FACTORS AND INFLUENCE OF JOB-RELATED STRESS FOR VERMONT PRINCIPALS: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY

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Andrew Conforti

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Dissertation Examination Committee:

Shana Haines, Ph.D., Advisor
Jennifer Putney, Ph.D., Chairperson
Jessica Strolin-Goltzman, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Katharine Shepherd, Ed.D.
Holger Hoock, DPhil, Dean of the Graduate College

Abstract

School leadership is one of the most important school-related factors that contribute to student learning, so high burnout and turnover rates of principals is concerning. Recent findings from Stiener et al. (2022) highlight significant levels of job-related stress among principals, with twice as many teachers and principals experiencing job-related stress compared to the general workforce while one in two are considering leaving their job. To effectively address stressful job demands and burnout, it is essential to understand contributing factors within principals' sphere of influence and beyond. This qualitative case study focused on how the ecological factors, spanning from the macro- to micro-levels of society, impact the job-related stress of Vermont secondary school principals (RQ 1), how those principals manage it (RQ 2), and what influences their decisions to stay in their positions (RQ 3). I conducted ten in-depth semi-structured interviews with current Vermont principals, four in-depth semi-structured interviews with Vermont educational leaders (one superintendent, one legislator, two VPA leaders), and a review of policies and state and district websites. Data analysis examined verbatim interview transcripts, reflective and descriptive observation notes, and assessed their alignment with documents from government websites, the Vermont Principals Association (VPA), and the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE).

Using ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the transactional model for stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), this case study explores factors from national, state, and community levels of society and their interconnected influence on Vermont principals. Findings include favorable policies with unfavorable resources, limited staffing, expectations and behaviors from society, the impact of technology and the pandemic on culture, communication, and work-life balance. Mindfulness, self-reflective practices, supportive relationships and leadership serve as valuable coping strategies and supports for principals. Moreover, Vermont principals' love for students and the fulfillment of helping them succeed is an existential belief that acts as a primary motivation which plays a crucial role in their resilience and job satisfaction.

These findings demonstrate that educational leaders, legislators, and stakeholders have a role in contributing to and mitigating stressful job demands of principals. This study contributes a broader view of job-related stress for principals, indicating that a systemic approach, extending beyond individuals, is needed to address the overall well-being and sustainability of the public education workforce. Implications for research, practice, and policy are discussed.

Key Words: Principals, Stress, Burnout, Job Demands, Resources, Support, Ecological, Factors.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter One: Introduction

Public education in the United States has experienced significant changes over the past two decades and has increased the job demands of principals. Ecological factors have exacerbated challenges to public education that influence all levels of society, including job-related stress affecting secondary school principals and workforces (Grissom et al., 2021). About twice as many teachers and principals reported experiencing frequent job-related stress as the general population of working adults (Steiner et al., 2022). Understanding principal and teacher well-being is a matter of immediate concern for principals, teachers, and the students they teach (Steiner et al., 2022) and understanding the sources of their stress is paramount for developing a broader approach to support principals and their schools.

By understanding the job demands of principals and schools, we may better understand the stressful demands placed on the educational workforce, including the impact of a mental health crisis that followed the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic along with the long-term impact of two decades of federal and state education legislation. In addition to a need for communities to address systemic inequities that students of color, students with disabilities, and students with a low socioeconomic status disproportionately experienced, there is an urgent need to attend to the sustainability and future of the public education workforce who are essential to student outcomes. Understanding the relationship between teachers' and principals' well-being, perceived working conditions, and teacher and principals' intentions to leave their current positions (along with actual resignations) is critical for pandemic recovery and the long-term health of the teacher and principal workforce (Steiner et al., 2022). It is

important to research and understand the complexities and impact of ecological factors on teachers and principals in order to develop recommendations. Currently, there is a gap in the research regarding the impact of factors outside of a principals sphere of influence, including job-related stress that followed the Covid 19 pandemic.

Purpose

This exploratory case study of Vermont secondary school principals aims to address the gap in the research regarding a more comprehensive understanding of the factors and the influence of job demands that contributes to job-related stress for the public education workforce in Vermont. It is important to understand the factors that compel principals to stay in their roles and the specific ecological factors that affect principals' job demands to inform training, policy, and practice. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) and Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model for stress and coping (TMSC), This study identifies and contextualizes factors that encompass a wide range of societal influences on Vermont secondary principals, most of which are outside their direct control. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to identify and understand the ecological factors and influence, spanning from the macro- to micro-levels of society on the job-related stress of Vermont secondary school principals.

The following research questions guide this case study:

Research Question 1: How do various ecological factors influence job-related stress on secondary school principals?

Research Question 2: How do secondary principals in Vermont manage job-related stress and burnout?

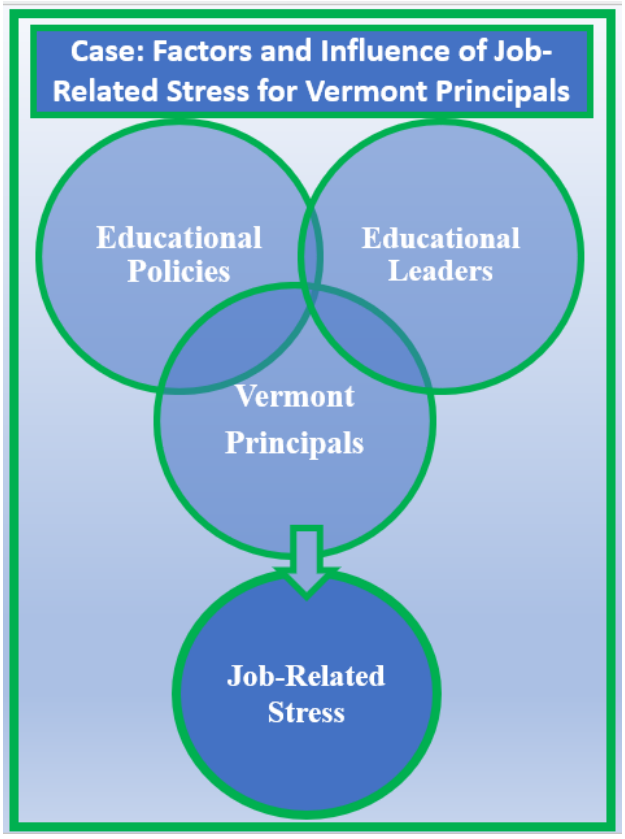
Research Question 3: Why do secondary principals stay in their positions?

The Case Study Approach

I chose an exploratory case study approach to examine the impact of ecological factors that surround and influence Vermont principals and elicit a deeper understanding of their experience with job-related stress and desire to stay in the profession. This case study design (See Figure 1) allowed me to collect case study data from Vermont secondary school principals and educational leaders (a superintendent, a state legislator, and two Vermont principals association leaders) through semi-structured interviews and an analysis of education policy documents and government websites.

Figure 1. 1

Adapted from Hinchey (2023): Factors and Influence of Job-related Stress



This research is fundamental to the larger context of the impact of ecological influences on the job-related stress of the educational workforce and how educational and

legislative leaders, higher education preparation programs, and stakeholders may better support and sustain excellence and equity in public education.

Study Impact

This study explores the impact of and needs for addressing ecological factors that influence secondary school principals' job-related stress. This research helps to provide broader context for educational leaders, legislators, higher education, and stakeholders to research and evaluate collective strategies, systems, professional learning, and policies that may mitigate the impact of job-related stress and protect the sustainability of the public education workforce.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter is a review of literature regarding the ecological factors and influences that contribute to Vermont principals' job-related stress. The purpose of this study is to explore the ecological factors that influence secondary school principals' job-related stress (RQ 1), how principals manage that stress (RQ 2), and factors that influence their decisions to stay in their position (RQ 3).

To design this study and research questions, I use two theories as my theoretical framework: Bronfenbrenner's EST (1979) and Lazarus and Folkman's TMSC (1984). Together, these theories helped to identify ecological factors to understand the impact and implication of job-related stress for Vermont secondary school principals. These theories have been adapted by embedding the components of TMSC within the microsystem level of the EST as my conceptual framework in this exploratory case study. Given the two theories' influence on the study, the theoretical framework precedes the literature review to help frame and guide the review.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, I show why the EST and TMSC theories are appropriate frameworks for this study. I also describe how they are a fundamental component of my conceptual framework.

Bronfenbrenner's EST

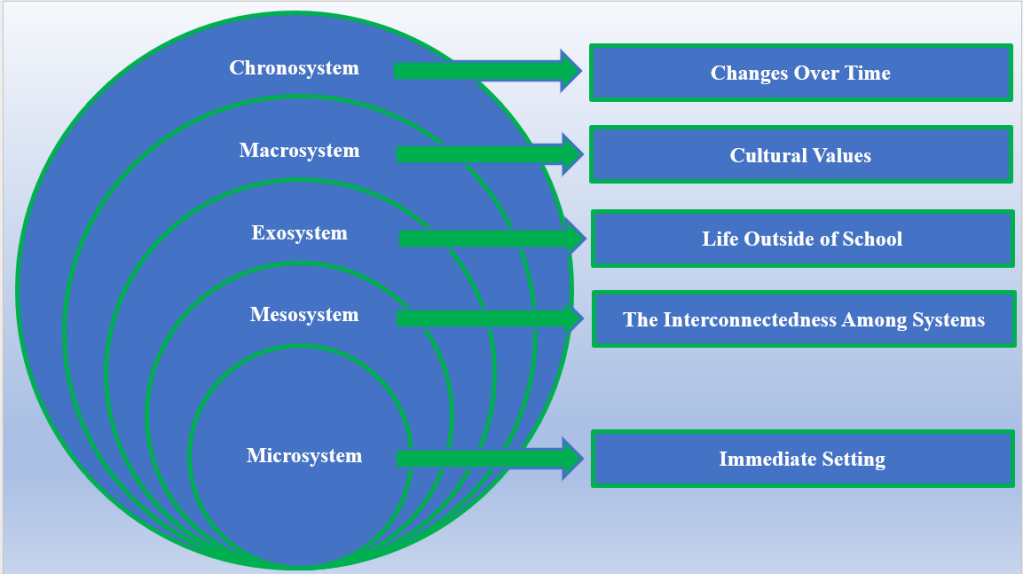
Bronfenbrenner's EST defines human development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment from immediate family and school settings to broad cultural values, laws, and customs (Evans, 2023). Bronfenbrenner (1994) later included the chronosystem as a part of the EST. A

chronosystem encompasses change or consistency over time within all the theory systems (e.g., changes over the life course in family structure, socioeconomic status, employment, place of residence, or the degree of hecticness and ability in everyday life (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Although EST primarily has been applied to the development of children, the examples of a "complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment" apply to this study, focusing on the interconnected ecological systems that influence principals' job-related stress.

According to Bronfenbrenner's EST (1979; Figure 2.1), a person's development and socialization are influenced by the different width rounds (or circles) of the environment in which a person is in active inter-relation. The microsystem is the immediate setting. The mesosystem consists of interconnections among systems. The exosystem describes events affecting an important person other than the developing individual at the heart of the model. The macrosystem is society. The chronosystem changes over time.

Figure 2. 1

Bronfenbrenner's EST (1979)



Given that schools are a microcosm of society, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST helps encapsulate and contextualize the complex changes in ecological factors and shifts in the educational landscape over time. As a microcosm of the community that it serves, a school reflects and engages with the greater political, social, and economic issues and dynamics at any particular stage in its development (Haupt, 2010). This study includes Lazarus and Folkman's TMSC theory to help illustrate and analyze the stressful nature of principals' job demands and understand the impact.

Lazarus and Folkman's TMSC

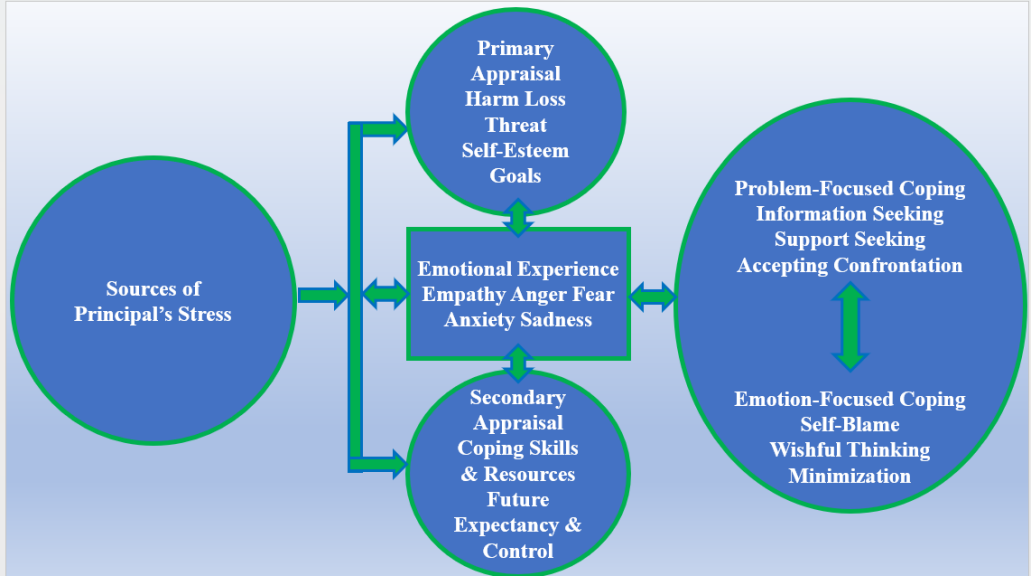
The Lazarus and Folkman model allows researchers to examine perceived life satisfaction and its impact on social activities (Kelso et al., 2005). Kelso and colleagues (2005) applied the TMSC in their qualitative case study of twenty-six primary caregivers of children with a disability exploring their perceptions of stress and coping process.

Although their study focused on caregivers of students with disabilities, they used TMSC to analyze the stress factors and coping mechanisms among adult participants.

The cognitive appraisal of a stressful situation precedes the coping process in the TMSC (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). Cognitive appraisal consists of two key components: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal refers to the process by which people appraise a situation as being a threat, a harm/loss, or a challenge whereas secondary appraisal points to the coping options for dealing with the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). TMSC is essential to understanding how Vermont principals manage the intensification of job-related stress. TMSC (Lazarus & Folkman,1984; Figure 2.2) helps identify how secondary school principals process their primary appraisal (e.g., harm, loss, threat, self-esteem, goals), secondary appraisal (e.g., coping skills and resources, future expectancy and control), and emotional experience (e.g., empathy, anger, fear, anxiety, sadness) when experiencing stressful job demands and whether participants use problem-focused coping (e.g., information seeking, support seeking, accepting confrontation), or emotion-focused coping (e.g., self-blame, wishful thinking, minimization).

Figure 2. 2

Graphic Description, Specifying Sources and Appraisal of Principal Stress



Conceptual Framework

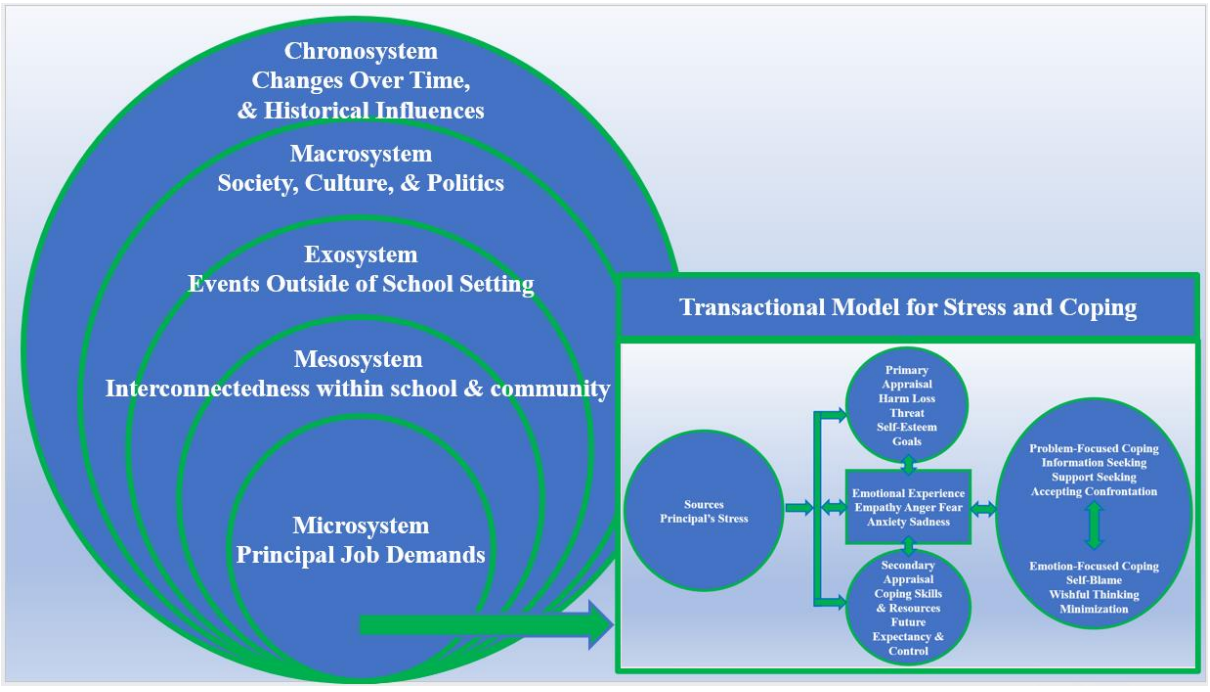
I used the conceptual framework to identify interconnected ecological factors that influence Vermont principals' experience with job-related stress and to show the impact of the stress; Bronfenbrenner's EST offers the opportunity to investigate numerous environmental factors and persons in different interaction relationships, roles, actions, and processes (Härkönen, 2008). The transactional model underlies Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive theory of stress, which views the person and the environment in a mutually reciprocal, bidirectional relationship. Combining the EST's ability to identify "numerous environmental factors and numerous persons" with the TMSC's framework to understand the "views of the person and the environment in a mutually reciprocal, bidirectional relationship" helped answer my research questions and design this study. A final factor in the increased interest in stress and coping is the emergence of

a strong environmental or social focus in behavioral science research (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 325).

The conceptual framework (Figure 2.3) includes: (1) ecological factors and sources for the principals' job-related stress coupled with the TMSC within the microsystem; (2) interconnectedness within the school and community for the mesosystem; (3) events outside of school setting for the exosystem; (4) society, policies, and culture for the macrosystem; and (5) changes over time and historical events for the chronosystem, with each level impacting the stressful job demands for secondary school principals differently and providing guidelines for how they manage it.

Figure 2. 3

Conceptual Framework



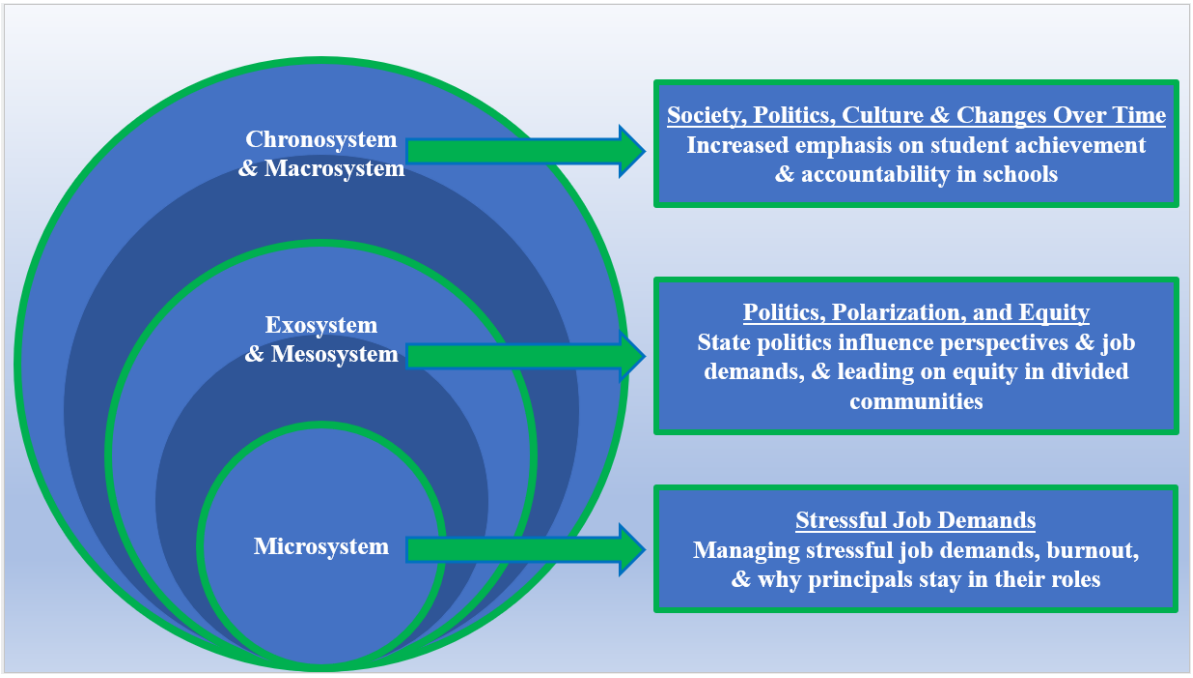
Literature Review

For the remainder of the literature review, I use the conceptual framework as an outline (Figure 2.4) to contextualize research from the outermost reaches of society at the

chrono and macrosystems level to the interconnected influences on secondary school principals' job demands in Vermont at the microsystems level. I first review literature highlighting the impact of society, policy, culture, and time at the chrono- and macrosystems levels. I then review literature underscoring the influence of state legislation, politics, and polarization at the exo- and mesosystems level. Next, I review literature highlighting the impact of job-related stress and burnout at the microsystems level. Finally, I review the literature on the ecological factors influencing principals' decision to stay or leave their positions.

