

Tending to the Leaders: Research on Stressors and Coping Strategies for
Oregon Elementary Education Administrators

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Title: Tending to the Leaders: Research on Stressors and Coping Strategies for Oregon Elementary Education Administrators

This mixed-methods study investigates the job-related stressors experienced by elementary school administrators in Oregon and the coping strategies they employ to manage these challenges. Drawing on survey responses from 173 administrators and focus group input from seven volunteers, the study explores the professional and personal impacts of administrative stress, including feelings of isolation, burnout, and decreased job satisfaction. The most frequently reported stressors include managing student behavior, personnel issues, workload demands, and insufficient support structures. Participants also reported physical and emotional symptoms, such as exhaustion and sleep disruption, as well as impacts on their home life and well-being. Despite these challenges, administrators employ various coping mechanisms, such as physical activity, professional collaboration, mindfulness, and social support. The findings underscore a pressing need for improvements in pre-service training and ongoing district-level support. Recommendations include embedding self-care practices into administrator preparation programs, increasing mentorship and coaching opportunities, and reevaluating workload expectations. The study contributes to the growing discourse on principal retention and leadership sustainability, offering practical insights for improving administrator preparation and support systems.

Keywords: educational administrator, elementary, stress, stressors, impact, coping skills, strategies, burnout, professional development, mentor, collaboration

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A saying I grew up with is: “A system is only as good as its parts.” Although I knew this phrase as it related to the parts of a car, the same can be said for education. Specifically, an educational system is only as good as the people who comprise it and the tools they use to educate children. A district's leadership team drives the achievement, culture, and direction of education for all those it serves. Schools, staff, and students rely on a robust leadership team for guidance and support. The impact of stressors on a leader can have widespread effects on building culture, long-term commitment to the education field, and most importantly, student achievement. While there is ample research on burnout and the longevity of teachers, there is limited information on how stress affects educational administrators and how they utilize coping strategies to maintain a healthy work-life balance. This research aims to identify stressors that impact educational administrators in their role as leaders. Specifically, my research will focus on elementary school administrators. I will examine the impact of work-related stressors and the coping strategies used. Ultimately, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of how we can support our administrators not only in their careers but also as they are being trained for this crucial leadership role. This introductory chapter will provide the background on why this topic is important and outline the research questions that will be used to explore it. Finally, limitations and gaps in the research will be identified.

Research on job-related stress is a global phenomenon, with studies consistently identifying common stressors across various countries. Workload concerns, such as unexpected incidents, administrative tasks, multiple demands from stakeholders, and personnel issues, are commonly cited sources of stress. Working relationships are identified as a significant factor influencing stress levels among educators, as reported in studies from Israel and Australia.

Principals often feel anxious when met with resistance from staff regarding changes, citing staff behavior and facility conditions as stressors. Regardless of location, the impact of stress often results in feelings of isolation, loneliness, sadness, and frustration, leading to decreased work performance. To manage job-related stress, individuals often use self-regulation strategies and seek social support, which can function as a buffer against the negative effects of stress. These findings from multiple countries do not radically differ from findings in the United States, where administrative stress is a concern at all levels of education.

Research related to principal job satisfaction in the United States is increasing. The cost of turnover directly impacts student achievement and is often felt in high-poverty areas more than others. The fiscal impact of hiring and training new administrators puts a burden on school district budgets and affects the culture of a building. Research on the reasons for principal burnout is growing; however, it does not match that of teacher burnout. As in other countries, feelings of isolation and loneliness lead to reduced job satisfaction. Stressors that impact a principal's sense of self-efficacy are ever present, but often, they are not discussed due to the need for the building leader to "have it together" and maintain a sense of service to others. In Oregon, the trend continues with principals experiencing stress that will often lead to vacating their positions. One elementary school in the Portland Public School district, for example, had six principals over just eight years. The impact of this type of turnover shakes morale along with student achievement and a sense of community.

Anecdotally, in my current role as a building principal, I feel an enormous amount of stress to improve the academic performance of my school. The Oregon Department of Education has labeled us as a school in need of improvement, so I am responsible for developing and overseeing an improvement plan to get us out of this category. This improvement plan requires

me to rely on several stakeholders in our school—the building leadership team and the teaching staff to implement the district curriculum with fidelity, the special educators and assistants to partner with the teachers in small groups and interventions, and the families to understand the gravity of our shared situation and support their students accordingly. The targeted school status requires extra reporting to our District Office Leadership and School Board. It means our school receives extra funding to support our improvement plan; however, with extra funding comes increased accountability. The resultant stress can feel daunting given I must draft quarterly reports that other school principals do not have to write, and I try to shelter my teaching staff from the stress of such reporting. Although staff and families had a voice in the plans to improve our performance, they often do not see all the work that falls on the shoulders of the building leaders along the way to improved achievement.

It typically takes five to six years to settle in a school after a leadership change. Facing a crisis of principal retention is an area that must be further studied to slow down these changes. Investigating the job-related stressors and their impacts might lead to a better understanding of how we can support this crucial role. Students deserve stability so their academic achievement does not suffer. Families need to have confidence in those who oversee their children. Teachers need a leader who can be wholly present each day and ready to help guide them in their professional growth. School districts can reduce the cost of replacing and training new administrators when appropriate support is in place, which leads to better job satisfaction. Universities can improve their training programs if they provide education that helps future administrators in areas of their job that are not typically addressed but have a major impact on their job longevity.

All of this is important, but first, we must understand what is happening with administrators in Oregon elementary schools. My hope is that the proposed study, designed to first survey elementary administrators about their stressors and coping strategies, and then, follow with in-depth focus groups, will help identify information about how we can better understand and build a stronger workforce of elementary administrators who choose to stay in their positions and maintain a powerful sense of self-efficacy. We have much to learn about the role of an educational administrator at any level, and ultimately, our students stand to benefit.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature synthesis, I provide a comprehensive overview of the existing research related to educational administrator stressors, their impact, and the coping strategies used by school leaders. The role of the principal can be thought of as the combination of an instructional leader and a business manager. Principals are tasked with influencing educators' goals, use of curriculum, processing of academic data, and responses to behaviors. They are held to a high standard of building a culture of community where the attitudes (and efforts) are centered around a growth mindset and provide a safe and nurturing environment for staff and students to thrive. In addition to instructional leadership, principals are expected to oversee their building budget, create reports demonstrating accountability for constituents, and have an eye toward what is to come (e.g., changes in laws or policy) that may influence future decisions. In this light, Marsh et al. (2022) shared this pointed description of a school principal which, although originally published in 1995, is still relevant today:

Wanted: A miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second-guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paper, and work double shifts (75 nights a year). He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend much money, replace any personnel, or upset any constituency (R. Evans, *Education Week*, 1995).

In many schools, the number of administrators is limited, often with one per building, so leadership and managerial tasks are often placed on the shoulders of a single person or a small team. How they cope with this complex and multifaceted role plays a significant part in principals' job satisfaction and long-term retention. The impact of job-related stress can manifest

in a multitude of ways, affecting both personal and physical levels, as well as our professional demeanor and relationships.

After analyzing the research on stressors, their impact, and coping strategies, I discuss how college programs train new administrators and offer related suggestions from the literature that show promise for improved preparation of school leaders. Finally, I evaluate the gaps in the literature that focus on the elementary administrative position and offer suggestions for research.

Stressors that Impact Administrator Perceived Job Satisfaction

The role of a building administrator is inevitably stressful at times. Carr (1994) surveyed 94 principals in South Australia on factors that seem stressful. Of the 83 stressful scenarios identified in the survey, 80.7% were job related. The top stressors were identified as “feeling a lack of support, coping with the heavy work demands, and difficulty in interpersonal relationships with staff” (p. 27). Principals and assistant principals are expected to prioritize student achievement and ensure equitable policies that support all students, including those from historically marginalized populations. This process can be laborious, especially in low-performing schools, and also time-intensive. Resistance to change is challenging and often presents itself as teacher pushback (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Along with this priority comes the need to hire and support certified and classified staff and offer a consistent curriculum with associated professional development. Supporting student achievement also requires a functional building culture, which means that systems must be in place to address routines, budgets, schedules, and behaviors that impact learning. Special education, as well as cultural awareness and support for our English Language Learners, play a role in this enculturation process. DiPaolo and Tschannen-Moran (2003) studied 1,543 principals in Virginia, using a mailed or online survey to gather their perceptions of job-related stressors. Among the principals, 75% reported

special education law and implementation as a major stressor, while 74% indicated increased student achievement on standardized tests and 72% reported data-driven decision-making as top stressors. Seventy-one percent reported strategies for staff development as stressful. Creating a sense of inclusion for all students and teachers requires a strong relationship with families and the community. In other words, principals must build and maintain strong partnerships between stakeholders to provide necessary support engrained in a school's daily functioning.

A 2014 report from the New Teacher Center called *Churn: The High Cost of Principal Turnover*, reported that one-quarter of the country's principals leave their positions each year. Half of new principals quit within their third year, and those who stay in the principal role often choose to move to more affluent schools where the leadership position is not as difficult as in high-poverty schools. With an average cost to hire and retain a principal of \$75,000, the fiscal impact that turnover has on a school district's budget can be quite profound. The question must be asked about the impact on teachers, and therefore, on students when there is a high rate of principal turnover. New Teacher Center also analyzed the long-term impact on students' future income potential of principal turnover. Their research showed a 10% reduction in principal turnover in high-poverty schools (from 27.4% to 17.7%) at the same time principal effectiveness improved (from ineffective—25th percentile of all principals to somewhat effective—50th percentile) has the potential to affect a single child's earnings by over \$30,000. DeMatthews et al. (2021) reported that while 82% of principals in United States public schools remained at the same school the next year, 6% moved to a different campus, and 10% left their principalship. Leadership changes in high-poverty schools is 40% higher than in more affluent schools, with 21% of principals leaving the following year compared to only 15%, respectively. Granted, there

are various factors that influence the long-term earning potential of students, but a strong teaching force is more effectively supported by consistent leadership.

There are numerous studies examining the teacher stressors that contribute to burnout. The term “burnout” has been in use for a long time and can be defined in various ways. Mahfouz (2020) described it as a state of mental and physical exhaustion caused by one’s professional life. Burnout can lead to a re-evaluation of careers and, in some cases, a reduction in physical and mental health. Mahfouz also reported that relationships with students’ parents, administrators, teachers’ unions, and other staff can cause teachers’ emotional stress. The reasons that teachers experience burnout are parallel with those of administrators. Darmody and Smyth (2016) investigated factors such as gender, age, experience, working conditions, and teacher climate, examining their contributions to stress in administrators. Like teachers, role overload was found to contribute to job dissatisfaction, including in areas surrounding student achievement, operational expectations, relationships with staff and the community, work location, and demographic considerations.

Student Academic Achievement

The most important task of a school leader is to ensure that systems are in place for students to succeed academically. When a principal leaves their position, teacher turnover often follows, which ultimately leads to instability in student achievement that the new administrator inherits (Shoho & Barnett, 2010). This chain reaction influences the types of professional development required to alter the academic trajectory, resulting in stress that permeates the staff as they strive to shift data toward positive outcomes. Friedman (2002) studied 821 elementary and secondary principals and the role-related antecedents that resulted in burnout. Student achievement was listed as a stressor along with worrying about teachers’ success in this area.

The pressure of being accountable for students' academic success impacts teachers, causing concern for building principals. Although the expectation to enhance student performance may be directed by district and state expectations and initiatives, the day-to-day changes occur at the building level, leaving administrators feeling isolated in their responsibilities.

Operational Expectations

The role of an administrator entails managing a building, in addition to serving as an instructional leader. Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) described the various roles that are part of a leadership role that adds to stress. Managing daily schedules and annual calendars, supervising students and staff, maintaining facilities and operating budgets, responding to emails and other communications, selecting and implementing curriculum and assessment systems, and performing many other routine and more complex tasks are key aspects of leading school operations. These overarching managerial activities can increase the workload and affect an administrator's ability to lead a school. These tasks add additional hours to the work week beyond the school day.

DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003) surveyed principals on problem areas of communication. Respondents identified the need for communication with families (88% of participants) and inadequate time for networking (85% of participants) as major stressors that required more support. When taking on the role of principal or assistant principal, it is essential to prioritize how time is spent; otherwise, the day may be consumed by tasks behind a computer, reducing visibility within the school community. Shoho and Barrett (2010) shared the words of a new principal: "When you become a principal, it's everything" (p. 575). The question remains as to how an administrator learns to prioritize so that they do not become ineffective. What are the specific tasks in operating a school that lead to job-related stress?

Personnel. Emotional exhaustion occurs when people feel powerless to change things. Administrators experience similar stress with the addition of personnel issues. Overseeing the staff evaluation process and managing occasional incompetencies and potential removal of teachers is a heavy burden. Oplatka (2017) discovered how intense the management of personnel can be in a study of 50 elementary and secondary principals when they described it as an acute workload source of stress. The principal-teacher interactions were filled with conflict management, evaluations, guidance, and the navigation of misconduct. Oplatka learned that it is a major stressor for principals when teachers are ineffective and resist the implementation of corrective feedback. Principals reported feeling “stuck” with underperforming teachers, thus increasing the time and energy it takes to field complaints by students, staff, and parents.

A constant devotion to maintaining a positive building culture can be a burdensome feeling at times, and plans need to be put in place and monitored by a principal to ensure the smooth functioning of the staff. Shoho and Barnett (2010) described an administrative challenge in their research as trying to get everyone to share values and move in the same direction. Counteracting staff resistance to change and getting everyone to commit to continual learning was discussed as another challenge. In their research, new principals reported feeling unprepared to manage personnel issues and listed this as one of the tasks that are the least enjoyable. Barker et al. (2020) shared examples of principals feeling misunderstood, filled with anxiety over something as simple as sending an email versus having a meeting, and having trouble connecting with staff members in diverse ways. They explained, “We must understand the meaning behind mood swings, disengaged blank stares, and midnight emails from parents, staff, or students... We must learn to ask questions, clarify nonverbal communication, and decipher events” (p. 92). As they explained, knowing your people can be a leader’s greatest superpower.

Evaluations. The evaluation process is a large part of personnel management as well as a complex and time-consuming part of leadership. Considering the legal ramifications of an authentic teacher review that can be looked at years later, the pressure to have accurate feedback is enormous. Principals can strengthen evaluation integrity when they are visible in classrooms and participate in professional development and collaboration. Muoio (2019) researched administrator perceptions of the teacher evaluation system in New Jersey and found strong and positive outcome of teacher evaluations. When considering the impact of evaluations on school culture and climate, 64% of administrator participants said there was an above-average impact and 88% reported an average or above-average impact on student achievement.

Another study in Ohio gave a different viewpoint. Williams and Crates (2015) analyzed the perceptions of 437 elementary and/or middle school administrators on the workload and efficacy of their teacher evaluation system. Although teachers and administrators felt they understood how to implement the evaluation system, administrators were not confident they had the time to do this work. One administrator shared concern about the sheer volume of evaluations that needed to be done and was fearful of the amount of time it was going to consume. Another administrator reported feelings of disappointment in the time it takes to do quality evaluations and stated their opportunities for interactions with students and families would be destroyed. The continuous balancing act related to making time management choices can lead to feelings of guilt and frustration, which further exacerbate feelings of fatigue and failure.

Finances. School principals shoulder significant stressors in this complex role. They are tasked with being instructional leaders and coaches, part-time counselors, representatives for their school at Board meetings or community events, keeping a social media footprint, and

staying current on educational laws (Friedman, 2002; Poirel & Yvon, 2014; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). One related area demanding attention is the budgetary aspect of school management.

The size and location of U.S. schools determine financial resources and often, adequate funding feels lacking. In Oregon, for example, the school finance system combines state, local, and federal revenue to support 197 districts and 19 education service districts. There are three sources that combine to form the State School Fund (SSF): (a) income taxes from the General Fund, (b) lottery receipts, and (c) the Fund for Student Success, which includes revenue from the Corporate Activities Tax (Gezelter, 2023). Funds from state and local agencies support each school district and therein lie some of the disparities that districts face.

