

School Leadership in Crisis: A Job Demands–Resources Model of Saskatchewan School Administrators’ Work, Stress, and Burnout

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ABSTRACT

This article mobilizes the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model and draws on data from a longitudinal study of Saskatchewan school administrators’ work and wellbeing to situate and trouble the enduring nature of high job demands, low job resources, and stress for incumbents in this province. Our findings point to serious implications of continued inattention to issues of stress, with school administrators either retiring from, leaving, or expressing their desire to leave, the role. We position this reality as unfolding within an overarching neoliberal school leadership context that promotes efficiency, accountability, and productivity over school leader workload and wellbeing and caution that this troubling reality does not reside solely in and with the school principalship but can morph into a larger school system crisis if not urgently addressed.

Introduction

This article draws on data from a longitudinal study of Saskatchewan public school administrators' work and wellbeing to situate and trouble the enduring nature of high job demands, low job resources, and stress for incumbents in this province. In two recent publications, we not only pointed to unprecedented work for Saskatchewan school administrators during the pandemic (Osmond-Johnson & Fuhmann, 2022) but alluded to burnout being imminent for these school leaders (Swapp & Osmond-Johnson, 2023). In this article, we take a step further, situating the historic nature of workload and wellbeing issues for school administrators and examining grave consequences of continued inattention to these issues. We position this reality as unfolding within an overarching neoliberal school leadership context that promotes efficiency, accountability, and productivity over school leader workload and wellbeing and therefore argue that these consequences do not reside solely in and with the school principalship but can morph into a larger school system crisis if not urgently addressed.

Context

High job demands and stress among school administrators are unfortunately not new phenomena. Historically, the school principalship has required the incumbent to wear many hats and juggle many moving pieces (Lashway, 2006; Horng et al., 2010; Rousmaniere, 2013; Pollock et al., 2015a; Owens & Valesky, 2022; Willis, 1980; Wolcott, 1973). This context has only intensified over time, with the literature now replete with evidence of school leaders' work intensification across international contexts (Day & Armstrong, 2016; Alvarado et al., 2019; Grissom et al., 2015; Pollock & Hauseman, 2018; Pollock et al., 2015b; Sebastian et al., 2018; Swapp, 2024; Walker, 2021). And while contextual dynamics shape the scope, types, and impacts of work intensification in local settings, a pervasive neoliberal agenda has contributed to this troubling reality for school leaders across many jurisdictions (Brauckmann et al., 2023; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Lynch, 2014;

Riveros et al., 2016). Within this neoliberal agenda, the contemporary school administrator is caught up in dominant discourses of productivity and accountability under broader regimes of governmental surveillance and control that foster inequitable and exploitative arrangements of work and work contexts (English, 2012; Hadley Dunn, 2018; Lynch, 2014; Smyth, 2008; Swapp, 2022). School administration now unfolds amid new and increasing expectations, standards, and operational priorities around work and incumbents struggle to navigate and keep abreast of the politics, inequities, funding shortfalls, and myriad other circumstances influencing and dictating their work (Pollock & Hauseman, 2015; Pollock et al., 2015a, 2015b; Pollock & Winton, 2016; Ryan & Armstrong, 2016; Sebastian et al., 2018; Schechter & Shaked, 2017; Swapp, 2022, 2024). Not surprisingly, common themes of voluminous work, fatigue, and stress pervade school administrators' current work across jurisdictions (Hauseman, 2020, 2021; Markin & Wang, 2020; Pollock, 2016; Stelmach et al., 2021; Walker, 2019, 2021; Wang & Pollock, 2020). This reality, namely the historically intense nature of school administration and its association to incumbents' stress, is key in situating the school leadership crisis.

Compounding this troubling reality of chronic intense work and high stress, school administrators' stress levels *surged* during the pandemic, with incumbents reporting extraordinary levels of physical and mental exhaustion, vulnerability and low self-efficacy, and even burnout (Bellemans et al., 2023; Osmond-Johnson & Fuhmann, 2022; Pollock, 2020; Reid, 2022; Swapp & Osmond-Johnson, 2023; Upadyaya et al., 2021). Further to this, post-pandemic literature call attention to pandemic-related stress *still* impacting school communities globally (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2023; United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2024). Specific to school administrators, it is important to highlight two points here. The first is that, generally speaking, work and wellness issues predated, increased during, and now continues beyond the pandemic. The second is that, while the Canadian Mental Health Association (2016) asserts that stress, as the body's natural reaction to a situation, can be positive or negative, the chronic nature of unmanaged stress

within the school principalship combined with the lack of robust mitigating conditions within school environments have likely compounded issues of work and wellness for incumbents (Alvarado et al., 2019; Hauseman et al., 2017; Osmond-Johnson et al., 2020; Pollock et al., 2015a; Stelmach et al., 2021; Walker, 2019). These issues have elevated disengagement and burnout within the principalship (Beusaert et al., 2016; Bellemans et al., 2023; Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Leksy et al., 2023; Markin & Wang, 2020; Marsh et al., 2022; Ontario Principals' Council, 2017; Pollock et al., 2019; Upadyaya et al., 2021; Wang & Pollock, 2020; West, 2018). This is the grave context that we center and trouble in this article.