Figure 2. 4

Conceptual Framework Outlining the Literature Review



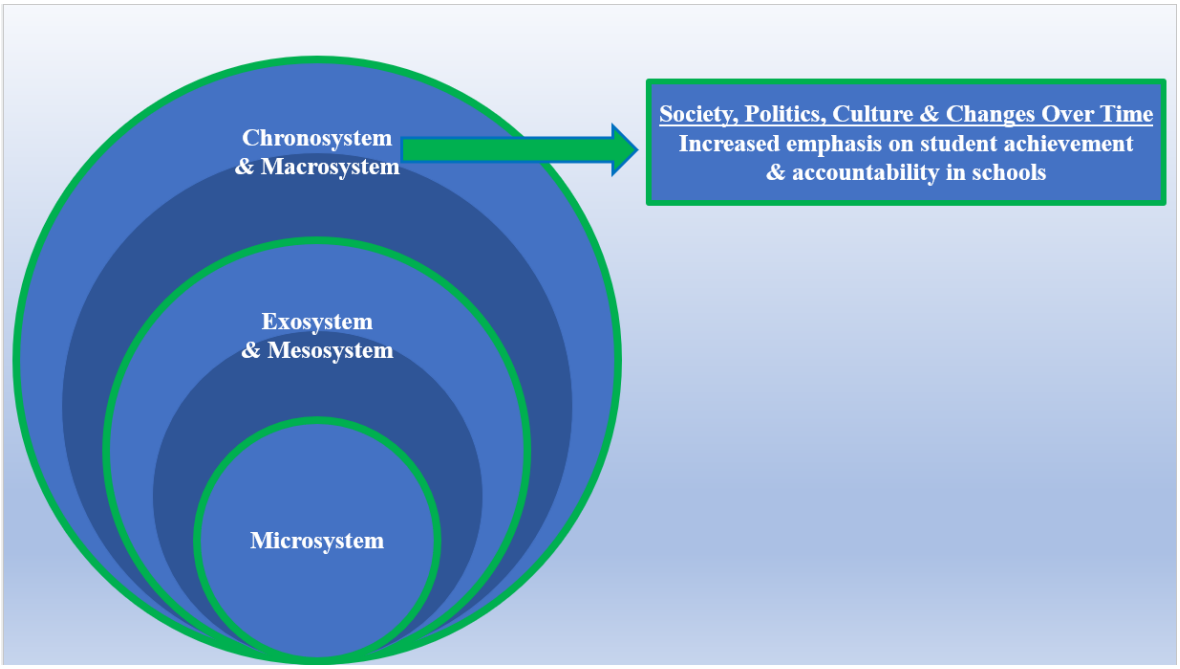
Chrono- and Macrosystems: Society, Politics, Culture, and Time

In the following section, I review literature highlighting the influence of society, policies, culture, and changes over time at the chrono- and macrosystems level (Figure 2.5). The literature includes the impact of political action such as changes over time in

educational mandates (e.g. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and Vermont's Act 173 and Act 77; these mandates increased emphasis on student achievement and accountability in schools, which significantly changed principals' job demands.

Figure 2. 5

Chronosystems and Macrosystems Level for Job-Related Stress



Federal Policy: NCLB

The NCLB Act of 2001 stands as a landmark educational reform in the United States, with extensive research underscoring its lasting impact on principals, teachers, students, and overall school outcomes. In their review of empirical literature, Husband and Hunt (2015) found that the NCLB Act of 2001 is arguably the most significant educational reform enacted in the United States in decades. Grissom and colleagues' (2021) systemic synthesis of two decades of research published since the year 2000 on principals and students, teachers, and school outcomes using journal databases and grey

literature sources, supports that claim and demonstrates the lasting effect of this powerful legislation.

Since 2001 numerous policy changes have contributed to reshaping the principal's role, with increased educational mandates for equity and improving student outcomes for historically underserved students. Grissom and colleagues' study yielded an initial return of more than 4,800 documents, which were then individually screened and processed. Grissom and colleagues (2021) reported that since the year 2000 to 2021, three phases of evolution in federal education policy forced a recalibration of the school principal's role: NCLB under President Bush, Race to the Top and NCLB waivers under President Obama, and the passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was also under President Obama. Grissom and colleagues highlight that NCLB has dramatically influenced the public discourse surrounding education and significantly affected the daily workings of students, teachers, and administrators. Each of these laws has components meant to ensure greater equity for all students. Over time, NCLB's prescriptive requirements became increasingly unworkable for schools and educators. Recognizing this fact, in 2010, the Obama administration joined a call from educators and families to create a better law that focused on the clear goal of fully preparing all students for success in college and careers (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

In summary, NCLB (2001) significantly impacts the educational landscape and directly influences "recalibrating" the principals' role and job demands. Two decades after the NCLB legislation, the ensuing literature shows a significant increase in student, teacher, and principal accountability, which has intensified demands on schools and the amount of pressure and job-related stress for principals to manage.

The enactment of federal policies since 2001 significantly recalibrated the role of school principals, shifting their responsibilities from primarily managerial tasks to increased accountability for student achievement. These changes have contributed to heightened job-related stress transforming the principals' role over the past two decades. The greater accountability was due to the subsequent changes in educational policy at the federal level over the past 20 years. Before NCLB, according to Burress (2017), principals' positions were highly managerial, and their schools had autonomy over curriculum and how to support educators, students, and their community stakeholders. However, Burress's (2017) study pointed to how school reform initiatives since NCLB have dramatically expanded and transformed the principal's role. Indeed, one of the most visible areas that NCLB accountability measures manifested in schools in the two decades following its implementation was increased standardized testing to evaluate student achievement in addition to more accountability for teachers and administrators (Levin et al., 2021).

NCLB introduced accountability measures that significantly increased pressure on school principals to improve student outcomes, specifically underserved students and spurred a critical national dialogue on education improvement. Burress's (2017) qualitative study borrowed elements of a narrative analysis through an interview process with nine current or former administrators in two Piedmont North Carolina school districts about the NCLB new measures. Burress found that the principal's role in improving student achievement came with greater responsibility and pressure. The study's participants reported that a major point of stress from NCLB was the increase in responsibility for raising achievement scores for underserved students. Moreover, the

added pressure brought on by student achievement included mandated testing and accountability for which each school's principal was now responsible. In fact, Levin and colleagues (2021) found that principals who could not raise student outcomes found themselves and their schools severely sanctioned.

The Obama administration expanded federal accountability policies to included educator evaluation, significantly reshaping the principal's role. In pushing for educator evaluation and encouraging states to attach compensation, tenure, and other job outcomes to evaluation, the Obama administration extended the school accountability focus of federal policy to a more direct focus on accountability for teachers and leaders (Grissom et al., 2021). Grissom and colleagues (2021) found that the widespread implementation of educator evaluation systems based on multiple performance measures has represented perhaps the most significant shift in school principals' role. Since NCLB, principals, instead of their managerial role, are expected to be in classrooms regularly and providing teaching staff with the tools for assessing and discussing instruction. This change helped move principals' roles beyond general notions of instructional leadership to more specific practices around assessing instruction, providing feedback, and coaching, and supporting teachers' professional learning (Grissom et al., 2021). The increased demands to support professional learning and improved student outcomes may result in positive and negative impacts on principals regarding job-related stress (Grissom et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2021).

The literature shows that the heightened accountability measures introduced by NCLB have contributed to increased stress, burnout, and turnover for principals. Beausaert and colleagues (2016) defined burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion,

depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do "people work" of some kind. Burress (2017) connected accountability for instructional leaders as a possible factor in lower principal retention rates. Levin and colleagues (2021) published a study in which the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) partnered on an intensive research project in 2019–2020 to identify the causes and impact of principal turnover nationwide through a national survey of school leaders and examination of existing data and literature review. Levin and colleagues (2021) found evidence that implementing NCLB was associated with a higher level of principals' job stress and a higher turnover rate; in summary, this study highlights how NCLB is related to principals' increased stress and turnover rates. Thus, the lower retention of school leaders could reflect the increasing emphasis placed on accountability (Burress, 2017).

The evolving role of principals under NCLB, particularly the focus on accountability and instructional leadership, has been a key factor in higher stress levels and turnover rates. The literature shows that due to changes in federal legislation, the shift to instructional leadership and accountability is an essential factor and backdrop for illustrating one of many shifting job demands over the past two decades influencing principals' stress, burnout, and turnover.

Education Legislation in Vermont

While NCLB set federal accountability mandates, states were given flexibility in implementation, leading to varied policy responses and increased responsibilities for local school leaders. The conditions attached to federal waivers from the NCLB requirements reinforced policy changes, which were first issued in early 2012, and

pushed even more states to adopt rigorous learning standards and implement more intensive educator evaluation systems (Grissom et al., 2021). This is an example of the interconnected nature of the EST and how federal policy flows to the states and local schools as the federal government allows individual states to meet the requirements of how they see fit to achieve these goals. In 2012, the Obama administration began granting flexibility to states regarding specific requirements of NCLB in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state- developed plans designed to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Policy changes that originate in Washington, DC flow to the states and localities, where school leaders are asked to engage more directly with classroom instruction, compete for students in public and private school choice environments, and pay close attention to equity as a stand-alone policy and professional goal (Grissom et al., 2021). For the state of Vermont, legislators responded with the passing of Act 77 in 2013 and Act 173 in 2018. These state laws gave Vermont school leaders the task of evolving their school's system and support for all students, especially those historically underserved.

Vermont's Act 77 and Act 173 emerged as state level response to federal waivers under NCLB, reflecting the continued emphasis on accountability and student achievement. As per federal waivers, the state of Vermont developed Act 77 (2013) and Act 173 (2018); as per Vermont Statues Online (2024), these mandates extended flexibility to local school districts to develop and maintain, in consultation with parents, a comprehensive system of education designed to result, to the extent appropriate, in all

students succeeding in the general education environment (State of Vermont Educational Equity, 2023).

> Act 77 was intended to improve Flexible Pathways Initiative: (1) to encourage and support the creativity of school districts as they develop and expand high-quality educational experiences that are an integral part of secondary education in the evolving 21st Century classroom; (2) to promote opportunities for Vermont students to achieve postsecondary readiness through high-quality educational experiences that acknowledge individual goals, learning styles, and abilities; and (3) to increase the rates of secondary school completion and postsecondary continuation in Vermont (State of Vermont Educational Equity, 2023, p. 1).

The school's responsibility to ensure that all students succeed in the general education classrooms is coupled with accountability for students, administrators, and teachers and is ultimately the responsibility of principals. These state mandates are examples of the emphasis NCLB placed on student achievement and how the State of Vermont adapted to meet those mandates.

Vermont's Act 173 was implemented to improve the effectiveness, availability, and equity of support services for students emphasizing a tiered system of academic and behavioral interventions (State of Vermont Educational Equity, 2023). To accomplish this, the Agency of Education contracted with the District Management Group (DMG), which issued in November 2017 its report entitled "Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Supports for Students who Struggle" (Delivery of Services Report) (Education Laws Agency of Education, 2023, p. 1). A major component of Act 173, including DMG recommendations, tasked schools to develop a tiered system of support for all students,

including an educational support team. Within each school district's comprehensive system of educational services, each public school shall develop and maintain a tiered system of academic and behavioral supports for the purpose of providing all students with the opportunity to succeed or to be challenged in the general education environment in the state of Vermont. (Agency of Education, 2023).

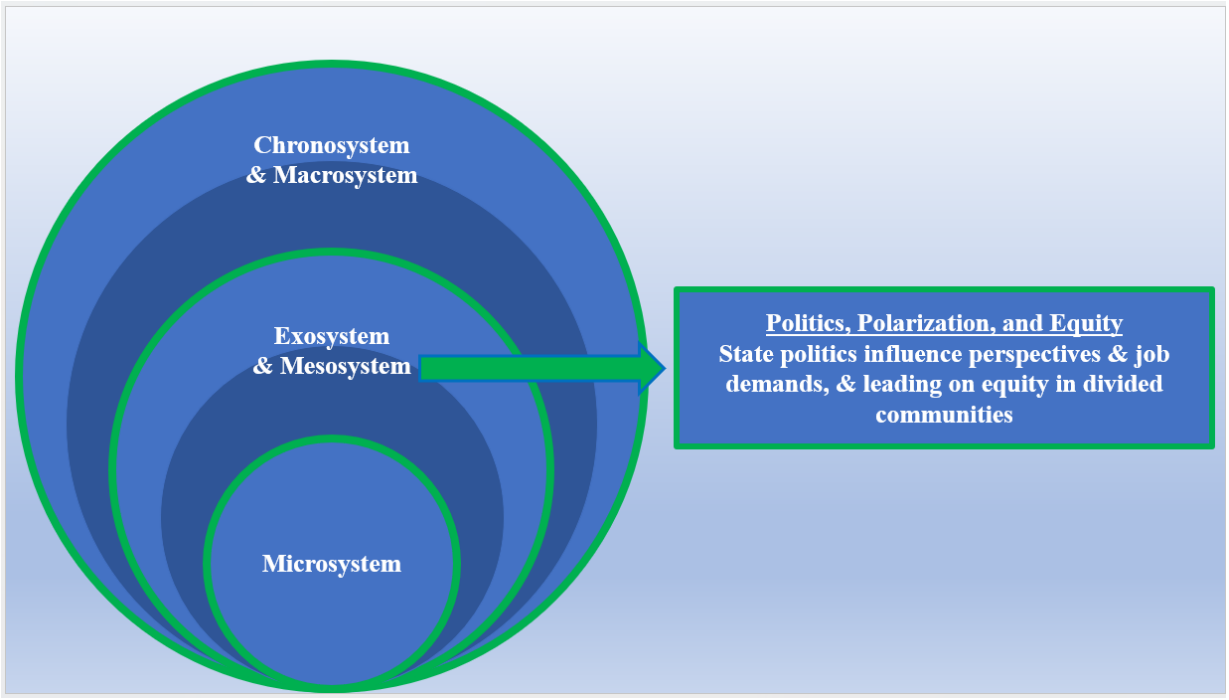
The implantation of Acts 173 and 77 in Vermont has expanded principal's responsibilities reinforcing their role in ensuring student success, equity, and school accountability. Act 77 and Act 173 are a result of Vermont's waiver proposals that meet the requirements of NCLB and as a result have shifted principals' job demands. Vermont continues to adapt and emphasize the equity required in Act 77 and Act 173, while also navigating how to appropriately fund these mandates and public education in Vermont.

Exo- and Mesosystems: Politics, Polarization, and Equity

In the following section, I review literature highlighting the influence of state politics on community perspectives and polarization at the exo- and mesosystem levels (Figure 2.6). The literature includes the impact of education legislation in Vermont on community perspectives, along with the job demands for ensuring equity in divided communities.

Figure 2. 6

Exosystems and Mesosystems Level for Factors of Job-Related Stress



State Politics Influence Perspectives and Job Demands

Vermont's Act 173 and Act 77 introduced significant changes to education funding, impacting resources and contributing to the financial challenges faced by school leaders and their communities. Policies such as the Flexible Pathways Initiative, including the Early College Program, created by Vermont Act 77 and requirements to implement multi-tiered systems of support for struggling students have implications for how resources are allocated to ensure equal access to quality educational programs and services (Study of pupil weights in Vermont's education funding formula, 2019). Both federal and state educational policies were enacted and implemented without significant federal funding, creating early challenges for the successful implementation of the state's

education funding system. To fund Act 173, stakeholder perspectives were mixed as to whether the special education census grant calculation should be revised to include adjustments for differences in student need across school districts (Study of pupil weights in Vermont's education funding formula, 2019). While this literature review does not go in depth into the responsibility and stressors related to budgeting and funding, it is important to highlight the influence education legislation has on stakeholders' attitudes and the implications that has on principals' job-related stress.

Act 173 introduced a shift from reimbursement-based to census-based funding model in Vermont, aiming to provide greater flexibility and streamline service delivery. In a 2018 article for the *Rutland Herald*, organizer of the Alliance of Vermont Schools board members, David Clark, wrote that the legislature passed a significant piece of legislation while the community was asleep, which fundamentally changed the way special education was paid for in Vermont. Act 173 states that to support the enhanced delivery of these services, the state funding model for special education shall change for all supervisory unions in fiscal year 2021 for school year 2020–2021 from a reimbursement model to a census-based model, which will provide more flexibility in how the funding can be used. This model is also aligned with the state's policy of prioritizing students who require additional support across the general and special education service-delivery systems and will simplify administration (State of Vermont Educational Equity, 2023).

Rising educational costs in Vermont, driven by increasing school budgets and health care costs, have sparked concerns over property tax hikes and placed additional pressure on school budgets and principals. In December of 2023, Vermont Governor

Phill Scott described an average projected increase in education property taxes of almost 18% as unacceptable and asked school boards to control costs. Vermont Legislator Representative Erin Brady of Williston, an active public-school teacher; Representative Rebecca Holcombe of Windsor-Orange 2, former Vermont Secretary of Education; and Representative Monique Priestley of Orange-2, clerk of the tri-partisan Rural Caucus argued that rising educational spending is also driven by state level issues and requires state level solutions (Vermont Principals Association, 2023). The projected education property tax increases are driven by a projected 12% increase in school budgets statewide; for example, districts face a 16% increase in health care premiums this year – an increase twice the rate of inflation (Vermont Principals Association, 2023). Altogether, 80 percent of current expenditures (in public schools) were spent on salaries and benefits in each year from 2010–11 to 2019–20, and about two-thirds of expenditures for salaries and benefits were considered instructional spending (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2023). Rising costs for school budgets are concerning as failed budgets lead to reduced faculty and staff, which has a profound impact on principals having to manage the loss while trying to improve schools and student outcomes.

Vermont's school funding system relies on state and local funds that are pooled together by the state and redistributed to districts based on a weighting formula designed to allocate more resources to underserved students and has sparked budget concerns and voter pushback on school budgets. School funding in Vermont is funded by state governments (47.0%), local governments (44.8%), and the federal government (8.3%) (Skinner, 2019). The U.S. Department of Education provides funding through federal

grants tied to compliance with ESSA. The primary source of local revenues for public elementary and secondary education is the property tax (Skinner, 2019). At the time of this study, Vermont was undergoing a new weighting system created to prioritize more money to schools with a higher population with weighting that favors demographics of students who historically have been underserved and underrepresented in positive school outcomes, the biggest of which was students categorized as English Language Learners. Schools with larger populations of traditionally underserved and under-resourced students receive additional resources, but this threatened higher budgeted and higher resourced schools when voters learned the significant impact on their local tax rates. In March of 2024, voters struck down close to a third of school budgets across Vermont, the highest proportion in at least a decade, according to the Vermont Superintendents Association (Weinstein, 2024).