School districts located in areas that generate lower property tax may need a different type of assistance. In order to equalize funding, a weighted measure is used to support districts with a higher number of students with disabilities and students at risk (e.g., pregnant and parenting students, those in foster care, multilanguage learners, and students in poverty). In Oregon, for example, if a standard student has a weight of 1.0 for the purposes of school funding allocation, a student receiving Special Education services will be an additional weight of 1.0, English Language Learners will equal an additional weight of 0.50, and a student in foster care would add a weight of 0.25 (Gezelter, 2023). That being said, Awwad (2018) found that school district funding in Oregon between 1991 and 2015 did not account for inflation using these weighted measures, and funding decreased by 20%.

Even when ratios and measures are used to share district funds equitably, schools still have students with unique needs that are not accounted for when only numbers are considered. Having to report to a business office, grant writers and the federal government limits principals' autonomy and equates to more stress related to spending. Many new principals report feeling

challenged and unprepared to balance federal, state, and local budgets (Shoho & Barnett, 2010; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). Although budget considerations are usually part of the course principals take when training to become administrators, every district manages these expectations differently. Because of the lack of customary practice and no universal method that can be learned before becoming an administrator, budgeting is often learned by trial and error.

Curriculum and Assessment. Instructional leadership is a prominent part of being a school principal. Effective principals lead instructional efforts, coordinate instructional programs, and uphold high academic standards and expectations. They support teachers in a continuous improvement process that monitors progress in enhancing student performance. Prioritizing the implementation of a quality curriculum is essential and requires dedicated time each day. Principals must also understand the needs of all students, including those with special needs, multilingual learners, and marginalized students, ensuring these needs are met (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moren, 2003).

Principals provide instructional leadership to their staff, a role staff regularly emphasize as being important. In a study by Shoho and Barnett (2010), 62 new principals expressed frustration concerning their leadership abilities when it came to curricular implementation. The principals found it difficult to maintain connections with the learning process and sometimes felt they did not have adequate training in their administrative preparation programs. This is another example of the stress that is part of leadership and requires continuous attention and time.

Student achievement is the highest priority of schools and the data from quality assessments is how education success is measured. Whether assessments are school or classroom-based formative assessments, district-mandated assessments, or those required by state and federal governments, they are a priority focus for administrators. With the adoption of

No Child Left Behind (NCLB), an era of high-stakes accountability was born. Powell et al. (2009) describe the stress involved when instructional time throughout the day has to change due to increased high-stakes testing in Maine and Missouri. In their study, 54% of the participants indicated that Social Studies received less attention, 45% reported less time spent on Science education, and 41% of educators reported more time was spent on Math and Language Arts. Additionally, the schedule adjustment necessitated reducing nap time for Kindergarteners and recess time for all grades. Powell and colleagues reported principals were concerned about losing autonomy and feared for their jobs if their school's achievement level fell below *proficient*.

Similarly, Li (2012) studied the effects of assessments on school administrators' mobility rates. With high stakes testing, some principals felt the need to move to schools with higher student achievement. After NCLB was mandated, Li found that average principal quality decreased in schools serving disadvantaged students due to the movement of principals to higher-performing schools and away from schools that might face NCLB sanctions.

Sunderman et al. (2018) made a shocking discovery in two school districts identified for school improvement in California and Virginia. Teachers in both districts reported that they did not plan to be teaching in five years. In one district, 75% of the teachers in sanctioned schools planned to be somewhere else. Such mobility leads to additional workload for principals, as they try to improve test scores while under intense scrutiny to retain high-quality teachers.

Communication and Relationships

Stressors related to communication and relationships can stem from the demands of being ready to respond to a multitude of personalities and attitudes. The fear of saying something that might be misunderstood and having the intent morphed into an unintended impact is ever present as an administrator. Mahfouz (2020) studied administrators who described relationships with

students' parents, upper administration, teachers' unions, teachers, and students as stress-inducing, with the most challenging group being parents. In particular, principals reported feeling stressed when parents were not happy and ready to argue. Shoho and Barnett (2010) described the need for effective communication skills as beginning principals reported feeling their interpersonal skills were constantly analyzed and challenged by teachers, staff, and parents.

Family and Community. Leaders understand that the success of team members is directly tied to their own success, so having trustworthy partners is an essential part of an administrator's role. As such, principals must maintain positive relationships with their students' caregivers and partners who serve their school community in addition to their employees. In administrative preparation courses, there is a lack of training in working with families and the community. For example, in the highly respected Principal Licensure programs at George Fox University and Portland State University, there are courses on Legal Issues, Equity, Human Relations, Human Resources, Finances, Curriculum, and Evaluations, but courses on how to manage family dynamics and community partnerships are not included in required coursework (Oregon Principal Licensure Program, 2023; Principal License Course of Study, 2023).

Principals reported a significant stressor from community members making unreasonable demands, behaving rudely, and taking up too much of their time (Friedman, 2002). Soliciting input from family and caregivers is a requirement for principals who want to build a collaborative environment that reflects the culture of the students they serve, yet it is a delicate balancing act. Shoho and Barnett (2010) described principals needing to convince community members about their vision for the school and justify their principles and approaches as a significant source of stress. Indeed, administrators must constantly prove themselves worthy of their leadership role in the eyes of the broader school community. In a study by Mahfouz (2020),

interacting with unruly parents was described as cruel, threatening, and awful. One principal said she feels the need to be “on the attack... sometimes they make you be on edge all the time...” (p. 447). Parents will sometimes curse at administrators and threaten the involvement of police and social media agents. One principal reported having to hide in her office because of the number of news reporters waiting for her outside.

Staff and Supervisors. The culture of a school is one area of leadership that administrators are expected to navigate, and yet, it relies on the collaboration of every person in the building. Some research has shown that a constant commitment to staff morale and resistance to change from staff are common stressors for most principals (Poirel & Yvon, 2014; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). When implementing a shared vision, principals bear the largest amount of accountability, but the disconnect between decision authority and decision accountability can lead to confusion and frustration (Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2011). It is natural that some anxiety accompanies this leadership role; the successes and failures of the school, regardless of how many people were involved in any given decision, usually point back to the principal.

Mahfouz (2020) learned about leadership clashes with upper administration when principals described working with superintendents as broken, abusive, and controlling. They felt humiliated and powerless to make changes. Relationships with staff are considered stressors in this study due to the emotional energy required to collaborate with teachers. For example, giving corrective feedback without worrying about hurting someone’s feelings is listed as a stressor when collaborating with staff. Principals admit that it was lonely to do this work without another administrator, which led to feelings of sadness and isolation. (Mahfouz, 2020).

Age and Gender Considerations

Little is written about age and gender considerations as they relate to job-related stress among educational administrators; however, some researchers have examined stress experienced by female leaders compared to that of male leaders. Friedman (2002) reported that women tend to experience burnout more frequently than men, which contributes to work-life conflict. Often, women share a larger portion of child-rearing responsibilities, and this can become a significant stressor. Mahfouz (2020) found that some women felt self-conscious and unauthentic due to fears of being attacked for who they are. One young principal noted the speed with which she went through her administration program, sharing that she felt she had to constantly prove herself as knowledgeable and a good leader. Darmody and Smyth (2016) found no significant differences between genders in terms of types of stressors; however, they noted differences in consequences, with men reporting better mental and physical well-being than women.

Impacts of Job-Related Stressors

One's feelings about their role play a significant part in job satisfaction and the ability to persevere. Human agency, the idea that a person can influence change in their circumstances and be self-regulating, proactive, and self-reflective, is an essential concept that empowers people (Federici, 2012). This self-reflection is a key aspect of human agency, making one feel introspective and self-aware. Like a professional athlete who consistently trains, when the arduous work leads to finishing a race in first place, it makes one feel that the effort was worth the payoff. On the contrary, if the work involved in reaching a certain level of success comes with an unsustainable cost, one might stop putting in so much effort. The same can be said for the commitment level of school administrators. The rewards of intense effort can be motivating, or exhaustion and stress can hinder longevity in a position and/or the field.

Much of school administrators' success depends on their self-efficacy. In a research study conducted by Skaalvik (2020), self-efficacy was described as a type of future thinking about one's own ability to respond to a situation. Skaalvik found that many researchers have defined self-efficacy. For example, one researcher described it as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance" (p. 481). Bong and Skaalvik (2003) suggested self-efficacy may answer questions such as "Can I do it?" and "How well can I do it?". More specifically, in educational settings, principal self-efficacy is the assessment of an individual's ability to organize a specific plan of action to achieve desired outcomes within the school they lead (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). The researchers suggested that principals assess their capabilities—skills, knowledge, strategies, and personality traits—and balance those with their weaknesses or liabilities. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis argued that areas where capabilities and weaknesses/liabilities overlap and intertwine lead to judgments about self-efficacy and leadership skills.

Researchers have conducted studies to examine the stressors that lead to school administrator burnout; however, there is more to learn about the nature and long-term impact of these stressors (Gmelch & Gates, 1998). At specific points in an administrator's career, managing too many aspects of their complex, multifaceted job can manifest as visceral responses within the body and lead to reconsidering long-term career plans.

Physical and Emotional Effects of Stress

Carr (1994) found that feeling a lack of support, coping with heavy work demands, difficulty with interpersonal relationships, and the evaluation of one's school or one's performance were the top five factors that contribute to acute stress that manifested as anxiety or depression for school administrators. The perception that loneliness is uncontrollable in one's

work setting can lead a principal to adopt withdrawal behaviors, thus promoting further feelings of isolation (Dussault & Thibodeau, 1997). This area must be addressed, as the principal is a central character expected to shape the building's culture, leading to continuous school improvement. Beyond loneliness, the physical effects of stress influence sleep patterns in building leaders and can instigate emotional eating habits, sadness, a reduction of energy, focus issues, anger, and anxiety (Dor-Haim & Oplatka, 2021; Poirel & Yvon, 2014). One elementary principal reported weight gain from emotional eating that stemmed from work-related anxiety coupled with anger and frustration (Dor-Haim & Oplatka, 2021). Another principal noticed an increase in physical ailments, such as pneumonia, which was atypical in her history.

Poirel and Yvon (2014) shared their findings after observing and filming six principals over the course of several workdays. The multitude of interruptions of scheduled events to deal with an urgent issue led to anger and frustration. In nine out of 21 scenarios recorded, principals were expected to refocus their attention on an unexpected situation and resolve the matter promptly. Similar anxiety was felt during staff meetings when principals were openly blamed for aggression between teachers. In five out of 21 scenarios, they were admonished for things beyond their control; one example included a principal being blamed for other people's issues of hostility with each other and a poor school culture. The response to such stressors is individualized and based on severity, comfort level, and each school leader's method of coping.

Impacts on Administrator Retention

In a study by Whitaker (1996), experienced principals explained why they rethink how long they could stay in their positions. Many of them explained that it comes down to work overload, where they feel they cannot fulfill the tasks and responsibilities of a principal. They

added reduced resources, increased paperwork, and greater expectations from the public as causes of principal burnout.

Other studies have brought to light factors that correlate with administrative mobility. Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) studied factors that influence retention. Some examples are the age of the principal, gender, racial makeup, and degrees earned. They inspected urban schools and rural schools. Interestingly, older principals had a lower turnover rate, related to a perceived reduction in career opportunities. The most significant correlation was between mobility and the emotional aspects of the work. Those who believed their work was worthy and their district was satisfied with their performance tended to stay in the profession longer. The principals who reported burnout and a sense of isolation also had a higher turnover rate and a lower persistence rate (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer & Silver, 2018).

Coping Strategies Used by Administrators

A desired chosen career path can still have its negative impacts. The role of a building or central office administrator still carries with it the need to manage the stressors that are a natural part of the job. How one copes with the negative parts of a job is genuinely personal and based on resources and past practices.

Self-care Strategies

One prevalent response seen throughout research studies is the need for mindful reflection and physical exercise. Mahfouz (2018) found that mindfulness programs help build community and opportunities for people in similar roles to share their experiences. Physical exercise is a common strategy, although Mahfouz's study participants found it challenging to find the time for a routine. Some principals must wake up early for quality exercise, while others try to include their families after school or on weekends (Mahfouz, 2020; Poirel & Yvon, 2014).

Other strategies used to cope with stress can be anything from hobbies, crafting, reading “even a trashy novel” (Mahfouz, 2020, p. 451), and hanging out with friends. Success can be seen when principals use proactive strategies. Tikkanen et al. (2015) found that some principals focus on regulating their responses or altering the situation until the stress is diminished as a way of dealing with on-the-job stress. Taking a positive point of view in any stressful situation seems to reduce stress for some administrators (p. 263). They also list setting limits, controlling one’s work pace, and believing that stress can be managed as additional coping strategies (p. 271).

Work-life Balance

It is not uncommon for principals to be consumed by the demands of the leadership role. Long hours and the unrelenting need to resolve issues can interfere with a healthy balance of work and personal life. Mahfouz (2020) conducted a study in Pennsylvania with 13 administrators from a rural school district. The administrators were selected using a convenience sampling and came from one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools. This qualitative study included 39 semi-structured interviews and 21 shadowing observations over the course of two years. Mahfouz reported principals’ concerns about sacrificing their home life for work. 92% of participants report stress related to a lack of work-life balance and giving up on family time for the sake of their jobs. One participant described her life as “all work” and that her job is also her husband’s job and her son’s job. She said, “It’s like when I took this position, everyone took this position” (p. 449), and unfortunately, her husband does not enjoy it. Among the principals, 61.5% reported high stress from navigating relationships with parents. The emotions attached to these stressors showed 69% feel guilty and 46% feel loneliness. Several participants used the word “draining” to describe their imbalance between work and family.

Shoho and Barnett (2010) shared the need for a strong social support, and this support includes extended family helping with childcare. Their study included 62 new principals—36 elementary principals, 15 middle school principals, and 11 high school principals from mid-sized schools. The demographics varied and consisted of 24 women and 12 men. There were 36 White principals, six Black/African American principals, and 20 Hispanic principals. Their schools ranged from 6% to 99% low socio-economic status. This qualitative research study yielded responses that were coded multiple times with themes created. Shoho and Barnett reported that the older new principals are amazed by how the younger principals with small children balance it all. They listed childrearing, having insufficient time to complete tasks, pursuing other degrees, and long commutes as issues that needs addressed. Their suggestions in coping with these stressors may not be attainable to all administrators; they list having no children, older children, and adequate partner support as ways to cope with job-related stress.

Hauseman (2024) shared suggestions from principals to manage work stress and home life in his book titled *The emotional life of school-level leaders*. Spending time cultivating meaningful relationships, exercise to clear the mind, more sleep, and a healthy diet are strategies that help the body stay regulated and reduce the emotional toil of leadership, thus making a person more emotionally available for family and friends. Barker et al. (2020) suggested practical strategies for a better work-life balance, such as turning off one's work brain, for example, shutting off emails at a certain time of day, shutting off the work phone, and avoiding social media. While taking vacations and disconnecting from work is often what principals encourage their staff to do, it is wise to remember that these suggestions are made for an upper-tier leaders as well. When leaders take time off and disconnect from work, they model for others

what balance looks like. In sum, when principals practice better self-care, their staff tend to be happier as well (Barker et al., 2020).

Social Supports

The risk of loneliness in a leadership role has already been established as a stressor. Principals often report feeling isolated in their jobs, which is a natural characteristic of a position where there might be only one administrator in a building. The need to surround oneself with like-minded peers has been studied as a potential method of coping with job-related stress. DeMatthews et al. (2021) found in their literature review that many principals rely on personal and professional networks as part of their self-care. Although not all districts arrange these interactions, principals often seek out time with colleagues to engage in activities such as exercise, sharing meals together, and just meeting up to talk about their stressors. DeMatthews suggested that school's organize professional learning communities led by principals and to include opportunities to learn about burnout, managing the workday, and sharing resources.

Similarly, Dor-Haim and Oplatka (2021) studied 22 school principals from elementary and secondary schools in three out of six education districts in Israel who were willing to share their experiences as new principals and reported feeling lonely. Participants ranged in age from 37 to 58 years and were primarily women (77%). This qualitative study employed criterion sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants who participated in semi-structured interviews. Four overarching themes emerged from this study:

- Negative effect on work performance,
- Emotional distress,
- Physical health consequences, and
- Positive perspective on loneliness.

