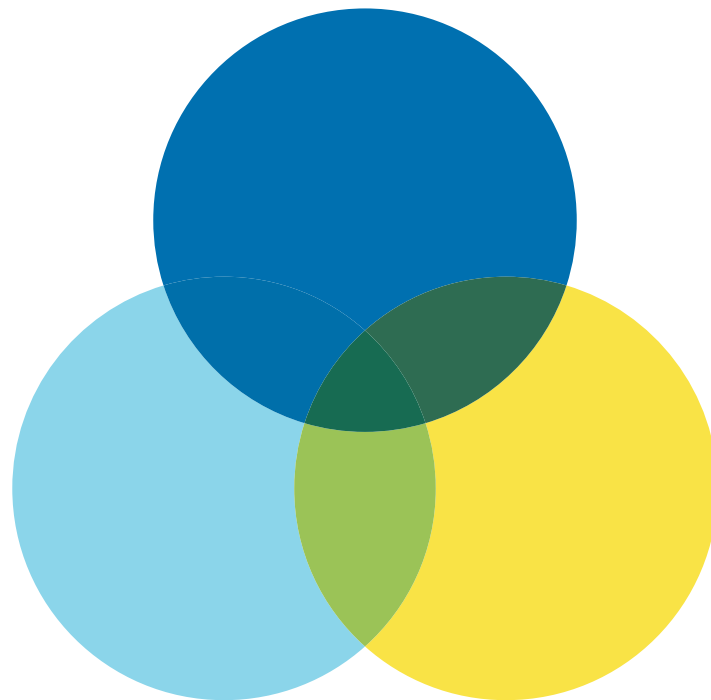


# EMPOWERING **SCHOOL LEADERS** TO THRIVE

Lessons Learned from School Leaders on What They Need  
to Cultivate Well-Being in Themselves & Others



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# Executive Summary

In a year marked by unprecedented challenges and unending change, our public school leaders have bravely taken to the front lines in support of students, teachers and families throughout the community. The role of a principal has always been highly complex, but the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting economic recession, and ongoing organizing for racial equity, have required leaders to be bolder and more resilient than ever before.

While a strong instructional leader is important for students' academic outcomes, times like this expose the reality that this alone is not enough. The pandemic has deepened equity gaps and led to mental health crises among students and adults alike, which will surely reverberate through schools for years to come. To navigate the complex, human-centered nature of this work, we must also ensure principals have the emotional capacity to persist through the volatility themselves, the commitment to cultivate resilience in others, and the skills to inspire a campus culture where everyone can thrive.

The Principal Impact Collaborative at UNT Dallas (PIC) is an organization dedicated to improving outcomes for public school students by investing in the school leaders who serve them. Since program inception in 2016, PIC has focused intentionally on building principals' personal resilience and well-being as a core program pillar and a key lever for improving whole campus outcomes.

After five-years of pioneering a holistic leadership development model for public school principals, we recognize this work has many layers and complexities. At the same time, we are compelled by the possibilities that emerge when we create spaces for school leaders to thrive and are committed to empowering other organizations to do the same.

## Through this whitepaper, we hope to:

1. Elevate the voices of principals to illuminate the challenges they face preventing them from prioritizing their well-being
2. Share the enabling conditions emerging within our own programming that leaders need to effectively manage their well-being
3. Provide actionable recommendations for district and preparation programs to advance leader well-being without compromising results

Through our research and focus groups with school leaders, the following **five key challenges** emerged that prevent leaders from prioritizing their well-being:

1. The meaning of “well-being” is inconsistent, lacking a common framework and language, across individuals and organizations
2. The complex, people-centered nature of the principalship creates an element of ambiguity, leading to “firefighting” and leaving principals feeling exacerbated, alienated, and burnt out
3. The “Super-Hero” personification of a principal puts well-being and achieving outcomes at odds
4. Many well-being supports tend to be misaligned to principal needs or lack follow-through, which leads to principals feeling undervalued or condescended
5. Lack of differentiated & responsive supports for Black and Brown principals leaves them to bear an even greater emotional burden and pressure to perform

Our work in this area has also led us to identify **five key enabling conditions** leaders need in order to effectively manage their well-being:

1. Well-being should be defined as more than “self-care” and should acknowledge the holistic picture of what adults need to thrive
2. Supporting principal well-being is more effective when it is embedded in broader leadership development
3. Creating intentional time & emotionally safe spaces for principals to focus on their well-being allows them to do so purposefully and without guilt
4. Developing adults’ capacity to manage their well-being takes time and positive reinforcement
5. Well-being is not “one-size-fits all” and requires a customized approach that honors personal identity and lived experiences

Lastly, we propose **five recommendations** for districts and preparation programs in order to prioritize school leader well-being in their organizations:

1. Acknowledge the tension between prioritizing principal well-being and campus outcomes, then work intentionally to create a more integrated vision and definition of success
2. Collect and include principal climate and well-being data in program evaluation and accountability systems
3. Develop mentorship and principal-coaching frameworks that explicitly include well-being
4. Create space for principals to “focus on the tough stuff”
5. Provide differentiated development opportunities, particularly on the basis of intersectional identity

Educator well-being is critical for remaining engaged and effectively supporting students

# Call to Action: Student Recovery Hinges on the Recovering Educator Well-Being

As campuses everywhere begin to re-open their doors to students and teachers, nearly 18 months after being shuttered by the Covid-19 pandemic, school and system leaders continue to face new and complex challenges related to the [recovery and reinvention](#) of our education system.

Students, on average, are likely to be coming into the 2021-2022 school year [five to nine months behind](#) academically—a figure that grows when looking specifically at Black and Brown students.<sup>1</sup> An estimated [48%](#) of students are likely to be suffering from pandemic-related mental health issues, and many continue to cope with the trauma from a year marked by loss, isolation, financial strife and our nation's long overdue emergent racial reckoning with inequity and injustice.<sup>2</sup> With the [heaviest toll](#) from the pandemic and resulting school closures taken on our most marginalized communities, an estimated [3 million students](#) may have disappeared from the system altogether.<sup>3,4</sup> The stakes are high and the margin-of-error is slim when it comes to charting the path forward.

At the same time, our educators on the front lines are experiencing the lowest morale on record. Exhausted by a year of [long hours](#) due to ever-changing instructional models and safety protocols, struggling to emotionally support and maintain meaningful connections with students, educators have worn the burden of the last year in more ways than most.<sup>5</sup> As of May 2021, [Rand Corp](#) found that 92% of

educators believe their job is more stressful now than prior to the pandemic, and are now nearly three times more likely to experience symptoms of depression than adults in other professions. These worrisome figures are likely to play out negatively in the classroom, ultimately resulting in [new vacancies](#) once the dust settles.<sup>6,7</sup> This is a national issue that will have ramifications far beyond our education system, and should be alarming to us all.