As a specific sub-group in education, school leaders have been sidelined. Most attention to wellbeing in education – both in the literature and from school districts and/or governments – has been given to students (Government of Ontario, 2024; Government of Alberta, 2017; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2021). Lesser attention, but still some, has been given to teachers (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2022; Corrente et al., 2022). Least attention has been afforded school leaders. This is concerning because we know that in schools, school leaders are second only to teachers in influencing student learning (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012). In the Western/North American context, particularly, so much continues to be demanded of school administrators, especially in relation to constrained budgets (Owens & Valesky, 2022; Pollock & Winton, 2016; Rocha et al., 2023), growing diversity in student populations (Diem & Brooks, 2022; Kirova et al., 2016; Lam, 2019; Lopez, 2022; Prochner et al., 2017; Young et al., 2024), increasing neoliberal influence on schools (Keil & Osmond-Johnson, 2022; Loewen Walker & Adesanya, 2024; Lynch, 2014), and heightened surveillance and accountability within the contemporary principalship (Eacott, 2015; Lynch, 2014; Riveros et al., 2016; Sebastian et al., 2018; Schechter & Shaked, 2017; Swapp & Osmond-Johnson, 2023). That school leaders are teetering on disengagement and burnt out is an inevitable result of a chronic lack of attention to the striking imbalance between work demands and adequate resources to achieve this work. Our theoretical framework provided a critical lens through which to illuminate this tension in the Saskatchewan context. The argument we are making here, through our mobilization of the JD-R model, is that

Canadian school administrators are undertaking increasingly complex and voluminous work with dwindling to little resources that have been specifically designed to support them in this work and that this reality has reached crisis levels.

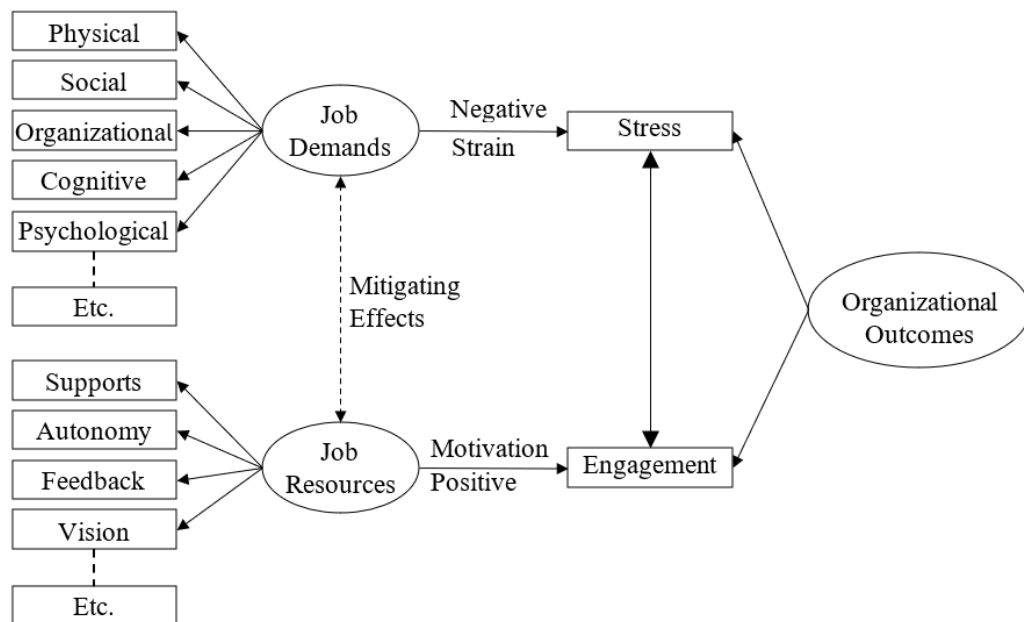
Theoretical Framework: The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model

Conceptualized by Demerouti et al. (2001), the Job Demands-Resource (JD-R) model has been used in studies across disciplines to illuminate issues around work and wellness (for instance, Bakker & Costa, 2014; Llorens et al., 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), including with regard to the school principalship (Beausaert et al., 2016; Bellemans et al., 2023; Leksy et al., 2023; Marsh et al., 2022; McMullen, 2023; Upadyaya et al., 2021; West, 2018). At its core, the JD-R model situates how aspects of a job, and resources needed to perform this job, correlate to job stress. In its simplest form, the model suggests that overtime, *high job demands* coupled with *low job resources* is a recipe for *stress* among workers (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). It is this premise, applied to the work of school administrators, that we advance in this paper.