The responses to questions about loneliness and their emotional experiences, Dor-Haim and Oplatka argued, suggest that creating a social network may mitigate the emotional and work performance impacts that loneliness can cause. Dor-Haim and Oplatka further suggested principals need support in reflecting on their emotional distress, and practicing mindfulness and engaging in physical activity would be supportive of a positive growth mindset.

Beausaert et al. (2016) found burnout occurs when principals lose social support. Their qualitative research consisted of survey questions; 3,572 school principals participated in a longitudinal study over four years, from 2011 to 2014. There were three hypotheses studied:

- Social support negatively influences burnout in principals;
- Social support negatively influences stress in principals; and
- The relation between social support and burnout is mediated by stress. Higher levels of social support will influence principals' experience of stress and, in turn, they will exhibit fewer burnout symptoms.

Beausaert and colleagues argued that their results align with their hypothesis, namely that collegial support reduces the stress that can lead to burnout. They found social networking might function as a buffer to avoid burnout. Interestingly, two instances of social support actually led to increased burnout if they come from the broader community, rather than colleagues. This was attributed to potential empathy principals give towards community members that increase their stress. Terosky (2021) studied five principals through convenience sampling and conducted 45-60-minute interviews. Over the course of a year, there were 10 full-day observations and time diaries collected. The collected information was coded, and themes were identified. Terosky suggests several approaches to coping with stress, such as engaging in laughter with colleagues

and devoting time to interact with students in learning settings or in quiet, one-on-one moments. They discovered that these acts increase vitality and reduce principal burnout.

Professional Recommendations for Supporting Administrators

The reasons why educators pursue administrative roles vary. We all have our own perspective, but once this goal is obtained, how do we retain high-quality administrators and reduce principal turnover? To understand how we can approach this question, we must first learn how we can recruit and train educators to become administrators with a realistic understanding of what the job entails. Once they assume this leadership role, we can focus on how to support them in avoiding the costly impact of job-related stress. What can we learn from research that dives into principal training and retention?

Supporting Educators in Administrative Training Programs

Shoho and Barnett (2010) studied 62 principals over several years to gain insight into the realities of new principals. Their findings reveal that efforts to recruit strong educators to become principals are being undertaken by several districts. They provide leadership opportunities for teachers in their succession-planning programs. However, the question remains: how can new building leaders be prepared before the doors open to a new school year? Ray et al. (2020) surveyed 473 practicing building administrators from Arkansas and found that preparation programs could play a critical role in retention if they included teaching on self-care, which was sorely lacking. For example, 44.6% said they drink 0-3 glasses of water a day, 85% said they work 31-120 minutes outside of work hours per day, and over 51% report they sacrifice their personal life three or more days a week for work-related issues. While aspiring administrators were trained in their preparation programs on curricular, financial, legal, and managerial aspects

of the job, there was no training on self-care and personal management. The researchers suggested that these skills be required as part of their preparation programs and internships.

Mahfouz (2020) stated that 67% of participants reported they still felt unprepared for the realities of the job despite their training. The call to include training on managing work demands, building healthy relationships, and incorporating self-care strategies was heard by researchers as recommendations for future leaders among new principals. In a similar finding, Poirrel and Yvon (2014) recommended required training for school leaders emotionally as well as cognitively. They studied six school administrators by recording them on a typical day. Afterwards, participants watched the videos and provided feedback on what they saw. There were 21 videos in total, and data showed the participants showed anger in three videos, received reproaches from staff members in five videos, and experienced anxiety in 11 videos. Further education on the emotional-transactional process was recommended for training programs in order to shed light on these experiences and the consequences for mental health. Finally, Gmelch and Gates (1998) studied 656 administrators using the Administrator Work Inventory. The participants reported working 54 hours per week, and 65% of their stress is work-related. They recommended preparation programs to include courses on survival skills such as time management, negotiation and mediation training, and self-awareness programs. They stressed the importance of new leaders understanding the emotional intensity of administration.

Supporting New Administrators at the Local/District Level

An area of study to explore is how new administrators cope with their first foray into educational leadership and how they can be supported to persevere through stress and remain effective leaders. The answer could lie in the support received during their early career. Rooney

(2000) shared a list of recommendations that new school leaders should consider in order to avoid mistakes that may lead to burnout and lack of retention:

- Recognize the school they lead has a history, and whether or not it is a positive or negative history can make a difference;
- Know who you lead and respect the culture, even if it needs to change;
- Realize your relationships with teachers will change as you move to “the Dark Side” and plan for work to be all-consuming;
- Set up a network of colleagues to understand the history of your community and,
- Promote mindfulness as a means to moderation and self-care in the leadership role.

DeMatthews et al. (2021) made several recommendations in their study of the literature on this topic. They suggested models of self-care that are used in other industries, such as counseling. These revolve around the practice of self-awareness and reflection. They encouraged investments in training principals as well as their supervisors on topics related to burnout, including routine check-ins with principals, redeveloping workload expectations, scheduling time for principals to engage in self-care, and providing social events. Shoho and Barnett (2010) learned how principals felt prepared or not in their new roles. Of the 62 principal participants, the leading areas they feel most unprepared for and could use additional support are communication, conflict and personnel skills, curriculum instructional skills, daily operational skills, and working with budgets. Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) found several factors that impacted the longevity of a principal. The researchers analyzed information gathered from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) for the 2003-2004 period and revealed that district-sponsored internships and training, made mandatory for new principals, reduced the turnover rate among participants. Bauer and Brazer (2018) echoed this idea in their literature review, which showed

that coaching can serve as a means to counter isolation and develop the skills necessary for productivity. They suggested intentional coaching that meets the needs of each leader. Specifically, Bauer and Brazer suggested coaching that helps a new principal develop school systems that enhance functions and facilitate collaborative decision-making. Bauer and Brazer also suggested another avenue; that is, coaching to address day-to-day management demands, such as calendaring, budget analysis, and teacher evaluation obligations. These recommendations for support would also have a positive impact on mid-career and veteran administrators, so these suggestions for new principals should be considered as part of an administrative team.

Study Context and Research Questions

To begin analyzing stress and its impact on Oregon administrators in relation to their leadership roles, I conducted a survey and focus group research to identify the perceived stressors and cited coping strategies of elementary school administrators in Oregon. My goal was to learn more about the stressors and coping strategies used by this subgroup of Oregon educational leaders as a means to suggested improvements in the preparation programs that train our newest administrators. My research questions were:

- RQ1. What are the job-related stressors encountered by Oregon elementary school administrators, and how do those stressors impact administrators' professional and personal lives?
- RQ2. What coping strategies do Oregon elementary school administrators use to manage the impact of job-related stress?
- RQ3. How can we better prepare and support administrators for real-life job-related stressors and their impact?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

This research design employed a mixed-methods approach. Mixed methods offer a more comprehensive explanation than either quantitative or qualitative methods alone. It integrates both approaches equally while maintaining their distinct characteristics and thoughtfully considers the relationship between the researchers and the study design (Stoecker & Avila, 2020). Different methods can generate distinct types of information, allowing one method to inspire research questions for another or to broaden the scope of a research project. As such, I integrated data from a predominantly quantitative survey that also included qualitative responses along with qualitative data from focus groups. This integration aimed to address the research questions in a single study (Zhou et al., 2023).

I designed this study to gain a deeper understanding of the stressors and coping strategies experienced by elementary school administrators in Oregon. I hoped to learn how leaders can balance the multitude of expectations thrust upon them daily, including increasing demands for improved student achievement and a strong school culture, while maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Shedding light on administrators' coping strategies may help their colleagues remain in leadership roles and inform training programs that support those in administrative roles.

Researcher Positionality

I am an Oregon native with a background in science education. I later became a secondary science teacher in the Georgia public school system. Moving back to Oregon and teaching in three different districts sparked a curiosity about larger systems, and I explored other roles within education. I earned my administrative credentials and moved into a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) position as a Student Behavior Specialist (SBS) and a Curriculum

& Assessment coordinator in a public Oregon school district. I was in this dual role for two years before moving into another SBS role in SE Portland at a Title I school. I had an administrative mindset in this SBS role and four months into my first year as a new district employee, I was asked to be an Interim Principal at an elementary school for the remainder of the school year. It has been over ten years, and I still serve as the permanent principal at the same school.

My interest in this topic stems from my own experiences as an administrator and the stories I hear from colleagues. There is a copious amount of information written about the struggles teachers experience with job-related stress and burnout; however, far less attention is given to the plight of school administrators. As I spend more time on the administrative side of education and experience my own job-related stress that differs from those of teachers, I want to explore how administrators manage their stress so they can continue high-quality leadership. My own experiences with stress and its impact introduce a potential bias that must be identified. It will be vital to this study to separate my lived experiences from those of study participants to get an unbiased view of Oregon elementary administrators' job-related stress and their coping strategies. Identifying my own background and personal experience with this topic is an important part of building credibility and trustworthiness into my research design.

Setting and Participants

Because of my professional connection to the state and the stated goal of the University of Oregon's Doctor of Education program to inform professional practice, this study is set within the state of Oregon and focused on educational administrators at the elementary level. Although administrators at all levels experience job-related stress that differs from that of teachers, I highlighted only elementary administrators in this study due to my position and the unique communities they serve. The Oregon Department of Education (ODE; 2023) reported that as of

2023, there were 726 public or charter elementary schools in 197 districts. These districts range from suburban to urban and rural, so the experiences of those who lead them likely differ vastly. For example, not all elementary schools have an administrative team consisting of a principal and an assistant or vice principal. In this study, I solicited information from all elementary schools in Oregon included on the ODE listserv.

Participant Recruitment

Because data collection occurred in two distinct phases, participant recruitment varied. Phase One survey participants were recruited from information gathered from an ODE-provided listserv. Homogeneous sampling was used for the first round of survey data collection. District emails for all elementary administrators were obtained, and I sent an invitation to participate in a secure and anonymous survey using a link. No invited participants were excluded from the survey based on any demographic information. This type of sampling is best suited for gathering in-depth information from a specific subgroup of educational administrators (Glesne, 1998). The survey was sent to only elementary administrators in Oregon, ensuring consistency at the school-level variable, which allowed me to focus on other variables of interest.

Participants for Phase Two focus groups were selected using voluntary response sampling from those who completed the survey. Voluntary response sampling is a type of non-probability sampling because participants choose themselves, rather than being randomly selected by the researcher. These samples are easily accessible, making data collection quicker (Voxco, 2021). However, this can create bias because participants are more likely to have strong opinions. It is essential to consider that participants' answers may not generalize. Voluntary response bias can be mitigated by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, thereby protecting identity and encouraging open and honest responses.

Participant Demographics and Administrator Roles

Survey participants responded to seven demographic and administrative role questions at the beginning of the survey (see Data Collection). These responses are presented in Tables 1-8. Participant-level characteristics include self-reported demographic information (gender, age, and race/ethnicity) and professional information about their role as school administrators (single/dual roles, school region/location, level of administrator support, and years of experience).

In terms of personal demographic characteristics, 128 participants were female (74%), 43 were male (25%), one was non-binary/third gender (0.5%), and one (0.5%) preferred not to report gender (Table 1). Age ranges of administrator participants are shown in Table 2. Of note, 125 (72%) of participants were 41 to 55 years old, whereas 21 (12%) and 15 (9%) participants were 36-40 and 56-60, respectively. Just 12 of 173 (7%) participants were younger or older than those age ranges, and no participants were 26-30 years old.

Table 1
Frequency Counts and Percentages for Gender

Gender	Participants	Percent (%)
Male	43	25
Female	128	74
Non-binary/third gender	1	0.5
Prefer not to say	1	0.5
Total	173	100

Note. n = 173; What is your gender?

Table 2*Frequency Counts and Percentages for Age*

Age Range	Participants	Percent (%)
21-25 years old	1	1
31-35 years old	4	2
36-40 years old	21	12
41-45 years old	49	28
46-50 years old	40	23
51-55 years old	36	21
56-60 years old	15	9
61-65 years old	4	2
>65 years old	3	2
Total	173	100

Note. n = 173; What is your age?

For race/ethnicity, 151 (87%) participants indicated White/Caucasian, 20 indicated another race/ethnicity, and seven preferred not to answer (Table 3). Participants were invited to select all options that described their racial/ethnic identity. Four respondents chose more than one option, which is why there are 178 total responses from 173 individual participants.

Table 3*Frequency Counts and Percentages for Race/Ethnicity*

Race/Ethnicity	Participant Responses	Percent (%)
American Indian/Alaskan Native	4	2
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	1
Black/African American	2	1
Hispanic	7	4
White/Caucasian	151	85
Multirace/Ethnicity	5	3
Prefer not to answer	7	4
Total	178	100

Note. n = 173; What race/ethnicity best describes you? Check all that apply.

In terms of professional information that helps characterize participants in their role as school administrators, participants were not provided descriptions of specific regions or locations in Oregon, and thus, information reported in Table 4 relied on participants' opinion. School region/location was rather split—67 administrator participants (39%) worked in a rural school, while 60 participants (25%) selected suburban, and 40 (23%) selected urban school setting.

Table 4

Frequency Counts and Percentages of Administrators' School Region/Location

Region/Location in Oregon	Participants	Percent (%)
Rural	67	39
Suburban	60	35
Urban	40	23
Online	2	1
Hybrid	4	2
Total	173	100

Note. n =173; How would you categorize your school's region/location?

With respect to administrator role, participants were asked to select all options that described their professional role in schools (Table 5). Of the 181 total responses, 164 indicated principal (91%), while 10 indicated superintendent (5%), 5 indicated assistant principal (3%), and 2 indicated teacher (1%). Of these, three were superintendents only and five were assistant principals only. Eight individuals (approximately 5%) selected two or more roles, which is why there are 181 total responses from 173 participants. A breakdown of dual role descriptions is presented in Table 6, with percentages calculated based on the total analytic sample of 173 individuals. Six participants reported their administrator role as principal and superintendent, and just one participant each reported having a role as principal and teacher and as a principal, teacher, and superintendent.

Table 5*Frequency Counts and Percentages of Administrator Roles*

Role	Participants	Percent (%)
Principal	164	91
Assistant Principal	5	3
Teacher	2	1
Superintendent	10	5
Total	181	100

Note. n = 173; What is your current role in your school? Check all that apply.

Table 6*Frequency Counts and Percentages of Administrators with Dual Roles.*

Role	Participants	Percent (%)
Principal and Superintendent	6	3.5
Principal and Teacher	1	0.6
Principal, Teacher, and Superintendent	1	0.6
Total	8	5

Note. n = 173. What is your current role in your school? Check all that apply.

Participating administrators were also asked to indicate the level of support from other administrators in their school building. Ninety-eight participants indicated they were the only administrator in their building, whereas 70 indicated they had regular interaction with another school administrator. Just four participants indicated that while another administrator was in their school building, they did not regularly interact. The total in Table 7 is one less than the total of 173 participants in the analytic sample because one individual, who identified as a superintendent, did not answer this question.

Table 7*Frequency Counts and Percentages of Administrator Support Level*

Level of Support	Participants	Percent (%)
Interact with Principal or Assistant/Vice Principal on a Regular Basis	70	41
Do Not Interact with Principal or Assistant/Vice Principal on a Regular Basis	4	2
Only Administrator in Building/Location	98	57
Total	172	100

Note. n = 172; Do you have an administrator colleague in your building/location?

Participating administrators reported a range of years of experience (Table 8). The most common ranges were 3-5 years and 9-14 years. Fifty-four (31%) and 56 (32%) reported these years of experience ranges, respectively. Survey response options did not include descriptions of experience, such as administrative internships, and thus, a variety of administrator experience is likely being included by participating school administrators when self-reporting their years of school administrative experience.

Table 8*Frequency Counts and Percentages for Administrator Experience*

Years of Experience	Respondents	Percent (%)
0-2 years	7	4
3-5 years	54	31
6-8 years	32	19
9-14 years	56	32
15 years or more	24	14
Total	173	100

Note. n = 173. How many years of administrative experience have you had overall?

Data Collection

This study was approved by the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board (IRB) on August 15, 2024. Data collection took place in two phases. Initially, participants were invited to complete a survey. Then, a subgroup of those who completed the survey and indicated a desire to further participate were invited to the focus groups.

