foster this talent to maximize the leadership capacity of the human capital within their influence.

**Recommendation five.** Trusted support circles were identified as one of the main strategies used by principals to help mitigate stress and burnout. Based on this evidence, it is recommended that principals establish an inner circle of likeminded colleagues in the profession. It is critical for principals to maintain consistent communication with other principal colleagues so that they are not working in isolation. Principals should use this peer-oriented professional network to problem-solve through challenges and talk through the joys and frustrations of the role; colleagues help to serve as thought partners. Principals may also form trusted circles of

family and loved ones or faith-based circles to keep them grounded in their beliefs, passions and purpose. It is imperative that these solutions-oriented circles serve to uplift the principal.

**Recommendation six.** Evidence from existing research and participant responses suggest that having a positive mindset is essential to managing stress and burnout in the role of principal (Brock & Grady, 2002; Connors, 2000; Sogunro, 2012). It is recommended that principals maintain a positive mindset and take the time to reflect on daily wins and successes. During the interview portion of the study, one principal remarked, “Find a way to win the day.” Principals can take a moment before leaving work or after arriving home to mentally record a positive win achieved in the day no matter how big or small. Principals could also journal responses to document daily successes in a tangible way.

**Recommendation seven.** In response to the evidence suggesting that principals have endured years of secondary trauma when managing and processing the emotions and stress of others, it is recommended that principals seek therapy. More recent research encourages principals to make regular visits to their physicians and to seek medical care from therapists, counselors, and other professional caregivers (Grady, 2004; Sogunro, 2012). Findings from this study indicate that principals do not seek out medical assistance as regularly as they should. Although some participants did reference undergoing medical care, this was in response to severe health conditions after years of neglect due to untreated stress and burnout. Principals should be proactive in receiving medical support and advice on preventative strategies rather than be reactive with serious health concerns.

### **Recommendations for School Districts**

Findings from the study reveal that school districts lack the supports needed to sustain the mental health and wellbeing of the principal. Evidence from the data show that school districts

also lack the resources to sustain principals in their current position. Klocko and Wells (2018) argue that principal stress may result from an “imbalance between the demands principals face and the resources available for dealing with those demands rather than from the demands alone.” School districts must mobilize resources and available supports to help principals deal with the demands of the job. The following are recommendations for school districts.

**Recommendation one.** In response to varying interpretations of the principal supervisor position and the ambiguity of the role, it is recommended that school districts clarify the role of principal supervisor and define the strategic supports offered to principals. As supported by research, the role of the principal supervisor should be revised to address supporting principals with stress-coping strategies related to burnout and self-care (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Principals within this study identified principal supervisors as a major cause of organizational stress. There is a need for clarity and consistency with the principal supervisor position. School districts must recognize that the principal supervisor position is a key lever in principal talent, recruitment and retention, specifically in turnaround schools. It is imperative for school districts to protect the role of the principal by ensuring adequate support to the principal supervisor, whose role must be restructured to align directly with the needs of the principal.

**Recommendation two.** Principals consistently agreed that central office departments, particularly curriculum and instruction, were a significant stressor. It is recommended that school districts provide organizational clarity and cohesiveness with all departments to achieve true system coherence. Beyond the district organizational flowchart, there should be evidence to show that departments are aligned to the strategic priorities of the district. School district leaders must be aware of principals’ needs and they must redesign departments that offer embedded

supports for principals. School districts should recognize the instructional expertise of principals and solicit feedback on district curricular resources and materials.

**Recommendation three.** Given the current realities that principals face, school districts must make principal mental health as high a priority as student achievement. It is recommended that school districts redesign their professional development sessions to regularly address social emotional competencies for their leaders. Districts must be intentional in supporting the mental health and stability of principals (DeMatthews et al., 2019). There is a dire need for school districts to invest in training for both principals and principal supervisors on strategies related to burnout and self-care and how to generate conversations around the topics (DeMatthews et al., 2021). In order to retain school administrators and equip them with the necessary supports to lead their schools effectively, professional development programs for leaders must focus on social emotional competencies (Mahfouz, 2020). School districts must strategically plan for professional design and implementation of social emotional learning (SEL) for principals just as they would for students. Principals should engage in high-impact learning sessions geared towards managing their emotions and the emotions of others, managing stress and burnout, and practicing strategies to mitigate stress. The inclusion of mindfulness practices in educational leadership training would also benefit school leaders (Goldman-Schuyler, Skjei, & Sanzgeri, 2017; Klocko & Wells, 2018). School districts must recognize that embedded SEL supports for principals positively impacts school culture and student achievement.