Today's systems leaders are facing an essential tension: balancing equitable student academic recovery, while also rebuilding the morale and well-being of their human capital. As school and systems leaders grapple with strategic decision-making surrounding their rebuilding efforts, this is [one of a few key tensions](#) that must be acknowledged as a [paradox](#) rather than a polarity.<sup>8</sup>

The long-game is critical here, and addressing student needs without also prioritizing the well-being of adults is nothing more than a short-term bandage. Schools are the cornerstones of our communities, and even the most well-intentioned efforts that fail to deliver on a ["both/and" solution](#) will likely exacerbate inequities across students, teachers, and families alike, compromising the long-term recovery across so many aspects of our society. In fact, scholars suggest an essential tenet of strong leadership is the ability to build [dynamic equilibrium](#) between tensions. This is done by actively recognizing conflicting imperatives (here, student and adult needs), while at the same time working to identify and leverage the connections that allow a leader to move forward faster.<sup>9</sup>

Who do we see as the single most important linchpin to creating a dynamic equilibrium between student and adult needs in schools?

**The school principal.**

## National State of Our Teachers

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**92%**

believe their job  
is more stressful  
post pandemic

---

**3x**

more likely to  
experience symptoms  
of depression

---

**1 in 4**

say they plan to  
leave the role  
within the year

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Prioritizing leader well-being is critical  
for the success of the leader, and ultimately  
the success of the campus.

# Its Starts at the Top: Creating More Resilient Schools

The [Principal Impact Collaborative at UNT Dallas](#) (PIC) works intimately with school leaders from across North Texas to drive impactful change on their campuses. Since program inception in 2016, PIC has focused intentionally on building principals' personal resilience and well-being as a core pillar of the program model and a lever for improving whole campus outcomes. The rationale is two-fold, with a nod towards creating greater dynamic equilibrium in schools.

First, we know that in order to effectively lead, leaders must prioritize their own social-emotional health. This allows for greater engagement, creativity, adaptability, strategic decision-making and, ultimately, long-term sustainability in their role.<sup>10</sup>

We also know an investment in leader well-being is a compounding investment in the social-emotional health of [teachers and students](#).<sup>11</sup> This is particularly true today, as pandemic-era stress, burnout and depressive symptoms among teachers are [significantly more likely](#) to occur when they do not feel their well-being is supported by their administration.<sup>6</sup>

On campuses where the principal possesses the awareness and skills to effectively prioritize their own social-emotional health, they are more likely to set the enabling conditions where their staff can do the same for themselves and their students.<sup>12</sup>

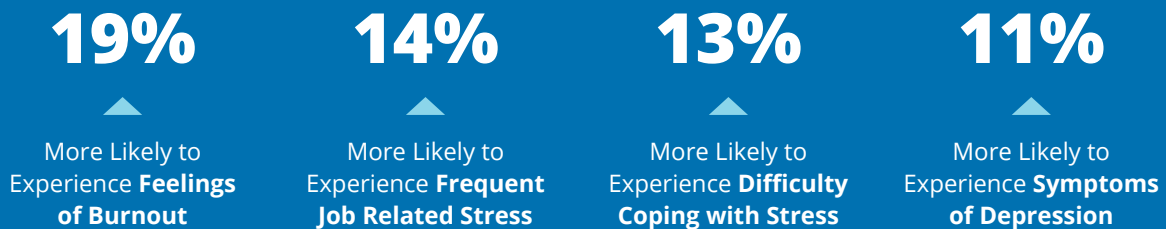
There is also evidence suggesting this creates a ripple effect that positively impacts student academic and community outcomes. A recent [study](#) from the Wallace Foundation found that replacing a below average principal with a high-performing principal leads to almost three extra months of learning for students. One of the four characteristics they found to be related to principal effectiveness: ability to build a productive climate.<sup>13</sup>



Additionally, a [study](#) by CASEL found that students with access to social-emotional supports in school, on average, demonstrate 11 percentile-point gains in academic achievement over those who do not have the same access.<sup>14</sup> Principals with higher social-emotional competencies are also likely to build stronger connections to communities, including partnerships with out-of-school programs and community agencies,<sup>11</sup> which are an essential tenet of post-Covid recovery.

Without strong and resilient leaders at the helm of our schools, we believe the status quo will maintain, and we run the risk of never recovering for students and communities what has been lost over the last eighteen months.

## Effects of An Unsupportive Administration on Teachers



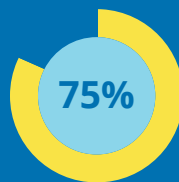
Source: Rand Corporation (2021). "Job Related Stress Threatens the Teacher Supply".

# Educator Morale: National Data Compared to PIC Results

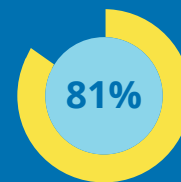
## In May 2020,

Nationally **54%** of administrators report a decline in their morale and **45%** say the pandemic is prompting them to leave their role sooner.

At the same time, **PIC principals** reported less work-related stress and feeling more empowered to persist since they began the program prior to Covid-19



Feel less work-related stress as a school leader



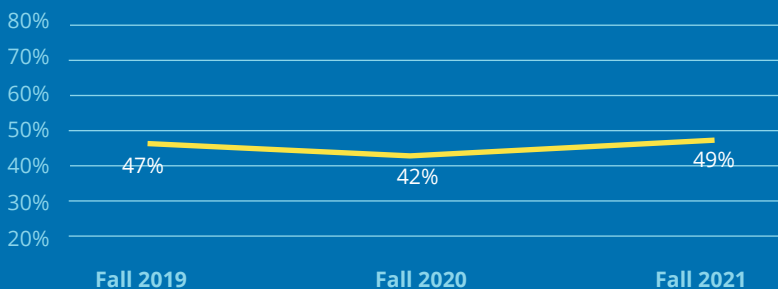
Feel more empowered to persist as a school leader

## In May 2021,

Nationally **92%** of teachers feel their job is more stressful than prior to the pandemic.

Teacher morale on **PIC led campuses** has remained stable since prior to the pandemic

PIC Cohort 2019: Pre- to Post-Pandemic Staff Survey  
*"Morale on my campus has improved this year"*



— % of educators selecting Agree or Strongly Agree

Note: The PIC data above represents snapshots in time that are consistent with the available national data. The longitudinal data on PIC teacher morale is from our 2019 Cohort, who was in their first year of programming in Fall 2019 (pre-pandemic). We recognize that the comparison between stress and morale is imperfect; however, we believe that the relation between the two allows us to make comparative inferences. While there is currently no dataset that provides 1:1 comparison between national and local data, PIC is working to build our body of data so that we can provide a more accurate analysis.