According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), job demands are the physical, social, or organizational dimensions of work requiring prolonged physiological or psychological effort while job resources refer to conditions, arrangements, or supports that can mitigate job demands to facilitate the fulfillment of work and/or promote employee learning, development, and personal growth. These theorists further posit that when job demands are high and job resources low, and this imbalance is sustained over a period of time, this context negatively impacts employee wellbeing and contributes to stress. Conversely, as Bakker and Demerouti (2007) illuminate, high levels of job resources can serve as a counterbalance to extreme job demands, resulting in improved workplace engagement and employee satisfaction.

The original JD-R model espoused three dimensions of job demands, namely physical, social, and organizational (Demerouti et al., 2001). Bakker and Demerouti (2007) included psychological job demands as a fourth (new) category to the model and subsumed cognitive dimensions under psychological job demands. In this article, we include cognitive demands and psychological demands as two additional and separate categories to the JD-R model because our data analysis supports cognitive demands and psychological demands as markedly distinct categories. Figure 1 below depicts our adaptation of the original JD-R model to reflect this modification.

FIGURE 1: THE JOB-DEMANDS RESOURCES MODEL



Reprinted from Bakker and Demerouti (2007) and adapted to include two new categories of high job demands and to highlight the dynamics of stress versus engagement.

High Job Demands

In keeping with the adapted JD–R model, high job demands are characterized as the physical, social, organizational, cognitive, and psychological dimensions of work requiring prolonged effort that, if not mitigated by adequate job resources, could result in stress and subsequent burnout (see Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). While the model does not define each category of high job demands, we apply plain definitions and the literature to our conceptualizations. *Physical job demands* are tasks school administrators perform that relate to the body as opposed to the mind, so physiological as opposed to mental tasks. Physical work is perceived and/or executed through the senses, such as seeing, walking, and talking. For example, school administrators responding to emails, making and receiving telephone calls, chairing staff meetings, and walking round their school compounds are all physiological in nature (Alvarado et al., 2019; March et al., 2022; Owens & Valesky, 2022; Pollock et al., 2015a; Swapp, 2012, 2022; Wolcott, 1973). *Social job demands* refer to work undertaken in companionship or interaction with others, rather than by oneself or in isolation. We acknowledge a blurring between social and other dimensions of work, as the nature of the principalship is inherently social, necessitating incumbents' frequent interactions with others. Engaging with student families, communicating between school and senior administration, hosting parent–teacher nights, and sharing condolences with bereaving families all constitute social engagement of work (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Hauseman et al., 2017; March et al., 2022; Swapp, 2012, 2022; Walker, 2021; West, 2018; Winton & Pollock, 2015). *Organizational job demands* describe tasks around operationalizing the plant to keep the school running. Staffing, timetabling, bell schedules, and building safety are routine but important organizational functions school leaders oversee (Grissom et al., 2015; Horn et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2022; Owens & Valesky, 2022; Pollock, 2016; Swapp, 2012, 2022; Upadyaya et al., 2021). *Cognitive job demands* are tasks and responsibilities relating to or involving school administrators' conscious intellectual activity such as thinking, recalling, or reasoning. Cognitive work demands a strong knowledge acumen and is often associated with school administrators' sense of confidence and efficacy (Bellemans et al., 2023; Marsh et al., 2022; Riveros, 2015; Swapp, 2022; Wang & Pollock, 2020). Lastly, *psychological job demands* are aspects of work that affect or arise in the mind

that are related to the mental and emotional state of a person (Hauseman, 2020; Markin & Wang, 2020; Pollock et al., 2020; Swapp & Osmond-Johnson, 2023; Walker, 2019, 2021). Altogether, we advance these five categories of work as coming together to create an intense work environment for school administrators that, if not mitigated, contribute to high levels of stress.

Low Job Resources

According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), job resources are conditions, arrangements, or other supports that can mitigate job demands, support or facilitate work achievement, or promote learning, development, and personal growth of employees. Demerouti et al. (2001) refer to job resources as “health-protecting factors” (p. 501) that mitigate employees’ job satisfaction and overall wellbeing. As the JD-R model espouses, the absence, inadequacy, or lack of these resources constitutes low job resources, negatively impacts employee work and wellbeing, and leads to stress and burnout. Conversely, adequate job resources can serve as a counterbalance to extreme job demands and their impact on wellbeing, resulting in improved workplace engagement and employee satisfaction (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Elements of job resources include positive feedback, care, respect, and job control (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Llorens et al., 2006). According to the JD-R model, stress is the result of a demanding work environment (high job resources) and inadequate or a lack of supports to mitigate this environment (low job resources).

Stress

Stress generally describes the state of tension or strain that results from prolonged demanding circumstances. The APA Dictionary of Psychology (2018) defines stress as

the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave. Stress contributes directly to psychological and physiological disorder and disease and affects mental and physical health, reducing quality of life.