Education policy in Vermont is shaped by local and national political influences, adding to the complexities principals face when implementing legislative changes. Clark (2018) suggested that ultimately, the Koch brothers' American Legislative Exchange Council organization was pumping hundreds of thousands of dollars into conservative causes in the Vermont election season beginning with Governor Phill Scott. Regardless of the merit of these claims, Clark's article helps to illustrate how politically charged a piece of educational legislation can be and how education policy in Vermont includes influences at the national level that contributes to the polarization of educational legislation. It then becomes the responsibility of educational leaders and principals to operate and implement these changes in the face of stakeholders like Clark who may be

opposed to legislative changes and the ensuing work that principals carry out in their schools to meet the demands of equity-driven policy.

The politization of educational equity across the United States has led to divergent policy approaches, with states like Florida restricting curriculum content while Vermont advances equity initiatives. Florida's State Board of Education banned "critical race theory" from public school classrooms, adopting new rules it said that would shield school children from curricula that could "distort historical events" (Calvan, 2021). In contrast, the state of Vermont AOE has proven to be far more progressive:

> Vermont is determined to eliminate the inequity that persists between Vermont's affluent white students and student groups that have historically demonstrated achievement gaps within our state's school systems, including students who are on Individual Education Plans, English Learners (Els), students eligible for free and reduced lunch, migrant children, children experiencing homelessness, children in foster care systems, and students of color (State of Vermont Educational Equity, 2023, p. 1).

While the values and intention behind these policies align with principals' values for supporting all students, the work and expectations associated with accomplishing these goals contributes to increased job demands for principals.

Policies like Arkansas's LEARNS Act influences educational discourse in Vermont, shaping stakeholders' perspectives adding to the challenges of the principals role in promoting equity in their schools. Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders' signed legislation, the LEARNS Act, an omnibus bill intended to revamp education from early childhood classes through the 12th grade bans on classroom instruction regarding

gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexual reproduction before fifth grade—prompting comparisons to Florida—and bans teaching that would indoctrinate students with ideologies, such as critical race theory (ABC News Network, 2023). Equity-oriented school leaders consider how their instructionally-focused interactions with teachers affect equity in the broader school community (Grissom et al., 2021). Stakeholders in Vermont are influenced by national and social media such as this, and attitudes and ideas around such legislation persist within many Vermont communities.

Leading on Equity in Divided Communities

Vermont's commitment to educational equity through Act 77 and 173 places principals at the intersection of policy, politics, and community dynamics, requiring them to navigate accountability measures while fostering an inclusive environment. In January 2018, the Vermont Principals' Association (VPA) stated that equity involves disrupting inequitable practices, acknowledging biases, and employing practices that reflect the reality that all students will learn (State of Vermont Educational Equity, 2023). An underlying aspect of Act 77 and Act 173 is Vermont's intent and mandate to address systemic inequities of students who require special education services and those students who have been historically marginalized and systemically struggled to achieve positive school outcomes. When leaders strive for equity as human rights and social justice issues in their schools, these ideologies intersect with politics and American culture. They are often at odds with one another. These concepts are evident in Grissom and colleagues' (2021) study, which found that accountability changes dramatically altered school leaders' roles by increasing leadership time devoted to the management of testing, focusing leaders' attention on managing school personnel toward specific metrics,

imposing accountability sanctions for previously overlooked subgroups, and encouraging stakeholders to focus on school performance judged by external benchmarks without necessarily increasing school resources and capabilities. Therefore, school leaders must often adapt to manage their stakeholders' responses in building consensus and building a basic understanding of initiatives, which is often in a divided community without additional resources while emphasizing accountability measures for schools.

Equity driven policies in Vermont schools have sparked community debates and attention on mascots, flags, transgender athlete inclusion, and title IX enforcement, leaving Vermont principals at the center of contentious and polarizing discussions. Many secondary schools have experienced protests, counter-protests, media coverage, and advocacy of support or decent directed towards principals' and superintendents; further, school boards weigh in on these issues. The Rutland area National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Gedakina, a nonprofit that supports indigenous culture and teachings have asserted that mascots including the Thunderbirds, the Colonels and the Rebels, were "upholding harmful legacies that continue to harm our children." Many of these calls for change come with great division and tension in school communities and are often a recipe for stress-induced situations and challenges for secondary principals tasked with leading such efforts in oftentimes divided school and local communities. Vermont's secondary school principals are left to manage the political backlash when policy and practice intersect with national politics and polarization.

While Vermont's education legislation emphasizes equity and inclusion, principals must navigate divided local communities, balancing stakeholder relationships amid political and social tension. The VPA's position on equity and inclusion has defined

equity to mean that a student's success is not predicated nor predetermined by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, economics, class, geography, disability, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or initial preferences (State of Vermont Educational Equity, 2023). Although Vermont's Agency of Education (AOE) and the VPA value equity and inclusion, many local communities and stakeholders are as divided as state and federal politicians. Principals face those divisions as they must interact and develop relationships with all stakeholders. The nature of relationships is a common factor influencing principal stress and their decisions to remain or stay in their position and will be expanded upon in the literature review.

In summary, schools and principals must lead their schools amid political divisions, balancing policy implantation, stakeholder expectations, and increasing accountability demands. The disparity in perspectives on what should and should not be taught in schools is present in Vermont. Despite stakeholders' perspectives, principals are tasked with implementing educational policies while their actions may or may not align with people's political leanings or views that media often fuels, which creates friction and impacts the community's expectations for schools and principals. This contributes to increased job demands that come with accountability and a call for a reduction in budgets to better ensure schools improve student outcomes.

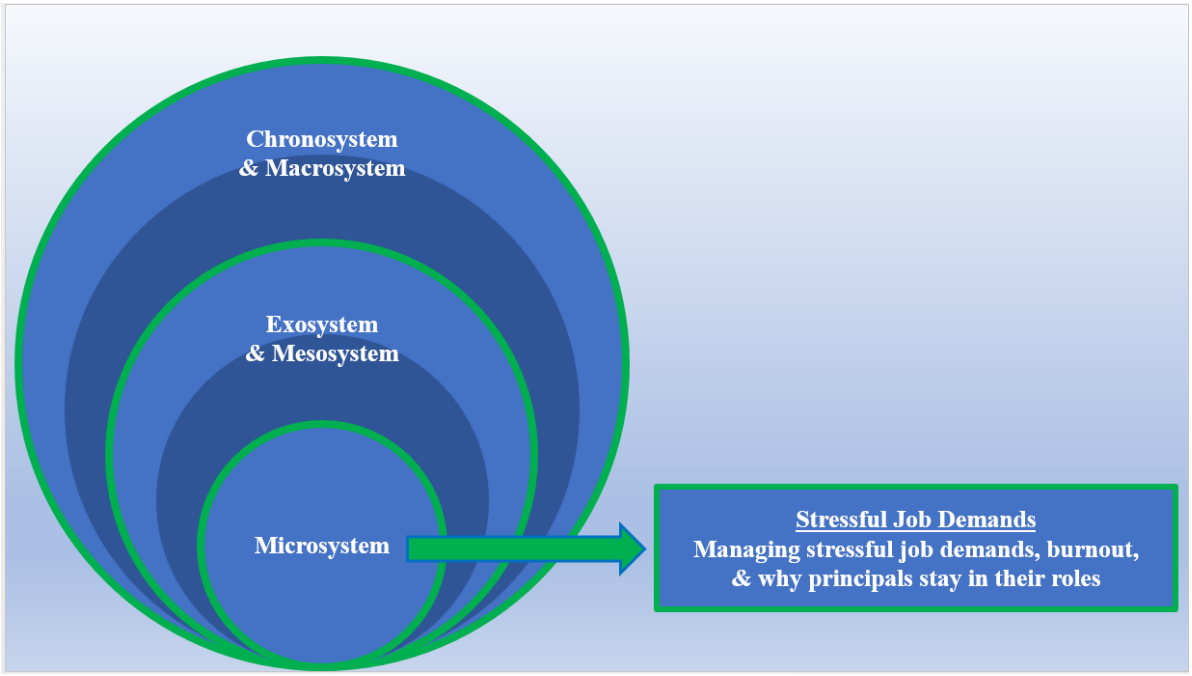
Microsystems: Stressful Job Demands

In the following section, I review literature that identifies influences on principals' job demands that lead to job-related stress at the microsystems level. The literature highlights unreasonable job demands that influence job satisfaction, job-related

stress that tests resiliency and leads to principal burnout, and how principals manage stress and burnout.

Figure 2. 7

Microsystems Level Factors for Job-Related Stress and Burnout



Unreasonable Job Demands Influence Job Satisfaction

Much of the literature shows that unreasonable job demands, stressful responsibilities and managing stakeholders contribute to stress and reduced job satisfaction. De Jong and colleague's (2017) quantitative study of 176 principals from a Midwestern state found that secondary principals unanimously conveyed the belief that job expectations are unreasonable. Secondary principals serve in complex and important, high-stress roles, including demanding job responsibilities (De Jong et al., 2017). De Jong and colleague's (2017) study also highlights key detriments to a principal's job satisfaction: unreasonable expectations, managing difficult stakeholders, problematic work/life balance, and lack of support.

Principals experience psychological vulnerability when job demands exceed their available resources, leading to stress and potential threats to their well-being. The relationship between the individual's pattern of commitments and their resources for warding off threats to those commitments (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When principals report that they are overwhelmed, they are likely responding to a deficit in resources, or their job responsibilities are such that they cannot effectively warn off threats. In addition, according to the TMSC, stress is the relationship between a person and the environment, and "psychological stress is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). When participants in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) study characterized the job demands as too much or overwhelming, they are expressing that what they are being tasked with is taxing and exceeding their resources and endangering their well-being.

Although Wang and Hauseman's (2018) study takes place in Canada, they found that policy impacts work intensification, and relational dynamics on principals' job satisfaction. Wang and Hauseman (2018) used logistic multiple regression analysis on survey data collected from 1,423 elementary and secondary school principals who were members of the Ontario Principals' Council in Ontario, Canada. Their findings identified factors similar to those in DeJong and colleagues' (2017) study, including the influence of policy. Wang and Hauseman (2018) found that because of work intensification, motivating factors (e.g., workplace challenges, recognition from the employer, work demand) and maintenance factors (e.g., external policy influence, organizational support, principals' relationships with teachers, superintendents, and unions) both have a significant impact on principals' job satisfaction.

Time constraints are critical and often overlooked factors for principals' stress, influencing job satisfaction, and retention amid increased job demands. Much of the literature poignantly describes specific pressures placed on schools (teachers, students, and principals) and the role those stresses play in job satisfaction and retention (Wang & Hauseman, 2018). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) highlight time as one of the most important parameters of stressful situations, yet it has been one of the most neglected areas of stress research. The relationship between time use and job satisfaction is central to understanding the nature of principals' work and individual principals' experiences (Wang & Hauseman, 2018) in managing it.

In summary, Wang and Hauseman (2018) and other researchers highlight the significant influence that several job-related stresses have on job satisfaction because of work intensification for principals and their influence on principal turnover. Wang and Hauseman also make a connection between external policy influences directly impacting principals' job-related stress.

Job-related Stress Tests Resilience and Leads to Burnout

The literature indicates that the expanding scope of a principal's responsibilities has made the role increasingly unmanageable, contributing to stress, burnout, and calls for structural changes. Luebke (2013) stated that principals today are expected to carry out these roles while also tending to building management, budgets, and other managerial tasks that at one time were the primary focus of the job. Luebke's (2013) qualitative study explored the institutional factors, personal characteristics, and work-related relationships of high school principals that led to their longer-than-usual tenure. Luebke interviewed 10 high school principals who had served in their positions for eight to 23

years. Luebke (2013) found that the principal role is now too significant for one person and offered suggestions to modify the principal's traditional role. This finding reinforces the results of some of the previous studies regarding the significance of changing job demands and their impact on stress and burnout.

The evolving role of principals, marked by increased accountability and multifaceted responsibilities, has intensified job related stress and tested principals' resiliency. Burress (2017) helped to contextualize how stressors are complex and, again, tied to the changing role of the principal over time. Interviewing nine current or former principals, Burress (2017) concluded that principals' duties have changed over time, from managing to leading as today's era of schooling insists on high expectations for students, including improving test results based on the new standards. Using narrative inquiry, Burress (2017) collected data using the personal stories of principals and the narrative method of interviewing participants, which allowed for gathering the perspectives of various school leaders. Some stressors are innate to the position, such as accountability related to achievement scores, implementing new initiatives, handling dwindling budgets, satisfying all stakeholders, and acting as a school safety expert, disciplinarian, school marketing representative, and instructional leader (Burress, 2017). One participant in Burress's (2017) study explained general stressors on the job as "stressful in the sense of just the everyday stressors of principals, achievement, perception, the community perception, culture, those things, and trying to balance all those things and keeping a happy medium and being able to continue to drive student achievement" (Burress, 2017, p. 59). The literature shows that intensification of job demands is causing significant stress and tests principals' resiliency.

For the purposes of this study, resilience is defined as a person's ability to effectively and consistently cope with stressful job demands. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and or internal demands appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. The resilience of principals is increasingly tested as they navigate their own self-care while being exposed to a wide range of societal issues and stakeholders in their communities during a mental health crisis. In Richard and Dixon's (2020) article review, the authors pointed out that a person's resilience will differ from individual to individual. Richard and Dixon (2020) highlight the importance of fostering resilience to prevent poor mental health outcomes from adverse responses to crises and long-term stressors. Richards found that when individuals face major stressors due to natural disasters, trauma, public health crises, and now COVID-19, resilience is tested on an individual, organizational, and societal level. Pre-COVID or post-COVID, principals are responsible for managing personal, organizational, and societal needs in their schools, and they must support their stakeholders' resiliency while attending to their own.

Lazarus and Folkman's concept of tasks or interactions exceeding a person's resources certainly applies to the daily experiences of principals where their internal and external resources vary, which is why much of the literature highlights the influence of interacting with others as a factor for stress and burnout for secondary school principals. In May 2023, US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General Advisory calling attention to the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health [OASH], 2023). The National Alliance on Mental Illness defines a mental health crisis as a "situation in which a

person's behavior puts them at risk of hurting themselves or others and/or prevents them from being able to care for themselves or function effectively" (Hogan & Goldman, 2021).

The literature highlights the pervasive and multifaceted stressors principals face, which can lead to significant physical, psychological, and emotional challenges over time. Sogunro (2012) interviewed 52 principals in Connecticut for a two-year case study and identified major stress factors, including unpleasant relationships and people conflicts, time constraints and related issues, crises in the school, challenging policy demands and overwhelming mandates, budgetary constraints, and related issues, fear of failure, negative publicity and dealing with media, and continuous frustrations and challenges. Evidence abounds that stress is a worrisome and inescapable entity in school administration and that it predisposes principals to various physical, psychological, physiological, and socioemotional problems (Sogunro, 2012). According to Maté (2019):

> The physiological impact of the emotions is still far from fully appreciated. The Medical approach to health and illness continues to suppose that body and mind are separate from each other and from the milieu in which they exist; compounding that mistake is a definition that is narrow and simplistic. Medical thinking usually sees stress as highly disturbing but isolated events such as sudden unemployment a marriage breakup, or the death of a loved one. These major events are potent sources of stress for many. However, there are chronic daily stresses in people's lives that are insidious and more harmful in their long-term biological consequences. Internally generated stresses take their toll without in any way seeming out of the ordinary (Maté, 2019, pp. 29).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) assert that we must identify the multiple demands in a stressful transaction and assess coping with respect to those demands and how they shift over time and contribute to burnout.

In summary, principals must balance their own resilience with the responsibility of fostering resilience at individual, organizational and societal levels, while navigating evolving job demands that contribute to stress and burnout.

Managing Job-related Stress and Burnout

The literature shows that principals relationships with stakeholders can both cause and alleviate stress, with secondary traumatic stress (STS) emerging as a significant factor that leads to burnout. DeMatthews and colleagues (2019), in their explanatory sequential mixed-method design of principals within one large urban school district along the U.S.-Mexico border, found one experience or set of experiences that contribute to burnout is secondary traumatic stress (STS), which is often referred to as compassion fatigue. STS is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another (Peterson, 2022). Principals' roles predispose them to experience others' stress, which manifests through a wide range of behaviors and expectations. Social scientists argue that this type of stress will have psychological and physiological effects on a person's well-being.

Principals face pressure from various stakeholders, requiring them to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics while balancing administrative and leadership responsibilities. DeMatthews et al. (2019) found that principals reported pressures from parents and community members with unreasonable demands, overload from too many

meetings, unrelenting job expectations, unsatisfactory or underperforming teachers, and uncooperative or incompetent administrative support staff. According to Maté (2019):

> Interactions with other humans, particularly emotional interactions, affect our biological functioning in myriad and subtle ways in every moment of our lives. They are important determinants of health… understanding the intricate balance of relationships among our psychological dynamics, our emotional environment, and our physiology is crucial to well-being.

In DeMatthews et al.'s (2021) mixed methods study, the authors used qualitative and quantitative survey data of 72 principals in one large urban school district in the Southwestern United States. DeMatthews et al. (2021) stated that principals are professionals leading human-service institutions, which means they need to complete the job functions of the principalship and manage the personal and social dimensions of leading an organization designed to support students, teachers, families, and staff.

Additional research is needed to explore the impact of trauma, coping strategies, and working conditions on principal burnout, as well as professional support in mitigating stress and improving retention (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Principals who experience secondary trauma and compassion fatigue may experience higher levels of burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Burnout is often used to describe job-related stress and can be considered an occupational hazard that may impact an individual's personal and professional well-being (DeMatthews et al., 2019; DeMatthews et al., 2021). These interactions add to the complexity and challenges of the principal's position and undoubtedly contribute to principal stress and poor health. It is important to note that studies also find that support from colleagues or supervisors is a crucial factor in

mitigating burnout and is a positive factor for principal retention (Cieminski, 2018; Dejong, 2017; Federici & Skalvik, 2012; Luebke, 2013; Wang, 2018).

The literature shows that incorporating mindfulness practices into principal preparation programs may help to reduce stress and burnout, offering a strategy to help address principal turnover. Kim and Pendola (2022) define mindfulness in several ways, such as paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, or waking up to what the present moment offers. In Wells and Klocko's (2018) conceptual article, the researchers reviewed the nature of stress as reported by principals and suggested a means for responding to that stress with efforts that have resulted in resilience for people in numerous occupations. Wells and Klocko found that principal preparation programs in colleges and universities charged with providing training that prepares aspiring and practicing school leaders for work in the field may wish to consider mindfulness practice in the curriculum. In their conceptual paper, Kim and Pendola (2022) sought to recognize and define how the positive outcomes of mindfulness practices may address the root causes of principal turnover. An emerging body of research has shown that mindfulness practices for school administrators can result in significant benefits, including a reduction in stress and a sense of burnout (Wells & Klocko, 2018).

While external stressors impact principals, research highlights the importance of internal resources, such as mindfulness-based interventions, in building resilience and managing stress. Kim and Pendola (2022) discuss two approaches to addressing principal turnover with Mindfulness-Based Interventions. Practicing using reflection and mindful awareness to identify and manage strong emotions is another skill that could help school

administrators deal with stress (Mahfouz, 2020). Of course, not all principals cope in the same manner, operate in the same exact environment with the same resources, perceive or cope with stress in the same way, or have the same prerequisite skills. Kim and Pendola (2022) note that intrapersonal antecedents to principal dissatisfaction and turnover include stress, role conflict, task overload, emotional exhaustion, and low self-efficacy, and research on mindfulness practices align with many of these identified factors, and in some cases exceed them.

The literature shows that principals must navigate dynamic environments while managing stress, fostering relationships, and developing skills to sustain their well-being and effectiveness as leaders. Mahfouz (2020), in their study of 13 school administrators in central Pennsylvania, found that the school administrators (experienced and novice alike) admitted that it was difficult to manage day-to-day stressors associated with their positions. Mahfouz's (2020) study relied on a corpus of data that included 39 in-depth individual interviews, and 21 shadowing observations recorded in field notes with the 13 administrators. They found school leaders must work in dynamic, rapidly changing environments, with expectations to adapt while remaining composed and positive. School administrators are thought of as change leaders who are expected to maintain high-quality instructional leadership and sustain supportive learning environments. But they must also attend to their social needs (Mahfouz, 2018). Thus, school administrators need to develop skills that enable them to interact with others consciously, with full awareness of how their actions impact themselves, others, and their environments (Mahfouz, 2018). The importance of social needs, resources, and relationships are crucial factors that many of

the studies in the literature review highlighted as necessary for principals' decisions to stay or leave the position or profession.