Sources: Nationally representative EdWeek Research Survey, 2020. n=447 <sup>28</sup>

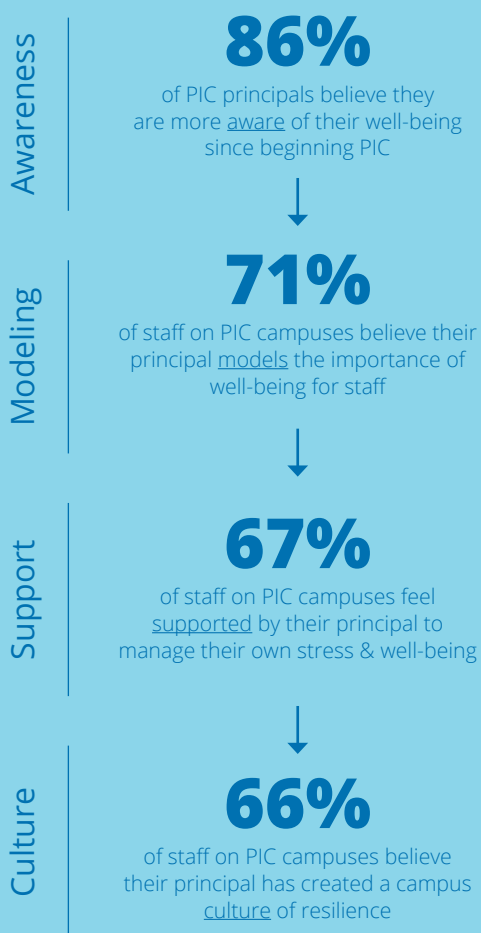
Nationally representative National Association of Secondary School Principals Survey, 2020. n=1020 <sup>29</sup>

Rand Corporation (2021). "Job Related Stress Threatens the Teacher Supply". <sup>3</sup>

PIC 2019 Cohort End-of-Year Staff Surveys, May 2019 - May 2021. <sup>30</sup>

# Road to a Culture of Well-Being Starts with the Principal

After a year of enduring the Covid-19 pandemic, **PIC school leaders have continued to foster resiliency on their campuses through a maintained commitment to well-being for themselves and for their staff.** These data are a welcome reprieve from educator data nationally, which shows drastic declines in morale, exacerbated by a perceived lack of support from campus administrators.



The effects of the pandemic on our schools are countless and are sure to reverberate for years to come. However, we have seen glimmers of hope in our program data provoking us to double down on the claim that prioritizing leader well-being is critical for the success of the leader, and ultimately, the success of the campus.

For example,

- In May 2021, despite the pandemic, 83% of all PIC principals reported feeling **more** empowered to persist in their role and 67% reported less work-related stress since starting the program prior to the pandemic;<sup>15</sup>
- 71% of staff on all PIC-led campuses felt their principal modeled the importance of well-being and 66% feel their principal created a culture of resilience on their campus;<sup>16</sup>
- 60% of staff on all PIC-led campuses feel that morale at their school has **improved** over the last year;<sup>16</sup>
- Despite ambiguity and pressure facing teachers everywhere, 69% of staff on all PIC-led campuses feel empowered by their principal to take risks and try new things in order to better serve students.<sup>16</sup> We see this as a byproduct of a more resilient campus culture and believe it will be an important enabling condition for teachers as they navigate the ambiguous road ahead.

Though the last eighteen months have been nothing short of harrowing, most principals would agree that it is simply a gargantuan-scale representation of the many smaller-scale challenges they are forced to reckon with on the job each day. We believe that if there is a true desire to recover what has been lost, our education institutions and systems cannot go back to the old way of operating. Focusing solely on academic recovery and campus outcomes is insufficient.

We must also account for the complex, human-centered nature of the work and ensure that we are equipping every educator with the skills they need to be resilient today and in the future.

After five-years of pioneering a holistic leadership development model for school leaders, we recognize this work is comprised of many nuances and complexities—many of which we ourselves are still understanding. At the same time, we know intimately the importance of creating space for school leaders to thrive and have set out to codify what we have learned in a way that empowers others to do the same.

## About our Methods

*The data, findings and recommendations discussed in this report represent a synthesis of five years of qualitative and quantitative program data from The Principal Impact Collaborative, combined with existing research that is currently present in the field. The authors of this report drew from quantitative program outcome data, historical qualitative data and input from program participants, as well as a series of focused group conversations and interviews, led by Dr. Yasmene Mumby, with 9 PIC participants and alumnae, 4 district leaders and 2 leaders of educator preparation programs.*

Educator well-being is critical for remaining engaged and effectively supporting students

# Five Challenges to Maintaining Well-Being for School Leaders

*We believe that the challenge of improving school leader well-being requires taking a human-centered approach towards understanding what is currently standing in the way. Our goal is to elevate the voices of our school leaders, in an effort to bring others more proximate to the challenges they see standing in their way of thriving. Our focus group discussions with leaders surfaced the following challenges:*

## 1. The meaning of “well-being” is inconsistent, lacking a common framework and language, across individuals and organizations

Principals recognize and appreciate the increased discussion surrounding “well-being” over the last 18 months. However, as a relatively new term in education circles, most districts and preparation programs have yet to adopt a common definition or framework for what “well-being” truly means or looks like in practice.

In fact, most principals report never discussing well-being at all during their principal preparation programs. As one principal said,

*“I don’t ever remember talking about well-being in my prep programs. They spared no expense on building my instructional and organizational leadership, but they don’t teach you anything about what it takes to actually persist in the job.”*

This creates a shaky foundation for principals that prevents them from proactively preparing to manage the inherent workload and stress of the role. We also see this play out nationally, even prior to the pandemic, as the average 5-year retention rate for principals is only 30%.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, besides a promotion, DFW-area principals named work-life imbalance as the leading driver that would prompt them to leave the role.<sup>18</sup>

Principals also shared the lack of a common definition and language for well-being within their districts leaves them feeling disempowered to upwardly communicate what support they need to sustain themselves or their staff. As one leader explained:

*"I have a great relationship with my supervisor, but we operate our lives really differently. While PIC has helped me define well-being for myself, I have struggled with advocating for what I need with my supervisor, because we define well-being differently. This makes it harder for me to set boundaries for myself. Without some common ground, I feel like [principals] will never be set up for success."*

Lastly, principals express that the idea of "well-being" is often confused with "self-care" or "work-life balance." Several districts are striving to support principals' work-life balance by providing development opportunities related to time management skills or through protected days off and physical health perks. Though appreciated, principals feel districts are missing the opportunity to invest more holistically in their well-being through building the additional mindsets and skills that create the emotional resilience needed to do the job well.

## 2. The complex, people-centered nature of the principalship creates an element of ambiguity, leading to "firefighting" that leaves principals feeling exacerbated, alienated, and burnt out

There is no denying the complexities associated with running an urban public school. Leading a school is human-centered work—it is complicated, progress is non-linear, and even the most

strategic of decisions may never account for every nuance and emotion at play. Pandemic-times aside, even the most proactive of principals are regularly forced to make swift decisions in response to unexpected, small- and large-scale crises that arise.