As per the Canadian Mental Health Association, unmanaged stress contributes to many negative responses across a range of body responses. These include cognitive responses, affecting memory issues, worrying, and low self-confidence; physical responses, such as increased heart rate, headaches, digestion issues, and fatigue; psychological responses, for example, low morale, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed or hopeless; and behavioural responses, as registered in changes in sleeping or eating habits, avoidance of social interactions, and increased substance (drugs and alcohol) use. The JD-R model outlined in Figure 1 above illustrates the spectrum of organizational outcomes mitigated by job resources, with low resources in intense work environments associated with negative outcomes and stress whereas high job resources fuel motivation and positive job engagement. Markin and Wang (2020) sound an important caution that “work-related stress can have damaging effects that inhibit school leaders’ ability to function effectively while lowering their job enthusiasm and motivation to perform well” (p. 3). Unfortunately, our evidence corroborates this finding as the troubling reality for school administrators in Saskatchewan.

Methodology

We refer to Saskatchewan school administrators as individuals holding the title of principal or vice (assistant) principal within a public K-12 school context in the province. In this article, we pull data from a mixed-methods study examining the work and wellbeing of these school administrators. The broader study employed focus groups in fall 2020 and spring 2021 and a survey in spring 2023 and fall 2023. Altogether, 41 school administrators participated in six focus groups and 93 responded in two surveys. Two focus groups were open to all school administrators

and four targeted particular groups, namely one each for female school administrators; new school administrators (one to three years in the role); school administrators in urban Saskatchewan; and school administrators in northern Saskatchewan. The majority of participants in the focus groups self-identified as female (over 30). The surveys were open to all school administrators in the province. Respondents had a breadth of experience in their roles, ranging from between one to five years (29%), six to 10 years (21%), 11–15 years (17%), 16–20 years (12%), to over 20 years (21%). The majority self-identified as female (64%) and white (87%) and worked across 17 school districts in the province. Seventeen percent (17%) of respondents chose not to disclose their school district. Focus group participants were recruited using convenience and purposive sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Mills & Gay, 2021) while the survey utilized a targeted, census-type approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). We collaborated with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) on this project. We sought and received university REB approval and the STF led a multi-pronged recruitment, circulating the letter of information and consent to all school administrators across Saskatchewan via email, social media, and through word of mouth at federation-led school administrators' meetings.

Focus groups were qualitative and interpretive (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Patton, 2002), designed to unpack school administrators' work experiences during the pandemic. Focus groups were therefore semi-structured and generative to facilitate dialogue (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Gall et al., 2010; Merriam, 2016). The survey was designed to capture an overall picture of work and wellbeing (post- and pre-pandemic) and comprised closed and open-ended categories, including Likert scale, ranking, multiple choice, and essay-type questions. We followed a cyclical and iterative process in analyzing the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). In this article, we draw on the qualitative components of the findings, namely the six focus groups and the open-ended responses in the surveys. We applied the JD-R theoretical framework to these data to expose prevailing issues around work and wellbeing for school administrators, including evidence of stress and burnout over time.

Findings

In this section of our paper, we present data to situate the historicity of high job demands, low job resources, and stress relative to Saskatchewan school administration. We unpack these findings in the context of the JD–R model that informed our data analysis and focus our gaze on areas that point to enduring issues around workloads and unmitigated stress for school administrators.

High Job Demands

We expose five dimensions of high job demands impacting the work of Saskatchewan school administrators. While some data illuminate pandemic-related challenges, we focus on findings that point to issues of chronic high job demands.

Physical Demands

We noted evidence of the amplified, tangible dimensions of school administrators' work before, during, and beyond the pandemic. Participants described a range of such concrete tasks, responsibilities, and actions, including how these escalated during the pandemic. Two shared:

I'm so used to being on the go, like you just sit down and then you have to go, there's a call, you got to come to this classroom... there's a kid out here that you need to call his parents... like, it's nonstop.

Everything I do, I do extra. So extra communication, extra budgeting, extra procurement, extra management, extra nurturing. I feel like everything that goes into being the leader I am, I need to do more of it, and I need to do it better than I ever have before.

Both quotes captured the unrelenting pace of the physical demands of leading schools during the pandemic. As another participant framed it, “There’s more stuff piled on to what I have to do in a day,” further supporting evidence that school administrators experienced heightened physical workloads during this crisis. “Nothing has been taken off our plate. We have been given no grace,” reiterated another participant. Unfortunately, workload issues continue beyond the pandemic. In response to an open-ended question about how they would describe their work in the last week, one survey respondent indicated, “Busy and on my toes all the time.” And in another open-ended question about current workloads, another survey respondent said, “I was hoping to keep teaching and working...but the daily demands and expectations from above have made the job less desirable.” As detailed more below, it appears a lot of this physical escalation of work is in the context of organizational governance.