Phase One: Survey

All elementary school administrators in Oregon on the ODE listserv received an email invitation to participate in a brief anonymous online survey (see Appendix A). I opted to use both an established survey and create my own survey using Qualtrics so that it would align more closely with my research questions than the published surveys used in previous research. The survey consisted of an initial document that served as the consent for research participation. The next set of questions was seven demographic questions, including school region/location, age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of experience as an administrator, current role(s), and whether they received regular administrative support. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) questionnaire consisted of 10 questions, including six that measured feelings of perceived helplessness and four that assessed perceived inability to handle problems (Harris, et al., 2023). Response choices were Never, Almost Never, Sometimes, Fairly Often, and Very Often. Each response was assigned a numerical score from 0 and 4, which was then summed to yield a total overall score. The results included three ranges to report stress levels: Low, Moderate, and High Stress. The remaining questions on the survey were written by me with support from my dissertation committee and asked participants to check all that apply in three areas aligning with the research questions: (a) job-related stressors, (b) impacts of job-related stressors, and (c) coping strategies. There were 27 choices for job-related stressors, 15 choices for the impacts of job-related

stressors, and 19 choices for coping strategies related to job-related stressors. All choices were gleaned from the literature review and a pilot presentation at the 2024 Annual Coalition of Oregon School Administrators (COSA) Conference in Seaside, OR, in which I presented pertinent findings from the literature synthesis of this dissertation and held an open discussion attendees centered on the three main areas of focus of this dissertation. Each of the three areas included a “None of the above” option. In addition to the options available, participants were given the opportunity to share their thoughts about each of the three areas in an open-ended format. The survey was designed to take 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Survey participants were required to answer all questions except for the optional narrative questions.

Participants received an email invitation to participate on November 3, 2024, which included an introductory email and a link to the Qualtrics survey. A reminder email was sent on November 8, 2024, and the survey closed on November 15, 2024. The survey concluded with a request for participants to consider taking part in a focus group. Respondents could choose an option that took them out of the Qualtrics anonymous survey, where they could provide their name, email, and phone number if they were interested in participating in a focus group that explored the third research question. After the data was collected and analyzed, I used the survey results to inform the development and refinement of questions for the focus groups.

Phase Two: Focus Groups

Focus group participants were selected from the initial Phase One survey using voluntary response sampling. Of the 173 survey participants, 37 administrators expressed a willingness to participate in a focus group to analyze research question three. I sent a Doodle poll to the 37 respondents to determine availability. There were five dates and eight times included in the poll. Of the 37 initial respondents, 13 people shared their availability. After reviewing the poll data,

two focus groups were scheduled: one for January 14, 2025 and one for January 16, 2025. Each of these focus groups had six invited participants who received an email with a formal invitation and a secure Zoom link. A reminder email was sent one day in advance with the Zoom link.

The two focus groups were conducted outside working hours and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Focus group one, held on January 14, 2025, consisted of four participants, while focus group two, held on January 16, 2025, consisted of three participants. Focus group one consisted of three veteran administrators and one administrator in their third year of leadership. Focus group two consisted of two administrators who had been serving for less than 10 years and one administrator who was in their second year of service. Additional demographic details are being left out to protect their privacy according to IRB guidance. I guided the conversation using a focus group protocol written in a prior writing course at the University of Oregon – EDUC 610 (see Appendix B) while recording and transcribing the conversation through Zoom. Permission to obtain an audio recording was obtained with written and verbal consent. Focus group participants were given the opportunity via email to remain anonymous. They had the option to keep their cameras off and use a pseudonym. I requested advance notice so I could identify who they were in case I needed to follow up with them. No participants expressed a desire to remain anonymous, so cameras remained on and names were displayed during the conversations.

The focus group protocol began with introductions and a review of the survey data to ground our understanding of who took the survey and what the data revealed about job-related stressors, their impact, and the coping strategies employed. Initially, I reviewed the raw survey data and then asked participants if they noticed any results that stood out to them. This method is best to increase the meaningfulness and validity of the findings, as participants can often feel at ease with less intrusive conversations (Patton, 2014). After reviewing the survey data, I

transitioned the participants to explore the third research question using a slide of narratives taken from survey Phase One respondents about job-related stressors and their impact. These narratives were used to focus conversation on how we can support pre-service administrators during their training and early years of service, as well as how we can support current administrators throughout their careers. The provided narratives were emotionally charged, so I allowed time after they read the quotes for them to process their thoughts and feelings. They took turns sharing the impact these statements had, and I assured each participant that they had an opportunity to respond or not, as they desired.

The next part of the focus group focused on how we can support pre-service administrators. Participants took turns sharing what they had hoped for and what they saw either in their current experiences or what they thought was missing in current training programs. There was an initial prompt requesting suggestions on coursework that could help address the stressors outlined in the survey data. I called on specific participants if it seemed they did not have an equal opportunity to respond or if they were not engaging in the conversation. As time allowed, I asked additional questions outlined in Appendix B. I followed the same process for the second part of third research question, as we examined ways to further support current administrators. I focused the questions not on coursework, but on professional development and other supports that might be provided to administrators to address job-related stressors. Participants in both focus groups had ample time to share ideas and stories from personal experiences. The focus groups concluded with a sharing of gratitude for their participation and an outline of next steps.

Data Analytics Strategies

A transcript of the focus group was uploaded into NotebookLM for coding purposes (NotebookLM, 2025, January, 27). For each survey question, I provided frequency counts of

responses using SPSS version 29 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences; IBM Corporation, 2023). In addition, the following demographic variables were collected for possible future analysis and research: type of district (rural, suburban, urban); experience level as a school administrator (years); level of administrative support (presence of additional administrator and amount of interaction/collaboration); and self-identified race/ethnicity (American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, or African American, Hispanic, White/Caucasian, Multiple Race/Ethnicity, prefer not to answer), and sex (male, female, non-binary/third gender, prefer not to say) of administrator.

Narrative responses from the survey were coded in two ways. First, I used descriptive coding to develop initial codes that aligned with the first two research questions: What are the job-related stressors, their impact, and the coping strategies used by Oregon elementary school administrators? Descriptive coding is often used to assign basic labels as a means of inventorying data and does not intend to code the actual content (Saldana, 2013). This involved reading the survey narratives for each area of study and writing down overarching themes. The second coding cycle involved the use of an In Vivo coding technique. This approach was used to tease out the actual words and phrases that convey the participant's meaning (Saldana, 2013). This revealed different areas of interest that helped me understand administrator stress and how individuals cope with it. I highlighted specific phrases and comments made by participants in each area that corresponded to the overarching theme. A brief summary of this process is presented in Table 9 and further detailed in the Results section.

Table 9*Themes for Survey Narratives on Job-Related Stressors, Impacts, and Coping Strategies*

Area of Study	Descriptive Coding	In Vivo Coding
Job-Related stressors	Lack of Support	“I can’t do this alone.” “..the amount of work without additional VP support is out of this world.”
	Challenging Student Behaviors	“The behaviors are constant and unsafe.” “Student behaviors....cause immense stress..”
	Personnel Issues	“I have several toxic members of staff...” “...several of my staff are in the mindset of “no”...”
	Workload Concerns	“The workload is untenable...” “Getting caught up seems impossible these days.”
Impacts of stressors	Feelings of Isolation or Loneliness	“It’s a lonely job for several reasons.” “This is a job of isolation.”
	Job Dissatisfaction	“I don’t want to be a building administrator anymore.” “I’ll be resigning my position at the end of the year.”
	Personal Life	“The long hours hurt my family. I am done.” “...I have to complete most other tasks at home.
	Physical, Emotional, and Mental Manifestations	“Fatigue and irritability are the two greatest impacts.” “I worry about the long-term impact on my health and longevity.”

Table 9, continued*Themes for Survey Narratives on Job-Related Stressors, Impacts, and Coping Strategies*

Area of Study	Descriptive Coding	In Vivo Coding
Coping Strategies	Social Support	“...colleagues and I are able to commiserate with each other.” “...people tell me that they always feel better...after having a chat with me.”
	Self-Care	“I have increased the amount of exercise I get each day...” “Regular mental health counseling.”
	Hobbies or Personal Activities	“Trying to plan one thing to look forward to..” “...I removed all work-related apps from my phone.”
	Sleep	“...I manage [7 hours of sleep] maybe 4/7 nights.” “I prioritize my sleep schedule over getting more work done...”

Transcripts from the focus group dialogue were also coded in two ways. Focus group participants were emailed the transcripts in their entirety. They were asked to review the transcript before the additional coding process began to ensure that their original words were accurately recorded. No focus group participants provided additional feedback or asked for corrections. Before finalizing the data analysis, I solicited peer feedback on the coding process and identified established themes. I consulted with a veteran school administrator on the data to help me consider alternative perspectives and discuss the trends revealed. When another researcher analyzes and provides feedback on qualitative data from transcripts and summarized interpretations, it validates and strengthens the researcher’s comprehension (Stahl & King, 2020). This fellow administrator pointed out alternative connections, such as the coping strategies used did not address the job-related stressors as a way to alleviate the stress or make a positive change. This helped me consider further research on professional development in a

district that would clearly address a stressor and align with the highest need, rather than focusing on those that improve student achievement.

Focus group transcripts were initially coded using descriptive coding (Saldana, 2013), and I identified preliminary overarching themes that I subsequently divided into two categories: pre-service administrator training and in-service administrator support. Findings associated with these categories addressed the third research question: How can we better prepare and support administrators for real-life job-related stressors and their impact? After reviewing the comments made by participants and identifying preliminary themes, I uploaded transcripts into NotebookLM (NotebookLM, 2025; <https://notebooklm.google.com/>) and directed the program to generate a briefing document. The themes with specific examples from NotebookLM were then compared to what I originally did, and final themes were created. See Table 10 for a brief summary with a more detailed explanation in the Results section.

Table 10

Themes for Focus Group comments based on transcript analysis

Area of Study	Descriptive Coding	Suggestions from transcripts
Pre-service administrator training	Enhanced Practical Training	Improve experience in crisis management, social-emotional learning (SEL), and managing personnel
	Mentorship and Support Systems	Structured mentorship programs External coaching opportunities beyond the first year
	Advocacy and System Support	State agencies should reduce unnecessary reporting requirements AI and technology should be leveraged
	Focus on Coping Strategies and Well Being	Training should address stress management, boundary setting, self-care

Table 10, continued*Themes for Focus Group comments based on transcript analysis*

Area of Study	Descriptive Coding	Suggestions from transcripts
In-service administrator support	District and State Level Support	Workshops and conferences recognizing administrative stress Additional planning with supervisors
	Reducing Administrative Tasks	Using AI tools Reduction of paperwork
	Mentorship and Support Systems	Support all administrators, not just during the initial years Normalizing conversations that address job-related stressors
	Advocacy	Better advocacy for administrative voices Opportunities for administrators to voice their need for a stronger work-life balance

Methodological Integrity

To ensure ethical integrity, confidentiality, security of data, and compliance with IRB guidelines, four steps were taken throughout the data collection process:

1. **Informed Consent:** All potential participants in both Phase One and Phase Two received a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, the nature of the questions, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The consent forms outlined the potential risks and benefits of involvement, as well as how their data would be used and protected. This process aligns with the principles of respect for persons, ensuring that participants are fully informed before they consent to participate.
2. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** In Phase One, there was no collection of email addresses, and all participants will remain anonymous. A link was provided that will take participants out of the anonymous survey to leave their contact information for potential participation in Phase Two. All anonymous responses are housed through

Qualtrics on a home computer and backed up on a password-protected, secure virtual server at the University of Oregon, Behavioral Research and Teaching. Anonymity was offered to participants in Phase Two; they could choose to use a pseudonym and keep their cameras off to protect their privacy during the Focus Group. All participants elected not to use this option. Their responses are backed up and stored as in Phase One. There will be no connection between the survey that was filled out and their answers to the focus group questions.

3. Pilot Study: Before distributing the survey, the questions were reviewed with individuals skilled in qualitative research. I piloted the questions through an informal focus group comprised of school administrators, who are not part of my expected participant group. A key benefit of conducting a pilot study is that it can provide early warnings about potential failures in the main research project, identify areas where research protocols might not be adhered to, and reveal if the proposed methods or instruments are unsuitable or overly complex (Teijlingen & Hundle, 2001). Feedback from the pilot study was reviewed and incorporated to ensure that the survey is practical and ethically sound.
4. Review and Approval: The entire survey process, including the consent forms and data management plan, was submitted for IRB review and approval. This ensured that all aspects of the study adhered to ethical standards and that the rights and well-being of participants were fully protected.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This research study examined the job-related stressors, the impact, and the coping strategies experienced by Oregon Elementary Education Administrators. I first present the findings from the comprehensive survey that collected demographic data on participants and related to the first two research questions. Research question one (RQ1) asked participants to choose job-related stressors they have experienced along with their impact. Research question two (RQ2) asked participants to choose coping strategies for the previously identified job-related stressors and their impact. Both questions gave an optional section for participants to share their thoughts on the topic. I then present the findings from the two focus groups of willing survey participants. The focus group sessions explored Research question three (RQ3), which asked participants their thoughts on supporting pre-service administrators in their prep programs and as new administrators and discussed ways to support current administrators at the local and state levels in improving the retention of high-quality administrators.

Survey Results

The following data is a summary of the job-related stressors, impacts, and coping strategies as reported by the Oregon elementary administrators who participated in the survey and focus groups. It is organized first by survey data and reported in tables by the number and percentages of respondents. The top-ranked survey responses were then organized in column graphs and reported for the three areas of research. Following the table and graphs are unedited narratives that represent impactful responses from those who took the survey.

Job-Related Stressors

Elementary administrator participants were given a list of 26 perceived job-related stressors obtained from the literature review and the COSA conference, where questions were piloted to Oregon administrators. Table 11 presents the frequencies and percentages of job-related stressors. Figure 1 shows the six top-ranked job-related stressors, where the y-axis represents the percentage of respondents who indicated these job-related stressors are in their top three rankings.

As indicated in Table 11, the majority of elementary administrators surveyed identified chronic and difficult student behaviors, personnel issues with existing staff (certified teaching and classified), and an overwhelming workload as their biggest job-related stressors. When asked to rank their top three job-related stressors, Figure 1 shows that these stressors were chronic and difficult student behaviors, personnel issues related to hiring, and a workload that seems to never be completed. The optional narratives were numerous, as administrators offered a more personal perspective on their job-related stressors. Their comments noted concern about the unending workload, limited time during the workday to address administrative tasks, the challenging behaviors exhibited by students, personnel-related matters, and the sense that they lack adequate support to address these concerns.

Table 11

Frequency Counts and Percentages of Response Patterns for Respondents for Job-Related Stressors

Survey option	Respondents	Percent (%)	Survey option	Respondents	Percent (%)
<i>High expectations for improved student academic achievement</i>	84	53	Feeling inadequate to meet job-related expectations	56	35
<i>Personnel issues related to hiring (e.g., unfilled positions, hiring process).</i>	86	54	Students' socio-economic concerns	58	37
<i>Personnel issues related to existing staff (e.g., poor performance, low attendance)</i>	117	74	Student absenteeism	65	41
Ensuring curriculum is being used with fidelity	68	43	<i>Insufficient time to meet expectations</i>	95	60
Maintaining financial reports	15	9	<i>A workload that seems never to get done</i>	115	73
<i>Staff observations and evaluations</i>	98	62	<i>Chronic and difficult student behaviors</i>	117	74

Note. Which of the following job-related experiences routinely lead to stress for you? Check all that apply. Data italicized and bolded indicates administrators' top stressors (> 50% of respondents).

