




Here's to Your Health

*Recommendations for becoming
a healthy school leader.*

By Sally Beisser and Randal Peters



As school principals, you have no doubt felt the increasing demands of the role: 60- to 70-hour work weeks and a seemingly infinite number of tasks required of you each day. Further, legal mandates of accountability for student achievement, a steady stream of reform initiatives, high expectations for learning leadership, and the demands of school management all contribute to unprecedented stress, anxiety, and time on the job.

Despite these challenges, most of you maintain an admirable sense of passion and mission for your role. Many of you have even envisioned and facilitated environments in your schools that are designed to reverse negative health behaviors among your students, and in doing so have enhanced students' academic performance and a range of other positive outcomes. In fact, your support and modeling may be the most important catalysts for advancing an effective school wellness model.

Yet, many educational leaders neglect their own health and family time trying to fulfill their seemingly all-consuming professional roles, often at a time in their lives when they need to pay closer attention to eating better and exercising more deliberately. When principals succumb to such lifestyle patterns, it makes it harder than ever to advance healthy school environments for their students while still maintaining credibility.

To learn more about how and why principals make the decisions they do regarding their own wellness, we have researched their support networks, stress levels, nutrition, exercise, and sleep patterns. We also asked about their sense of responsibility for creating healthy school environments. Over 1,000 principals were invited to participate, and a wide range of rural, suburban, urban, public, and private administrators responded with strong opinions regarding the lack of time for a healthy lifestyle. While just 300 administrators responded, a lower response rate was anticipated due to the demands of busy principals.

Competing Priorities

Principals acknowledge that their jobs are stressful, yet purposeful and fulfilling. Further, it is clear that this high level of stress invariably intensifies once individuals enter the field of administration. Despite the dedication with which administrators perform their jobs, it is clear that many feel ill-equipped with strategies to find balance in their lives.

There is also a large gap between what principals know about health and wellness and what they actually do to model it or create healthy school environments. This knowing-doing gap represents the universal challenge of applying what is known about health and wellness. Not surprisingly, the widest gap exists among stressed-out principals who are often in the early stages of their careers. They admitted, "I work long hours and I have a hard time leaving work," "I am not a top priority for myself—everything else gets attention first," and "I have had a much harder time balancing things since I became a principal."

This issue of how principals' work-life balance, nutrition, and exercise change in their transition from the classroom was one focus of our study. Respondents noted that work "dominates all phases of my life. I am interrupted in almost any task I do—the job is 24/7," "There's less time for exercise; I don't have time for lunch every day, much less for family," "I used to work out every day, but now I don't have the energy or time to make it happen."

At the same time, many other more experienced principals related that they have learned to prioritize time for family, friends, and personal interests; benefit from professional support networks; and regain patterns of regular exercise, healthy eating, and restful sleep. Based on these best practice accounts, we offer recommendations for principals to reclaim more balance, health, and wellness in their personal and professional lives.

Recommendations

Clearly, there are no easy answers to meeting the challenges of becoming a healthy school leader, which requires establishing a balance of passion and priorities in work and life. While many principals believe that their professional obligations render a healthy lifestyle practically impossible, the reality is that failing to find a balance will result in diminished health and reduced effectiveness as leaders. Simply put, principals need to understand, develop, and model well lifestyles. Start with these strategies:

Get moving. Being inactive is one of the most serious threats to your health. The best form of exercise is the one that is most accessible and that you are most likely to engage in. For most of you, that means walking as much as possible. Walking is easy because it can be done on the job while walking around the building to visit classes, holding “walking meetings” with staff members, and remaining visible and interacting with students in the cafeteria and on the playground.

Additional walks with your friends and family members in the evenings or on weekends can supplement this, to reach the recommended 10,000 steps per day. If this seems unrealistic, weigh the relatively brief commitment of your time and effort against the effects of weight gain, work missed due to illness, unchecked stress, and ultimately, the potential for a diminished career and lifespan. Also, the message that it sends to students and staff when they see you modeling regular physical activity cannot be overstated.

Establish a healthy nutritional environment in your school. Unhealthy food choices are everywhere in most schools. High-calorie, sugar- and carb-laden food in the break room; birthday and holiday snacks shared by well-meaning students and parents; and fast food consumed in the few minutes before evening meetings are no doubt occupational hazards in your life as a school leader. Taking the time to bring healthy snacks, foods, and home-prepared meals to school can help you avoid the “grazing” culture of our

environment. This mindset can and should be translated to the entire school. Nutritional policies should encourage healthier school lunches, breakfasts, after-school and birthday snacks, and vending machine options.

Find knowledgeable and helpful mentors. Principal stress is often tied to a deep sense of professional isolation. Being ultimately responsible for creating a safe environment, as well as for the professional development of staff and academic development of students is quite daunting. Especially for newer administrators, having a trusted mentor is an important way to gain professional confidence and competence, and of limiting professional stress. If mentors are not assigned as part of the onboarding process, new principals should seek out individuals with a track record of success for counsel.

Collaborate with your peers in the profession. Every principal should also establish and maintain a strong professional network of other administrators. If you work in a large district, formal, regular working groups or professional learning communities comprising principals from multiple buildings may be the norm. However, even if you are in a smaller or rural district, social media and other technology can facilitate the joining of digital professional communities in which you can interact, discuss issues of concern, and stay informed on reform initiatives and best practices.

Adopt a more collaborative leadership style. Whether or not you have an inclination to lead collaboratively, advancing such an approach has become a de facto survival skill in today’s school settings. If you have not already done so, consider refining your professional learning community framework.

For students to learn at higher levels, teachers in your building should have regular, cooperative, job-embedded opportunities to learn, plan, and analyze student data. You will also benefit greatly from a strong, well-established, and well-defined team structure. It should include building leadership teams, student assistance teams, and social committees that allow delegation of responsibilities, promote empowerment, and advance leadership development.

Improve your modeling of healthy behaviors. With the credibility of research showing the benefits of healthy behaviors on learning, principals and school staff can no longer in good conscience ignore the charge to model healthy behavior in children in every way possible.



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Become more intentional and mindful.

Overcome the professional excesses of the job by finding coping mechanisms such as carving out time each day to work out, eating regular healthy meals, finding quality time with friends and loved ones, and maintaining a sense of hope and perspective. Remain purposeful and intentional. Don't waste time dealing with things that have little to do with improving student learning. Resolve to not take your job home with you, and to understand what you have control over (and what you do not); focus on the things you can impact.

A Need for Change

Principals speak articulately about their key community leadership role that is becoming increasingly demanding, challenging, and accountable. Many of you are mentally and physically exhausted, even while you maintain

a strong sense of passion for your job. The need for change is clear. With the increasing frequency and intensity of reform initiatives, you will need a concerted effort to limit job stress, improve work-life balance, and more fully collaborate with, and empower, faculty and staff.

Beyond the impact of these actions on your own health, stamina, and sustainability, they are powerful examples for your students. In the end, it may not be overstating it to say that what is at stake may be the sustainability of your professional quality of life and the health of your school and community. 

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