While the successes are rewarding, the daily grind is taxing. Principals often point to the isolation of the role on their campus as a compounding factor. Additionally, they share because the majority of trainings are focused on the administrative and instructional components of the role, they feel less equipped to lead through the complex, human-centered challenges. As a principal shared,

*"Especially this year, there is so much accountability to the unknown, and it feels like we are navigating it alone on our campus. That wears on you. It is hard not feeling like I know how to meet my teachers' needs, not feeling like I am successfully reaching them. I can't feel like I'm thriving personally without feeling like I am successful professionally."*

This sentiment is echoed in both our PIC program data and regionally collected data. When incoming 2021 program participants were asked about the greatest source of stress in their role, the most common response (70%) was managing campus adult culture.<sup>19</sup>

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# 70%

of incoming PIC principals name **managing campus adult culture** as a primary source of stress during the 2020-2021 school year.<sup>19</sup>

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A similar theme emerged in qualitative research conducted by the Best In Class Initiative, which found the social and emotional wellness of students and teachers to be a major source of stress and top priority for most leaders, particularly in the wake of the pandemic.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The “Super-Hero” personification of a principal puts well-being and achieving outcomes at odds

Principals, like systems leaders, feel the tension between prioritizing adult and student needs. Not only is a lot asked of them, but principals also recognize that the fate of entire communities rides on their ability to successfully lead. Principals shared that their intrinsic motivations to perform on behalf of students tends to be amplified by a “whatever it takes” mentality that permeates the system.

For principals, the pressure to perform that comes from this superhero personification reinforces a false sense of conflict between serving students and sustaining oneself. One principal shared:

*“As a leader, I feel like I’m just trying to carry everyone to the end of the year. I don’t have time to let my guard down. I know I should take time to reinvest in myself, but at what cost? The pressure is too high and the load is too heavy to stop.”*

District leaders also recognize this challenge facing their principals. As another leader noted, even when given time off,

*“principals just won’t give themselves permission [to do so].”*

Though some principals recognize this pressure can be self-conceived, most name that it starts at the systems level and in the examples set by their direct

supervisors. Principals echoed testimonials of working under principal mentors and district supervisors who themselves worked long hours and deprioritized their personal well-being, with some principals even sharing they felt their own commitment to the job is questioned when they fail to mimic similar working-styles. This creates a fear-based environment that, again, leads principals to ignore their well-being under the false assumption it is at odds with their performance. A principal recounted their residency experience:

*“My mentor principal was really hard charging, working long days, sending emails at 2:00am. She was getting results for kids, so I assumed that was the expectation of what I needed to do to be successful. I had a panic attack my first year as a principal because I didn’t realize there was a better way.”* Another shared, *“It 100% matters who your boss is whether or not well-being is prioritized. It is often incentivized to work long hours because it’s about the kids.”*

Simply put, until we start to actively recognize the paradox between enabling school leader well-being and creating transformative change for students, the status quo will remain.

### 4. Most well-being supports tend to be misaligned to principal needs or lack follow-through, which leads to principals feeling undervalued or condescended

Despite a recent uptick in “work-perks” and well-being related opportunities, principals feel most districts and preparation programs are still missing the mark when it comes to delivering on three important levers: meaningful differentiation, space to operationalize, and follow-through.

As one principal shared:

*"We've done some trainings on adult wellbeing, but it wasn't really responsive to what [principals] were needing right then. It was just like, 'here's your training for the day' and it didn't delineate between teachers and principals. While they at least tried something, I think it backfired because as principals, we felt it was a waste of our time."*

A principal from another district expressed:

*"I think there is a lot of well-intentioned talk about well-being, but there is also this expectation of excellence and competing messaging. I hear messages like 'effort is good but results are better' and I just feel so easily replaceable and patronized. Like the talk about well-being is just for show."*

Without actively creating space for adult well-being, we are running the risk of requiring principals to navigate a workplace where they feel their humanity is deprioritized.

One leader applauded their district for providing time off to their school leaders to reinvest in themselves, but shared they felt the opportunity to rejuvenate was thwarted by multiple deadlines stacked on at the end of the break. "Creating space" without also looking inward to understand what else is filling the room can unfairly place the onus of change solely on the

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## 78%

of current PIC principals name managing multiple district demands as a primary source of stress during the 2020-2021 school year.<sup>15</sup>

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leader. 78% of current PIC leaders pointed to 'managing multiple district demands' as a primary source of stress over the last year, which we believe unearths the need for change on both sides.<sup>21</sup>

Lastly, we heard that most "well-being" trainings or supports are often one-off and lack follow-through. Principals noted that these types of trainings typically come across as reactive on behalf of the district and tend to be perceived by principals as an inefficient use of time that infantilizes their role as school leaders.

## 5. Lack of differentiated and responsive supports for Black and Brown principals leaves them to bear an even greater emotional burden and pressure to perform

We know that the presence of school leaders and educators of color in our schools is an important contributor to student success.<sup>22</sup> However, despite the [growing diversity](#) of our public school principals,<sup>13</sup> our Black and Brown leaders are continually required to navigate white-centric workplaces and norms.

Not only do Black and Brown leaders feel more is expected of them because they often share (or are perceived to share) similar racial backgrounds, they also feel a greater pressure to perform. One leader said:

*"As a Black female leader, there is an expectation of carrying more. You are expected to be able to handle more and to be stronger because of that perception of a shared identity."*

We also heard that the increased pressure to perform creates an undue perception that they do not have the space to prioritize their well-being. As another leader shared,

*"As a leader of color, I don't have the same opportunity to let my guard down. If I want to show what I'm capable of, I have to be even more high achieving than my white peers just to get someone to look my direction."*



We see this play out in our own research where average stress-levels among Black and Brown leaders are consistently higher than their white peers.<sup>23</sup>

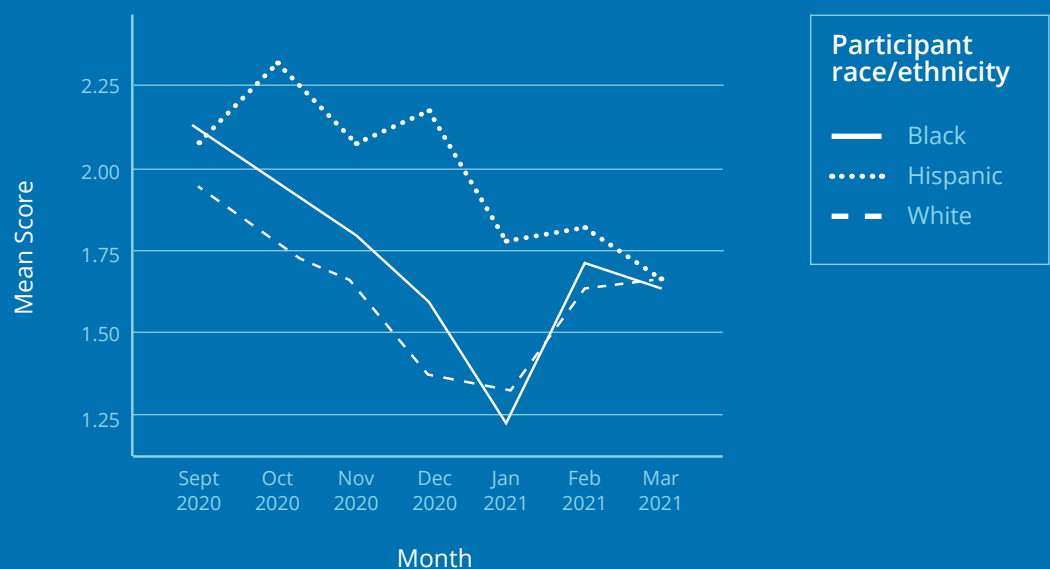
At the same time, Black and Brown leaders report that the majority of their development opportunities are white-centric and rooted in cultural norms and practices that they rarely identify with. One leader shared,