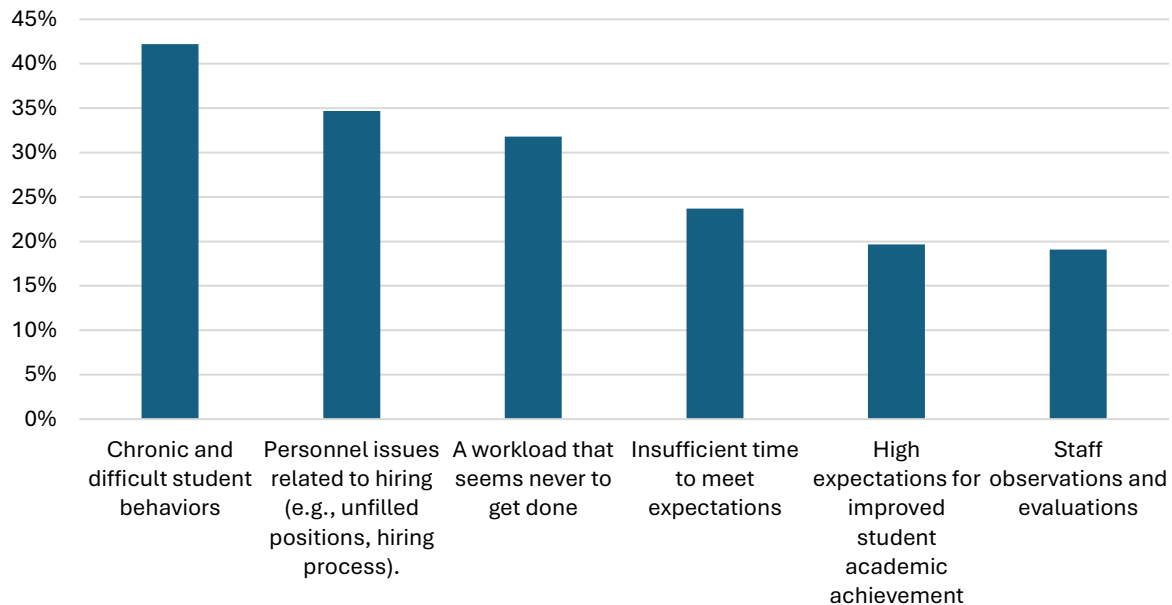
Table 11, continued*Frequency Counts and Percentages of Response Patterns for Administrators*

Survey option	Respondents	Percent (%)	Survey option	Respondents	Percent (%)
Relationships with caregivers/families	38	24	<i>Taking work home and missing out on family or personal time</i>	85	54
Relationships with supervisors	27	17	Lack of experience in leadership	8	5
School safety concerns	54	34	School relationships with wraparound programs	22	14
Stress with Labor Management or Union issues	43	27	Lack of coordination with Central Office	50	32
Misunderstanding of certain laws, like SpEd	24	15	SpEd and McKinney Vento compliance	35	22
New software systems	22	14	Amount of data collected when it's redundant or not coordinated	41	26
District Office change in leadership (e.g., superintendent turnover)	26	16	Political pressures (e.g., book bans, challenges on curriculum content)	31	20

Note. Which of the following job-related experiences routinely lead to stress for you? Check all that apply. Data italicized and bolded indicates administrators' top stressors (>50% of respondents).

Figure 1

Top Six Job-Related Stressors



Optional Narratives on Job-Related Stressors

Respondents were given the option to provide any additional information to help explain their answers related to job-related stressors. Of the 173 respondents, 79 administrators shared feedback on their experiences with job-related stressors. Below are common themes identified along with representative quotes directly and unedited from respondents.

Lack of Support. This theme relates to the resources available to administrators that help them cope with job-related stressors. These resources were typically in the form of support personnel, time to complete needed tasks, or collegial support. While some comments inferred that a monetary portion is needed, some comments centered around needed emotional support and understanding from colleagues and supervisors.

- “The amount of work that needs to be done without additional VP support is out of this world.”

- “I can’t do this alone. I don’t even have a coach. I’m just tired of feeling like I don’t do enough. Ever. And I know how important collaboration is, but I’m not able to collaborate with other admins. This job is not sustainable.
- “The most difficult aspect of school administrative leadership is dysregulated adults who have no accountability for their behavior while I am held fully accountable for every single action I take.”

Challenging Student Behaviors. Many respondents described dysregulated students as posing safety concerns and requiring large amounts of planning time and staff involvement. Some comments addressed the impact that challenging students had on the safety and mental well-being of the school community, while others focused on the time required to properly support dysregulated students.

- “As an administrator it feels like everyone in the building expects me to solve their problems, no matter the size. The largest stress is by far, student behavior. The behaviors are constant and often unsafe, and teachers aren't sure how to manage them in the classroom. Communication with parents about those behaviors is the most stressful part for me. Parents are often disrespectful and deny that their child should have consequences.”
- “We are battling highly disruptive behaviors daily, and the amount of data tracking we're being asked to do, parent emails/meetings regarding the behavior, and that other students in the classroom are expected to withstand the repeated disruptions just isn't fair.”
- “Student behaviors that are threatening and unsafe cause immense stress on the school system. The mental health, trauma, and other impacts are devastating on the individual and holding the school together.”

Personnel Issues. Staff issues that involve the behaviors and professionalism of adults are included in this theme. This theme did not focus on the hiring process.

- “I have several toxic members of staff and have to find a way to remove the toxicity and help everyone heal.”
- “I work very much from a "how can I support/ just say yes" model and several of my staff are in the mindset of "no" as the first answer to everything.”

Workload Concerns. This theme describes the overwhelming amount of work that never seems to be completed, as well as the stress of having insufficient time in the workday to address required tasks. This theme blends with the concern of having an unhealthy work-life balance.

- “I basically work until I emotionally can't anymore and am forced to take a PTO day or weep at work. It is horrific.”
- “The workload is untenable, and for the first time, I'm seriously looking to make a career change. This makes me sad as I love my staff and my community, but it's taking a toll on my health and family.”
- “When cuts continue to impact workload, staffing, and resources, but expectations from our supervisors are simultaneously raised, it feels dismissive and frustrating. I was a passionate educator who thought I could fix our broken system, and now I can feel myself burning out.”
- “Being the only administrator in the school means everything is my responsibility - with the significant increase in unexpected student behaviors that must be addressed first to ensure everyone's safety, so many other responsibilities are left for “later”, but later never comes. Most days, I feel like I am drowning at work. I am so far

underwater that most days, I can't even see the top of the water. Getting caught up seems impossible these days."

- "I cannot complete the work and go home with work daily after staying sometimes 12 hours. It's priority triage and yet still trying to improve instruction and the learning and experience for students, staff and families."

Understanding the various job-related stressors administrators face provides insight into the challenges of their roles. However, identifying these stressors is only part of the equation; it is equally important to examine their impact. The toll of prolonged stress extends beyond the workplace, affecting administrators physically, emotionally, and mentally. These effects can influence job performance, a healthy work-life balance, and overall well-being, potentially leading to burnout or decreased job satisfaction. By analyzing the impact of these job-related stressors, we can gain a deeper understanding of the importance of effective coping strategies and support systems.

Impacts of Job-Related Stressors

Survey respondents were given a list of 14 impacts of job-related stressors, compiled from the literature review and suggestions from participants at the COSA conference. Respondents could select all that applied to their experiences and provide feedback. Table 12 presents frequency counts and percentages of respondents for these impacts. Figure 2 shows the top-ranked impacts of job-related stressors—physical, emotional, and career analysis—where the y-axis represents the percentage of respondents who indicated that these impacts related to job-related stressors are in their top three rankings. The majority of elementary administrators indicated persistent fatigue/feeling tired as a major impact. Table 12 and Figure 2 also show that

46% of respondents also consider leaving the field, and a higher proportion (50%) are considering leaving their position.

Table 12

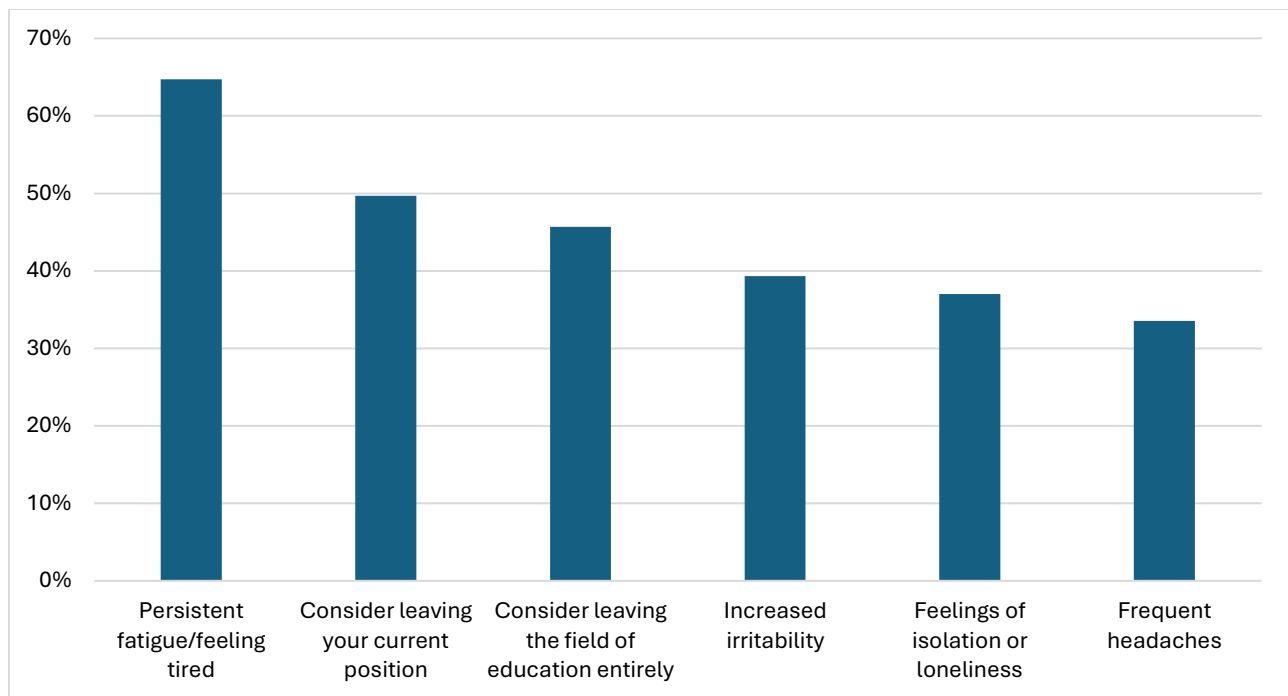
Ranked Frequency Counts and Percentages of Response Patterns for Respondents for Impact of Job-Related Stressors

Impact of Job-related stress	Respondents	Percent (%)
Persistent fatigue/feeling tired	112	65
Consider leaving your current position	86	50
Consider leaving the field of education entirely	79	46
Increased irritability	68	39
Feelings of isolation or loneliness	64	37
Frequent headaches	58	34
Increased heart rate or high blood pressure	56	32
Resentment toward certain staff	50	29
Emotional sensitivity	49	28
Strained relationships at home	43	25
Depression	33	19
Emotional dysregulation	31	18
Strained relationships at your work location	23	13
Persistent sadness	18	10

Note. $n = 173$. Which of the following impacts of job-related stress do you encounter on a routine basis? Respondents were not asked to indicate their top three impacts of job-related stressors. These numbers reflect the highest frequency of options from the respondents.

Figure 2

Top Ranked Impacts Related to Job-Related Stressors



Optional Narratives on the Impact of Job-Related Stressors

Respondents were given the option to provide any additional information to help explain their answers related to the impact of job-related stressors. Of the 173 respondents, 44 administrators shared feedback on the impact of job-related stressors. Below are common themes identified along with representative quotes directly and unedited from respondents.

Feelings of isolation or loneliness. This theme examines the effects of feeling disconnected, both professionally and emotionally. Responses reveal the frustration of being misunderstood and underscores how isolation erodes mental and emotional well-being.

- “It is a lonely job for several reasons. You take on so much emotionally that others cannot relate to, but also it consumes so much of your time you don’t get enough time with others socially.”
- “This is a job of isolation! If you don't like that - this is not the job for you.”

- “I do still feel isolated at times. Being a principal is so hard right now. During and post-pandemic, things just feel more difficult.”

Job Dissatisfaction. This theme addresses the systemic frustrations and challenges of the role, revealing how heavy workloads, insufficient support, and unrealistic expectations contribute to burnout and stress.

- “I have been in my current position for seven years but I am looking for a new job. I don't want to be a building administrator anymore. Dealing with the stress of staff plus parents/caregivers has had a significant toll on my health.”
- “When you work endless hours and never feel done with any of it, it gets exhausting. There is never a finish line in sight.”
- “I'll be resigning my position at the end of this year. I cannot see the path to being successful at doing all that is expected.”

Impact on Personal Life. This theme highlights the erosion of work-life balance experienced by school administrators. It examines how the job affects personal time, relationships, and overall well-being, ultimately leading to strain on family time and a compromised work-life balance.

- “The long hours hurt my family. I am done. But I also feel trapped. I don't know what else to do.”
- “My day is mostly responding to behaviors, so I have to complete most other tasks at home.”

Physical, Emotional, and Mental Manifestations of Stress. This theme examines the physical effects of stress, focusing on the bodily manifestations of psychological stress.

Responses reveal how stress can lead to physical ailments and compromised sleep patterns. In addition, this theme encompasses the need for some participants to seek mental health support

- “Fatigue and irritability are the two greatest impacts I feel. Every Friday, I feel completely drained. “
- “My physical health has deteriorated as a result of my job, including higher blood pressure and digestive system issues. Last year, I had considered leaving the profession.”
- “I have had to move from lifestyle supports for blood pressure management to medical interventions - the only shift has been the shift in job and work responsibilities. I worry about the long-term impact on my health and longevity.”
- “I don't sleep. Five hours a night at most. I wake up with anxiety every morning.”
- “I have weekly therapy. The professional I work with has encouraged me multiple times to leave this role and fully believes that I would not need ongoing therapy if it were not for my job.

The challenges faced by administrators are significant, and it's necessary to address the impact of stressors on their well-being. It is essential to adopt resilience-building coping strategies to effectively navigate these pressures. Social support, effective time management, and a strong commitment to self-care are essential for preventing burnout, maintaining job satisfaction, and achieving a sustained healthy work-life balance.

Coping Strategies

Survey respondents were provided with a list of 18 coping strategies for job-related stressors, compiled from the literature review. Like the stressors and impacts mentioned above, these strategies were also derived from suggestions made by participants at the COSA

conference. As with the previous survey questions, respondents could select all that applied to their experiences and provide optional feedback. Table 13 presents the frequency counts and percentages of respondents for these coping strategies. Figure 3 shows the top-ranked coping strategies for job-related stressors, where the y-axis represents the percentage of respondents who indicated this as a top coping strategy to address the impacts of job-related stressors.

A large majority of respondents, 71% and 68%, indicated physical exercise and sleep as their top coping strategies. Another coping strategy that received over half of the respondents' votes was social support from family and friends. Almost half of the respondents indicated they use social support from colleagues, watching television or movies, and hobbies outside of work as a means to cope with job-related stressors. Figure 3 shows the ranked coping strategies most often used by respondents. Listed are the top six, with two of them being related to social support, and the others are typically done solo.