Organizational Demands

Focus group data situated how a lack of decisive and/or clear actions and directions from superiors at school divisions contributed to organizational chaos and undermined school administrators’ leadership. Two participants shared in the focus groups:

I have incomplete information, I have contradictory information, I have, you know, different groups trying to sway things in different ways around kinds of COVID-19 practices. And then, it’s like you always are feeling like in terms of leadership that there’s just never enough information, right? So, you do the best you can with the pieces of information, as you can. And then just get more and more used to the notion that, you know, I’m going to make decisions that are going to be failures, or we progress along with procedures and policies that... weren’t effective.

My building specifically, is full of lots of trauma, and lots of stress... That work existed before, it’s just really amplified now [during COVID-19]. We’re continually having to go to our senior admin[istration] with, “What about the

kids that we know are just sitting at home? What is your plan? How can you help us?” They don’t have a plan?! How did you not foresee some of these barriers and these roadblocks for us? We foresaw them.

Both quotes point to issues of organizational governance predating the pandemic, around how issues of trauma have been an enduring issue in schools but also in relation to participants’ frustrations at the lack of assertive and decisive leadership and supports from senior level officials.

The survey data captured in 2023 also point to evidence of this ongoing frustration with senior administration and high levels of organizational demands faced by school administrators. Two respondents shared:

850 [students] is too large for a school. It puts undue stress on administrators. As well, the amount of administrative support for an elementary school is nowhere near what a high school receives. There is a great deal of inequality in the system.

The lack of definition [around the role] and the increasing demands make the vice principalship the most difficult job I’ve ever had. I don’t know how sustainable this can be with a mixture of teaching duties. I do my best every day, but I feel like it is never enough. I wish there were more supports and more release time to be able to be a better administrator.

As evidenced from the quotes above, high student numbers and a lack of administrative supports to more effectively lead schools are contributing to school administrators’ current organizational job demands.

Cognitive Demands

Participants described feeling particularly vulnerable during the pandemic, believing that they lacked important knowledge, competence, and self-efficacy to lead their schools through the crisis. These feelings were particularly undermined

by the lack of clear guidance and support from senior administration. Two participants related:

[m]y leadership, it's sort of questioning decisions that I'm making which I haven't in the past... you're trying to question those a little bit sometimes.

You always feel in leadership that you need to be able to answer those questions, and know what's going on, and be confident in your decision making. But it was really challenging because you couldn't always answer questions, and more so you couldn't answer questions in a way that was totally effective because you didn't really know the answer yourself or the answer changes the next day. So, I think that really put a big weight on the administrators' shoulders about how we lead.

Participants seemed unsure of themselves and their leadership. Thoughts of inadequacy were particularly difficult for new school administrators during the pandemic, one of whom shared, "I worry that my staff is thinking, she doesn't have a clue what she's doing. Which is kind of true, I didn't really have a clue what I was doing. Right?". This participant seemed to be seeking validation and/or positive affirmation from her peers in the focus group that she was on the right track.

While much of the immediacy and uncertainty of the pandemic had waned, survey data nevertheless registered continued concerns among school administrators, with some respondents expressing doubt about their ability and preparedness to lead their schools. Two respondents shared in the 2023 survey:

I am more concerned about myself after completing this survey (I thought I was doing better than I am). I am also incredibly worried for new administrators who are just beginning.

The lack of definition [around the role] and the increasing demands make vice principalship the most difficult job I've ever had.

In the first quote, the respondent alludes to their overall work and wellbeing but also seems worried about new administrators' capacities and overall preparedness to do the work of school administration in its current challenging context. In the second quote, the respondent laments the ambiguity and/or seeming open-endedness of both the role and expectations of the vice principalship, compounded with demanding workloads. This respondent shared further that they wished there was "time to breathe and think" in the role, so that school administrators could develop the knowledge and competence to be better leaders in their buildings. As we explore next, these feelings of inadequacy connect to school administrators' emotional and mental stress.

Psychological Demands

In the surveys conducted in 2023, school administrators also registered the current, troubling psychological toll of their work. We were startled and heartbroken to read that a respondent wrote only one word, "suicidal," in response to an open-ended question about their wellbeing. Other respondents were similarly blunt:

I started in the noblest of professions and thought I could have a positive impact as an admin [administrator]. I feel I did but it cost me my health and my soul.

Administrators by the end of the pandemic carried the weight of contact tracing, phoning homes, and informing families... We were free labour... We worked seven days a week for months. It changed relationships, it stressed us, principals were exhausted. Then suddenly the pandemic was over. And we went back to "normal." Senior admin[istration] couldn't understand why teachers and [school] admin[istrators] were stressed. Total disconnect.

We came into this season like the pandemic never happened. And the problem is, teachers and students are still affected by it. The gov't [government's] lack of support is appalling. The general sense that teachers are not held in high regard by our gov't [government] affects morale. And now we have a teacher

shortage, way less teachers out there applying for jobs! And we wonder why?! Education is in a crisis and not enough people in power are making everybody aware of it. I am very concerned for public education.

