

# Don't Sacrifice Self-Care

What happens when principals care for everyone in the building but themselves?

By John Pijanowski and Joshua Ray



School principals don't just feel stress, they are often defined by it. Like those in other helping professions such as nursing, school leaders are quick to describe the high-paced nature of their jobs and the long hours. "Putting out fires all day" is a phrase that works both as a lament and a badge of honor—and with good reason. The role of the principal is increasingly pressure-packed, and it is also critical to the success of every other person in the building. Student success, teacher retention, community support, and staff efficacy have all been shown by researchers to be strongly linked to the ability of school principals to make difficult decisions, build strong organizational systems, and nurture professional relationships.

The average building principal reports spending approximately 60 hours per week at work, with principals leading high-needs schools investing even more time. Not surprisingly, work demands correlate to principals reporting high perceived levels of stress, sleep problems, and work-family conflicts. Despite these concerns, principals commonly express deriving a deep meaning from their work, and it is the sense of purpose that drives them to push through the job's long hours, hard conversations, and stress.

However, there is another side to that coin. Principals, as a group, are notoriously bad at embracing proper self-care habits, in part because of that same strong sense of purpose. For some,

there is a reluctance to "give" to themselves, because they think it takes away from their ability to give to others—a practice that defines who they are as leaders. In other words, they think that time spent meditating, eating healthy meals, exercising, or sleeping is time when they aren't tending their fires.

## Sleep Makes Us Stronger

As researchers discover stronger insights into the effects of poor self-care, however, it becomes apparent that principals are hurting their performance through their personal sacrifice. Perhaps no single aspect of self-care has a more dramatic impact on a school leader's ability to do his or her job than chronic sleep deprivation.

Cognitive performance is diminished from sleep deprivation in multiple and significant ways, including decreases in psychomotor response times, decreased effectiveness in attention-intensive performance, short-term and working memory decline, and decreased capacity to learn new information. As decision-making demands on principals become more complex, the

A person who gets no more than six hours of sleep per night functions at the same level as someone with a 0.1 percent blood alcohol concentration.

effects of sleep deprivation on performance intensify.

### Fueling Mind and Body

Researchers have identified myriad ways that poor nutritional habits and moderate dehydration can limit cognitive performance, negatively affect energy consumption and distribution, cause long-term health problems, and even promote addictive habits. Many principals eat meals with low nutritional value at their desks or skip meals altogether. Working long hours in any job while maintaining a healthy eating routine requires planning.

Poor hydration is also a concern, and it, too, can have significant physical and cognitive effects. Diminished cognitive function related to decision-making and feelings of mental fatigue has been shown to result from dehydration, and research on

students has found that this problem is often exacerbated toward the end of the school day.

### Caring for Ourselves

Ignoring self-care at its most basic level (i.e., proper sleep, nutrition, and hydration) leads to increased tiredness and fatigue, making it more difficult to concentrate on the sort of work principals do all day.

Researchers often compare these effects to various levels of intoxication. For example, people who get no more than six hours of sleep per night function at the same level as someone who has experienced 24 straight hours of acute sleep deprivation, which corresponds to functioning with a 0.1 percent blood alcohol concentration—over the legal limit for impairment. When sleep hours drop to four per night, neurological function becomes equivalent

to 48 hours of acute sleep deprivation after only two weeks.

Poor self-care makes principals' lives harder at home and at work, as well as more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress in all parts of their lives. The cumulative effect explains the high reports of burn-out and depressive symptoms among school principals. There will always be proverbial fires throughout the school day, but the well-rested, properly nourished, hydrated principal is the one best positioned to put them out. 

---

**John Pijanowski** is professor of educational leadership at the University of Arkansas.

**Joshua Ray** is principal of East Pointe Elementary School in Greenwood, Arkansas.



**Office DEPOT<sup>®</sup>**  
**OfficeMax<sup>®</sup>**

**Exclusive NAESP Member Benefit**

### NAESP Members Save Up To 80%

Because you're a member of the National Association of Elementary School Principals you now have access to exclusive members-only discounts at Office Depot and OfficeMax! Your discount can be used for personal or business purchases of thousands of eligible program items such as ink and toner, paper, cleaning and breakroom supplies, and even furniture!



### Substantial Discounts

Discounts of up to 80% off 93,000 items



### Increased Flexibility

Discounts apply both in-store AND online



### Best Value List

Access to a full list of our best offers



### Dedicated Support

Get answers from an Office Depot representative

Shop online, or print your free discount card at: [officediscounts.org/naesp](http://officediscounts.org/naesp)