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened awareness of personal well-being, emphasizing the importance of self-reflection, mindfulness, and emotional regulation. Yamamoto and colleagues' (2013) qualitative multi-case study research study on principals' experiences found that processing emotion derived from critical incidents catapulted leaders into a willingness to self-reflect and to engage in storying and re-storying with self and others, thus using emotion to grow as a person and leader as illustrated in the model: emotion in leadership. This willingness and movement to self-reflect aligns well with coping strategies such as mindfulness. Kim and Pendola's (2022) concept paper pointed to an emerging body of research showing that mindfulness practices for school administrators can result in significant benefits, including a reduction in stress and a sense of burnout. The concept of self-reflecting is reinforced in Mahfouz's (2018) study recommending that principals need to use strategies and skills that enable them to be effective leaders through emotion regulation, self-awareness, and promotion of care and compassion. According to DeMatthews et al. (2021):

> With greater attention focused on principal burnout and self-care, we believe that districts can improve principal retention, which will translate into improved and healthier schools for teachers and students. In sum, healthy principals that prioritize their well-being can sustain efforts to improve schools, and support teachers, interrogate inequitable policies and practices that marginalize students, and build trusting relationships with families. (p. 165)

Emotionally stable leaders who can manage and cultivate positive relationships with those with whom they interact and are responsible for create a healthy, positive school culture.

The increasing job demands of principals continue to escalate stress levels, with surveys indicating that principals are considering leaving their job or the profession due to job related stress. In contemporary times, stress in school administration is an everyday thing that accumulates because of the growing demands of the job and continues to take a toll on the professional and private lives of principals and those whom they administer (Sogunro, 2012). This is evident in a June 2022 NASSP survey. NASSP partnered with the Gotham Group to survey 1,000 secondary school principals and assistant principals and 1,000 secondary level students in grades 8 to 12. The 2022 NASSP survey found that one in two school leaders said their stress levels were so high that they considered a career change or retirement (NASSP, 2022). For this study, these findings are important as principals' decisions to leave their positions or professions are often a direct result of job-related stress.

While principals play a crucial role in school improvement, job-related stress can hinder their effectiveness and contribute to turnover, with mindfulness emerging as a potential strategy for mitigation (DeMatthews et al., 2021). DeMatthews and colleagues argue that mindfulness can effectively address or mitigate a number of factors highlighted in this literature review as sources for job-related stress.

What Influences Principals to Stay or Leave?

In this section, I reviewed literature (see Appendix A) that highlights factors that influence principals to stay or leave their jobs at the microsystems level. The following

section includes relationships, change, balance, and health issues as factors that influence principals' decisions to stay or leave their positions. These factors were the most commonly identified factors in the review of literature. Whether the factors are characterized as stressful (negative) or as supportive (positive) determines why principals stay or leave their position.

Relationships

The literature consistently underscores the dual role of relationships in a principal's experience, serving both as a crucial support system and source of job-related stress. Luebke's (2013) qualitative study explored the institutional factors, personal characteristics, and work-related relationships of high school principals that led to longer-than-usual tenure in their positions. Using the Colorado Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) Survey, Cieminski's (2018) qualitative study examined the succession practices of five large school districts in Colorado by gathering the perspectives of principals and school district leaders using interpretive design. Cieminski's (2018) study, which included seven school district/system administrators and 11 school principals, found the importance of the relationships between teachers and building principals emerged when analyzing data from the school districts with high TELL results. Luebke (2013) found that several factors influenced the decision to remain in one position for an extended period of time, including positive relationships with students, faculty, and staff and their superintendents. Sogunro (2012) found that unpleasant or sour relationships and conflicts with people constituted the greatest source of stress for school principals especially because the roles principals entail when making relationships with all kinds of people (internal and external stakeholders) whether it is at

the elementary, middle, or high school level. This was also seen in Leubke's (2013) study. All participants in Leubke's study cited relationships as a primary factor in their decisions to remain in their positions or seek another. The strength of many of their relationships was mentioned when asked why they stayed; the tenuous nature of other relationships was mentioned as a factor that could influence them to leave.

Strong relationships with stakeholders, supervisors, and colleagues play a crucial role in principal retention, job-satisfaction, and well-being. The relationships between various stakeholders and principals, principals and their supervisors, and among principals were recognized as important to the development and retention of leaders (Cieminski, 2018). Wang and Hauseman's (2018) findings suggest that building trust and fostering positive working relationships with various stakeholders is an important part of principals' work—highlighting the importance of taking the time to build solid relationships with people both within and beyond the school site. District leaders influenced principals' retention in ways that were centered on relationships such as differentiating support for individual principals, fostering a collaborative culture, and maintaining supportive relationships with the principals (Cieminski, 2018). According to the teachers and principals in Steiner et al.'s (2022) samples, positive school environments and strong relationships with colleagues were key sources of support in stressful times. Steiner and colleagues found that working conditions indicative of supportive environments such as being actively involved in decision making and supervisor support were linked with better well-being and with a decreased likelihood of leaving.

In summary, relationships serve as a source of stress for principals, with stakeholder interactions influencing their job satisfaction, well-being, and decision to remain in or leave their positions. The literature also highlights the spectrum of stakeholders that principals must have relationships with; this acts as another complex ecological layer that increase a principal's chances and challenges for experiencing relationships perceived as supportive (positive) and experiences perceived as stressful (negative) and thus influence a principal's decision to stay or leave in contrasting ways.

Change

The evolving role of principals from managers to instructional leaders has increased job complexity, contributing to job retention challenges, burnout, and a decline in interest in the position. Burress (2017) discussed how principals' duties have changed over time from managing to leading. While expectations for principals have evolved into instructional leaders, there is growing concern that their retention, especially at the secondary level, is posing a problem for many school districts (Luebke, 2013). Luebke (2013) found that change included subthemes of continuous improvement, instructional leadership, cultural changes, sustainability of change, socioeconomic factors, and student achievement. The job's complexities became relevant from the literature review, as research revealed an increasing workload resulting in burnout for some and health issues for others (Buress, 2017). Participant principals in Cieminski's (2018) study recommended that school district leaders should be mindful of the changes, make sure that the expectations regarding changes were reasonable, and ensure support to principals making those changes. In our changing and complex society, leaders face the challenge of cultivating and sustaining learning under the dynamic conditions of rapid change

(Burres, 2017). Not only is the work intensifying but also the very nature of school administration is changing; the position is becoming less desirable especially to new principals (Wang & Hauseman, 2018).

In summary, these studies show that the type of changes happening are significant and the number of changes contribute to the intensity and stressful nature of an increasing workload, which is resulting in burnout for some and health issues for others; these reasons influences principals' decision to stay or leave their position.

Balance

The increasing job demands of the principalship, coupled with work-life balance challenges and deteriorating job conditions, contribute to low job-satisfaction and retention. Long hours, a contentious political environment, lack of recognition by their employers, increasing work demands, lack of autonomy in hiring and firing, and imbalance between management and instructional leadership have significantly contributed to principals' low job satisfaction and become the surest signs of deteriorating work conditions (Wang & Hauseman, 2018). Burress's (2017) study found that striving to achieve balance in the principalship was a universal theme among the nine principals interviewed. Parker's (2019) case study about principals' perceptions of retention and attrition used elementary school principals in Central Texas from two urban districts and one suburban district located in Central Texas. Parker (2019) concluded that districts must balance high expectations with a margin of flexibility so that principals can provide the support their campus needs. Luebke (2013) found that balancing the demands of the job, balancing the job and family life, and responding to managing the multiple demands of work and home life are crucial factors that influence principals'

considerations for staying or leaving. Most will experience stress related to balancing personal and professional responsibilities as well as health concerns, and it is vital to remember that daily stress that is short-lived is normal, but when it continues, it can turn into distress (Burress, 2017).

In summary, the literature identifies several ecological factors that contribute to imbalance for principals' professional and personal lives. The research shows that evolving job demands make it increasingly difficult for principals to manage the multiple demands of work with home life. The literature also reinforces job-related stress and how the imbalance of professional demands and personal needs influences principals' stress and their decision to stay or leave their positions.

Health Issues

The literature highlights the importance of job-satisfaction, health and well-being, emphasizing the need for strategies to mitigate stress and burnout. Major themes in Buress's (2017) study included the importance of finding balance in the principalship, the impact of health issues, the rewards of being a school leader, and advice they would give to new administrators. Principals' job satisfaction is closely related to their personal and organizational well-being and work conditions (Wang & Hauseman, 2018). In Buress's (2017) study, all interviewees shared at least one health-related issue they believed was a direct result of the stress of the job as a school leader and rising job demands in both quantity (e.g., work overload and multitasking) and quality (e.g., changing work conditions and reduced autonomy). The study found that stress can significantly impact principals' health and well-being. It is imperative to develop strategies that can provide the motivation for appropriate policy changes, highlight health concerns, and generate

knowledge that can be used to support principals' occupational health and well-being (Wang & Hauseman, 2018).

In summary, the literature indicates that increased demands are so stressful for principals that it negatively impacts their health and well-being to a point it is considered an occupational hazard, which is influencing their decisions to stay or leave their positions. The literature review highlights numerous factors that influence principals' job demands, including policies, societal influences, unreasonable job demands, polarization that are influencing principals stressful job demands. There is a gap in research showing the interconnectedness and impact of factors outside of a principal's sphere of influence, including job-related stress.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This qualitative research study focused on how the ecological factors, spanning from the macro- to micro-levels of society, impact the job-related stress of Vermont secondary school principals (RQ 1), how those principals manage it (RQ 2), and what influences their decisions to stay or leave their positions (RQ 3).

The Case Study Approach

An exploratory case study methodology allowed for the collection of detailed textual descriptions of Vermont principals' job demands obtained through semi-structured interviews and an analysis of education policy documents and government websites. An exploratory case study seeks to "explain real-life issues that are too complex for survey or experimental strategies" (Yin, 2018). An exploratory case study is an appropriate design as minimal information about job-related stress in Vermont secondary schools exists.

A qualitative exploratory case study methodology allowed for the collection of detailed textual descriptions of Vermont principals' job demands obtained through semi-structured interviews, including education policy documents and a literature review. Given that perceptions varied from person to person, a case study method offers the tools to analyze real life by studying multiple participants in a bounded system. Qualitative data emphasizing people's lived experiences are fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them (Miles et al., 2020).

Sampling, in the context of a qualitative case study, includes not only making decisions about who to interview but also about what processes to explore that will provide an in-depth understanding of the case (Miles et al., 2020). Six sources of data

typically are used in qualitative case studies: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2018). This case study triangulated interviews of principals and educational leaders, and materials such as state agency websites and sources for education policies. The case for this study is defined as understanding job-related stress for Vermont secondary principals because of multiple, interconnected ecological factors that influence them. This case study design allowed me to inquire with Vermont secondary school principals and educational leaders (a superintendent, a state legislator, and two VPA leaders) through semi-structured interviews, including a review of education policy documents and government websites.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry helped elicit stories from and perspectives of participants to capture the magnitude and nuance of multiple participants' experiences related to this study's purpose. Yin (2018) stated that a case study is an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; it is especially meaningful when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear. Yin (2018) states that a qualitative researcher "deliberately wants to cover contextual conditions, believing that they would be highly pertinent to the phenomenon being studied." By interviewing principals, educational leaders, and legislators to contextualize the phenomenon of job-related stress brought on by myriad ecological factors, the study was able to contextualize job-related stress "that are not evident" for Vermont principals. The central claim for using narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The academic importance of narrative inquiry is that it brings theoretical ideas about the nature of

human life as lived to address educational experience as lived, which was an essential tool in this case study of secondary principals' lived experiences that were bounded by the ecological interconnections and influences within the state of Vermont.

Data Collection

A feature of qualitative data is their richness and holism, with a strong potential for revealing complexity (Miles et al., 2014). Although this study used narrative inquiry as a part of the design, triangulation of data allowed me to gain a broader and more secure understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon of job-related stress for Vermont principals. The study included semi-structured interviews of principals, educational leaders, and policy makers from government websites to gather multiple sources of evidence to maximize the study's trustworthiness. Data collection methods included ten in-depth semi-structured interviews with current Vermont principals, three in-depth semi-structured interviews with Vermont educational leaders (one superintendent, one legislator, two VPA leaders), and a literature review of policies and state and district websites. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the research questions and associated sources of evidence.

Table 3. 1

Research Questions and Sources of Evidence

Research Questions	Source of Evidence
How do various ecological factors influence job-related stress on secondary school principals?	Interviews with current Vermont principals Interviews with educational leaders and legislators. Policies, documents, and websites
How do secondary principals in Vermont manage job-related stress and burnout?	Interviews with current Vermont principals Interviews with educational leaders and legislators

Why do secondary principals stay in their positions?	Interviews with current Vermont principals Interviews with educational leaders and legislators

Qualitative methods allow for a deeper understanding of processes under investigation as they emerge during data collection (Kelso et al., 2005). The data collection strategy was through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each participant. I wrote notes after each interview, including my observations on body language, breathing, emotional reactions to questions, topics that arise, and relevant emerging themes. I used Microsoft Teams as the mode to gather data. Several benefits of the study included accommodating each person's schedule, maximizing our time, and providing a platform where I could easily record and transcribe the audio and video.

I emailed participants introducing myself and the study. In the email, I discussed the purpose of the study, its relevance for real-world application, and described the requirements for each participant. After I obtained an agreement from the participants for the study, I scheduled the actual interview meeting with the participants on Microsoft Teams. Each participant in the study was interviewed once for approximately 45 minutes. I did not perform any formal follow-up interviews with the participants as no clarification was needed.

I sought Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before beginning recruitment or data collection. Using Creswell and Poth's (2018) sample interview protocol (see appendix B), I structured my interview with each participant with the date, location, identifying information of interviewer and interviewee, the description of the study approved by the IRB, and asked semi-structured questions from the interview protocol (Table 3.2). I shared the IRB-approved information sheet and questions with participants

before the scheduled interview to help interviewees feel prepared and offered them time to consider personal stories or factors that may provide rich data.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with secondary school principals and educational leaders allowed me to ask questions and follow-up to gain an in-depth understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of perceptions on ecological factors that influence job-related stress, how they manage them, and the factors that influenced their decisions to stay in their jobs. The interview questions were developed using the literature review and the theoretical framework as guides.

Table 3. 2

Sample Interview Protocol for High School Principals in Vermont

Research Question	Examples of Interview Questions
RQ 1: How do various ecological factors influence job-related stress on secondary school principals?	a. What factors would you say have the greatest influence on your job-related stress? b. What has changed the most in your role as principal or in education?
RQ 2: How do secondary principals in Vermont manage job-related stress and burnout?	a. What factors would you say have the greatest influence on mitigating or managing job-related stress? b. What strategies or resources do you use to manage job-related stress?
RQ 3: Why do secondary principals stay in their positions?	a. What factors would you say have the greatest influence on you wanting to remain in your position? b. How often, if ever, do you think about leaving your position?

Participants and Setting

This study utilized a purposeful sampling method, aiming to select participants who could provide deep insights into the research problem. By employing a sampling grid (Table 3.3), the study ensures trustworthiness, acknowledging that stress-related factors vary by individual, and environment. The inclusion of participants with diverse perspectives aligns with the recommendation from Creswell and Poth (2018) that varying viewpoints often enrich research findings and that ordinary, accessible, or unusual cases may also offer value. Ultimately, the participants were chosen to share meaningful insights into the ecological factors influencing their stress, their coping strategies, and their decisions to remain in their roles.

Given that this case study aimed to understand the ecological factors that include events outside the school setting, it strengthened the case study to include the perspectives of educational leaders (a superintendent, a state legislator, and two VPA leaders) in addition to current Vermont secondary school principals from around the state. I invited ten current Vermont secondary school principals from various regions (northeast, northwest, central, and southern) of Vermont. I aimed to sample a representative group of principals regarding years of experience (i.e., less than five years and more than five years), school demographics (i.e., student enrollment, and socioeconomic population), and gender (i.e., male, female, or other).

I also selected four educational leaders: one superintendent, one Vermont Legislator, two Vermont Principals Association executive council members. I aimed to sample a representative group of educational leaders with varying years of experience (i.e., less than five years and more than five years) and gender (i.e., male, female, or

other). These criteria helped give context to this case study to deepen understanding of current narratives and ecological factors that create the context in which Vermont secondary school principals operate, manage, and consider staying in their positions.

As seen in Table 3.3, the study included fourteen participants, eight female, and six males. Ten participants were active principals at the time of the study. Thirteen out of fourteen participants had high school principal experience, with the state legislator being the only exception. Three participants' years of experience ranged from one to four years. Three participants' years of experience ranged from five to ten years. Four participants' years of experience ranged from eleven or more years. Five out of ten principals were in schools that included grades six to eight. Three principals work in schools with student populations under three hundred. Five principals work in schools with student populations ranging from four hundred to five hundred. Two principals work in schools with student populations ranging from five hundred to under eight hundred and fifty. Principals from this study had student populations considered to be economically disadvantaged, ranging from 14% to 68%, for an average of 30% overall. With the exception of the northeast region of Vermont, the study included interviews with principals from all regions of the state.

Table 3. 3

Participant Sampling Grid

Participant	Years of Principal Experience	Gender	Position	Region	Student Population	% Economically Disadvantaged
Participant 1	17	Female	Principal Grades 6-8	Northwest	488	35%
Participant 2	5	Female	VPA Leader	Vermont	___	___
Participant 3	13	Male	VPA Leader	Vermont	___	___
Participant 4	2	Male	Principal Grades 9-12	Central	403	23%
Participant 5	9	Female	Principal Grades 9-12	Northwest	439	20%
Participant 7	23	Male	Principal Grades 9-12	Northwest	838	14%
Participant 8	17	Male	Principal Grades 6-12	Central	483	20%
Participant 9	2	Female	Principal Grades 9-12	Central	278	30%
Participant 10	1	Female	Principal Grades 9-12	Central	519	18%
Participant 11	___	Female	State Representative	Vermont	___	___
Participant 12	10	Female	Superintendent	Northwest	2,409	21%
Participant 13	15	Female	Principal Grades 6-12	Southern	119	36%
Participant 14	7	Male	Principal Grades 6-12	Northwest	476	37%
Participant 16	12	Male	Principal Grades 6-12	Northwest	215	68%

Recruitment Process

Participant selection was conducted through a formal request letter emailed through the VPA's list serve and by direct email to potential participants with whom I had relationships or connections. The request letter explained the purpose of the study and included a section where the participants were asked to respond to the email indicating whether they wish to participate or decline participation in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary, and the letter clearly stated that.

The IRB consent form was presented to participants before the interview process. Once the participants responded to the request, I followed up with an email to each participant to confirm their decision to participate in the study. Once I met the criteria for obtaining participants, I scheduled interviews and shared the interview protocol via email.

Yin (2018) espoused that case studies rely on data triangulation and provided three principles relative to data collection: (a) gather multiple sources of evidence to make findings more convincing, (b) create a case study database to house the raw data separate from the research report, and (c) maintain a chain of evidence linking data from the research question to the conclusions. I relied on the transcription feature from Microsoft Teams to effectively transcribe the recordings from each interview, allowing me to transcribe each interview accurately. I archived identifiable correspondence in the University of Vermont's secure OneDrive, and I have maintained my files for the duration of this study. One calendar year following the conclusion of the study, I will delete all identifying information of the interview participants. In my initial email, I included the research information sheet, highlighted the importance of confidentiality and anonymity, and provided a summary of the purpose and process of this study.

I established a database to separate the raw data from the research report. As a part of the data collection procedures, I maintained a chain of evidence linking data from the research question to the conclusions, drawing connections between the literature review and data collection. The evidence included my notes from interview observations, data retrieval from government documents and websites, and the literature review. This qualitative research design used these data collection procedures to provide the detailed and descriptive data necessary to understand the ecological influences on principals experiencing job-related stress, how they manage it, and the factors that influenced their decisions to stay in their jobs.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted at various intervals throughout the research. The following section includes an in-depth look at the data analysis processes used for each data type collected and analyzed for this study. Specifically, I used interview data from verbatim transcripts and observation data in the form of reflective and descriptive notes on the interview; furthermore, I explored how those data correspond with documents collected from government websites as well as websites of the VPA and the Vermont AOE.