These quotes point to issues of physical, organizational, and psychological strain affecting school administrators before the pandemic and continuing in present-day work. Given school administrators' hesitation to speak openly about their mental health or any issue that may be perceived as vulnerability, it was not surprising that these school leaders were more candid in the anonymous survey than they were in the focus groups about the poor state of their mental health and wellbeing.

Social Demands

Social demands were perhaps the keenest felt dimension of school administrators' work during the pandemic. The nature of this crisis necessitated physical distancing and participants felt the strain of the social constraints. Several participants in the focus groups shared:

I think for me with my leadership style and how I usually approach what I'm doing, it's just, I feel a real disconnect with our community... it's a definite impact on how I do my job and my leadership style because that's really what I thrive on, is activities and being in classrooms and all of those pieces.

I think we all recognize leadership is lonely at times. And it's even more lonely when you're in an entity in a global pandemic... where we don't have... even some of the informal things that happen over the lunch hour, where you get to sit down and break bread together and actually talk about some things that maybe are personal struggles in your own building or things like that.

I feel like I've also spent maybe more time in this office space than I would normally, because I just feel like I need to have more reset moments during the day or during the week where I need to be, I can't be around people and be who I, who I think that I normally am as a leader, as an educator. I needed

those breaks more. I still do. So, I'm kind of isolating myself in some ways at times, just so that I don't react in a way that I normally would not.

These quotes underscored the impact that social distancing had on school communities. School administrators reconceived the very notion of leadership and themselves as school leaders during the pandemic. This crisis period reconceptualized the school principalship as especially lonely and burdensome. In the last quote, particularly, the burden of leadership during the pandemic is apparent, with the school administrator speaking of taking advantage of the social distancing to address their own psychological wellbeing. Unfortunately, some of these issues prevail, with survey respondents reporting that they are “working long hours,” “feeling fatigued,” “more tense,” and “feel[ing] alone” in their current work. Even though social distancing no longer holds post-pandemic, school administrators' work is inherently social so factors mitigating stressful work may have a positive, regulating effect on these leaders' social and overall wellbeing. Unfortunately, as we discuss next, targeted resource supports for school administrators are urgent but mostly lacking and this reality predated and continues beyond the pandemic.

Low Job Resources

The findings of the study revealed an overall lack of supports for Saskatchewan school administrators, including not just a lack of material and human supports but also the absence of an overarching environment in which school administrators feel safe to be vulnerable, ask for help (i.e., seek supports), take intellectual and organizational risks, and be visionary leaders.

Lack of Downtime/Administrative (Release) Time

A lack of downtime and administrative (release) time for school administrators was a dominant theme across both the focus group and survey data. Two school administrators shared:

I wish I can say that I had done something for myself, but I really feel that I didn't have time to, if that makes sense. I felt that it was like a situation where your phone was ringing at all hours. Your commitment to your job really had to be present, because the needs rapidly changed.

More admin[istration] time is definitely needed. We are supervisors for facility operators that honestly take more time to manage than teachers.

The first quote came from a participant in a focus group in 2021 conducted during the pandemic, and the second from a respondent in the 2023 survey. The first quote situated the principalship as a demanding and relentless role during the pandemic while the second confirms it continues to be so in present work. In addition to no release time, participants identified other kinds of lacking supports.

Lack of Human & Wellbeing Supports

Participants also registered an inadequacy of human and wellbeing supports in their work. We isolate two quotes to buttress the historic lack of such supports at the systems-level for school administrators. The first comes from a focus group and the second from survey data:

So, I guess a concern I have is, I know the provinces said that... there would be, you know, continued work with reading and some of the academic pieces. And they've always said that there was going to be a mental health and wellbeing component. But it doesn't seem to have a lot being shared in that element, and I'm concerned that that aspect is again being left up to divisions to find ways to fund, to support that mental health and wellbeing in divisions.

I am currently on leave and doctoring and seeking counseling supports... I hear a lot of talking about supports for mental health, but little actual support from our division. When I resigned from my principalship in 2023, it was all done over the phone and through email. Nobody from the division even came out to the school to see if I needed support. Now that I am in a better spot with

my mental health, I can see how I was not treated properly at my time of greatest need.

Both quotes point to a practice of inadequate and/or lacking commitment and action from senior administration towards supporting Saskatchewan school administrators' wellbeing. But, even if there were supports, it seemed participants were too vulnerable to seek them.

Lack of Confidence to Seek Supports

Participants generally lacked confidence to ask for supports, either because they worried about how they would be perceived or felt discouraged about exposing their vulnerabilities. We isolate three quotes to support this context:

I didn't feel I could like, just, reach out [to senior administration] and sort of say, "Hey, like I'm really struggling. I'm exhausted."

...you're in these very difficult emotionally draining situations. And, you know, it would take a lot of vulnerability for somebody in this position to phone up someone and say, "Hey, I'm really struggling emotionally with stuff." I know, because we haven't really, in my opinion, really built that culture in [X school division].