**Recommendation four.** Principals struggle to create boundaries because it is not a practice modeled by district leadership. It is recommended that school districts establish a principal planning period similar to the leadership delegation plan proposed in recent literature by DeMatthews, Carrola, Reyes, and Knight (2021). Principals should designate and calendar

specific dates and times during the workday for at least 45 minutes of interrupted time to meet with a colleague or principal supervisor and plan. During this time, principals should focus on reducing job-related stress and burnout. An alternate point of contact should be identified for emergency purposes. School districts should support this structure and work with principal supervisors to equip them to serve as thought partners for principals. School districts must establish clear and consistent boundaries that support principals.

**Recommendation five.** Data collected in the study reveal valuable feedback offered by principals on ways in which their principal supervisor could best support them. Participants in the study were eager to share ideas and strategies to inform district practices with effectively supporting turnaround leaders. Based on findings collected from the study, it is recommended that school districts incorporate principal feedback as a metric in principal supervisor evaluations. School districts should solicit principal input and feedback on all central office structures that are designed to directly support principals.

### **Recommendations for Principal Preparation Programs**

Principal preparation programs must evolve just as school leaders do. These programs should offer authentic learning experiences that mirror the reality of the job. Principal preparation programs are a critical part of shaping aspiring school leaders. The following are recommendations for principal preparation programs.

**Recommendation one.** Findings from the study show that most principals were familiar with the school environment in which they were leading due to personal background experiences; however, all principals selected to lead turnaround schools may not have similar experiences or familiarity with a turnaround environment. Therefore, it is recommended that principal preparation programs provide students with varied learning experiences geared towards

urban school leadership and turnaround environments. Students should be required to complete administrative internship hours at two different campuses of their choosing with the specification that at least one campus meet the requirements of a historically underperforming school.

Aspiring school leaders should be equipped with embedded learning supports before they accept the position as principal.

**Recommendation two.** Stress management should be a top priority in educational leadership programs. Data collected from the study reveals that school districts do not prioritize social emotional learning for principals. Current research exposes the reality that very few principal preparation programs focus on the social and emotional component for school leaders (Mahfouz, 2019; Sogunro, 2012). It is recommended that principal preparation programs incorporate social emotional competencies and strategies to manage stress and burnout in their curriculum and core competencies. As supported by the literature, colleges and universities should incorporate stress-coping skills in their principal preparation programs (Sogunro, 2012). Findings from the study show that principals normalize stress, and little is done to help combat stress. Principal preparation programs are the first touchpoint for educating aspiring principals on the realities of stress and burnout, and how to navigate them effectively.

### **Implications for the Research**

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead in historically underperforming schools. This study identified individual and organizational factors for stress and burnout as well as principal coping strategies. Findings of this study magnified previous research and extended the literature in specified areas. Reflecting on the findings and limitations of the study, I present the following implications for research:



- Examine the impact of central office systems to identify specific practices that strategically support turnaround principals.
- Examine the role of the principal supervisor to identify consistent support structures that directly impact turnaround principals and their sustainability in the role.
- Examine other school leader support models that are non-evaluative and specifically aligned to strategic coaching of principals.
- Examine the role of the leadership team and organizational structures in place on campus that strategically support the principal in managing stress and burnout.
- Examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the role of the principal in addressing student learning gaps and ultimately supporting student academic achievement.
- Expand study participation to include those who began their first year as principal during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Expand study participation to include principals with seven or more years of principalship experience in order to identify sustainable supports and strategies for managing stress and burnout in the role.