*“As a man of color, I have gotten used to the fact that most opportunities in education are not designed for me. As a student I felt it, as a teacher I felt it, and as an administrator I feel it. I walk into a meeting or a training and I think, ‘okay: what can I take from this and make it work for me?’ And I’ve gotten good at that, but it gets old always feeling like it’s not meant for me.”*

This echoes national research from [The Learning Policy Institute](#) & [EdTrust](#), which found that most educators of color feel they lack the racially affirming resources and supports they need for continued growth in their career.<sup>24,25</sup>

This often leaves Black and Brown leaders feeling like they must operate in spaces where they do not belong--held to higher standards than their white peers while deprived of equitable opportunities to succeed in their roles. The emotional burden that this creates sits in direct contradiction to the conditions that leaders need to thrive socially and emotionally, deepening the equity divide that already exists.

## Averaged Perceived Stress Scores (PSS) of PIC Principals September - March 2021<sup>23</sup>



Source: PIC 2020 Cohort Monthly Perceived Stress Scale (n=21). Note: This graph does not include leaders who identify as Asian or mixed-race due to insufficient sample-size.

Educator well-being is critical for remaining engaged and effectively supporting students

# Five Enabling Conditions Emerged which Allow Leaders to Cultivate Well-Being

*PIC's commitment to principal well-being has led us through various iterations of curriculum and program design over the last five years. In listening to feedback and responding honestly and humbly to our program data, we have given our program participants the space to challenge our approach and lead us to a place where we can proudly recognize PIC's positive impact on their ability to thrive. Through this work, we have identified five key enabling conditions that leaders need to effectively manage their well-being.*

1. Well-being needs to be defined as more than “self-care,” and should acknowledge the holistic picture of what adults need to thrive

The first step in enabling leaders to cultivate well-being in themselves and in others is to define it. Through PIC's work over the last five years, we have noticed a common misconception that well-being is simply “self-care”—getting rest, exercising, eating healthy, etc. However, what we have found is that: while yes, “self-care” (or “wellness”) is important, it alone does not take into consideration the many neurobiological layers humans need to thrive.



Identifying personal purpose, vision and opportunity to have impact



Sustaining physical, mental and emotional energy through diet, exercise / moment, breath, and rest



Expanding perspective, embracing differences and challenges, seeking beauty & awe



Getting “in the zone” and bringing your full self to work and life



Understanding your overall well-being and ability to be resilient when faced with a challenge



Accelerating leadership potential to empower thriving / well-being in others

In 2018, PIC adopted [Wisdom Works' Be Well, Lead Well](#)® Framework of Thriving as our common definition for well-being, which combines six dimensions of psychological well-being and stress resilience.<sup>26</sup> Wisdom Works defines well-being as a biophysical experience that emerges from the interplay of biological, physical and social/cultural pathways, which can be proactively enhanced by each of the six dimensions.

By anchoring on a more holistic definition of well-being, what was once an ambiguous concept now has the clarity and scope needed to resonate with more leaders.

One leader shared,

*“PIC helped me define what well-being is for me. Having a framework and this definition for myself enabled me to identify what I needed to do to sustain in this job, which gave me the confidence to ask for what I needed.”*

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**81%**

of PIC principals feel more equipped to advocate upwards for the support they need

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Another shared that the holistic perspective of well-being pushes them to have

*“more self-awareness around how I show up, what my personal needs are and where I might be getting in my own way.”*

When we broaden the definition of well-being to include our emotional, intellectual, social, and physical needs altogether, it allows individuals to pinpoint more closely what they feel they need and how they can get there. This restores an important power for individuals as they start to realize how much of their well-being is actually within their own control and not completely dependent on outside factors.

## 2. Supporting leader well-being is more effective when it is embedded in broader leadership development

A key component for effectively addressing the tension between producing student outcomes and maintaining adult well-being is to ensure that well-being supports do not happen in a silo.

We know there is a [link](#) between feeling confident and successful to one's overall social-emotional health. We also know when leaders are constantly "firefighting" or even struggling to manage the basic responsibilities of the role, they are less likely to prioritize their own well-being. Therefore, the most effective way to build leaders' capacity to be resilient is to couple well-being supports with broader leadership development that targets the most challenging aspects of the principalship.

One leader summed it up best,

*"If my professional life is out of whack, it is hard for me to take care of myself personally. The more this gets in order, the more I can focus on my own well-being. But, at the same time, I've got to have the foundational skills and understanding of how to take care of myself emotionally and physically. That's how you make the work sustainable and have the clarity to get better. You've got to leverage both for either to be impactful."*

For more information see

*"Primary Causes of Principal Stress" graph on page 21.*

It is important to note here that despite common reoccurring challenges facing school leaders (e.g., improving student achievement and supporting student SEL, campus adult culture, challenging community matters, managing multiple demands, etc.), they ebb and flow throughout the year. The most meaningful supports account for this fluidity and are responsive to the evolving needs.

In describing PIC's approach, which tracks sources of stress and elicits principal feedback monthly to inform our leadership programming, one principal shared:

*"The development we receive is so dynamic and adaptive. It amazes me how much PIC staff glean from our responses and how quickly they pivot to ensure our needs are met and our whole selves are supported. I know what I'm going to get is customized to me, which helps me feel like I am thriving."*

## 3. Creating intentional time & emotionally safe spaces for principals to focus on their well-being allows them to do so purposefully and without guilt