I triangulated the data, using interview data from secondary principals, educational leaders, and policy documents and government websites to help aide me in answering this study's research questions and improve the trustworthiness of the study. Triangulation occurs when researchers make use of multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence for validating the accuracy of their study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A review of additional sources was an important addition to the data collection and analysis for this study. Given that secondary principals are bound by state and federal requirements and laws, reviewing overarching policies influencing stressful job demands was essential.

Narrative methodological strategies were tools used in the interviews and the analysis. As described by Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 2), narrative inquiry is "a study of the ways humans experience the world" that is grounded in the belief that stories are the best portal through which human experience is interpreted and made meaningful both individually and socially. Generating themes was an inductive process grounded in the various perspectives articulated by the principals, and narrative inquiry provided the

tools to unpack the experiences and perspectives (Wei, 2020). Reflexive thematic analysis involves organizing the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the database, coding, and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation of them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Once I completed the interviews, I read the interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents. I looked for common themes, characteristics, and divergent ideas from the analysis of the interviews and data sources.

Coding

Following the organization of the data, researchers continue the analysis by getting a sense of the whole database (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following interviews of principals and educational leaders, I revisited documents collected from government websites and the literature review to help categorize codes into themes. The coding process is central to qualitative research and involves making sense of the text collected from interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss forming codes or categories (and these two terms will be used interchangeably), which represent the heart of qualitative data analysis. As they noted, I applied codes, developed themes to connect the codes, and provided an interpretation considering their views or views of perspectives in the literature. Using my conceptual framework as a guide, the multiple sources of evidence and associated themes were integrated to support the development of a comprehensive understanding of job-related stress for Vermont secondary school principals.

In categorical aggregation, the researcher seeks a collection of instances from the data, hoping the issue-relevant meanings will emerge and offer indirect interpretation, yet

the case study researcher looks at a single instance and draws meaning from it without looking for multiple instances (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 206). This study looked for meaning through the subject's experience and perspective on factors related to job-related stress, how principals manage it, and what influences their decisions to stay in their position.

Words, phrases, or similar events were grouped into the same category. I used NVivo, a qualitative computer program to support intuitive analysis and robust visualizations for students and academic researchers. NVivo provides tools to analyze qualitative data, enabling the researcher to manipulate the data easily and conduct searches (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through pattern coding, clusters of data were reduced in number and combined to form "meta-clusters" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 87).

To strengthen the data analysis, I met with my advisor after every three to four interviews to report emerging themes. After I coded the data, I shared parts of my anonymized database with her so she could conduct a data audit, checking the definitions of codes and the data I had entered into them. She read approximately ten percent of the data in the database, and we met to discuss what she saw as emerging themes. During these meetings, she asked me questions about my initial findings, which caused me to back up the findings with direct quotes from the data and deepen my analysis of the data. We also worked together at arranging the emerging themes and ensure they corresponded to the RQs.

Researcher Identity

At the time of this study, I was in my third year as the principal of Colchester High School in Colchester, Vermont. I spent the previous four years in Addison Central

School District, with two years' experience as an assistant principal and interim principal of Middlebury Union Middle School. Deeply committed to public education, I recognize the importance of understanding how to be most effective in my role as a principal for the benefit of those I serve. My values are rooted in love, family, friendship, partnership, and community connectedness, which guide both my professional and personal life and pursuit of learning.

As a current principal in Vermont who met the criteria for this study, I may have influenced this case study as a researcher due to my experiences among other biases. Having been a secondary school administrator since 2020, I had unique firsthand knowledge of working as a principal in Vermont, which is why it is essential to be clear about how my experiences, biases, and the lens from which I gathered, analyzed, and reported findings of the study may have influenced the study. While I acknowledge my areas for growth, as well as my biases and privileges, my diverse personal and professional experiences have shaped my passion for learning, research, and leadership. These influences drive my commitment to exploring strategies that support sustainability and effectiveness of public education.

My eighteen-year career in education, spanning New Jersey and Vermont, has included roles in alternative schools, and public schools with grades ranging from six to age twenty-one and student populations ranging from eighty to over two thousand with a wide range of demographics. I have experience as a special education teacher, a social studies teacher, a district level coordinator, a building-based administrator, and as a coach. These experiences have immersed me in diverse demographics, challenges, successes, cultures, systems, and communities. They have also shaped my understanding

of the complexities of education and the importance of adaptability, resilience, and power of relationships and teams.

I deeply value learning and the practice of putting theory into action. Sixteen out of my eighteen years in education, I was a graduate student obtaining a master's degree in teaching special education, a master's degree in educational leadership and policy studies, and now a doctorate in educational leadership and policy studies. Dating back to my undergraduate degree in history and American studies, I have always valued understanding history through perspectives on historical events, biographies, and inquiry into the unique stories and circumstances of others, guided by empathy and compassion. This influences my appreciation for qualitative research that explores the depth and richness of individual and group perspectives. Such research provides insights that go beyond surface-level findings, uncovering the nuanced meanings behind experiences. By deepening our understanding of others' perspectives and strengths, we can illuminate evolving best practices in education and social science research. These experiences have validated, changed, and expanded my worldview, reinforcing my commitment to fostering inclusive, informed, and impactful evidence-based approaches to education and leadership.

I am highly influenced by trauma-informed pedagogy, and I regularly practice reflecting on my experiences and the experiences of others through a trauma-informed lens. This improves my ability to know myself and to connect with a wide range of people and be more effective in my role of building positive relationships in and outside of school. Central to both my personal and professional philosophy is the belief that relationships and connection are fundamental to effective teaching, learning, and well-

being. I recognize that an individual's effort to understand themselves profoundly shapes their relationships with themselves and others. Equally important is the understanding of how each person influences those with whom they interact and build community with.

These perspectives anchor my vision as a school leader and researcher, particularly when considering the influence on the culture and climate in which people operate. It also underscores my belief that professional learning for educators in social emotional learning (SEL) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are closely aligned and should hold equal relevance and importance for all stakeholders as foundational for teaching and learning. By prioritizing these areas, we can create environments and communities that are not only inclusive and equitable, but also deeply supportive of emotional and social well-being for ourselves, our students, and our communities.

As I embarked on this dissertation study, I positioned myself within the complex and diverse dynamics of our world, reflecting on who I am, how I engage with the world around me, and how those interactions, in turn, shape my experiences. I am committed to intentionally examining the intersections of my biases with the focus areas and interactions of my research and leadership. This self-awareness guided how I gathered and analyzed information, ensuring that my work remained reflective and grounded in my methodology and frameworks.

Assumptions and Limitations

This study included only a small subset of educational leaders and secondary principals in Vermont public schools and was not generalizable to other groups outside of this population. The small sample size was a limitation because it may not represent all secondary school principals in Vermont. Another limitation was the data only including

one semi-structured interview per participant conducted via Microsoft Teams, as this one-time interview limited direct observation in the workplace and continued discussion over time. Another limitation was not performing observations of participants. There was also a limitation for the data, which may be skewed by each participant's inability to recognize their own stress, underlying factors for it, specific details, or the coping strategies they knowingly employ.

Delimitations

In deciding what to include and what not to include there were a few delimitations to this study. This qualitative study focused on Vermont secondary principals. The most significant delimitation of this study was the decision to restrict data collection to Vermont principals, educational leaders, and educational policy documents and government websites. Restricting the selection of participants to only public-school secondary principals will affect the generalizability of the study's findings to principals of other grade levels and states. The objective was to use this study's results as a foundation for future research on the influences of job-related stress of the educational workforce and students in Vermont.

Chapter Four: Findings

As a result of asking the first research question regarding how various ecological factors influence secondary school principals, this study found that changes in society influence principal job demands. This theme refers to national events or incidents in society that changed over time (including state and federal politics and legislation, societal expectations, and norms) that impact cultural and behavioral implications on principal job demands. Specifically, I identified changes in society expressed through the following five subthemes a) technology and the pandemic influence communication and culture, b) technology and lack of time diminish work life balance, c) expectations and behaviors from society influence job demands, d) favorable policies come with unfavorable resources, and e) limited staffing influences job demands.

Research Question One: How Do Various Ecological Factors Influence Job Related Stress for Principals?

As a result of asking research question one, how do various ecological factors influence job-related stress on secondary school principals, this study found a strong and complex relationship between ecological influences and principals' stress levels. Findings highlighted the impact of overarching societal changes from the chronosystem level, including shifts in cultural values and evolving federal and state educational policies. These broader influences were shown to affect principals at the microsystem level, shaping their immediate work environments and day-to-day stressors. This interconnectedness underscores the multi-layered nature of stress factors, demonstrating how systemic changes cascade to directly impact individual experiences.

Theme One: Changes in Society Influence Principals Job Demands

Findings indicate that societal changes occurring outside of principals' control from national to state and community levels significantly influence their evolving job demands and contribute to increased stress. Participants' perspectives on uncontrollable external factors reflect the interconnectedness of broader societal change, and their influence on principals. While some changes were favorable, the predominance of stressful job demands were increasingly burdensome. This study extends the urgency for systemic interventions to address principal and school workforce burnout. There are several subthemes within this larger theme, including (a) favorable policies come with unfavorable resources, (b) limited staffing influences job-demands, (c) expectations and behaviors from adults influences job-demands, (d) technology and the pandemic influences culture and communication (e) technology and limited time influences work life balance.

Favorable Policies Come with Unfavorable Resources

Principals face significant challenges when implementing state and federal education policies, particularly when these initiatives lack the necessary funding and thoughtful implementation timelines. The term "unfavorable resources" underscores the disconnect between the ambitions of policy and the practical realities of school budgeting. While policies aim to improve student outcomes, findings show that the financial resources required to implement them effectively do not align. Participant Thirteen said,

> I don't think any of the initiatives (from the State and federal level) are ill intended. I don't think any of them come from a place of poor will. I think they

> come unfunded which creates a huge stress. So great, I'm going to do this, but I'm going to cut two teachers because now I can't really afford to do this in my budget. So now I have to cut people, and that makes me crazy. Unfunded initiatives are a huge stressor, and they (legislators) give very little consideration for what's actually happening in schools. There is no implementation timeline where people can take the time to learn about them.

Participants acknowledge that these policies are well-intended, with the goal of enhancing education and student success. However, good intentions are not enough when financial and structural support is missing. Principals are forced to make tough choices, such as cutting essential staff or programs to reallocate funds for compliance. Furthermore, the lack of adequate timelines for implementing new policies adds to the burden, as it leaves insufficient time for schools to adapt and for educators to fully understand the changes. This compromises the overall quality of education and increases stress among principals.

The following excerpt underscored the challenges principals face in implementing educational policies like Act 77 particularly within the constraints of limited resources such as time, money, and staffing. Participant Eleven said,

> I think Act 77 is an interesting variable as one piece of legislation that has really cool potential but needs sustained attention. There's not a lot of energy to give to that right now, but it's interesting. I think personalized learning, flexible pathways, proficiency-based work is exciting work. I'm philosophically aligned, but it takes staffing, time, resources, and attention to do that well. So, we're trying to do that here.

Participants expressed philosophical alignment with the goals of Act 77 and ACT 173, indicating support for the policy's vision. However, the practical challenges, lack of staffing, time, and financial resources make it difficult to translate this alignment into effective practice. While principals are required by law to implement policies like Act 77, the reality of doing so depends heavily on their local context and available resources. The disconnect between policy mandates and on-the-ground realities creates inconsistencies in implementation, inequitable outcomes for students, and stressful job demands for principals.

These mandates, while potentially transformative, add stress to principals already stretched thin by limited budgets and competing priorities. Specifically referencing the financial pressures of Act 127 and the broader implications of Acts 77 and 173, Principal Sixteen said,

> In today's financial crisis of Act 127, it's making a big impact on our budget. I think when you have Act 77 and Act 173, it doesn't matter when there is a lack of resources. You're going to be pushed into some unfamiliar places.

The phrase "pushed into some unfamiliar place" conveys the psychological and operational strain on principals and school leaders. Implementing unfamiliar policies without adequate support can lead to anxiety, uncertainty, and additional workload for principals. This is particularly true when policies introduce complex systems or approaches that require significant learning and adaptation. The financial crisis referenced in Act 127 exacerbates the difficulty of implementing other policies, such as Acts 77 and 173. The cumulative impact of multiple unfunded mandates can overwhelm principals and diminish the effectiveness of any single initiative.

The following excerpt captured the frustration and challenges that the federal government's unfulfilled financial commitments to education yielded, which was particularly significant in the realm of special education. Participant Eleven referenced the promise made during the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and reinforced under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

> We have a mandate for special education and the deal from the very beginning when the federal government passed (IDEA) was (the federal government) we'll pick up forty percent of the cost and special education is incredibly expensive. It's getting more expensive and we're nowhere near that forty percent, I think at seventeen or eighteen percent of the federal government's funding of special education as it was intended when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed…The lack of financial commitment has been tremendously disappointing, but I sort of have no expectations of the federal government around education.

Special education services are vital and legally mandated, yet their underfunding forces schools to divert resources from other areas to meet these obligations. While some participants feel legislators are unaware of the impact of unfunded policies, Participant Eleven suggests that legislators understand the issues but face challenges to address them. The lack of expectation for increased federal support signals a sense of resignation among participants, which could result in diminished advocacy or reduced efforts to hold policymakers accountable. If this trend continues, schools may increasingly rely on state or local funding sources, potentially widening inequities between districts with varying levels of resources.

Limited Staffing Influence Job-Demands

A lack of available staff to cover absences and fill open positions creates immediate operational disruptions, placing additional burdens on principals and existing staff to fill gaps. The combination of staffing challenges and increasing job demands stretches principals beyond their capacity. They are often required to take on additional responsibilities, such as covering classes, managing administrative duties, and addressing emergencies, leaving little time for instructional leadership. Staff shortages and overburdened principals can lead to decreased morale, inefficiencies, and additional stress for principals. Long-term staffing challenges may also affect student outcomes and school climate, which complicates principal job demands.

The following excerpt highlighted how staffing challenges directly impact principals' ability to fulfill their roles effectively, particularly their capacity to act as instructional leaders. Participant Two said,

> I was talking to a principal today that had a teacher out and had no subs. He's already got a bunch of provisional licensed teachers in a rural school where they don't pay very much and they're just managing day-to-day by band-aiding… Principals are spending their whole time in crisis management, which has become more and more a major aspect of the job… but when they are dealing with day-to-day stuff happening all the time, and they're overseeing a complex system, more so now than ever, I think it is more challenging than ever.

Schools have become increasingly complex, with heightened expectations for addressing diverse student needs, implementing new policies, and maintaining operational efficiency. These demands are even harder to meet when principals are constantly pulled

into operational emergencies and more time is spent on staffing vacancies. Participant Two's description of "spending their whole time in crisis management" underscores the chronic stress experienced by principals. Staffing shortages compound the evolving demands of the principal's role and render the position increasingly unsustainable.

Labor shortages have significant implications for principals, their staff, and overall school culture. The inability to fill certified teaching positions erodes the quality of education over time, contributing to stress and diminished outcomes for both principals and students.

With Vermont experiencing labor shortages, schools are competing in a labor market with fixed pay scales that vary from one district to the next. Participant Eight said,

> The labor market changes that have occurred in the last five to eight years where we have fewer and fewer people available to do these jobs has been a big shift. I used to never have to worry about filling a position. I would always have somebody and there's not always somebody available anymore. So, we ask a little bit about stress, how do we create systems that are resilient to labor shortages and high demands on the people that are here? This is certainly one of the biggest stressors that I personally feel as one of those things that are beyond my control.

Vermont's principals are competing in a constrained labor market with fixed pay scales, making it difficult to attract and retain talent, especially in districts with lower compensation, or in rural areas with a smaller labor market. Labor shortages put additional pressure on remaining staff, who may be required to take on extra responsibilities or work in less ideal conditions. This can lead to burnout, lower morale, and higher turnover. The shortage of certified staff leads to a reliance on provisionally

licensed or uncertified teachers, potentially lowering the standard of education. Participant Eight's question, "how do we create systems that are resilient to labor shortages and high demands on the people that are here?" highlighted the need for innovative and systemic strategies. This includes designing systems that can sustain school operations and maintain educational quality despite ongoing labor market challenges.

Staffing shortages, especially the challenges of maintaining instructional quality while managing day-to-day staffing logistics, place significant and persistent stress on principals. The decline in the number of certified and qualified applicants entering the teaching profession compounds the difficulties principals face. This shortfall forces principals to fill positions with underprepared or uncertified individuals, which impacts the quality of instruction, student outcomes, and influences principals' stressful job demands. The fact that participants universally described these challenges as daily occurrences points to a systemic problem that leads to chronic stress. Participant Eleven shared,

> You are basically spending almost every day trying to physically staff a classroom, and not focused on what's best for kids and how they are going to learn to read that day, but how am I going to keep the door open? Combining classes, principals being a substitute for a day or moving people around that kind of really basic logistics, so I think that adds a huge layer of stress.

The need to manage basic logistics, such as combining classes, substituting themselves, or rearranging staff has become a regular, if not daily, burden for principals. These tasks detract from long-term planning, school improvement efforts, and direct engagement with

student learning, leading to a sense of constant crisis management. Spending almost every day on these challenges leads to chronic stress and takes a significant toll on principals' mental and physical health, potentially leading to burnout, fatigue, and a reduced capacity to meet the demands of their role.

Expectations and Behavior from Society Influence Job Demands

The persistent exposure to high-stress interactions and unsustainable expectations places principals at significant risk of secondary traumatic stress (STS) and burnout. For principals, this often stems from dealing with highly emotional or conflict-driven interactions with parents, staff, and the broader school community. Findings showed a pattern of chronic worry, emotional exhaustion, and a sense of dehumanization, which are hallmark indicators of secondary traumatic stress (STS) and burnout. These experiences highlighted the emotional toll of managing the evolving and often overwhelming demands placed on school leaders. These conditions not only jeopardize their well-being but also compromise their ability to lead effectively. The challenges that principals face stem from a fundamental misalignment between stakeholder expectations and the capacity of school staff to sustainably meet those demands.

Societal changes in stakeholder behaviors have created significant challenges for school principals, with diminished trust and contentious interactions emerging as critical stressors. The shift in expectations and attitudes, especially the "always-on" standard and rising incivility, exacerbates the stress principals face. These changes are not merely operational but also cultural, reflecting a breakdown in mutual respect and a widening disconnect between school leadership and the communities they serve. Participant Twelve said,

> There has been a shift even in my time on the amount of trust that community members have for building level principals and the system. When you're calling to give a consequence, it's not just accepted; you have to fight that battle and that then has resulted in just a higher rate of litigation where communities aren't behind what is happening in a building, and I think that causes a lot of stress on every leader, principal, assistant principal, the whole nine yards.

The superintendent's observation of decreasing trust underscored a shift in how families perceive principals. Decisions that were once accepted with minimal scrutiny are now met with greater skepticism or outright resistance. Strained relationships between schools and families, weakening community support for educational initiatives, and a lack of constructive communication fosters mistrust and further alienates principals from their communities.

The increasing distrust and contentiousness between families and school leaders mirrors broader societal shifts in behavior, expectations, and values. As Participant Thirteen poignantly observed, schools act as microcosms of the wider world, with trends of disrespect, polarization, and diminished regard for education filtering into the school environment.

> We are a microcosm of what's happening in the greater world. People are like, kids are just not nice anymore. Well people aren't nice anymore. I can look at it through a microscope at school and see things that are happening here are the same trends that are happening with adults and communities. Just adults, parents, and again the community disrespect and lack of understanding and the way we treat people and the way we treat educators. The value we place on education,

> well, that really has diminished and as a result of that is a big stressor every day dealing with adults that aren't in my immediate learning community.

These ecological factors place extraordinary demands on principals, as they navigate increasingly strained relationships with stakeholders while managing the critical tasks of school leadership. When families distrust school leaders, every decision from student discipline to curriculum implementation becomes a potential battleground. Participant Thirteen highlighted the link between societal behaviors and the school environment, noting how disrespect and lack of understanding from adults mirror broader societal trends. Criticism from parents and community members outside the school can become an overwhelming stressor as Participant Thirteen described. This behavioral shift creates additional stress for principals, who must mediate conflicts while modeling the respectful interactions they hope to see in their communities.