Table 13

Frequency Counts and Percentages of Response Patterns for Respondents for Coping Strategies

Coping Strategies	Respondents	Percent (%)
<i>Physical exercise like walking, hiking, organized sports</i>	<i>112</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>Social support from other friends or family</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Sleep</i>	<i>89</i>	<i>57</i>
Watching TV or going to movies	71	45
Hobbies outside of work	68	43
Social support with colleagues	67	43
Maintaining a functional work-life balance	62	39

Table 13, continued

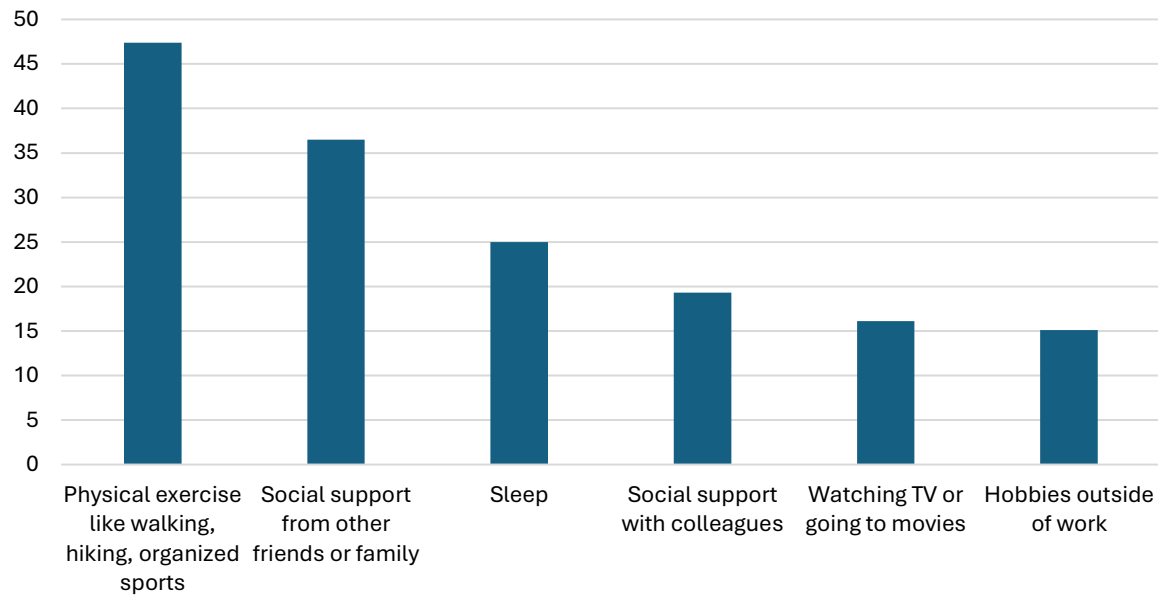
Frequency Counts and Percentages of Response Patterns for Respondents for Coping Strategies

Coping Strategies	Respondents	Percent (%)
Mindfulness practices such as breathing or meditation	51	32
Planning vacations	48	31
Intentional planning to address job-related stressors	48	31
Doom scrolling on the phone	43	27
Planning how to improve work stress (e.g., shut off the walkie, set boundaries, set aside office time)	40	25
Religion, faith, spirituality, or philosophical practices	39	25
Further education/professional development to help improve your practice	32	20
Attending musicals, plays, or concerts	23	15
Video or electronic games	22	14
Hobbies at work (e.g., plants, music, art)	11	7
Planning field trips	2	1

Note. n = 173. What coping strategies do you use to manage the impact of job-related stress? Check all that apply. Data italicized and bolded indicates the coping strategies chosen by the majority of respondents.

Figure 3

Top Ranked Coping Strategies for Job-Related Stressors



Optional Narratives on Coping Strategies for Job-Related Stressors

Respondents were given the option to provide any additional information to help explain their answers related to coping strategies for job-related stressors. Of the 173 respondents, 42 administrators shared feedback; below are common themes identified along with representative quotes directly and unedited from respondents. These narratives concerning coping strategies to address job-related stressors revealed the value of community and individual time for reflection and social interaction.

Social Support. Administrators can significantly reduce stress by actively seeking social support. This theme explores the importance of connecting with colleagues, mentors, family, and professional networks to offer emotional support, practical guidance, and a sense of shared experience.

- “I talk with my Dean of Students and Education Coordinator - we are Trauma Bonded.”

- “It's both healthy and unhealthy that colleagues and I are able to commiserate with each other over the challenges of this job and shared frustrations.”
- “Being mindful and keeping a positive outlook is the most important. I have people tell me that they always feel better or refreshed after having a chat with me.”

Self-care through physical activity and mental health support. This theme explores how engaging in regular physical activity or utilizing mental health resources can alleviate the pressures of leadership responsibilities, enhance emotional resilience, and promote well-being.

- “I have increased the amount of exercise I get each day because skipping just a few has a very real impact on my energy, mental health, and ability to be objective in all things.”
- “I have discovered prioritizing daily physical movement has substantially improved my mental and physical health.”
- “I try and get outside into nature on the weekend, and that often helps me. I also find time during the school day to go to places in the school that relieve stress....like going to watch a teacher who is always amazing or kinder recess.”
- “Regular mental health counseling.”

Hobbies or personal activities. Engaging in activities outside of work can serve as a valuable outlet for relieving administrative stress. It can help one disconnect from professional demands, recharge mentally and emotionally, and maintain a healthier work-life balance.

- “Trying to plan one thing to look forward to each week or every few weeks, for example, a massage, nail appt., etc.”
- “For whatever reason, cleaning my house and putting it in order is very helpful. It settles my brain.”

- “Two years ago, I gifted myself freedom by removing all work-related apps from my phone.”

Sleep. This is a crucial element in managing administrative stress. Quality sleep supports cognitive function, emotional regulation, and physical health—all essential for navigating the demands of leadership.

- “I am trying to get 7 hours of sleep a night; it is a goal, and I manage it maybe 4/7 nights.”
- “Sleep is my favorite because it is an escape. It doesn't eliminate or lessen the stress though.”
- “I prioritize my sleep schedule over getting more work/homework done in the late evenings to maintain my to-do lists.”

Perceived Stress Scale

As noted in the Chapter III, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Harris et al., 2023) was designed to assess feelings and perceived stress over the last month on an individual basis. This survey was administered in November 2024. Results are reported on a scale of Low Stress, Moderate Stress, and High Stress. The 10 questions from the PSS include two subscales: Six measure perceived helplessness, and four measure perceived lack of self-efficacy.

The majority of elementary administrator respondents received a score of Moderate Stress, with the remaining respondents falling equally between Low Stress and High Stress. Table 14 shows the distribution of respondent scores, while Table 15 provides a breakdown of frequency counts for each of the 10 PSS questions. The majority of respondents, 83%, indicate that they have sometimes, fairly often, or very often been upset due to unexpected events that have occurred over the last month. 71% indicated that they could not cope with all the things

they had to do or control important aspects of their life. A total of 78% felt angered by something outside of their control, and 69% reported that they felt things were piling up so high that they could not overcome them. The largest standout response is that 94% of respondents have felt nervous or stressed at some point over the last month, whether fairly often or very often. Of the four self-efficacy questions, 97% felt they were sometimes, fairly often, or very often able to handle their personal problems, while 88% and 89% felt certain they could control irritations in their life and that things were going their way. Lastly, 74% of respondents reported feeling on top of things over the last month.

Table 14

Frequency Counts and Percentages of Administrators' Perceived Stress Scores.

Stress Level	Range of scores	Respondents	Percent (%)
Low Stress	Between 1-13	38	23
Moderate Stress	Between 14-26	87	54
High Stress	Between 27-40	37	23
Total	-	162	100

Table 15*Frequency Counts of Response Patterns for Respondents for Perceived Stress Scale*

Survey Question	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
How often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	2	26	<u>61</u>	50	23
How often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	12	35	<u>56</u>	36	23
How often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?	2	8	50	<u>49</u>	53
How often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	15	32	<u>58</u>	33	24
How often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?	4	31	<u>71</u>	39	17
How often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	10	41	<u>50</u>	38	23
How often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	1	4	48	<u>67</u>	42
How often have you felt that things were going your way?	2	16	<u>83</u>	54	7
How often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	2	18	<u>68</u>	55	19
How often have you felt that you were on top of things?	7	35	<u>72</u>	39	9

Note. $n = 162$. Median responses on the 5-point ordinal scale are underlined-bolded-italicized.

Focus Group Results

This section presents findings from two focus groups conducted to address the third research question, which explores how to better prepare and support administrators given the data on their job-related stressors. The focus groups aimed to gather insights into how administrator preparation programs can be improved and what supports are needed at the district, local, and state levels to sustain administrators in their roles. Transcripts from the two focus groups were vetted for accuracy with focus group participants before analysis. I analyzed the transcripts by hand to establish initial codes for each section. Using the Google AI support of NotebookLM (2025, January, 27), I established themes that corroborated my initial coding.

Pre-Service Administrative Preparation

Focus group participants were asked for their insight on how we can better prepare new administrators for real-life job-related stressors. They had several suggestions for supporting participants in the administrative preparation program and newly hired administrators. They suggested enhancements to the training program, including managing personnel with performance issues, legal processes related to hiring and firing, and how administrators can better prepare to support staff and students with challenging behaviors and social-emotional learning (SEL). They discussed the value of mentorship programs and the importance of participating in New Administrator Academies. Proactive suggestions for mental health support were discussed, including boundary setting, self-care strategies, and ways to connect with support systems that enhance job satisfaction. After a new administrator has been in their position for three to five years, the suggestions become more about coping with the pressures of leadership. The four themes below summarize how administrators suggested preparing administrators during pre-service preparation programs or early in their administrative careers.

These recommendations can be used to develop a specialized course that better equips future school administrators for the realities of their roles.

1. Enhanced Practical Training

- Programs should incorporate hands-on experience in crisis management, student behavior interventions, and social-emotional learning (SEL).
- Training should emphasize managing personnel, board relationships, and legal processes related to hiring and firing.
- Programs should increase exposure to the challenges of charter schools and small districts.

2. Mentorship and Support Systems

- Districts should establish structured mentorship programs with experienced administrators guiding new hires.
- “New Administrator Academies” and external coaching opportunities should be developed to provide continuous support.
- Financial incentives for assistant principals and other leadership support roles should be considered to ease the administrative workload.

3. Advocacy and Systemic Support

- State and district agencies should reduce unnecessary administrative burdens, including redundant reporting requirements.
- AI and technology tools should be leveraged to streamline administrative tasks.
- Administrator voices should have greater representation at the district, regional, and state levels for policy changes that support work-life balance and compensation.

4. Focus on Coping Strategies and Well-Being

- Training should address stress management techniques, emphasizing social support, boundary setting, and self-care.
- Districts should create a culture where administrators feel validated and supported rather than isolated.
- Encouraging collaboration and resource-sharing among administrators can foster a sense of community.

In-Service Administrative Support

The second inquiry of the Focus Groups addressed how we can support administrators with their job-related stressors as they work to maintain a positive relationship with being a building leader. One area discussed was how to support administrators who lead schools other than traditional, general education schools. This included charter schools, online academies, and smaller school districts where administrators must take on dual roles, such as those of teacher and principal. Suggestions for support included mentor programs, which were also suggested for new administrators. Focus group participants discussed the need for more information on support groups, such as the Educator Advancement Council (EAC) and regional education service districts. The four themes below were gleaned from the focus group participants when discussing how to support in-service administrators at the district, regional, and state levels.

1. District and State Level Support

- Recognition of the stress administrators are expected to navigate using partners like COSA would be validating. This would include workshops and conferences that included these topics.

- The desire for increased support from district office personnel in managing certain tasks was discussed. Some administrators said they would welcome additional conversations and planning with their supervisors.
- One suggestion was to have advocates at the state level who could help explore the topics of administrative stress within regions.

2. Reducing Administrative Tasks

- The use of AI tools to assist in managing certain administrative tasks was mentioned. Further training on available options at the local and state level during workshops and conferences.
- Administrators wondered what reports and paperwork could be reduced or delegated.

3. Mentorship and Support Systems

- The importance of mentorship and support from colleagues was emphasized, with suggestions for establishing mentorship programs in districts to support all administrators, not just new leaders in their initial years.
- Participants discussed the importance of creating conditions that allow colleagues to support one another and have a designated “go-to” person, whether it is a supervisor or another colleague.
- Normalizing the conversation about coping with job-related stress for administrators was emphasized. Having a better understanding and support system within a district was seen as valuable.

4. Advocacy and Visibility

- Participants discussed the importance of trust and validation from district-level administrators and a need for advocacy and visibility for administrative voices.

- Participants suggested identifying opportunities for current administrators to have a stronger collective voice at the district, local, and state levels, advocating for better work-life balance and compensation.

Convergence of Phase One Survey and Phase Two Focus Group Results

The intent of the Phase One survey was to gather insights into job-related stressors, their impact, and coping strategies used by Oregon elementary administrators. Phase Two focus groups expanded on initial data, including how to support pre- and in-service administrators in navigating stressors. Below are parallels between the results of the two data collection phases.

Challenging and Difficult Student Behaviors and Professional Development

Phase One data revealed that consistently navigating challenging and often difficult student behavior was the number one job-related stressor. Seventy-four percent of respondents reported student behavior as something they find most difficult and time-consuming. Interestingly, the coping strategies shared in the survey did not indicate these issues were being addressed as administrators worked to maintain their own well-being. Only 31% of respondents said they use intentional planning to address stressors and just 25% said they plan how to improve job-related stress. Phase Two data revealed that administrators expressed a need for support in addressing behavior and emphasized incorporating additional strategies into their professional development as in-service administrators. They also suggested deeper training during pre-service work in areas of conflict resolution with students, staff, and caregivers.

Feelings of Isolation and Loneliness Partnered with Increased Social Supports

Social Supports were mentioned in Phase One as two of the top-ranked coping strategies used by administrators in dealing with job-related stressors. Social support with colleagues (43%) and family or friends (68%) helped leaders deal with the overwhelming feelings of

isolation and loneliness. Phase Two participants discussed how to incorporate the need for social support into the professional services offered by state partners, such as COSA, as well as the necessity of having support integrated within their districts through the use of mentors and intentional recognition of these stressors.

Workload and Time Concerns Mitigated with Further Research and Ideas

Phase Two participants discussed the evolving use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools that could alleviate some of the workload. While this technology is new and still being explored for various reasons, such as security and authenticity, it may help alleviate an administrator's paperwork burden. 73% of Phase One participants listed an unending workload as a job-related stressor—62% said staff observations and evaluations were stressful and 60% said they felt there was insufficient time to meet expectations. With the training and use of AI tools to address these stressors, it's possible to support administrators in these areas. The increased use of mentors to help guide and counsel on time management, as discussed in Phase Two, may also help tackle the required activities of a building leader.

The integration of data from Phase One and Phase Two underscores the need for further discussion. The next chapter will explore these findings, focusing on enhancing the preparation of aspiring administrators, identifying valuable improvements in support for current administrators, and highlighting how these insights connect with the existing literature.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss (a) gaps in preparing our aspiring administrators, (b) supports available to our current administrators that need improvement, (c) how findings address the research questions and relate back to the empirical literature base, (d) acknowledge limitations, and finally, (e) suggest how findings can inform future research and preparation programs.

Research Questions

This mixed-methods study explored research on job-related stressors, their impact, and the coping strategies used by Oregon elementary administrators to address these stressors. A quantitative survey was used to gather data from around the state of Oregon, and focus groups were conducted to gather qualitative data. The research questions (RQ) that guided this work are:

- RQ1. What are the job-related stressors encountered by Oregon elementary school administrators, and how do those stressors impact administrators' professional and personal lives?
- RQ2. What coping strategies do Oregon elementary school administrators use to manage the impact of job-related stress?
- RQ3. How can we better prepare and support administrators for real-life job-related stressors and their impact?

Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed that elementary administrators in Oregon experience significant job-related stressors, primarily due to increasing workload demands and heightened expectations for improved student achievement. The top-ranked stressors include managing student behavior, navigating personnel issues, and balancing instructional leadership with administrative tasks.

Many administrators reported feeling overwhelmed by excessive compliance-related paperwork and challenges in managing their time. Additionally, the emotional weight of supporting staff, students, and caregivers in a high-pressure environment contributes to exhaustion and burnout. Many participants expressed that their pre-service training programs could be improved to better prepare them for the realities of the role, particularly in areas such as crisis management, conflict resolution, and managing competing demands.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that administrators employ various strategies to cope with and/or mitigate stress, including prioritizing self-care and seeking support in social contexts, such as with colleagues, friends, and family. However, systemic barriers—such as inadequate funding and rigid schedules—often limit their ability to implement effective stress-reduction measures. Many administrators emphasized the need for more comprehensive pre-service support, including hands-on leadership internships, practical training in emotional resilience, and stronger mentorship connections before they assume their roles.

Study data suggests that enhancing pre-service preparation through immersive field experiences and targeted skill-building could better equip future administrators to navigate job-related stressors. Additionally, providing targeted resources, such as mental health support and leadership coaching, could improve administrator well-being and retention. These insights underscore the need for intentional planning that fosters sustainable support systems for school leaders, thereby enhancing both their effectiveness and job satisfaction, which could lead to improved administrator retention.