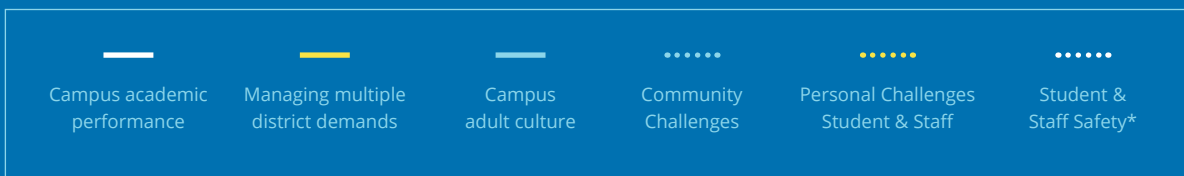
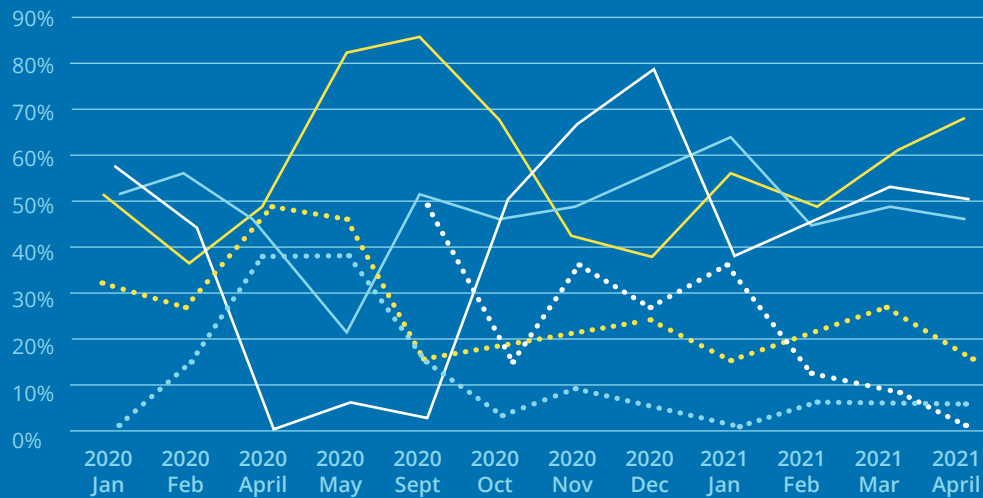
Without permission to practice their well-being, most principals will not do it. Or at least they will not do it intentionally or often enough for it to become a productive practice.

The competing demands and super-hero culture of the role, combined with a general lack of understanding for what well-being truly means, creates a sense of guilt around taking intentional time for oneself.

# Primary Causes of Principal Stress

% of Leaders Indicating as Top 3 Causes of Stress

Leaders in the PIC Program are surveyed monthly to determine individual levels of stress, as well as primary causes of stress. Stress levels are calculated on a scale of 0-4, using the research-based [Perceived Stress Scale](#). Part II of this survey asks leaders to indicate their Top 3 Sources of Stress along 11 stress indicators. (Appendix 1A).<sup>23</sup>



Footnote: \*Denotes items added to PIC Stress Scale Survey in Fall 2020; not all available stress indicators are depicted on this graph. Source: PIC Monthly Stress Scale, n=30-42. Question: In the last month, what have been the primary sources of your stress? Please select up to 3.

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# Prioritizing Well-Being

In May 2021,

**86%** of PIC principals report increased awareness of their wellbeing...

Yet, only **2 out of 5** PIC principals say they consistently protect time to focus on it

Even though **56%** of PIC principals say they are **more likely** now to protect time for their well-being now than they were prior to starting PIC

We see this as an important reminder that there is still work left to do in ensuring principals feel deserving of and empowered to take the necessary time to reinvest in themselves.

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When leaders enter the PIC program, the parity between well-being and the other executive leadership skills prioritized in the program is immediately clear. In addition to protected program time for leaders to reflect on, goal-set and action-plan around their well-being, it is also reinforced in one-on-one coaching sessions with program staff. By elevating well-being in this way, leaders report experiencing a mental shift that allows them to push past the inherent tension between well-being and results.

One leader shared,

*"PIC not only pushed me to prioritize well-being, but it made me finally feel like it was okay to prioritize well-being. For me, and for my campus." Another shared, "the program meets you where you are, and provides you with the peer support network and coaching to be vulnerable about where you are with your well-being. This allowed me to maximize the work I was doing to grow myself."*

Most PIC principals also describe a shift in their own leadership—becoming more cognizant of how they create similar safety for their staff to practice well-being.

*"So many of the practices I've learned, I feel the value for myself. And because of that, I now feel that it is valuable to talk to my staff about their [well-being] as well. So many of the practices and systems for well-being that I've gotten in PIC, I've taken back and shared with my team."*

We know this to be true for the majority of principals who have gone through the program, as 65% of staff on PIC-led campuses report their principal creates a campus culture that encourages them to invest in their own well-being.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Developing adults' capacity to manage their well-being takes time and positive reinforcement

Practice makes perfect and habits take time to form. Given how new the idea of practicing well-being is for many school leaders, working towards a routine that is reinforced through positive accountability is key to achieving long-term sustainability.

To hedge against leaders setting unattainable well-being goals that end up like most New Year's resolutions, PIC works with leaders to set small goals, or micro-actions, to practice and build on at their own pace. Leaders revisit these goals monthly, both in a one-on-one setting with their PIC coach and in small-group meetings with their peers where they discuss common challenges and potential solutions that will move them closer to their goal.

One leader explained the value of the reoccurring time to revisit their goals and positive reinforcement as follows,

*"The monthly well-being check-ins really make me slow down and reflect. I think sometimes I lose sight of my micro-actions, and this time forces me to look myself in the mirror again, talk to my accountability partners in my inner circle from PIC, and figure out a way to get back on track. I feel like the way this is set up allows us to be human."*

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## 86%

of PIC principals feel they have a stronger peer support network as a result of PIC

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#### PIC Well-Being Approach



This approach, which combines consistency and positive accountability with psychological safety and vulnerability, eliminates any undue pressure to perform. At the same time, it is an effective way to achieve incremental results, which we have seen play out over time with our program participants' improved stress coping ability and overall health. While participants tend to see an immediate spike in their well-being and ability to manage stress after the first year of the program, this continues to grow after their second year.

# Stress Coping Improvements

Comparisons of all current and previous cohorts' average wellbeing in January 2021, in the midst of the pandemic, show higher composite well-being among principals who have completed more of the program (Figure 1). PIC principals also report experiencing meaningful health improvements after participating in just one year of the program. These impacts continue to expand after the second year in the program (Figure 2).