### **Conclusion**

Principals, specifically those who lead historically underperforming schools, face disproportionate amounts of stress daily. When principals face chronic job stressors and exhaustion overload due to work demands, they experience burnout. Principal turnover is significantly high in persistently low-achieving campuses serving majority-minority populations. When a principal leaves the school, the institutional knowledge leaves with them. It can take three to five years for a campus to recover from a principal's exit. It is of the utmost importance for school districts to work aggressively to preserve the role of the principal, because the

principal is a key factor in determining student achievement and overall academic success for a campus.

This study expanded on current research, highlighting specific individual stressors faced by principals who lead in turnaround schools and the coping strategies they use to navigate stress management and burnout. This study revealed gaps in the research, specifically with organizational stressors faced by principals and the personal, campus, and district systems in place to help principals mitigate stress and burnout. This study provided opportunities for key contributions to the literature primarily focused on leadership team supports, social emotional learning for principals, leading in a global pandemic, principal supervisor supports, and system coherence with instructional departments and other centralized structures.

The pulse of the campus is shaped by the wellbeing of the school leader. The school principal must be constantly aware of their emotions, the way in which they respond, and its effect on others (Harris, 2007). The emotional temperament of the principal is paramount for the success of students, teachers, leaders, staff, and the entire school community. When the principal sneezes, the whole school catches a cold. Principals who lead historically underperforming schools must be protected at all costs. As goes the principal, so goes the school.

## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol**

First, I would like to thank you for participating in this research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead in historically underperforming schools. This study intends to amplify the voices of elementary, middle, and high school principals who lead in turnaround environments in efforts to inform future leadership practices, educational policy, and principal preparation programs.

I will ask you a series of questions in a semi-structured interview format. This means that you will have the opportunity to answer each question and expound upon your answer as it relates to the question. Please be reminded that this interview and any subsequent follow-up interview conducted by me is strictly confidential. Neither you nor your school or district will be identified in any way or form in any reports.

Before we begin, do I have permission to record the interview? The purpose of recording the interview is to protect the integrity of your responses so that they are captured accurately and interpreted precisely. Do you have any questions pertaining to the study or your participation? Again, thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study.

#### **Introductory Questions for Context:**

1. Tell me about you becoming a principal.
2. How did you start in education?
3. What led to your decision of becoming a principal in a turnaround environment?

#### **Individual Stressors:**

4. Let's talk about stress. Tell me about your own level of stress working as a principal.
5. What are the most significant causes of stress for you that are campus-related?

6. Do you feel that being a principal at this campus impacts your stress level? Please explain.
7. Let's identify those stressors that are not campus related. Students? Teachers? Staff? Community?
8. How do you process those challenges exhibited by students, staff, teachers, and others?
9. What do you do to decompress at the end of the day?

**Organizational Stressors:**

10. As a principal, do you feel that you have total autonomy over the decisions you make? If not, what prevents you from having this autonomy? Explain.
11. How do you deal with those challenges?
12. What are the most significant causes of stress for you that are district-related?
13. What pressures do you face from the state?

**Coping with Stress:**

14. What personal strategies do you use to help you manage stress and burnout related to the principal role?
15. Are there any strategies that you would like to try to help you manage stress and burnout related to the principal role? What prevents you from trying them?

**Systems to Manage Stress and Burnout:**

16. Are there any systems in-place at the campus-level to help you manage stress and burnout? If so, please explain.
17. What systems are in-place at the district and central office level to help you manage stress and burnout? If so, please explain.

18. What role does your direct superior (principal supervisor) play in helping you to manage stress and burnout?

**Closing Questions:**

19. What do you think will be the impact of the current stressors you face on your role as principal in 5 years?

20. What keeps you in this role?

21. Is there anything else you want to talk about that we have not discussed here?

## Appendix B

### Participant Recruitment Email

Dear Potential Research Study Participant,

In partial fulfillment for the requirements of my doctoral degree in Education Leadership and Policy at The University of Texas at Austin, I am conducting a study that will examine principal burnout in turnaround schools. This study intends to amplify the voices of elementary, middle, and high school principals who lead in turnaround environments in efforts to inform future leadership practices, educational policy, and university principal preparation programs.