...and it feels like if you say that... you need a little bit of support, it doesn't get seen very well. So you kind of just keep it all down and you kind of just act like you're managing everything just fine. And there's no weakness here. There's no nothing, I'm strong... So I don't feel like we have been supported in that way.

While all three quotes came from the focus group data conducted during the pandemic, the responses point to a longstanding hesitation among Saskatchewan school administrators to seek supports. Participants did not think that there was a

climate cultivated in their school districts wherein they felt comfortable or encouraged to seek supports.

Lack of Systems-Level Visionary Leadership

Lastly, participants were of the view that their superiors in senior administration (which include superintendents and others working at the division office) did not exhibit strategic, human-centered, and futuristic outlook to improve school leadership and schools. Data captured Saskatchewan school administrators' frustration and disappointment that what they saw as some positive lessons of and from the pandemic were not applied to post-pandemic school governance. The first two quotes were derived from focus group data while the third, survey data:

The pandemic has given us an opportunity to really take a look at what we do and decide what is really important and also given us a chance to kind of let go of some things that maybe we saw it used to be important that maybe we don't think is anymore.

Here we are, again. End of June and we're planning for August and no discussions about re-visioning school. Everything is about how we can return to "normal," and I don't want to do that. And I don't get the sense that, I'd say about half of the teachers in my school would probably say the same thing. They're open to new ideas, but I'm certain by October we will have fallen back into old behaviors and old patterns if allowed versus the other way around. So it's, it's disappointing as far as how that's impacted my leadership, I suppose. So I'll just keep trucking along and try again.

I hope moving forward that principals will be given back some local autonomy. Principals are often forgotten about when they go through traumatic events... If our principals are not mentally healthy, it will be difficult for them to be a healthy support for students and staff. I loved my job and have impacted many students throughout my 27 years. The last two years I have felt very unsupported at my job, and I know that other staff and

principals feel the same way. I hope my input can help foster some changes moving forward.

In these quotes, participants lamented the missed opportunities by senior administration to rethink school administration. In the second quote, particularly, the participant also alludes to the impact of this vacuum of systems-level visionary leadership to and on school governance, educators, and school leaders, with this participant being disappointed and unhappy but pressing on without enthusiasm or optimism about their leadership or the future of education in such a continued negative climate. In the third quote, the respondent makes the important connection between healthy leaders and healthy schools, a connection participants in the study believed was not sufficiently appreciated at the senior level. Without conscious, systemic supports, stress among school administrators is rising and will continue to rise.

Stress

The absence of care and visionary leadership to improve school administration coupled with unrelenting job demands have pushed administrators to defeat and burnout. Survey data capture the starkly harsh reality of the Saskatchewan school principalship, including the poor mental state of school administrators. Several shared:

The job of a school administrator is harder than it has ever been. Mental health and the inability to hire staff are two issues taxing our system more than ever before. I tried to get out of the job and go to another job in the division but was denied the opportunity. If I wasn't close to retirement I would quit the profession.

I think overall that administrator wellbeing is low and people are burnt out. I don't believe there is enough support and the financial payout as a school-based administrator is poor. I have recently made the decision to leave

education based on the poor work life balance and the inadequate financial compensation. Administrators are doing incredibly stressful jobs and caring for undoubtedly our most precious of resources and are not respected or cared for in the way they should be. This is not a division issue, this is a government issue. This job is absolutely one that should be so highly valued by every living breathing person as education should be considered of the utmost value but for some reason that isn't how it is.

I will be retiring in 3–5 years and will likely be looking for employment outside of the education sector when I am done.

Many staff are on medical leaves and teachers with 2–3 years left in teaching before leaving the profession cannot complete it and are leaving full pensions on the table to get out of education. Our system is broken.

We isolated these quotes to illustrate the stark reality of stress and burnout among Saskatchewan school administrators. In the quotes above, respondents are either resigning, leaving, or eagerly anticipating retirement from, the profession. The quotes paint a vivid and troubling picture of the Saskatchewan school leadership in crisis. This is of urgent concern.

Discussion

The major premise of the JD–R model that we have co-opted in this paper, is that high job demands coupled with low job resources create stress. And, as the model espouses, it is the sustained lack of adequate resources within a chronic demanding work environment that contributes to stress over time (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Our study clearly points to strain in the Saskatchewan school principalship; issues of exhaustion, disengagement, and low morale were appreciable among school administrators. As we demonstrated, a high job demands–low job resources status quo has existed in Saskatchewan school administration; this reality predated the pandemic, burgeoned during this crisis, and has continued without disruptions in

the aftermath. In a previous publication, we sounded a caution that, without targeted supports and other interventions, Saskatchewan school administrators were approaching burnout (Swapp & Osmond-Johnson, 2023). Our findings now confirm that stress among these leaders has escalated to disengagement and burnout.