Navigating Job-Related Stress, Impacts, and Coping Strategies

Survey results indicate that the most frequently cited stressors among elementary administrators are chronic and difficult student behaviors, personnel issues with existing staff, and a workload that seems never to get done. These findings are supported by Carr's (1994) earlier study, in which the top stress-inducing factors were identified as a "lack of support, heavy work demands, and difficulty in interpersonal relationships with staff" (p. 27). Administrators expressed deep concern regarding the behavior of both students and adults within their schools. One participant described this issue as follows: "Student behaviors that are threatening and unsafe cause immense stress on the school system. The mental health, trauma, and other impacts are devastating on the individual and holding the school together."

These stressors are not isolated challenges but rather symptoms of broader systemic issues. DeMatthews et al. (2021) discussed how pressure for increased academic achievement and equity implementation adds considerable strain on administrators, particularly in high-poverty schools. Additionally, both Oplatka (2017) and Shoho and Barnett (2010) highlighted that personnel issues, particularly dealing with resistant or underperforming staff, significantly increase emotional exhaustion. Moreover, many administrators in this study reported being the sole leader in their building, which exacerbated their sense of responsibility and contributed to a feeling of being overwhelmed. As one respondent shared, "Being the only administrator in the school means everything is my responsibility...most days, I feel like I am drowning at work." This sense of isolation has been described by Mahfouz (2020) as a chronic and emotionally draining condition, one that fosters burnout and disengagement if not appropriately addressed.

The impacts of stress on administrators were multifaceted, affecting them physically, emotionally, and mentally. The most frequently cited impacts in the survey included persistent

fatigue, consideration of leaving the profession, and increased irritability. Nearly half (46%) of administrators reported seriously considering leaving the field of education—a trend that aligns with national data, for example, from the New Teacher Center (2018), which reported that 50% of new principals leave the profession within their first three years.

Additional research literature further corroborates these findings. For instance, Skaalvik (2020) emphasized the role of self-efficacy in administrators' decisions to remain in the profession. When administrators question their ability to meet expectations or lack the necessary support, their confidence diminishes, and the likelihood of attrition increases. Administrators also reported health-related outcomes, such as elevated blood pressure, headaches, and disrupted sleep. One respondent disclosed, "My physical health has deteriorated...I worry about the long-term impact on my health and longevity." These findings echo Poirel and Yvon's (2014) observation that ongoing disruptions and urgent matters detract from task completion and provoke physiological stress responses. Mahfouz (2020) further explained that such chronic stress can manifest as emotional dysregulation, sadness, and feelings of guilt—especially when administrators sacrifice personal or family time for professional obligations. A pervasive theme throughout the narratives was feelings of isolation and loneliness, an issue previously identified by Dussault and Thibodeau (1997) as contributing to withdrawal behaviors. As one administrator succinctly noted, "This is a job of isolation! If you don't like that, this is not the job for you."

In the face of these significant stressors, administrators reported engaging in a variety of coping strategies. The most frequently cited included physical exercise, social support from family and friends, sleep, and engaging in hobbies. These strategies reflect a combination of proactive self-care and emotional regulation practices. As one participant stated, "I have discovered prioritizing daily physical movement has substantially improved my mental and

physical health”. This is consistent with research by Mahfouz (2018), who found that physical activity and mindfulness significantly improved participants’ capacity to manage stress. Likewise, Beausaert et al. (2016) found that collegial support functions as a protective buffer against burnout, particularly when the support comes from peers in similar roles.

Another critical strategy identified in both the literature and the current study’s data was intentional disconnection from work. Some administrators reported deleting work-related apps from their phones or setting strict boundaries around work communications after hours. Barker et al. (2020) recommended such boundary-setting practices, noting that disconnecting from the “work brain” can restore emotional equilibrium and promote healthier work-life integration. However, despite these strategies, several participants indicated that available coping mechanisms were insufficient to offset the systemic and ongoing challenges they faced. One administrator described the effort to rest and reset: “Sleep is my favorite because it is an escape. It doesn’t eliminate or lessen the stress, though.” This suggests that while individual coping strategies may offer temporary relief, they are likely ineffective longer-term in isolation. As suggested by Dor-Haim and Oplatka (2021), systemic interventions—including district-wide social networks, coaching, and leadership collaboration—may be necessary to reduce burnout and increase retention.

Enhancing Administrative Preparation and Development

A prevailing theme from the focus group data was the need for enhanced practical training. Participants emphasized that preparation programs must go beyond theoretical instruction and provide immersive, scenario-based experiences that mirror real-world challenges. Specifically, they called for training in crisis management, student behavior intervention, social-emotional learning (SEL), and managing personnel performance issues. This aligns with Gmelch

and Gates' (1998) recommendation that programs must incorporate “survival skills” such as time management, conflict resolution, and negotiation. Their study found that 65% of administrators’ stress is work-related and that most administrators work an average of 54 hours per week. These demands underscore the urgency of providing pre-service candidates with tools to navigate the emotional intensity of the role.

Furthermore, focus group participants expressed a need for training that includes exposure to the legal processes surrounding hiring and firing, as well as experience in small districts and charter schools, which often present unique challenges. Poirel and Yvon (2014) similarly advocated for emotional and transactional training in preparation programs for administrators. In their study of six school leaders, participants expressed visible anger, anxiety, and frustration during recorded workdays—emotions that traditional training programs rarely address. These findings highlight the need for preparation programs that acknowledge and address the emotional labor inherent in leadership.

Another major gap identified by both the focus group and literature is the lack of training around self-care and emotional resilience. Ray et al. (2020) found that over half of practicing administrators reported sacrificing their personal lives multiple times per week, with many working extensive hours outside of contracted time. Despite this, few reported receiving any training in wellness or personal time management during their preparation for administrator roles. This concern was echoed by Mahfouz (2020), who noted that 67% of administrators felt unprepared for the emotional demands of leadership, despite their formal training. In light of this, focus group participants recommended that preparation programs incorporate coping strategies, boundary setting, and wellness habits into coursework and internship experiences. These proactive strategies align with Shoho and Barnett’s (2010) assertion that emotional and

interpersonal competencies are crucial for early-career administrators, particularly as they transition to a leadership identity and navigate shifting relationships with colleagues.

The focus on stress management and mental health support must be framed not as a peripheral component of training, but as central to leadership effectiveness and retention. As one focus group participant noted, helping administrators develop these skills “before the doors open to a new school year” could be critical in building long-term capacity and resilience. These ideas align with the work of DeMatthews et al. (2021), who suggested adapting models of self-care commonly used in other professions, such as counseling. They recommended regular check-ins, reduced workload expectations, and time carved out for professional reflection and wellness. The focus group further emphasized that administrators must feel validated and supported by their institutions, rather than isolated and overburdened. This requires a cultural shift in how educational leadership is viewed and supported at all levels.

Participants also strongly emphasized the need for structured mentorship and ongoing support systems, especially during the transition from preparation programs into leadership roles. They advocated for district-sponsored mentorship programs, continued involvement in new administrator academies, and coaching opportunities that extend beyond the first year of principalship. These ideas are well-supported by the literature. Shoho and Barnett (2010) found that many new administrators felt unprepared in areas such as communication, conflict management, and daily operations, and that mentoring relationships were vital in bridging these gaps. Bauer and Brazer (2018) also highlighted the value of coaching, recommending a customized approach that addresses both the personal development and operational capacity of new leaders. They argued that coaching not only reduces isolation but helps administrators develop effective school systems and decision-making processes—skills that are often not fully

developed during initial training. Similarly, Tekleselassie and Villarreal (2011) found that district-sponsored internships and early-career training were correlated with lower turnover among principals. These findings reinforce the notion projected by study participants that mentorship and ongoing professional development must be integrated into both the training and early-career phases of leadership to enhance retention and satisfaction.

The Importance of Support and Advocacy for In-Service Administrators

As school leadership continues to evolve in complexity, attention must be paid not only to preparing aspiring administrators but also to sustaining those currently in the field. The data from focus group discussions and existing literature converge on a pressing issue: current and veteran administrators require ongoing support to maintain resilience, effectiveness, and professional satisfaction. Without such support, the risk of burnout, turnover, and diminished leadership capacity increases, particularly in under-resourced or high-stakes school environments.

A recurring theme from the focus group was the recognition that not all administrators lead in the same context, and therefore, support systems must be flexible and context sensitive. Leaders in charter schools, small districts, and online academies face unique challenges, often assuming multiple roles simultaneously, such as those of teacher and principal. These realities demand differentiated supports that go beyond traditional leadership training. Participants emphasized the need for increased visibility and inclusion of non-traditional school leaders in statewide initiatives and support networks, such as the Educator Advancement Council (EAC) and regional education service districts in Oregon. Their suggestions reflect a growing awareness that leadership supports cannot be designed and implemented as a one-size-fits-all approach.

One of the most strongly endorsed supports from focus group participants was the creation and expansion of mentorship and peer support systems for all administrators, not just those in their first years. Participants stressed the value of having a designated “go-to” person, whether a supervisor or peer, for support and guidance. This finding echoes Bauer and Brazer’s (2018) recommendation for intentional coaching tailored to the needs of both novice and experienced administrators. Their research emphasized coaching as a strategy not only to build administrative capacity but also to reduce isolation and support leaders in navigating daily operational challenges, such as budgeting, personnel management, and calendaring. Participants in the focus group also discussed the importance of normalizing conversations around administrative stress. Creating professional cultures where leaders can openly share struggles and coping strategies can promote emotional well-being and strengthen collegial bonds.

Focus group participants also highlighted that recognition and validation from district and state leadership are crucial to sustaining administrator morale. Leaders reported a desire for greater collaboration with supervisors and increased advocacy for their needs at the regional and state levels. An example of partnering administrator voice with professional development at the district level is to base the time spent during meetings on data that is an actual reflection of the district needs, not just top-down directions based on state needs. The survey data showed the top stressor as reported by administrators is challenging and difficult student behaviors while student achievement was ranked sixth as a stressor. The question each district should ask is how these are being addressed in administrator meetings. Is there more time spent on planning and passing down directives concerning student achievement because test scores are visible at a local, state and federal level and federal money depends on this data? Or will districts respond to the actual data realizing that increased student achievement cannot be accomplished if students are not

showing readiness to learn and the staff is spending more time managing behaviors than on classroom instruction? It is a delicate balance, so it is wise for district leaders to review their data and plan professional development to support specific challenges administrators must navigate.

One recommendation from the focus groups was to leverage organizations such as the Coalition of Oregon School Administrators (COSA) to provide workshops and conferences that explicitly address the emotional demands of leadership. This aligns with the recommendations of DeMatthews et al. (2021), who suggested that educational systems adopt self-care and workload management practices from fields such as counseling. These may include regular wellness check-ins, reduced expectations during high-stress periods, and scheduled time for self-reflection. Investing in the well-being of administrators is not a luxury—it is a strategic imperative for supporting and retaining them.

Additionally, participants expressed frustration about redundant or excessive administrative tasks and reporting obligations. Such sentiments highlight the need for systemic changes, including the utilization of AI tools to automate routine tasks and a clearer prioritization of responsibilities. Empowering administrators to focus on instructional leadership, school culture, and relationship-building—rather than being overwhelmed by paperwork—could significantly improve job satisfaction and retention. Focus group participants advocated for increased visibility of administrator voices at all levels—district, regional, and state. They emphasized the importance of trust between building leaders and district office personnel and called for opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that impact their work-life balance and compensation. These findings support Shoho and Barnett’s (2010) conclusion that emotional connection and relational trust with supervisors can significantly influence how

supported administrators feel in their roles. When administrators are trusted, heard, and involved in shaping policies, they are more likely to remain engaged and committed to their positions.

The results of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), administered in the Phase One survey, confirm and contextualize the research literature documenting the burdens of educational leadership. A majority (54%) of respondents scored in the moderate stress range, while 23% scored in the high stress range, suggesting that over three-quarters of administrators are functioning under considerable perceived stress. These self-reported levels of stress mirror the themes identified throughout the literature, particularly those related to role overload, personnel issues, and emotional exhaustion.

As detailed in the literature review, Carr (1994) identified top administrator stressors as a “lack of support, heavy work demands, and difficulty in interpersonal relationships with staff” (p. 27). These challenges are reflected in the PSS results, where 83% of respondents reported being upset by unexpected events, and 78% felt angered by things outside of their control. Moreover, 69% felt that “difficulties were piling up so high that they could not overcome them” (p. ?) reinforcing findings from Poirel and Yvon (2014), who observed frequent emotional disruption and stress responses in principals during the workday.

The high percentage (94%) of respondents who felt nervous or stressed “fairly often” or “very often” also aligns with Mahfouz’s (2020) findings that principals report frequent stress due to stakeholder conflict, particularly with parents and supervisors. This persistent emotional toll is further compounded by the isolating nature of the role. As Mahfouz noted, principals often feel “on the attack,” describing the work as lonely and emotionally draining.

Interestingly, while the PSS results show significant helplessness among administrators (e.g., only 26% felt they could always cope with what they had to do), they also reveal relatively

high levels of perceived self-efficacy at times. For instance, 97% of participants reported being able to handle personal problems at least sometimes, and 74% felt they were “on top of things” at least occasionally. This reflects research from Skaalvik (2020) and Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2004), who emphasized the critical role of self-efficacy in sustaining leaders’ motivation and buffering against burnout.

Despite this resilience, the tension between competence and chronic stress illustrates a growing concern—administrators may continue performing at high levels while privately experiencing unsustainable levels of strain. As noted by Friedman (2002), such “invisible stress” often precedes burnout and attrition. In this study, the emotional indicators in the PSS responses reinforce those findings, especially when coupled with feelings of role overload and systemic demands like evaluations, behavior management, and community engagement observed in survey and focus group findings.

Limitations

Educators move into a leadership role for many reasons, and regardless of why they became educational administrators, the literature shows there are countless stressors that have a direct impact on a person. That impact varies, and some of the stressors and impacts are unavoidable. It is crucial that this topic continues to be studied, and solid coping strategies be explored. Building leaders must continue and be supported in their quest to lead staff and students in positive student achievement and their training into becoming secure and confident adults. The cost of principal turnover is too high, and our students deserve a solid foundation in their formative years of schooling. To retain a strong leadership force in our schools, further research must be done.

Remaining Gaps in the Literature

The literature synthesis revealed gaps that may inform administrative preparation programs and administrative supports. While there is copious information about the stressors of being an administrator, there is still much to learn about coping strategies that are used and more specifically, encouraged and supported. For example, the research on district supported programs to promote self-care and emotional stability is scant, yet research shows this as a strategy used by some principals to cope with day-to-day impacts of stress. I question why we are not talking about this topic and normalizing the need for additional study. There is vast research, books written, and social media groups devoted to supporting teachers and helping them avoid burnout, yet the voice of administrators appears more muted perhaps in an effort to appear strong and stoic. As one administrator shared, “We are wired to ignore fatigue and loneliness.”

Scope of the Research

The nature of this research focused on a very specific portion of Oregon educational administrators—those at the elementary level. Data collected is limited to those who chose to participate in the survey and an even smaller portion of participants in focus groups. While their voices are important and may lead to positive exploration and change, the voices of the hundreds of administrators at elementary and other levels of education are crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the job-related stressors that impact our school leaders and how they successfully cope with these stressors. Continued and broadened research throughout the state would give a more in-depth understanding of these issues and offer results and remedies that may generalize more widely across school administrative contexts.

Positionality Bias

It is important to acknowledge my own biases when doing this research study. As a building principal who has been located in the same building for over a decade, I have witnessed changes in systems, fluctuations in funding, staff changes, and a significant shift in our students and families before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. While I tried to remain neutral, I discovered that some survey responses and focus group comments and data trends paralleled my experiences as an elementary principal. All efforts were made to remain non-biased and let the data and participants speak for themselves.

Recommendations for Practice

Despite the limitations mentioned, this study opened up opportunities to learn more and create a robust environment where administrators at all levels can continue to thrive. The multitude of expectations that are part of an administrative career is not diminishing over time. Recognition of the need based on data is just the beginning; now is the time to move forward in our efforts to learn more and create the conditions for sustainable working conditions.