Societal stressors, particularly anxiety and fear, on the behaviors of adults interacting with schools underscores a growing trend where principals are increasingly required to mediate emotional and behavioral challenges brought into the school environment by stakeholders.

Participant Sixteen said,

> When it comes to adults, I really do experience more stress because of how they are channeling their anxiety or their fears, or the fact that they're trying to control something that isn't really within their purview. It's not their primary responsibility. This is a school where teachers have taken on a lot more than they should have to. So, when I start building systems or to start taking this stuff away,

> there's a loss, and managing that loss for others can be challenging and I have to frame it as loss in grieving.

Stakeholders project their anxieties and fears onto school interactions, often inappropriately attempting to control matters outside their responsibility. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of secondary traumatic stress (STS) where exposure to others' emotional or traumatic experiences creates stress in principals. Principals, like Participant Sixteen, must not only implement policy changes but also manage the emotional responses tied to them, framing the process as one of loss and grief. These experiences reflect the interconnectedness of school leaders with their communities, making it difficult to separate personal well-being from professional demands.

Participant Four's reflections highlighted a critical approach to managing the challenges posed by secondary traumatic stress (STS) and negative interactions from adults in their role as a high school principal. Instead of focusing solely on the emotional toll, they adopted a problem-solving perspective, emphasizing relational norms, professionalism, and systemic strategies.

> Secondary traumatic stress, how do you manage that? I think it's challenging, because I can't control how adults manage their own stress. We could offer EAP or wellness, or all these other things… As we ask them to take on more responsibilities as teachers try to define their day more between the bookends of the day and not outside of the day… I come back to how do we have a relationship, and we can agree or disagree, but can we be professional? Can we come back to an agreement? How do we want to treat each other? How do we want to live our norms, how do we live to our agreements?

The principal acknowledged the pervasive impact of STS, recognizing that principals and teachers are often at the receiving end of stress and emotional displacement from stakeholders. While employee assistance programs (EAP) and wellness initiatives are valuable, Participant Four recognized their limits in addressing the underlying issues of stress projection and unhealthy dynamics. At the same time, they advocated for maintaining professionalism and fostering a professional learning community (PLC) where respectful disagreement and shared norms guide interactions, suggesting that teachers also contribute to unhealthy dynamics. Throughout the data, participants framed relationships as a cornerstone of school culture, emphasizing the importance of returning to agreed norms even when conflicts arise.

Participant Five's account reflected how national events and political polarization increasingly influence the responsibilities and stressors that school leaders experience. The impact of these broader societal issues, such as the events surrounding January 6th, 2021, in response to 2020 election outcomes, and debates over social justice shape how principals navigate sensitive topics in the classroom and in their interactions with the community.

> When January 6th hit, that was the beginning of some interesting times where we have an active social justice group and parents calling and basically yelling, how dare we let that information get out. So that just felt so strange to me. Then the election, and how that turned out. Then the school board asked how we run our school TV, which is a kid news station. They're just exploring it and then we have to meet with families and parents about what they're putting on and why are we

having a day of awareness for LGBTQ. All of those things become really stressful when you're just trying to make sure that all kids have a voice and a place.

The polarized political climate compounded the stress that principals experience, as they were tasked with defending decisions or events that were often seen through a political lens rather than focusing on their mandate for equity, educational value, and student well-being. This creates significant emotional labor for principals who must uphold policies that align with legal obligations and ethical principles even when faced with intense community backlash.

Technology and the Pandemic Influence Culture and Communication

The ongoing influence of COVID-19 continues to shape job demands, as principals adapt to a landscape that includes hybrid communication models, increased societal expectations, and the challenge of rebuilding trust within their communities. Participants' accounts underscored a perceived decline in mutual respect and civility in interactions where stakeholder expectations were often framed as urgent or non-negotiable. They spoke of a cultural shift that undermines relational trust between schools and their communities, making collaborative problem-solving more difficult. These changes have had dual effects: on one hand, technology enables efficient communication and broader accessibility; on the other, it disrupts traditional interpersonal interactions, creating a more transactional culture. Principals face the challenge of balancing these competing demands while maintaining relational trust and fostering community within their schools.

Advances in technology, such as Google Meet and other virtual platforms, have streamlined communication but at the cost of informal, relational interactions. The

absence of casual moments before or after meetings limits opportunities to build interpersonal connections, which are essential for fostering trust and community. When asked, for example, how your role as principal has changed over the course of your career, Participant Two stated,

> I would trace it back first when we had the pandemic. Now we have Google Meets and everything. People log on at the time the meeting starts, and then we have the meeting and then we log off when the meeting ends. No longer do we have those fifteen minutes of showing up before the meeting to make those solid interpersonal connections, so that opportunity to build community with one another is gone.

The pandemic amplified the influence of changes in technology and communication by isolating individuals and disrupting conventional ways of working and connecting. Participants underscored the stress arising from navigating adult relationships and communication in this transformed cultural landscape. The concept of a change in interpersonal connections and relationships was an important component of what participants expressed as both support and sources of stress. Participants referenced the challenges of adult interactions through communication and technology having implications on culture, communication, and relationships that influence their job demands.

A greater sense of urgency is evident in societal expectations for faster communication increase, driven by technology, principals face heightened pressure to respond quickly and effectively. This shift can strain relationships as the depth of connection is sometimes sacrificed for efficiency. Participant One articulated how they

have experienced an increased use of technology along with societal shifts during the pandemic that led to cultural shifts related to adult expectations for urgent communication and attitudes that equate to a loss of relational trust between school and community.

> The expectations of people that if you don't get to my email within the day that I sent it, or within twenty-four hours, has changed a lot. COVID didn't help us in that respect. I remember having to put parameters to say, at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon until seven thirty on a Monday morning, you are not to expect any of my teachers to respond to your emails, period. Now that we're past COVID that hasn't changed. The parents still feel like you have to get to them right away and their needs are great and it's probably greater than everybody else's.

Participant Seven shared a similar example of how technology has changed culture and communication over the past twenty plus years in their career:

> When I started, I didn't have a computer on my desk, and I didn't have a cell phone. I would call parents; they'd call me back. Sometimes we would miss each other for a couple days, whatever the issue was. Now it's instant, like everything is instant. I had just had a parent in my office saying I emailed this teacher, and they didn't get back to me. I'm like, when did you email them? They say Monday, and I'm like it's Wednesday, you know (laughing and being sarcastically perplexed) So, that's very different.

The principal's anecdote about a parent expecting a response within a short timeframe illustrates how technological immediacy has permeated societal attitudes. The cultural norm that "everything is instant" compounds the strain on principals, as they feel both

obligated to prioritize communication speed over their own mental health or other job responsibilities and the need to protect their employees. The increasing reliance on technology for communication, coupled with heightened societal expectations for immediacy, has created significant challenges for educational leaders.

The societal norm of expecting immediate responses amplified by technology places additional job demands on principals. This was particularly evident in the example where Participant One had to set explicit boundaries for teacher response times, highlighting the need to manage these expectations proactively. The pandemic not only intensified these dynamics but also normalized certain behaviors, such as round-the-clock accessibility and heightened job demands. Despite transitioning to a post-pandemic environment, many of these expectations persist, placing ongoing strain on school leaders. Over the past two decades, technological advancements have redefined expectations for responsiveness, significantly altering the dynamics of school leadership. Participants repeatedly expressed that these heightened expectations, fueled by technology, are neither appropriate nor reasonable. They feel that societal demands often disregard the realities of human and organizational capacity.

Technology, particularly social media, has added complexity to the role of school principals. The amplification of criticism and polarization via platforms like Facebook is emblematic of the challenges principals face at the intersection of communication, culture, and community dynamics. Participant Eleven pointed to unchecked communication on Facebook as an example of how criticism and polarization towards schools can be amplified and adverse to positive school and community connections.

> Communication is great, but also everybody has an opinion. You can easily jump on ten different forums and screen your opinion, and it gets bounced around. I see it on Facebook and our district where we live. It's like, have you gone and talked to the principal, or have you asked a question instead of nineteen people jumping into a conversation on Facebook about a decision you don't like or something you actually don't understand but you're mad about whatever. You know, I think all of that just feeds kind of negativity towards the role and, we're humans too.

These external ecological factors place additional demands on principals who must navigate the ripple effects of online discourse on school climate and relationships. Online interactions like this example may be perceived as a threat or harm for principals, especially when they involve personal or professional attacks. The principal's statement, "we're humans too," reflects the emotional toll of being subjected to unchecked criticism. The loss of personal respect in these interactions exacerbates stress and feelings of isolation. Social media forums allow stakeholders to bypass direct communication with school leaders, creating an environment where misinformation or grievances can be shared, magnified, and validated without context or resolution. The tendency for individuals to vent frustrations online rather than seek clarification or dialogue with school leaders undermines trust and fosters adversarial relationships between schools and their communities.

The influence of technology, particularly social media, has significantly impacted student behavior and mental health, requiring school principals to adapt their roles to address emerging challenges. Participant Two discussed the impact of social media on mental health and behavior of students being a change associated with technology.

> Our role changed with respect to technology. I think a lot about mental health issues that are happening for our kids. I think a lot about tick tock and some of the challenges that they put out and what our kids are looking at (on social media) and then they're replicating that here. So, we're having to respond to that.

This highlights both the short- and long-term impacts technology is having on students and in turn, principals. Participant two implies that the behaviors that students are replicating are not desirable and require administrative attention, be it restorative or disciplinary. This also underscores the prevalence of mental health concerns and the need for principals and schools to respond to it.

Technology and Limited Time Diminish Work Life Balance

Another theme that emerged from the data was that principals' tasks were too numerous to complete their job within the workday in tandem with boundaries around principals' availability during non-school hours. This combination deteriorated work-life balance due to the increase and ease in accessibility through email, cell phones, and shifting expectations that principals need to respond to work needs with a great expectation of immediacy. The sheer number of tasks required to manage a school, including administrative duties, communication with stakeholders, and addressing crises has grown to the point where completing them during standard work hours is often impossible.

The integration of technology, while enhancing accessibility, has also introduced expectations of constant availability and immediate responsiveness. The use of email, cell phones, and other communication tools has eroded boundaries around principals' availability. Stakeholders often expect responses at all hours, viewing school leaders as

perpetually on-call. Regarding how technology has changed their role Participant One said:

> With the increases and the changes in technology, and sort of society as a whole, there's this idea that as soon as I communicate with you, we live in this world now where everything has to be immediate, and gratification must be right now or I'm not satisfied.
>
> If you don't get to my email within the day that I sent it, or within 24 hours.

The inability to disconnect from work leads to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion. Principals may feel they are always on the clock, which prevents recovery and contributes to burnout. The encroachment of work responsibilities into personal time diminishes opportunities for self-care and personal time, affecting both personal and professional satisfaction and well-being.

The advent and increase use in technology influences work-life imbalance on school principals. Their narratives highlighted the unrelenting nature of school leadership, shaped by technological accessibility, societal expectations, and the evolving demands of the role. When asked for examples of how changes over their career have impacted their work-life balance, Participant Seven said,

> I might have worked longer hours in the office, but when I went home, I was done. Now, I'm never ever done, I'm never unplugged. I can't even make it through a beach vacation without having at least two hours where I'm up early or staying up late just getting back to people to say, like, hey, I'm actually away, but I'll call you when I can. I mean. It'd be easy to say that the impacts are all negative, but sometimes it's positive… Like feedback from kids who graduated

> fifteen years ago, saying hey, I was thinking about you the other day, can you do me a favor and tell Mister X that I really appreciate what they did for me… It's not all bad.

The expectation to remain accessible, even during vacations or personal time, prevents principals from fully detaching from work responsibilities, inhibiting their ability to recover and recharge. “I’m never ever done, I’m never unplugged,” encapsulates the pervasive challenge of technology in blurring the boundaries between work and personal life of principals. Not all work-related communication contributes to stress. Participant Seven noted that some interactions, like positive feedback from alumni, can provide a sense of fulfillment and purpose. This duality highlights the complex emotional landscape of school leadership where meaningful moments can coexist with overwhelming demands. Time management is central to principals’ experiences. The inability to allocate sufficient time to personal recovery or strategic tasks directly affects their satisfaction and effectiveness in their role.

The pervasive nature of stress in the role of a principal and the daily demands, even when described as "not oppressive," can escalate into high-stakes, emotionally taxing situations. Participant Ten offers a lens into how principals often normalize stress as an intrinsic part of the job, yet this normalization may mask the cumulative toll it takes.

> The stress is felt. I'm busy, but the stress isn't oppressive, it's just daily stress. In the last month or so I had one episode where I fell far enough behind on email that I missed a survey that needed to be filled out… It was at ten o'clock at night on the April eighth eclipse day. It said if you don't have it in by April second, we

> won't ship your exams and it's ten o'clock at night. Oh my God, they're not shipping our exams! I missed the deadline because it just got lost in my email. I wasn't tracking that, it wasn't even on my radar, you know? So, I called support and got on the phone. They have 24-hour service. So at eleven thirty at night I'm talking with them, and they can't fix it, and then I really worry. I said to my husband, I'm not going to sleep because our kids can't take these exams. I'm done, they're done, like nothing's OK.

This normalization can desensitize principals to the signs of burnout, as they may underplay the cumulative impact of chronic stress. Participant Ten's description of stress as "just daily stress" and "not oppressive" suggests a level of acceptance, where the constant undercurrent of pressure becomes an expected aspect of the role. Experiencing such an event late at night disrupts the participant's ability to recuperate, compounding the long-term effects of daily stress. Lack of rest perpetuates a cycle of diminished capacity to manage future demands effectively, further exacerbating stress levels.

Research Question Two: How do Principals Manage Job Related Stress?

As a result of asking research questions two, how do secondary principals in Vermont manage job-related stress and burnout, this study found that educational leadership and supportive relationships play a significant role in shaping how principals navigate and manage job demands.

Theme Two: Educational Leadership and Supportive Relationships Matter

This theme highlights the importance of building strong relationships with staff, district leaders, and peers to create a support network that helps principals navigate challenges more effectively. Principals demonstrated awareness of their stressors and role

demands, and recognizing these stressors is an important coping strategy to manage them. In this context, mindfulness involves understanding the limits of control, letting go of uncontrollable stressors, and using reflection or self-talk as strategies for stress management.

Leadership and relationships play a critical role in mitigating or exacerbating principals' stress. Building strong relationships with their team and stakeholders fosters a collaborative environment, reducing stress for everyone involved. When leadership from superintendents or district level supervisors is inconsistent or negative, it disrupts the principal's ability to focus on student outcomes, operational management, and stress mitigation. The actions, expectations, and type relationships from stakeholders, colleagues, direct supervisors, and government leaders have a range of positive to negative influences on mitigating or contributing to principal job-demands and stress management. Participant Eight said,

> Leadership is one hundred percent of what makes the job possible. I've had some great superintendents, I've had some average superintendents, I've had a couple of good ones, but I've had a couple of real bad ones… When you've got a bad person leading you, it is not good. Why would I want to keep doing this? The support must come both ways from people that you supervise and from the people who supervise you. It's like a volatile board. We have a board member who constantly says that I don't care about administration, I just want to talk to people who deal with kids and have boots on the ground. What do they think I do every day, if I'm not here?

Participant Eight recognized that positive relationships must flow both ways. Principals rely on the support of their supervisors, but they also have a responsibility to provide encouragement and support to the staff they oversee. The participant's rhetorical question, "Why would I want to keep doing this?" demonstrates how poor leadership can lead to doubts about continuing in the principalship. Showing that lack of support from supervisors is a key driver of principal turnover. Conversely, a strong, supportive superintendent or board can create an environment where the principal feels empowered, valued, and capable of managing the complexities of their role.

Superintendents play a pivotal role in creating a work environment that fosters trust, collaboration, and alignment with a principal's core motivations, particularly their focus on student outcomes. Participant Five's account underscores the importance of superintendents in creating a work environment that fosters trust, collaboration, and alignment with a principal's core motivations, with a particular focus on student outcomes.

> I had a really rough superintendent before, and I thought of leaving this district because of their relationship with me. That was probably the one time I actually thought, I can't handle the stress of this person, and they were just, in my opinion, bad for kids, bad for the community. They questioned my questions, my integrity, and I ended up making a couple of moves to help them out the door, so that was probably the one time that was very tough for me personally and professionally. I was ready to go anywhere else just to finish out my five years. But then our current superintendent came on board, got things in place.

Participant Five's contemplation of leaving the district or the profession underscores how detrimental poor leadership can be. The stress caused by a negative superintendent pushed them to consider leaving their job. The arrival of a new superintendent brought significant improvements, illustrating the transformative power of positive leadership. Superintendents wield significant influence over the morale and retention of principals. A lack of alignment in vision or values between a superintendent and principal can destabilize a school's leadership, ultimately impacting student outcomes.

Concerns for the lack of cohesive and visionary leadership at the state level has implications for job demands. Participant Eleven pointed out the structural issue of Vermont's education leadership being closely tied to the governor's office rather than being driven by an autonomous, education-focused Secretary of Education. Participant Eleven said,

> The fact that our state (educational) leader is basically the governor's office, not an education secretary, a person that's a part of a cabinet. I think that has a major impact… We don't really have somebody leading us right now. We lose principals who are on the ground in the buildings, and leadership matters. Leadership matters and you know that's part of the challenge we face right now. There's no statewide leadership. There's no vision for education from the governor. Leadership matters.

Without clear leadership or support, principals feel the weight of navigating complex issues, such as mental health crises, staffing shortages, and community trust on their own. The absence of statewide alignment intensifies stress and reduces principals' ability to focus on long-term improvement and student outcomes. The repeated emphasis that

"leadership matters" reflects the belief that strong leadership at the state level can provide the direction and support needed to unify and empower school communities. Leadership can set priorities, allocate resources equitably, and address systemic challenges, creating a sense of purpose and cohesion for districts and schools.

Participant Twelve, superintendent in the northeast region of Vermont, highlighted the critical need for state-level leadership to actively advocate for and support principals, emphasizing the importance of public understanding and trust in schools.

> I don't really think that our communities understand what the role of a high functioning principal is and what we really do for our community. That's bigger work, and that's work that the AOE and the governor, quite frankly, could really help us with… I don't really think folks have a handle on how big the job description of a building principal is.

The complex responsibilities of a principal, ranging from instructional leadership and crisis management to community building, are often invisible to the public, contributing to a lack of recognition and support. This gap in awareness contributes to a loss of trust in schools and their leaders. When the public does not understand the demands or value of the principalship, it becomes harder to build meaningful partnerships and support for school initiatives. By educating the public about the complexities of the principalship and promoting a cohesive vision for education, the AOE and governor can increase trust and strengthen support Vermont’s principals and educational system.

The combination of trust, relationships, and systems creates a framework for resilience, enabling principals and their teams to manage stress and adapt to unexpected challenges. Participant Thirteen’s insights emphasized the importance of supportive

relationships, trust, and effective systems in managing the demands and stress of the principalship:

> I have a great team, my associate principal, my director of special education, and my administrative assistant would do anything for me. They are incredibly dedicated workers. There are systems set up. There is trust between us. We have strong relationships. We check on each other. I think building the capacity through relationships of your team is really important. We just help each other.

The team's willingness to "check on each other" underscored a culture of mutual care and accountability, which is vital for resilience under pressure. Participant Thirteen highlighted the importance of having systems in place to manage responsibilities efficiently. These systems likely include clear roles, routines, and communication channels that enable the team to function cohesively. Systems reduce the cognitive load on principals by providing structure and predictability, which is particularly valuable when facing complex or high-pressure situations.

Participants stressed the importance of having strong, adaptable systems that promote success. This suggests a need for leadership structures that balance clear guidance with flexibility to address diverse school contexts. Participant Ten's insights emphasized the importance of systems, relationships, and structured support in managing the demands of the principalship.

> Just having really strong professional relationships and leaders, co-leaders, or colleague leaders who you really trust is essential because it does get too hard to manage alone. You need to have partnerships and I think that having really clear structures of support from the district level are essential, and I think that I have

> experienced and I think I've seen principals experience times when it's like the leadership structure needs to be the container needs to be stronger to really support success, so I don't know exactly what the right model is for district global leadership, but I think that it's really important.