As Maslach et al. (2001) assert, “Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy” (p. 397). In this sense then, burnout represents school leaders’ overarching psychological state, their negative emotional response to being a school administrator in the context of extended exposure to a stressful work environment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Swapp & Osmond-Johnson, 2023; Yildirim and Sait Dinc, 2019). As the JD-R model theorizes, such burnout has developed in two processes (Bakker & Costa, 2014; Demerouti et al., 2001). In the first, Saskatchewan school administrators’ demanding work has led to constant overtaxing and, ultimately, exhaustion for incumbents. In the second, a lack of resources, including material and human but also intrinsic supports such as autonomy, supervisor encouragement and appreciation, and shared system-school vision, not only constrains these leaders’ ability to complete their work but impedes their growth and development in the role. These negative processes compound, leading to dissatisfaction, disengagement, and eventual burnout (Keogh & Roan, 2016; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This is indeed a troubling reality, underscoring why we position the Saskatchewan school principalship as being in crisis. Scholars associate burnout with low productivity, discontent, and early retirement of employees (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Keogh & Roan, 2016; Markin & Wang, 2020; West, 2018). This is the case for school administrators in Saskatchewan and evidence indicates the reality is similar elsewhere. As we noted earlier in the article, there is a rise of stress and burnout among school administrators across international contexts (Beausaert et al., 2016; Bellemans et al., 2023; Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Leksy et al., 2023; Markin & Wang, 2020; Marsh et al., 2022; Ontario Principals’ Council, 2017; Pollock et al., 2019; Swapp, 2022; Upadyaya et al., 2021; Walker, 2021; Wang & Pollock, 2020).

Overall, school leaders are deeply dissatisfied with and in their roles, with many lacking confidence that they can do the work, others with no desire to continue in their roles, and still others leaving the profession prematurely.

Along these lines, the adage “healthy principals, healthy schools,” has empirical backing. Our findings and the broader literature situate much of principals’ dissatisfaction and stress on system-level demands and shortcomings that impact the school administrator role, so it is our position that there is a need to unlearn and relearn systems-level school leadership. As systems scholars note, strong school systems are characterized by shared district-school vision, clear and effective communication, strong leadership teams, robust professional capital and capacity, and supportive work cultures (Fullan, 2014; Hargreaves et al., 2014; Kirkman & Fullan, 2016; Swapp & Osmond-Johnson, 2023; Tong & Razniak, 2017). Unfortunately, the highly centralized and bureaucratic nature of schooling in many jurisdictions poses a challenge for institutional and/or widespread reform (Fullan, 2025; Pollock et al., 2015b; Pollock et al., 2015a). The system would first to become malleable and penetrable for any meaningful impact to take root.

Further, within a system-led approach to improving school leadership, achieving a more realistic and humane balance between the demands of the role and the resources to support incumbents in the role must be prioritized. This is an ongoing tension in the field of education, as dominant neoliberal ideals work counter to the realization of this balance. As school leaders in this and other studies have shared, resources and other interventions such as release time, larger budgets, mental health supports, positive feedback, autonomy, and consultation can be of value in their work (Abdulaziz et al., 2022; Hauseman, 2020, 2021; Keogh & Roan, 2016; Swapp, 2022; Tong & Razniak, 2017; Walker, 2021). However, when neoliberal governments prioritize efficiency, accountability, and competition in public education, these kinds of resources to support school administration will be inevitably sidelined. And while in a previous publication, we detailed the kinds of supports that school administrators could proactively undertake at the individual and school level to improve the balance between job demands and stress, including

professional learning around self-care, emotional regulation, and shared/distributed leadership (Swapp & Osmond-Johnson, 2023), we place focus here on systemic change, assigning responsibility for school leader workload and wellbeing squarely with school districts and the state. The longstanding lack of attention to the stress of the school principalship implies incumbents are expendable. As the findings of this study reveal, the implications of the continued lack of attention to this issue are dire: incumbents are deeply dissatisfied, burnout is becoming commonplace, and some are choosing to leave prematurely. Overall, action is urgently needed to stem the current crisis that is school leadership.

Conclusion

Our article drew on data from a longitudinal study of Saskatchewan school administrators to cast a critical gaze on work and burnout relative to contemporary school administration. We levered an adapted JD-R model to situate the longstanding inattention to high workloads and stress among Saskatchewan school administrators and highlight troubling consequences of burnout among Canadian school administrators. As we reported, drawing on mixed-methods data from school administrators in over 17 school districts across the province, incumbents are disengaged and burnt out, with some leaving their roles prematurely and many others plainly expressing their wish to be out of their roles. We situated this troubling context within an overarching neoliberal era, where accountability, austerity, and productivity are prioritized at the expense of resources to support educators' wellbeing. This level of burnout is not an issue that resides solely in and with the school principalship but can morph into a larger school system crisis if not urgently addressed. Healthy schools need healthy school leaders at their helms. Supporting the growth of public school administrators who are well and engaged therefore supports the growth of flourishing learning communities. We therefore concur with participants in our study, that visionary leadership is needed at the system-level to not only stem burnout among school leaders but nurture strong school communities with supportive work cultures wherein all thrive.

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