If you meet research study criteria requirements and agree to participate in this research study, your name and the name of your school and district will remain confidential and anonymous throughout the research and treatise.

With your consent, all interviews will be conducted via Zoom conferencing. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. No costs will be incurred by you. Attached is an information sheet that provides you with more details about the proposed research study.

If you are willing to participate in the study, **kindly reply to this email.**

Once you reply to this email, we can schedule a date to conduct the interview via Zoom. I know how valuable your time is to you as a principal. I am proposing that we schedule the interview during any evening on weekdays and at any time on Saturday or Sunday at a one-hour time slot that is convenient for you.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have. You can contact me at [angel.wilson3636@gmail.com](mailto:angel.wilson3636@gmail.com) or 281-910-8771.

Sincerely,

Angel Wilson  
Doctoral Student, The University of Texas at Austin

## Appendix C

### Participant Information Sheet

**Researcher:** Angel Wilson, Doctoral Student  
The University of Texas at Austin

**Title of Research Study:** Stress and Burnout of Principals Who Lead in Historically Underperforming Schools

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you with pertinent information about this research study so that you can make an informed decision of whether or not to participate. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may decide to not answer a question, stop the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time. Withdrawal or refusal to participate will not affect your relationship with the researcher and it will not warrant any negative consequences from any entities.

The interview and any subsequent follow-up interviews conducted by the researcher is strictly confidential. Neither the participant, school, or district will be identified in any way or form in any reports. You will be asked for consent to audio record the interview to protect the integrity of the data collected and to ensure that responses are captured accurately and transcribed and interpreted precisely.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to examine the impact of stress and burnout on principals who lead in historically underperforming schools. Furthermore, this study seeks to identify individual and organizational factors for stress and burnout as well as principal coping strategies.

#### **Use of the Data**

The findings from interviews will be used in partial fulfillment of my treatise. Findings may also be published in educational journals and/or articles. If you wish to receive a copy of my treatise once completed, an electronic copy can be sent to you.

#### **Procedures to be Followed**

I am asking for your willing and voluntary participation in this research study. If you approve, I will ask you a series of questions during the interview in a semi-structured interview format. This means that you will have the opportunity to answer each question and expound upon your answer as it relates to the question.

All interviews will be conducted via Zoom conferencing or in-person at a location of your choosing. Physical distancing protocols will be strictly enforced per COVID-19 suggested guidelines. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. No costs will be incurred by you, your school, or district.

Once you have confirmed your consent via email, we can arrange a date and time for the interview to take place. Please reach out to the researcher via [angel.wilson3636@gmail.com](mailto:angel.wilson3636@gmail.com) for any questions. You may also call at 281.910.8771.



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## **Vita**

Angel Wilson was born and raised in Missouri City, Texas where she later graduated with honors from Willowridge High School. She went on to attend Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas. Angel earned a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies, with a concentration in early childhood education in 2005. Upon graduating, she returned to Missouri City, Texas and began teaching at Lantern Lane Elementary in Fort Bend ISD. Angel then moved to Houston ISD as a teacher in 2008, and she also earned a Master of Education degree from Prairie View A&M University during this same year. After becoming HISD Elementary Teacher of the Year in 2010, Angel transitioned out of the classroom. She served the next two years as an HISD Elementary Math Teacher Development Specialist before becoming an assistant principal at both the elementary and secondary level. In 2017, Angel was named principal of Cornelius Elementary School and she was later honored as HISD South Area Principal of the Year in 2019. Angel was then appointed principal of Gregory-Lincoln Education Center for the Performing and Visual Arts. While serving as principal, Angel also fulfilled the role of Lead Principal for three consecutive years in Houston ISD. She entered graduate school in Fall 2018 at The University of Texas at Austin as a part of the Cooperative Superintendency Program in Cohort 29. In 2021, Angel moved to Austin, Texas and became Director of Leadership Development and Support in Austin ISD, a role she currently holds. Angel can be reached at [angel.wilson3636@gmail.com](mailto:angel.wilson3636@gmail.com).

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