Figure 1  
Average PIC Principal Composite Well-Being January 2021

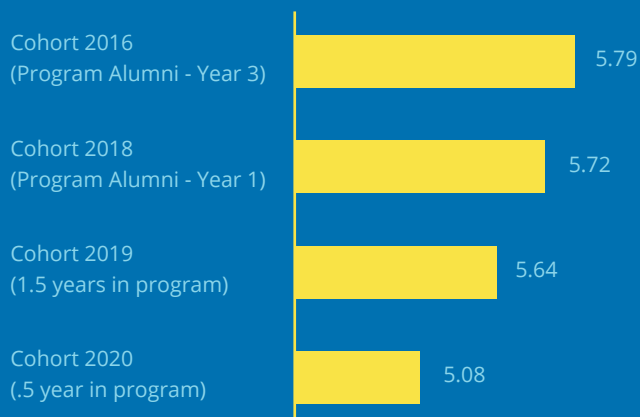
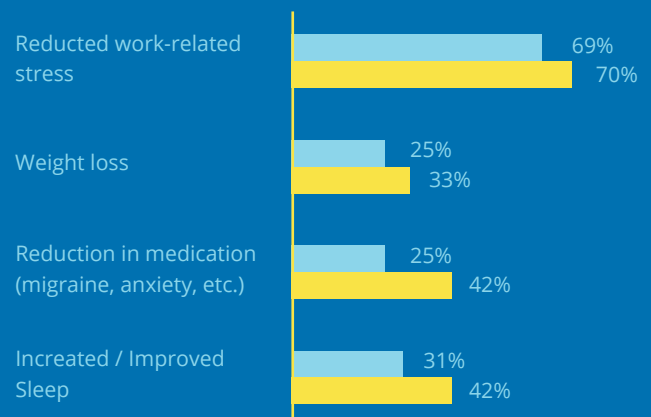


Figure 2  
Physical Health Improvements in PIC Principals



■ Composite Well-Being (Scale 1-7)

■ After Program Year 1 (May 2019 Pre - Pandemic)

■ After Program Year 2 (May 2020 Mid - Pandemic)

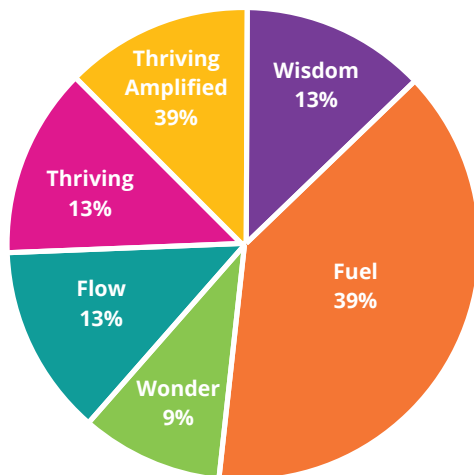
Figure 1: Source: PIC Mid-Year Principal Survey & PIC Alumnae Survey (January 2021). \*Composite Well-Being Scores are rolled-up averages of all Stress Coping questions administered on the PIC EOY Survey (See Appendix 1B for questions).  
Figure 2: Source: Cohort 2018 End-of-Year Principal Survey (May 2020 & 2019), n=12. Question: Have you noticed any measurable or observable improvements in your health since starting PIC? [Select all that apply]



## 5. Well-being is not “one-size-fits all” and requires a customized approach that honors personal identity and lived experiences

To create space for all leaders to thrive, we have learned (through trial, error, and frequent feedback from our principals) to never assume a one-sized-fits-all approach. While we ourselves still have a lot to learn about how best to serve leaders across all identities, we know that well-being is deeply personal and closely tied to one’s values and lived experiences. Therefore, it should inherently look different from person-to-person. Ultimately, what leads one person to a state of thriving is not the same as what will lead another person to their own state of thriving.

Well-being Focus Areas of PIC Principals



Note: September 2021, n=31. PIC principals selected one well-being focus area from the Be Well, Lead Well framework each month. Leaders identified a microaction or small habit to practice, in alignment to their selected focus area. Leaders were provided coaching and support by PIC staff and peers during 1x1 and small group check-ins.

Take, for example, breathwork. In the United States, this is often perceived as a predominantly white female practice and is therefore less likely to immediately resonate with non-white-female individuals.

That is not to say it could not, or that it is not a completely valid self-care practice that should be made available to all individuals regardless of race or gender, but we know that offering additional choice is important for ensuring all needs are met.

Zooming out even further to underscore a previous point: “well-being” is much more holistic than traditional “self-care” practices. For example, well-being can also come from feeling a sense of worth or purpose. For many Black and Brown leaders, the idea of “self-care” sits in contradiction with their values, often because they have been conditioned to think that self-care is not for them. Some leaders might gravitate towards other types of well-being practices such as engaging in meaningful dialogue, deeply exploring their intersectional identity, or creating strong relationships.

By focusing only on tactical self-care practices (e.g., exercising, sleeping, eating well, etc.) we are ignoring the other psychosocial elements needed to thrive.

Educator well-being is critical for remaining engaged and effectively supporting students

# Five Recommendations for Preparation Programs and Districts to Better Support Leader Well-Being

*We believe that district and principal preparation partners can shift the culture of our education system by instituting practices and policies that elevate the importance of adult well-being. Through our conversations with principals, district leaders and preparation program leaders we surfaced several opportunities for advancing this work on a systems-level. Our top five recommendations to districts and preparation partners are as follows:*

1. Acknowledge the tension between prioritizing principal well-being and campus outcomes, then work intentionally to create a more integrated vision and definition of success

Systems and school leaders alike are all held accountable to attaining certain outcomes on behalf of our students. Yet, at the same time, we know that failing to properly address the needs of our educators on the front-lines stunts, if not completely precludes, any real progress.

The tension is real, and the tension is important. We urge education system and program leaders to embrace this tension and create an integrated vision of successful outcomes for both students and adults.

This begins first by creating a common language regarding what well-being is and what it should look like within a given context. Then leaders should work to strategically evaluate systems and develop recovery plans that implore “both/and” solutions to improving student and adult outcomes. We urge our partners to consider adopting and utilizing research-based frameworks, such as [Wisdom Works’ Be Well, Lead Well®](#) Framework for Thriving, to guide this work.

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A recent [case-study](#) from Transcend Education highlights [Valor Collegiate Academy’s](#) approach to creating symmetry between adult and student well-being.<sup>8</sup>

They have also published a [Reflection Tool](#) for education systems and policy leadership grappling with this and other tensions related to post-Covid recovery and reinvention.<sup>27</sup>

We encourage our partners to take a look at this resource as they develop their strategic initiatives and recovery plans moving forward.

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## 2. Include principal climate and well-being data in program evaluation and accountability systems

As district and preparation program leaders continue to think strategically about how to shape their data and accountability frameworks to account for a post-Covid education system, they should begin collecting (and disaggregating by race/ethnicity & gender) principal climate and well-being data at both the pre- and in-service points in the pipeline.

For district leaders, keeping a routine pulse on principal stress and well-being data, including their sources of stress, can expose critical gaps and reveal important trends that will allow them to design more strategic and aligned interventions. We also believe incorporating principal well-being and climate into district accountability systems is an important step toward shifting district culture towards intentionally prioritizing adult well-being. Doing so encourages principal supervisors to think more holistically about how they are supporting and modeling well-being for their principals and increases the likelihood principals will receive development in all areas.

Preparation programs who incorporate participant well-being data into their program evaluation strategy are afforded a more holistic look at program effectiveness, and whether they are equipping leaders with the foundational resiliency skills needed to succeed in the role.

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The Principal Impact Collaborative has been working to build out our Well-Being Survey tools ([Appendix 1A & 1B](#)) and dataset as a key metric in our program evaluation strategy.