Further Support for Challenging Student Behavior

Many participants in the survey rated “Chronic and Challenging Student Behavior” as the top stressor they encountered. One participant stated, “The increased student behavior needs to take all of my time during the day, and there is no time for administrative responsibilities.” Another participant shared their stress about feeling supported with challenging behaviors when they said, “In addition, our SPED numbers of students with intense behavioral needs have greatly increased with little to no extra support.” Lastly, another example of the balance between being an instructional leader and supporting other services is when a participant stated, “I spend more

time managing business tasks and difficult student behavior than I do supporting teachers in the classroom to improve instruction (quality feedback, relationship building, etc.).”

These examples highlight the need for continued training in social/emotional understanding of our students and our communities. I wonder about the current training our new administrators receive in their prep programs. Are they learning specific education on what our post-Covid student population looks like? Have our coursework and programs adapted to an increase in what administrators are experiencing in their buildings? I recommend we continue working with specific agencies, such as COSA and Education Service Districts in Oregon and provide training on what current trends we are seeing in student behavior, support building, and district teams that look at the data and have to plan a response based on what they learn. Students’ needs have changed over the last 5-10 years, and we do not do ourselves any favors by continuing to use a system that was made for a pre-COVID pandemic world. The stress of not being able to address all of our building needs was summed up by a participant with this statement, “What we are expected to do and deal with on a daily basis is overwhelming. I am someone who likes to be good at what I am doing and do a good job with what is required of me. There is just not enough time in the day to get everything done that we are asked to do. I am constantly getting pulled away for student behaviors, and this year, parent behavior has been a big issue. If I truly want to get everything done, it has to be on my own time...”

Allocating Additional and Targeted Resources

Budgets are consistently stressed in education and Oregon is no different. Over the years, we have seen a struggle for many districts to maintain their service level, and in the absence of funding, something always gets reduced or eliminated. Despite these difficulties, we still are called to equitably educate all children, and I have faith individuals got into school

administration to make a difference and improve learning for all children. That being said, it is clear administrators are struggling with how to maintain a balance of resources and still provide for the students currently served, not the ones who came to us with a very different set of abilities a few years ago. It is time to rally together in districts, regions, and statewide to determine what we need to change, what we can take away to reduce workload, and what current concerns are most prevalent in our communities. Our children will continue to come to us with diverse needs, but are we ready to meet them with the current landscape of support resources?

Making Connections and Building a Foundation

The data is clear and convincing that we need each other to navigate through the perils of school leadership. Social support with colleagues, friends, and family ranked as two of the top six coping strategies for job-related stressors. Since time management is also a factor in job satisfaction, participants clearly recommended that districts create the opportunity for administrators to gather together for not only formal meetings where decision-making occurs but also to include pockets of time where they can informally discuss how they are managing throughout the day. It may be as simple as leaders gathering together for a long lunch. This requires relationship building so there can be safety in being open, honest, and vulnerable around job-related stressors and coping strategies.

To move forward without having the sense that problems were only observed but not addressed, a framework should be created that allows both to occur. Of course, leaving your building to attend these gatherings can be a stressor, so district-level support in managing supervision would be helpful. I am fortunate to work in a district where our Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent each visit once a month to listen and provide specific supports. For example, they will do observations with me, talk about teachers' instruction, discuss building

culture, or help me make plans for an upcoming professional development day. They have even come for dismissal help or to support with an escalated student. This is a commitment they make to each of us who lead buildings, so they stay connected with what is happening, and it is a clear message to building leaders that our work is understood and valued. They have created the conditions for me to be vulnerable without feeling judged, which leads me to provide similar support for my teachers and staff. These are values in our district, and it behooves us to revisit what works to identify and alleviate job-related stressors, and then, create opportunities to practice and evaluate their application in real time.

A few years ago, my supervisor wrote a letter to my parents and detailed the positive things I was doing in my building. This investment in his time was a distinct reminder to me that I was appreciated and valued. It was also a strong connection my family could then make with the work that I do because no one can fully understand what it means to be a school principal unless they have done it. Equipping family and friends of school administrators who lead different lives is imperative to realizing the feeling of contentment and peace that is crucial when school leadership work gets overwhelming. School administrators should discuss with important members of their family and social circles what they need when it is not only time to share victories but also when they need someone to listen. Normalize the discussion on what it means when job-related stressors are impactful and active support is needed (or not). Plan ahead so the stress of personal withdrawal does not become equated with relationship distancing. Some leaders can merge personal and professional lives; some cannot; both should be accepted. But school administrators using relationships with colleagues, friends, and family might be the key to sustainable years in the profession, so being intentional with these resources appears essential based on prior research literatures and findings from this study.

Thriving Through the Labyrinth: Strategies for Effective Leadership in Education

The convergence of information gleaned from this research leads me to question what type of coursework would be beneficial to our aspiring administrators. While we are moving from classroom teachers to a much broader form of leadership and preparing to manage staff, finances, safety, curriculum, and instruction, we do not have intentional opportunities to learn about the day-to-day scenarios that often consume an average day. I propose a graduate-level course that is taught in administrative licensing programs that encompass real-life scenarios that building leaders must navigate. For example, there isn't a lot of preparation given to administrators to deal with a parent who is screaming obscenities at you and threatening to call the news media. When do principals practice having difficult conversations with a teacher, writing a letter of expectation, and then making the difficult decision to move it into a Plan of Assistance? When do you learn strategies for working with Union Representatives beyond the days when you might have served as a Union Rep? There are books available to help new administrators prepare for the school year on a month-to-month basis however, the research shows this information would be helpful to have as you move through your program. One that can be added to as you do your practicum or talk to experienced administrators and have the benefit of a skilled instructor to advise you.

Opportunities for Future Research

The results from this mixed-method research project have revealed school administrator voices that need heard if we are to sustain an administrative workforce at the elementary level that is thriving and long-term. The needs of this group were clear as they shared their job-related stressors and how they successfully and unsuccessfully cope daily; however, two additional areas would add to our current understanding of school administrative needs and support.

Multi-Level Analysis of Administrative Stress in Education

This research included elementary administrators in the state of Oregon. I can attest due to my background as a secondary Science teacher, that the needs of secondary buildings vary from those of elementary needs. Further research should be conducted to learn more about the job-related stressors and their impact from a secondary administrative point of view. I hypothesize that even the demographic data would be different, such as the gender differences on who leads elementary schools and who leads secondary schools. The vastly different expectations on district level and early childhood administrators would most likely lead to an assortment of answers that would have some crossover. These might include personnel issues and time concerns being similar job-related stressors, as well as some of their coping strategies. That being said, they would each have unique characteristics, one could hypothesize, since the populations they serve are very different. As with elementary administrators, there is a gap in research that marries what we know about stress and how we can support educational leaders.

Professional Organizations and How They Can Support

In the survey research participants noted coping strategies they use to manage job-related stressors and their impact. As the data shows, physical exercise and social supports ranked very high in strategies to manage stress. In the focus group conversations, we discussed how we can support pre-service administrators with mentor programs as well as current administrators with support through professional organizations, like COSA, Regional Educator Networks (REN), the Educator Advancement Council (EAC), and the regional Education Service Districts (ESD). When one participant in the focus group stated, “What I would like to see districts do is tap into the REN or the ESD...Right now, the focus is teachers, which makes sense, but an educator should be all of us.” The participant was advocating for improved visibility of these

organizations within the systems of supports used by administrators. Such visibility can only happen if there is a strong relationship with districts so there is a clear gap in what these organizations can provide versus what administrators are aware of and have the time to connect with. The inclusion of supports from organizations like these made available specifically to school administrators would be a strong addition to an administrative preparation program as aspiring administrators prepare to be building leaders and colleagues within a district team.

Conclusion

Any kind of service profession is prime for job-related stressors. I have spent my entire career learning how to serve others in hopes I could help a child grow into a confident adult. Being an educator, regardless of the age of your student, has to be rooted in love and compassion for other people. We go into this work knowing we have skills to help others, and we return, year after year, with hopes for a strong school year. When you transition from the classroom into a leadership position, those hopes don't change, even if your audience expands to include caregivers, staff, and other building leaders. What does change is the shift from being able to share certain feelings, to set boundaries based on a bell or class schedule, or to turn off work when the day is done. When you become an administrator, you have more people relying on you as well as a broader scope of responsibilities. We prepare for this type of stress; however, there is a tipping point where it becomes unmanageable for some people, and the impacts begin to make strong leaders question their ability to continue in education. As one survey participant summed it up, "I love my school & my students so much, but I question daily whether this job is worth the toll it's taking on my mental health. It's a daily battle to not let it seep into my home life - my marriage & my own children." While we have certain coping strategies to help us have a sustainable work-life balance and experience many pockets of joy and professional satisfaction,

we must also acknowledge our struggles and seek support. Reframing the narrative that this might be a weakness is imperative, and it is up to those of us who choose leadership to make a difference. The knowledge and support are out there, and there are amazing colleagues and mentors we know or have not met yet who we can collaborate with and lead the way. Education, one of the oldest forms of loving someone else, is worth it, and so are the leaders.

APPENDIX A

OREGON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR SURVEY

Thank you for taking a few moments to share your experiences as an Oregon elementary school administrator. This survey is expected to take no more than ten to fifteen minutes, and your responses will be used to help inform school districts, the Oregon Department of Education, and Administrator Preparation Programs about the stressors faced by elementary administrators in our state as well as ways administrators have found to cope with the stress of the job.

Demographic questions for all participants

1. Type of elementary school – categories being researched through ODE and NCES
 - . Rural
 - Suburban
 - Urban
 - Online
 - Hybrid
2. Role within the elementary school
 - . Principal
 - Assistant/Vice Principal
 - Teacher
 - Superintendent
3. Do you have an administrator colleague in your building or location?
 - . Yes, I work with a Principal or Assistant/Vice Principal on a regular basis
 - Yes, but we don't have regular interactions due to our roles
 - No, I am the only administrator in my building
4. Years of administrative experience overall (drop down options)
 - 0-2 years
 - 3-5 years
 - 6-8years
 - 9-14 years
 - 15 or more years
5. Gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-Binary/third gender
 - Prefer not to say
6. Age
 - 21-25 years old
 - 26-30 years old
 - 31-35 years old
 - 36-40 years old
 - 41-45 years old
 - 46-50 years old
 - 51-55 years old
 - 56-60 years old

60-65 years old

>65 years old

7. Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian / Pacific Islander

Black or African American

Hispanic

White / Caucasian

Multiple ethnicity

Prefer not to answer

8. The following 10 questions come from a validated scale on perceived stress to calculate your current level of stress. To learn more, visit: <https://novopsych.com.au/assessments/well-being/perceived-stress-scale-pss-10/> Each of the 10 questions use an ordinal scale with answers being given a score of 0-4. The answer options are: Never, Almost Never, Sometimes, Fairly Often, Very Often.

- In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
- In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
- In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?
- In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
- In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
- In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
- In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
- In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?
- In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?
- In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

Questions below offer multiple options to choose from, allowing you to select all that apply, and offer additional information, if desired.

9. Which of the following job-related experiences routinely lead to personal or professional stress for you? Select all that apply.

- High expectations for improved student academic achievement
- Personnel issues related to hiring (e.g., unfilled positions and the hiring process).
- Personnel issues related to existing staff (mediocre performance, attendance, etc.)
- Balancing the budget
- Maintaining financial reports
- Staff observations and evaluations

- Feeling inadequate to meet job-related expectations
- Students' socio-economic concerns
- Student absenteeism
- Insufficient time to meet expectations
- A workload that seems never to get done
- Ensuring curriculum is being used with fidelity
- Chronic and difficult student behaviors
- Relationships with caregivers/families
- Providing ongoing professional development for staff
- Relationships with supervisors
- Taking work home and missing out on family or personal time
- Working location or neighborhood concerns
- Lack of experience in leadership
- Feelings of bias due to age or gender
- Feelings of bias due to race/ethnicity

10. From this same list above, please identify the **top 3** biggest job-related stressors you experience.
11. Optional (but please consider sharing!) – Provide any additional information to help explain your answers. Rest assured; all responses will be kept confidential.
12. Which of the following impacts of job-related stress do you encounter on a routine basis? Check all that apply.
- Chronic fatigue
 - Increased heart rate or high blood pressure
 - Frequent headaches
 - Emotional sensitivity or dysregulation
 - Sadness or depression
 - Chronic low-level anger
 - Resentment toward certain staff
 - Strained relationships at your work location
 - Strained relationships at home
 - Desire to leave your current position
 - Desire to leave the field of education entirely
13. Optional (but please consider sharing!) – Provide any additional information to help explain your answers. Rest assured; all responses will be kept confidential.
14. What coping strategies do you use to manage the impact of job-related stress? Check all that apply.
- Physical exercise like walking, hiking, organized sports

- Social support with colleagues
 - Social support from other friends or family
 - Mindfulness practices such as breathing or meditation
 - Maintaining a functional work-life balance
 - Video or electronic games
 - Planning vacations
 - Sleep
 - Hobbies outside of work
 - Intentional planning to address job-related stressors
 - Further education/professional development to help improve your practice
15. From this same list above, please identify the **top 3** coping strategies you use to manage job-related stressors.
 16. Optional (but please consider sharing!) – Provide any additional information to help explain your answers. Rest assured; all responses will be kept confidential.
 17. Please feel free to share anything else about your job-related stress, the impact on you, or your coping strategies that was not addressed sufficiently in the questions above.
 18. I'm looking for up to 12 volunteers to participate in a focus group on how we can better support administrators (both in training programs and on the job). If you would like to be considered for focus group participation, please click on the link below to share your contact information. Rest assured, your survey responses will remain completely anonymous and will not be linked to your name or contact information. Focus groups will be held via Zoom and will last no more than 60 minutes. Thank you for taking the time to help in this valuable research!

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Group Protocol - Questions will parallel those in the survey (see Appendix A) but will leave space for additional dialogue. The added question that relates to RQ 3 will be added:

What guidance would you think would be beneficial to share with new Oregon elementary administrators about job-related stressors and coping strategies?

Focus groups will consist of 5-6 participants collected from the initial survey using a Voluntary Response Sampling technique and will be conducted after work hours in a virtual format using Zoom. Two sessions will occur with two groups, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. All participant information will remain confidential and will be coded to protect privacy. Participants will be giving consent to be audio recorded as part of their participation. I will use Zoom to record the focus groups and transcribe the conversation using NotebookLM.

Focus Group Description

Date and Time: January 14 and 16, 2025

Location: Virtual via Zoom

Focus Group Facilitator: Susan Olds

Research questions

RQ1: What are the job-related stressors and their impact encountered by Oregon elementary administrators?

RQ2: What coping strategies do Oregon elementary administrators use to manage the impact of job-related stress?

RQ3: How can we better prepare and support administrators for real-life job-related stressors and their impact?

Method

Two focus groups will be conducted to learn how elementary administrators experience job-related stressors and coping strategies in my district. I will ask them to share their thoughts on additional questions not asked that might help me understand the research questions asked on the statewide survey. I will also expand my questioning to include their thoughts on strategies that would help support new administrators and administrative training programs as well as how to support current administrators. This method, a Nominal Group Technique (NGT), will be used because it capitalizes on the expertise of those who are involved in educational administration and may generate findings that are deemed clinically significant when participants can share their experiences at the same session (Harvey & Holmes, 2012).

Focus Group Participants

The focus groups will comprise current elementary administrators in Oregon. They will vary in age, years of experience, and race/ethnicity. They will be randomly placed into two groups.

Focus Group Questions

Question 1: After reviewing the data from the survey on job-related stressors, their impact, and coping strategies used by Oregon elementary administrators, do you see anything that stands out? Do you notice any trends?

Question 2: Did this survey data answer RQ1 and RQ2?

Participants will review narratives from the survey that describe perceptions on job-related stressors and their impact. Time will be given for a brief reflection on these narratives prior to moving to RQ3.

Question 3: What topics/study programs would you create for an administrative preparation program or mentor program to help administrators deal with work-related stressors?

Probe 3a: If you were designing a class for rising administrators to take during their preparation program based on your knowledge of stressors they will encounter, what would you include?

Probe 3b: What advice would you give new administrators on handling work-related stress?

Probe 3c: What supports would help you be more satisfied in your leadership position

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