These ideas align with a recurring theme across participants: relationships and educational leadership are vital for resilience and addressing job demands effectively. The phrase "it does get too hard to manage alone" captured the reality that the complexity of the principalship requires partnerships and shared leadership to navigate effectively. Participant Ten highlighted the critical role of district-level leadership and support systems. Clear structures that provide consistent guidance and resources are essential for principals to succeed in their roles.

Theme Three: Mindful(ness) of Stressful Job-Demands

In analyzing the data to address research question two, how do secondary principals in Vermont manage job-related stress, findings showed that mindfulness of stressful job demands, alongside targeted strategies and supportive measures, play a critical role in managing stress. This theme underscores mindfulness as a vital tool for principals, fostering self-awareness, resilience, and focus in navigating the complexities of their roles. Specifically, practices such as self-talk and problem-focused reflection emerged as effective approaches. These strategies enable principals to reframe challenges as manageable components of their work, supporting emotional regulation and enhancing their capacity for effective leadership.

The concept of mindfulness of stressful job demands among participants reflects a deliberate mental strategy to navigate the inherent challenges of the principalship. This

approach combines self-talk, problem-focused reflection, and conscious awareness to manage stress effectively. Participant Nine said:

> I have shut off my emotions due to my past trauma. So, I shut off, I don't cry. I will get tears in my eyes, but they will not fall down my face and I pride myself on that… I am very problem focused, and solutions focused. I really look at each situation and I go in being like, OK, we're going to talk about the problem, we're going to name it, and then we're going to be solution focused.

Participants engaged in internal dialogue to reframe stressful moments or interactions as an expected and manageable part of their job. Rather than dwelling on stressors, participants consciously analyze and reflect on stressful situations with a solution-oriented mindset. Mindfulness techniques help principals regulate their emotions, reducing stress and improving their ability to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively.

Participants revealed the importance of mindfulness, reflection, and relationship-building in navigating the challenges of school leadership. By focusing on what they can control, engaging in thoughtful problem-solving, and fostering open dialogue, they demonstrate effective strategies for coping with public criticism and conflict. Participant Five's reflection provided valuable insights into the challenges principals face in navigating public scrutiny and conflict. Their approach to stress appraisal and coping highlights the importance of mindfulness, relationship building, and reflective problem solving in managing stress effectively.

> I think that the hardest thing for me is when something becomes negatively public. I have a really hard time with that. I try to manage to keep myself calm

> and things calm. But when things get negative in a public way, I have a really, really hard time with that. I'm trying to manage it. I think, OK, how could I have done it differently? I'm very much into talking with people… Having those conversations about the conflict has helped me. I've really worked the last two years trying to manage my own things that I can control.

Participant Five's statement, "I've really worked the last two years trying to manage my own things that I can control," reflected a mindfulness-based approach to stress and how principals have varying capacities and skills. Principals operate in a highly visible role where decisions and outcomes are scrutinized by various stakeholders, including parents, staff, and the broader community. Negative publicity amplifies this stress, requiring leaders to balance emotional resilience with strategic responses. By focusing on what is within their influence, principals reduce the emotional burden of factors beyond their control.

A mindful approach to stress appraisal and coping highlights a pragmatic and solution-oriented mindset. By recognizing stress as an inherent part of the job and focusing on what they can control, Principals demonstrate resilience and adaptability. Participant Four's reflection provided valuable insights into the nuanced experiences of stress that principals encounter, as well as their mindful approach to managing these challenges.

> There's good stress and bad stress. The good stress is some of that day-to-day stuff. It's the bad stress is where people coming right at you for whatever reason. I'll knock on wood, I probably haven't had a parent come in at me in a month and a half to two months now, which is fantastic, but it's when they feel something's

> going on and that's the stuff that's the bad stress, the stuff where you can't control it. You have to know that it's not your fault, and you're trying to make the situation better. I think the majority of administrators are problem solvers. They want to solve problems and they make however many decisions a day.

Participant Four's perspective of stress as "just part of the job" reflected a pragmatic mindset. This acceptance helps principals process emotions without allowing stress to become overwhelming or debilitating. The participant's ability to distinguish between stress they can and cannot control is a good example of being mindful of their stress, and how this coping process helps mitigate their ownership and impact of that stress. By accepting that certain situations (like a parent's anger) are not their fault, they reduce the emotional burden and maintain focus on problem-solving. Viewing stress as a natural and unavoidable part of the job helps principals build resilience. This mindset prevents routine challenges from becoming sources of excessive anxiety.

Research Question Three: Why do Secondary Principals Stay in their Positions?

As a result of asking research questions three why do secondary principals stay in their positions, this study found that helping students is the primary love and motivation for the job**.**

Theme Four: Helping Students is the Primary Love and Motivation for the Job

This theme analyzed the data to answer research question three, why do secondary principals stay in their positions? Findings showed that helping students is the primary love and motivation for the job. This theme highlighted the centrality of students in the role of a principal, emphasizing their importance as both a motivating factor and a reason for persistence in the job. The decision to stay or leave the principalship often

hinges on external factors, such as stress, support, or leadership dynamics, but the presence of students as a source of inspiration encourages principals to remain. This intrinsic love for students and motivation for the job helps to balance the challenges principals face, providing a sense of existential purpose and fulfillment.

The responses from participants highlighted the deep sense of purpose and fulfillment principals derive from their commitment to students. This was revealed in every principal interviewed (as seen in Table 4.1). Principals consistently expressed that their greatest joy comes from seeing students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Participant Fourteen, grades 6-12 said:

> The best part is helping students and impacting students. You know the needs of our kids are pretty significant. And just knowing that you can make a difference, and you can see the difference in a kid, that's kind of what drives me and helping to run a successful organization.

This intrinsic connection to student well-being drives their dedication to the role. The positive impact they can have on students' lives serves as a constant motivator, helping principals persevere through the challenges and stress of their roles. The emphasis on personalized learning and flexible pathways in Vermont aligns with principals' drive to help students succeed, which further reinforces their love for the role. The sense of purpose principals derives from helping students succeed acts as a buffer against the stress and demands of the job. This focus on students can re-center principals during challenging times. These reflections collectively underscore the profound motivation and joy principals derive from their connections with students and their commitment to fostering student growth and success.

Table 4. 1

Data Supporting Theme Four

Theme	***Quotes***
Participant 13, Principal Grades 6-12	Students are my primary love, and really getting to know them, building relationships with them, helping them to guide them in their thinking. Just watching them grow as humans is probably the thing I love most about my job.
Participant 16, Principal Grades 6-12	I find that I would define my principalship as really hands on principal. I love working with students, I love doing walkthroughs and being an instructional leader.
Participant 4, Principal Grades 9-12	What I love about Vermont is its size. I love students and working with them. First of all, I want to see students grow and I want to see every student have the option to whatever career or college path after high school. That's the goal. Have a plan, have something. Let's make it actionable so after a student graduates, there's employment, because this is one of the last chances they get with resources that schools have.
Participant 5, Principal Grades 9-12	Our school is a special place and having an opportunity to make change and bring kids to a different level than their parents might have or the same or even higher. So that's always been attractive to me as an educator and trying to make a difference for kids and what they need and try to help them along their way. You know, we believe in all kids. So reducing that dropout rate to trying to get kids to apply to some of those higher level colleges that they might not have thought of or been able to get into previously.
Participant 8, Principal Grades 6-12	The reason I love it is you're close to the kids, I mean it. The central office job takes you away from that to a degree. I just enjoy adult learners and I enjoy the energy that kids bring to the school building.
Participant 10, Principal Grades 9-12	I felt so reenergized by daily connections with kids and with teachers that I decided to stay at the building level and so I applied to stay here permanently. So, I have been in the role of principal for the permanent role since last year.
Participant 12, Superintendent	I loved knowing all the kids in the building. I loved it! I typically blocked my schedule so I did all four lunches because I got to see so many people, and I could do so much business in the cafeteria. Folks just knew, that’s where I’d be if you wanted to find me. You

	found me in in the hallways in the morning before first period. You found me in the cafe between eleven and one. That was kind of my jam.
Participant 14, Principal Grades 6-12	The best part is helping students and impacting students. You know the needs of our kids are pretty significant. And just knowing that you can make a difference, and you can see the difference in a kid, that's kind of what drives me and helping to run a successful organization.

Principals consistently cited their love for students as a core reason for their commitment to the role. Participant Four, grades 9-12 said:

> I love students and working with them. First of all, I want to see students grow and I want to see every student have the option to whatever career or college path after high school. That's the goal.

Building relationships, guiding students, and witnessing their personal and academic growth are central to their satisfaction and motivation. Participants emphasized the importance of preparing students for life after high school whether through college, career, or other pathways. Principals view schools as a critical resource for helping students develop actionable plans for their futures.

Interactions with students and teachers provide a sense of purpose and energy for principals. Many described feeling reinvigorated through their daily connections within the school environment; this kept them grounded and focused on their mission. Several principals highlighted their decision to remain in building-level leadership roles because of the proximity to students and their ability to make a direct impact. Participant Eight, grades 9-12 said:

> The reason I love it is you're close to the kids, I mean it. The central office job takes you away from that to a degree. I just enjoy adult learners and I enjoy the energy that kids bring to the school building.

Their visible and interactive leadership style demonstrates a commitment to being accessible, connected, and engaged with the school community. Principals placed a high value on being close to students and staff, emphasizing the importance of being present in students' daily experiences, whether in cafeterias, hallways, classrooms, or extracurricular activities. The ability to make a tangible impact on individual students, particularly those with significant needs, is a key motivator for principals. Seeing progress and knowing they've contributed to a student's success helps to drive their passion and sustainability for the role.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This exploratory case study offers a valuable perspective on the job-related stress experienced by Vermont secondary school principals and its broader implications for the public education workforce. I asked the following research questions to guide this case study: (a) How do various ecological factors influence job-related stress on secondary school principals?, (b) How do secondary principals in Vermont manage job-related stress and burnout?, and (c) Why do secondary principals stay in their positions? The four interconnected themes of (a) changes in society influence job-demands, (b) educational leadership and relationships matter, (c) mindful(ness) of stressful job demands, and (d) students are a primary love and motivation for the job, highlight the challenges and the resilience inherent in the principals' roles. Findings in this study confirm previous research covered in the literature review while extending on themes related to relationships and perspectives on the impact of education policy on Vermont principals.

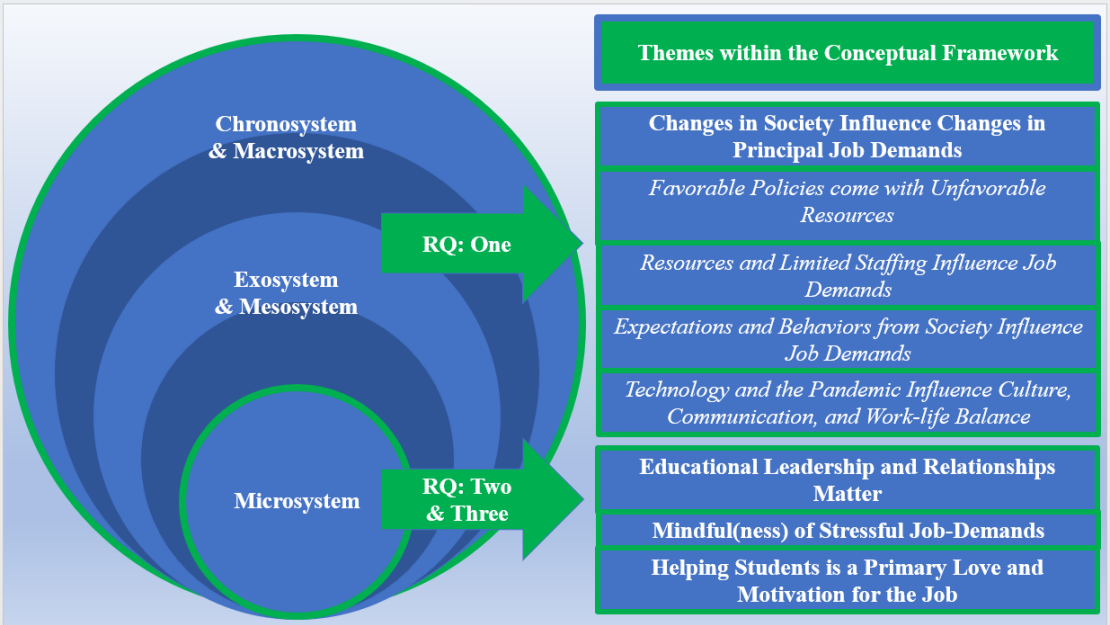
Findings show that societal changes occurring outside of principals' control, from national to state level and community levels, significantly influence principals' job demands, contributing to stress. Some stressors are innate to the position, such as accountability related to student achievement scores, implementing new initiatives, handling dwindling budgets, satisfying all stakeholders, and acting as a school safety expert, disciplinarian, school marketing representative, and instructional leader (Burress, 2017). Participants' acknowledgment of changes outside their control reflects the interconnectedness of external societal dynamics (chronosystem) with the immediate demands of their roles (microsystem). While some changes are favorable, the predominance of stressful and unsustainable demands aligns with research by Grissom

and colleagues (2021) that points to a myriad of factors that may influence principals' decline in tenure such as the shifting of job-related stress as a source of greater stress and burnout. This underscores the need for systemic interventions to address burnout.

Findings from this study reveal that the stressors Vermont secondary school principals experienced are deeply rooted in ecological influences outside of their immediate control. For instance, chronosystem-level societal changes, such as shifting cultural expectations and policy reforms, cascade into exosystem-level influences including district-level decisions and community pressures, ultimately manifesting into stressful job demands within the microsystem of the school environment. This alignment with Bronfenbrenner's EST shows the interconnected influences and will be utilized to outline the following discussion (see Table 5.1). Understanding the ecological interconnectedness of stress sources to capture the depth and complexity of the issue and suggest solutions and supports must include and focus on systemic solutions between schools and their communities.

Figure 5. 1

Themes situated within the ecological system related to the research questions.



Research Question One: Ecological Factors Influencing Principals

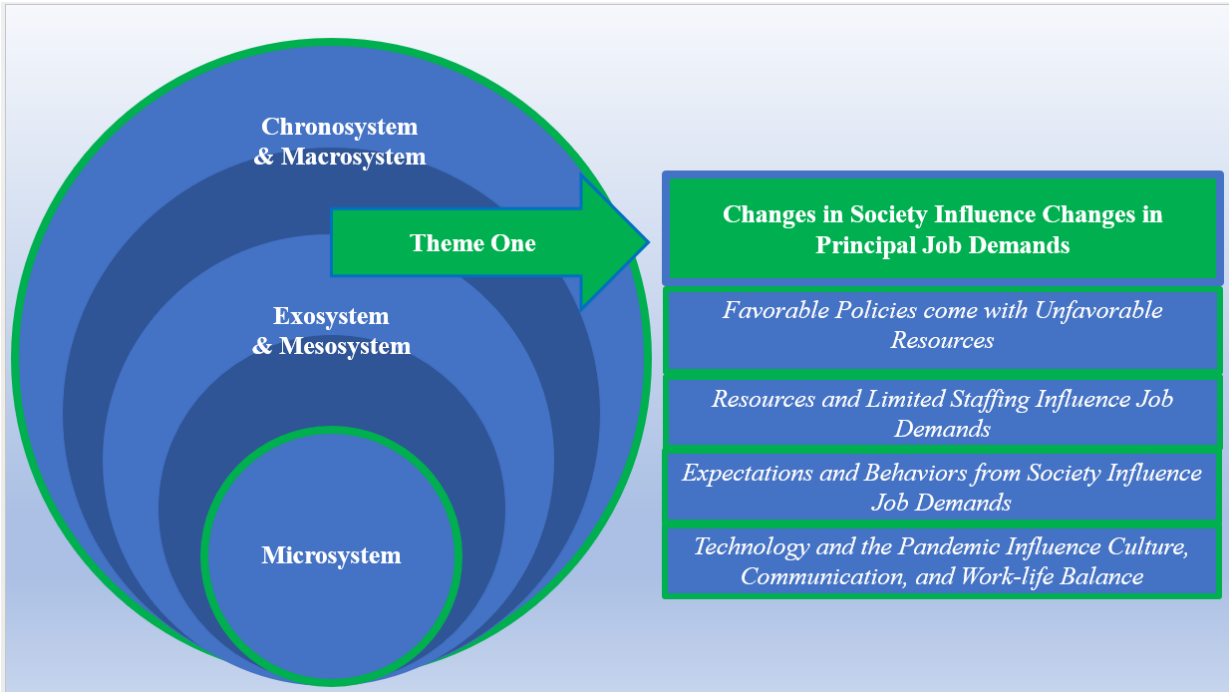
As a result of asking research question one, how do various ecological factors influence job-related stress on secondary school principals?, this study found a strong relationship of the complex ecological influences on principals' job-related stress. Overarching societal changes from the chronosystems level, such as shifts in cultural values, federal and state educational policies are connected to influence principals at the microsystems level. Policy changes that originate in Washington, DC flow to the states and localities where school leaders are asked to engage more directly with classroom instruction, compete for students in public and private school choice environments, and pay close attention to equity as a stand-alone policy and professional goal (Grissom et al., 2021). Vermont principals are influenced by these shifts and identified societal changes at the center of job-related stress.

Theme One: Changes in Society Influence Changes in Principals Job Demands

Findings indicate that societal changes occurring outside of principals' control from national to state and community levels significantly influence their evolving job demands and contribute to increased stress. Participants' acknowledgment of these uncontrollable external factors (Figure 5.2) reflects the interconnectedness of broader societal dynamics (chronosystem through mesosystems level) with the immediate demands of their roles (microsystems level). The demands found in this study align with prior research and recommendations for understanding the relationships between teachers' and principals' well-being, perceived working conditions, and teacher and principals' intentions to leave their current positions (along with actual resignations) as critical for pandemic recovery and the long-term health of the teacher and principal workforce (Luebke, 2013; Steiner et al., 2022). This study shows the urgent need for systemic interventions to address principal and workforce burnout.

Figure 5. 2

Theme One: Changes in Society Influence Changes in Principals Job Demands



Favorable Policies Come with Unfavorable Resources

This study finds that Vermont secondary school principals have favorable views of state and federal education policies. The study confirms prior research that found that the increased demands to support professional learning and improved student outcomes may result in positive and negative impacts on principals regarding job-related stress (Grissom et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2021). Vermont principals identify stressors associated with these policies to include a lack of resources, and insufficient time and staffing to ensure effective implementation contributes to stress. While the study highlights examples of accountability measures and policies related to student achievement and instructional leadership, these demands reinforce previous research that finds increasing stress for principals because of state and federal policies.

The demands of translating policy goals into practical implementation without adequate support or resources have overwhelmed principals. This confirms findings from Grissom and colleagues' (2021) study, which found that accountability changes dramatically altered school leaders' roles by increasing leadership time devoted to the management of testing, focusing leaders' attention on managing school personnel toward specific metrics, imposing accountability sanctions for previously overlooked subgroups, and encouraging stakeholders to focus on school performance judged by external benchmarks without necessarily increasing school resources and capabilities. The discontent between policy and the appropriate resources highlights a critical gap between the intentions of policymakers and the realities that school leaders face, exacerbating job-related stress and fostering perceptions that the role of principal is becoming increasingly unsustainable.

Vermont principals perceive education policies tied to NCLB, such as Act 77, Act 173, and Act 127, as aligning with their educational philosophies. Burress's (2017) study pointed to how since NCLB, school reform initiatives have dramatically expanded and transformed the principal's role. Policy changes were reinforced by the conditions attached to federal waivers from the NCLB requirements, which were first issued in early 2012, and pushed even more states to adopt rigorous learning standards and implement more intensive educator evaluation systems (Grissom et al., 2021). While previous research highlights how accountability measures and policies tied to student achievement, equity, and instructional leadership contribute to stressful job demands, this study contributes to those findings to include philosophical alignment with these policies and barriers to implement them contribute to job-related stress for Vermont principals. Act 77

was designed to enhance Vermont's flexible pathways initiative, aiming to provide students with personalized learning from highly qualified teachers, that align with students' unique goals and abilities (State of Vermont Educational Equity, 2023). Vermont principals emphasize the value they place on their role as educational leaders, while confirming prior research showing that principals are negatively impacted by the myriad demands of their job associated with these changes.