Our partners at Best in Class and Educate Texas have also begun to include well-being metrics on their bi-annual school leadership survey ([Appendix 1C](#)).

As systems leaders begin to unlock additional funding related to post-Covid recovery, we encourage them to allocate a portion of their funds towards adding similar metrics into their own evaluation and accountability systems.

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### 3. Develop mentorship and principal-coaching framework & resources that explicitly include well-being

Once education systems leaders have set a vision and defined outcome goals for adult well-being, principals and principal coaches will need appropriate learning and coaching tools to meaningfully engage in practices to improve well-being.

All principal mentors and supervisors must have a basic understanding and buy-in of adult well-being and its impact on principal effectiveness. It is also critical that they demonstrate the proficiency to manage their own social-emotional health and resiliency.

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This Sample Check-In Document ([Appendix 2A](#)) can be a helpful tool for principal coaches and mentors to imbed a well-being check-in into their reoccurring principal meetings.

Our partners at the [Southern Methodist University's Aspiring Leaders Program](#) have recently developed a Leading Holistic Development Class, which works intentionally to build aspiring leaders' own emotional capacity, as well as the skills needed to lead this work for adults and students on their campuses.

We believe this work should not stop at pre-service coursework and should be consistently reinforced through mentorship and coaching once on the job

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Districts and residency programs should screen for these competencies in the same way they screen for instructional, administrative and/or inter-personal leadership competencies during the hiring and selection process.

Districts and preparation programs should also develop coaching tools for supervisors and mentors to utilize when working with current and aspiring principals. At the most basic level, this could mean asking principals a set of consistent well-being check-in questions during reoccurring touchpoints or coaching sessions. We recommend incorporating elements of well-being and holistic development into their coaching and mentorship rubrics.

### 4. Create space for principals to “focus on the tough stuff”

To honor the vital role of the principal and the complex work we are charging them to lead, we must create space for them to do so. Principals consistently speak to the competing—and often compounding—demands of the role.

To give principals the opportunity to move out of a perpetually reactive space and begin focusing more proactively on the work that really matters, improving outcomes for kids, we encourage systems leaders to consider three key changes:

1. Avoid last minute meetings or requests by working strategically to anticipate potential needs and provide increased lead time for deadlines;
2. Evaluate any potential request against the questions: *Does this need to be on their plate right now? Is it critical that this is completed/attended by the principal? Is there anyone else who can handle this?* Then, direct accordingly;

3. Actively support principals to prioritize and leverage their teams. We know that these are both skills that take time to develop, and should be reinforced at all points of the leadership pipeline.

Lastly, district can empower principals to get creative with new staffing opportunities to increase their own capacity as their budgets increase in the coming year.

## 5. Provide differentiated development opportunities, particularly on the basis of intersectional identity

We know that leaders' experience in the principalship can look significantly different based on one's race, gender, sexual, religious or intersectional identity, and we believe that systems leaders have a responsibility to ensure that all leaders receive the support they need to thrive in their role. By creating safe opportunities within identity-based affinity groups for principals to work through trauma and towards a place of thriving, districts can begin to close equity gaps from the top.

We encourage our district partners to listen to and lift up the voices of Black and Brown leaders and actively utilize them to create systems-level changes.

The ability to collect and disaggregate data also creates new possibilities for systems leaders to unearth inequities related to the well-being and social-emotional health of different populations. It also makes it easier to identify opportunities to provide differentiated supports targeted specifically towards closing the equity gaps.

Despite our own best efforts to create a well-being curriculum and programming that is inclusive and honors each participants' unique identities, PIC still has work to do as well. Within our own programming, we are conducting a curriculum audit to improve the cultural responsiveness of our curriculum, working to increase facilitator diversity, and incorporating more time for affinity groups, as well as supplemental development opportunities to specifically recognize the unique challenges facing Black and Brown leaders.

It is our goal to share our future learnings as we continue to delve deeper into this important work.

# Closing

The time is now to shift the paradigm of school leadership.

The very purpose of our schools is to prepare students to become well-functioning adults, equipped with the lifelong knowledge and behaviors to contribute to the well-being of themselves and others. To do so, we must look holistically across the system and understand where we are falling short.

While great strides have been made to support our students, we are doing them a disservice by continuing to ignore the holistic needs of the school leaders who serve them. We also recognize there is even greater work to be done in lifting up the voices of Black and Brown leaders so they may have an equitable and necessary space to thrive. In order to move further faster, and to live out any hope of righting inequities and recovering what our society has lost through this pandemic, we call on all of our partners in this work to acknowledge our leaders for more than just their short-term campus results, but rather for their entire humanity.

*That* is how we create the conditions for everyone to thrive.

## **The Principal Impact Collaborative** supports public school principals to drive impactful change on their campus.

To our PIC principals, thank you for trusting us in this work. To lead a public school in these times takes selflessness and an endless commitment to educating the leaders of our future. We are continually inspired and humbled by each of you and your vulnerability as you engage in this work. Thank you for helping bring the issue of principal well-being to the forefront. By investing time and energy into your own well-being, you are able to lead in your public school communities with wisdom, grace and compassion.

To our district and network partners, thank you for investing in your talented leaders and for protecting the time for them to engage in whole leader professional development. We know external pressures require many trade-offs, and we are grateful to collaborate and serve your leaders alongside you.

To our educator preparation programs, especially those that collaborated with us to create this report, we appreciate your partnership and look forward to further collaboration, as we all care deeply about the development of school leaders.

To our philanthropic partners and program funders, thank you for investing in PIC as a resource for our local school leaders. You have understood the value of leader well-being from the beginning, and this work would not be possible without your philanthropic support.

We at PIC know that the topic of leader well-being has great depth, and we appreciate the small role we are able to play in the broader landscape. We are grateful for the opportunity to spark greater dialogue, attention, research and investment into this much needed work.

Thank you to each of you taking the time to read this white paper, we hope you will contact our team for further conversations, so we can also learn from your experiences as well.

We believe we will only improve school leader well-being if we work together collectively, so we are eager to continue elevating this work and learning from our communities.

### **PARTICIPATING DISTRICTS**

Dallas Independent School District  
Fort Worth Independent School District  
Garland Independent School District  
IDEA Public Schools Tarrant County  
KIPP Texas Public Schools  
Plano Independent School District  
Richardson Independent School District  
Uplift Education

### **OUR SUPPORTERS & PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS**

Best in Class  
The Better Together Fund  
The Byrne Family Foundation  
The College Football Playoff Foundation  
The Communities Foundation of Texas  
The Cotton Bowl Foundation  
The Harold Simmons Foundation  
The Hawn Foundation  
The Kellogg Foundation  
The Miles Foundation  
The Rainwater Charitable Foundation  
The University of North Texas at Dallas  
The University of North Texas at Dallas Foundation  
United Way GroundFloor  
W.W. Caruth, Jr. Fund at Communities Foundation of Texas

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