The findings of this study reveal that Vermont principals experience significant stress due to the expectation for immediacy and time constraints of their dual roles as instructional leaders and school managers, with a lack of resources further compounding their job demands. This contributes to Luebke's (2013) findings that the principalship has become too demanding for a single individual, advocating for a redefinition and redistribution of traditional leadership responsibilities. As principals must contend with difficulty in hiring certified teachers and qualified staff, principals must shoulder increasing responsibilities with potentially insufficient resources.

While Vermont principals express support for legislative initiatives such as personalized learning and proficiency-based education, state and federal policies still contribute to job-related stress. This stress primarily stems from inadequate resources, staffing shortages, and insufficient time to implement mandates effectively. Levin et al. (2021) found that the implementation of NCLB was associated with increased job-related stress and higher turnover rates among principals. These findings underscore the competing priorities principals face as they work to balance ambitious long-term goals with the urgent demands of daily operations. The disconnect between the aspirations of legislative mandates and the practical realities of school leadership highlights the urgent

need for systemic support to help principals meet these expectations without compromising their well-being or the quality of education provided.

Limited Staffing Influences Job-demands

One of the many tasks that interfere with instructional leadership is addressing staffing needs. Participants emphasized the growing difficulty of managing daily staffing requirements in their schools, as well as concerns over a future with highly qualified teachers. The challenge of covering classrooms, whether due to a lack of substitutes or an absence of substitutes altogether, has become a persistent source of stress. As a result, principals are often forced to be resourceful, frequently relying on already limited resources to address staffing shortages or vacancies. This reliance places additional strain on the school system and workforce, creating a ripple effect that extends to the broader community and further complicates principals' ability to fulfill their instructional leadership role effectively.

In response to these challenges, Vermont principals are actively working to develop system-level solutions. Participants emphasized the significant impact staffing shortages have on both students and staff, underscoring the need to support these stakeholders in building resilience amid ongoing challenges. Wang and Hauseman (2018) found that work intensification significantly affects principals' job satisfaction, with both motivating factors (e.g., workplace challenges, recognition from employers, work demands) and maintenance factors (e.g., external policy influences, organizational support, and relationships with teachers, superintendents, and unions) playing critical roles. Participants expressed growing concern about the shrinking pool of certified teachers applying for professional positions. This decline in highly qualified candidates

not only limits principals' ability to maintain high-quality instruction but also intensifies the challenges they face in effectively fulfilling their leadership responsibilities.

Principals also experience psychological vulnerability, which is shaped not only by a deficit in resources but also by the interplay between their commitments and their capacity to protect those commitments from threats (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). One such commitment, as highlighted in Theme Three, is a deep love for students. When principals are unable to mitigate the negative effects of staffing issues, and other challenges, the resulting impact on teachers and students deeply affects them, undermining their primary motivation and passion for their work. Many participants identified managing staffing as a recurring and challenging aspect of their role, which is one over which they have little to no control. Buress (2017) found that increasing workloads have led to burnout for some principals and health issues for others, which is a finding echoed by participants in this study who highlighted staffing challenges as a growing source of stress. Luebke (2013) found that the principal role is now too significant for one person and offered suggestions to modify the principal's traditional role.

Expectations and Behaviors Influence Principal Job-demands

Societal changes significantly shape and intensify the stress placed on school principals. These stressors arise from evolving cultural, political, and behavioral shifts, as well as the ecological effects of broader societal events. Factors such as state and federal legislation, cultural dynamics, and political developments directly contribute to the increasing complexity and scope of principals' responsibilities. Social change often brings about stressful and distressing conflicts, such as those between parents with "old school"

mindsets and children growing up under new societal conditions, or even among individuals within the same generation as they navigate shifting norms and expectations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 257). The public health crisis in the years following the pandemic manifested in a change in adult behaviors and contentious interactions with principals and schools. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping (TMSC) underscores how societal change can act as a significant stressor for both children and adults, creating opportunities for conflict and stress as individuals and communities adapt to these changes.

Principals are uniquely positioned within society, as they not only experience societal changes personally but also serve as leaders responsible for managing the stress and conflicts faced by their stakeholders, students, parents, and staff who adapt to these changes at varying rates, circumstances, and experiences. This dual responsibility amplifies their stress, requiring them to balance their own well-being with the needs of their school communities, often without sufficient systemic support. The findings of this study show that societal changes shape and intensify the demands on principals, aligning closely with Sogunro's (2012) identified stress factors with the exception of fear of failure. Sogunro (2012) highlighted seven major stress factors for principals: unpleasant relationships and conflicts; time constraints and related issues; school crises; challenging policy demands and overwhelming mandates; budgetary constraints; fear of failure; and negative publicity or dealing with the media, alongside continuous frustrations and challenges.

Additionally, societal attitudes and behaviors, influenced by evolving cultural norms, impose further pressure on principals. These changes result in heightened or

conflicting expectations from stakeholders, mirroring shifts in societal expectations and behaviors. In May 2023, US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General Advisory calling attention to the public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health [OASH], 2023). This interplay between societal evolution and school leadership responsibilities further compounds the complexity and stress of the principalship.

Findings from this study reveal the multifaceted challenges principals face in managing stress, particularly the compounded effects of chronic exposure to high-stress situations and heightened expectations of adult stakeholders. Frequent engagement in stressful interactions, especially with adults such as family members, staff, and other stakeholders, can lead to secondary traumatic stress (STS). DeMatthews and colleagues (2019) identified STS disorder, also known as compassion fatigue, as a significant factor contributing to burnout among school leaders.

A significant gap exists between the high expectations of families, staff, and stakeholders and the principal's capacity to meet those expectations sustainably. This misalignment generates frustration and intensifies stress levels for principals. When left unaddressed, the combination of chronic stress and exposure to disrespectful or challenging environments can lead to burnout. Richard and Dixon (2020) highlight the importance of fostering resilience to prevent poor mental health outcomes from adverse responses to crises and long-term stressors. These findings emphasize the pressing need for systemic support mechanisms to alleviate stress and foster resilience among school principals. Potential solutions include professional development opportunities, access to

emotional support networks, and initiatives to align expectations realistically between families, staff, and stakeholders.

The need to constantly adapt to environmental shifts and challenges necessitates effective coping and stress management strategies. This is a critical consideration when examining the significance of changing job demands, as it shows that the ongoing need for principals to reappraise and adapt to stressful situations and distressing conflicts. Principals not only navigate their own challenges but must also manage the shifts experienced by their stakeholders, which can further contribute to societal changes in behavior toward schools. Maté (2019) highlights the profound impact of emotional interactions on well-being, stating:

> Interactions with other humans, particularly emotional interactions, affect our biological functioning in myriad and subtle ways in every moment of our lives. They are important determinants of health… understanding the intricate balance of relationships among our psychological dynamics, our emotional environment, and our physiology is crucial to well-being.

This insight helps explain why participants in this study identified challenging behaviors from adults as one of the most stressful aspects of their job. While Vermont principals recognize stress and have strategies, like mindfulness, and resources, in colleagues and district leaders, to help manage it, the physiological and emotional toll may be affecting them in ways they do not fully realize, potentially impacting their long-term health, as Maté (2019) suggests.

Social change has contributed to a decline in trustful and respectful relationships with adults, creating a cultural shift that affects principals deeply. Given the sheer number

of interactions principals have with adults whether families, staff, or other stakeholders, these societal shifts can significantly increase the likelihood of stressful and distressing conflicts, compounding the demands of their roles and lead to burnout if not properly addressed.

Technology and the Pandemic Influence Culture, Communication, and Work-life Balance

One of the most significant changes identified was the shift in culture and communication brought about by the pandemic, alongside the increased presence and use of technology in and around schools. These developments gave rise to two subthemes, (a) the pandemic's influence on culture and communication through technology, and (b) the ways in which technology and time constraints have diminished work-life balance for principals.

During the pandemic, Vermont communities relied heavily on their schools for critical support, including meeting basic needs such as feeding families, providing daycare, and communicating essential public safety recommendations and decisions. One significant safety measure was the shift to remote learning, which relied heavily on technology and extended boundaries beyond the traditional school day; this fundamentally altered previous expectations and behaviors. These changes increased reliance on technology and reshaped communication dynamics. Luebke (2013) identified themes of continuous improvement, instructional leadership, cultural shifts, sustainability of change, socioeconomic factors, and student achievement as central to educational transformation. The findings from this study expand Luebke's (2013) findings by highlighting how post-pandemic culture and technology have reinforced persistent

expectations for immediate responses. Principals now manage the ongoing effects of these heightened demands, which continue to add stress and complexity to their roles.

This study also extended prior research on work-life balances, specifically with the evolution of technology, and communication. Examples include late-night realizations, sleepless nights, or disrupted vacations. Luebke (2013) found that balancing the demands of the job, balancing the job and family life, and responding to managing the multiple demands of work and home life are crucial factors that influence principals' considerations for staying or leaving. Stressful experiences, such as receiving emails late at night or during personal time, represent significant sources of stress for principals, if not a significant disruption of time needed to rest and recover. These disruptions blur the boundaries between work and personal life, contributing to heightened stress levels. Principals may not always be aware of the long-term implications of this persistent stress on their well-being. Additionally, the resources and support available to them vary greatly. Burress (2017) found that striving to achieve balance in the principalship was a universal theme among the nine principals interviewed. Ultimately, principals are often left to manage these challenges independently, relying on their unique capabilities, capacity, and access to external resources to navigate and cope with stress and manage a healthy work-life balance.

Research Question Two and Three: Managing Stressful Job Demands and Why Principals Stay in their Roles

As a result of asking research questions two and three 2) How do secondary principals in Vermont manage job-related stress and burnout? and 3) Why do secondary principals stay in their positions? I was able to analyze ecological factors primarily

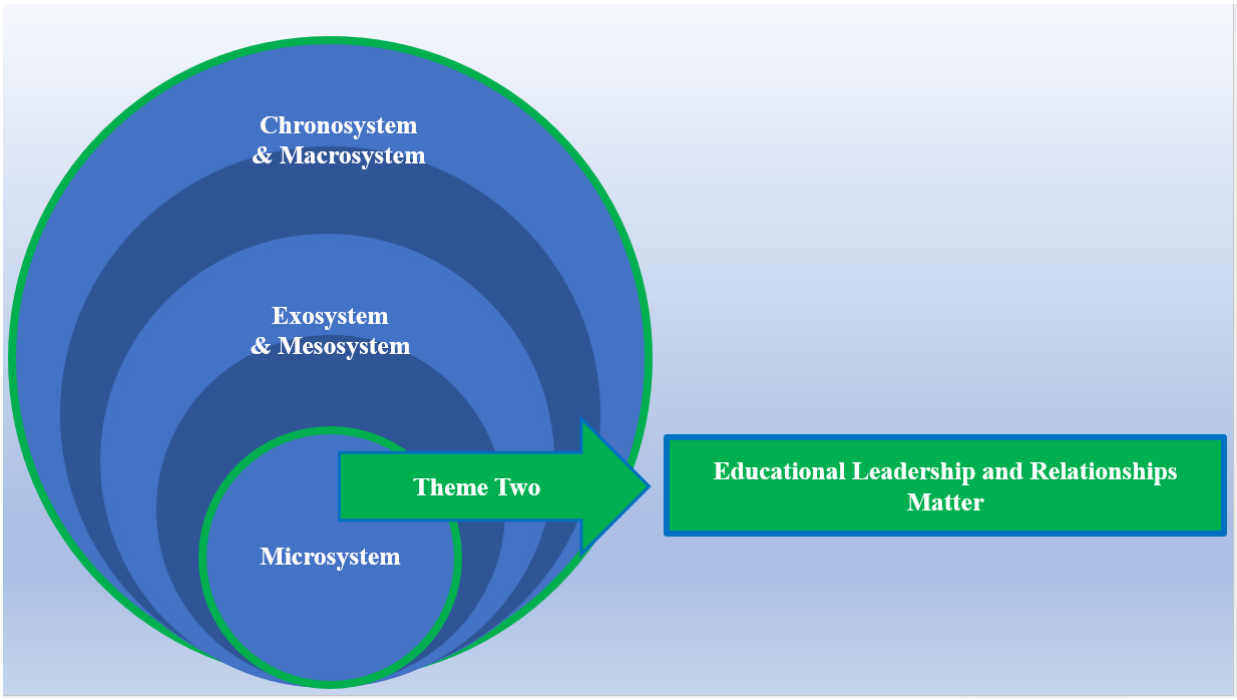
situated at the microsystem level. These factors highlight how principals manage stressful job demands and what motivates them to remain in their positions. The analysis considered how ecological factors influence principals within the immediate school setting and employs the transactional model of stress and coping (TMSC) to understand the impact of these experiences on job-related stress.

Theme Two: Educational Leadership and Supportive Relationships Matter

The findings of this study confirm that events outside the school setting are interconnected with principal job demands and that relationships with stakeholders can both positively and negatively influence stress and support. As highlighted in the literature, several studies emphasize the dual role of relationships in supporting principals while also being a source of stress (Cieminski, 2018; Luebke, 2013; Steiner et al., 2022; Wang & Hauseman, 2018). Importantly, research shows that support from colleagues or supervisors is a critical factor in mitigating burnout and serves as a positive influence on principal retention (Cieminski, 2018; DeJong, 2017; Federici & Skalvik, 2012; Luebke, 2013; Wang, 2018). Similar to the ecological factors discussed earlier, the influence of educational leadership and relationships varies, with both positive and negative impacts on principals' experiences and has significant influence on principals at the microsystem level (Figure 5.3). These findings show the complexity of leadership dynamics and the need for systemic strategies to maximize supportive relationships and minimize stress-inducing interactions.

Figure 5. 3

Theme Two: Educational Leadership and Relationships Matter



Participants in this study emphasized the dual influence of superintendents, noting that they can both contribute to and mitigate stress. Those who described their superintendents as unsupportive or ineffective reported increased stress and were more likely to consider leaving their roles. Conversely, participants highlighted the importance of supportive and effective superintendents, noting that these relationships foster a greater sense of support and contribute to the sustainability of their demanding positions. Sogunro (2012) found that unpleasant or sour relationships and people conflicts constitute the greatest source of stress for school principals especially because the role of principal entails making relationships with all kinds of people (internal and external stakeholders), whether it is at the elementary, middle, or high school level. These findings align with this study and Luebke's (2013) study, which identified relationships as a key factor in principals' decisions to remain in their positions or seek other

opportunities. Participants in Luebke's study frequently cited strong relationships as a reason for staying, while the fragile or strained nature of other relationships was noted as a potential factor for leaving. This shows the critical role that leadership dynamics play in shaping principals' experiences and decisions regarding their careers.

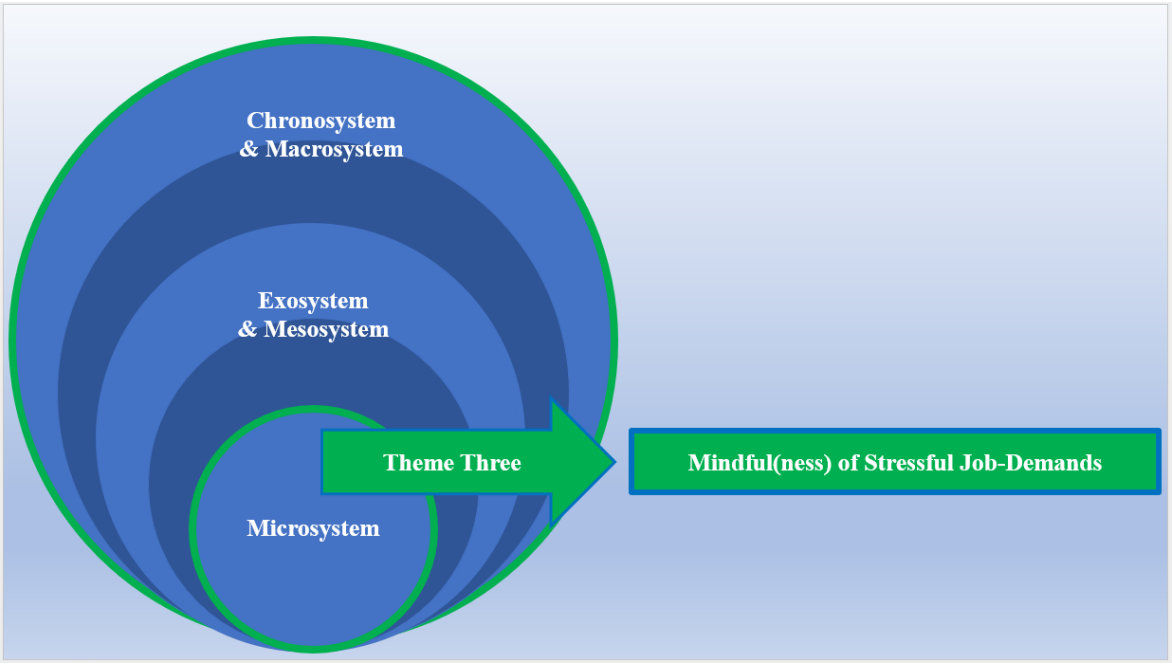
A key theme emerging from the study aligns with existing research: the critical importance of supportive relationships with colleagues and the broader leadership structure within a school district. Participants consistently emphasized the value of professional relationships and the support provided by colleagues and supervisors. These connections were identified as essential for fostering collaboration and trust, which are pivotal in helping principals effectively navigate the demands and challenges of their roles. The findings underscore that a robust network of professional support can significantly enhance resilience and job satisfaction among school leaders. The relationships between various stakeholders and principals, as well as between principals and their supervisors and among principals themselves, were identified as crucial to the development and retention of school leaders (Cieminski, 2018). Findings in this study include the influences of leadership at multiple levels. At the microsystem level, they referred to relationships with colleagues and superintendents, while at the mesosystem and macrosystems level, they highlighted interactions with broader entities such as the governor's office and the education secretary. These findings show the interconnected nature of leadership support across ecological levels and its substantial impact on principals' ability to manage their demanding roles effectively.

Theme Three: Mindful(ness) of Stressful Job Demands

The concept of mindfulness is a strategy emphasized in Mahfouz's (2018) study, which recommends that principals adopt strategies and skills such as emotion regulation, self-awareness, and the promotion of care and compassion to enhance their effectiveness as leaders. While individuals vary in their skills and frequency of employing mindfulness or self-reflective practices, they share coping strategies within this theme. However, the effectiveness of these strategies in managing stressful job demands depends on individual skill levels and the availability of resources, which differ from person to person. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) highlight the importance of proximal variables such as situational demands, constraints, and the resources of the immediate social environment in understanding and predicting sources of stress and coping mechanisms (Lazarus & Folkman, p. 233). In this study, participants demonstrated self-awareness of their challenges and frequently engaged in mindful reflection on stressful situations or tasks that were in their immediate control at the microsystems level (Figure 5.4). This practice emerged as a significant and regularly utilized strategy for managing the demands as principals.

Figure 5. 4

Theme Three: Mindful(ness) of Stress Job Demands



The ability to practice reflection, including leveraging relationships as a source of support, plays a crucial role in helping principals cope with stressful job demands. By utilizing others in their reflective processes, principals gain valuable insights and emotional support. While participants did not explicitly describe the strategies in these terms, the factors, influences, and coping mechanisms they discussed align with the conceptual framework of this study and highlight the potential health and well-being impacts of their experiences. For example, situational control appraisals refer to the extent to which an individual believes they can shape or influence a specific stressful person-environment relationship. These appraisals are informed by evaluations of situational demands, personal coping resources, and the ability to implement effective coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 69).

Practicing mindful reflection to identify and manage strong emotions is a critical skill that can help school administrators address stress (Mahfouz, 2020). However, attending to social needs is equally important (Mahfouz, 2018). Administrators must develop skills to consciously interact with others, maintaining full awareness of how their actions impact themselves, others, and their environment, to navigate the complexities of their roles effectively (Mahfouz, 2018). As Maté (2019) observed, chronic daily stresses are insidious and can be particularly harmful due to their long-term biological consequences and internally generated stresses take their toll without in any way seeming out of the ordinary. Yamamoto and colleagues' (2013) qualitative multi-case study on principals' experiences found that processing emotions from critical incidents often propelled leaders into self-reflection, encouraging them to engage in "storying and re-storying" with themselves and others. This process, illustrated in their emotion in leadership model, shows how emotions can be used as a catalyst for personal and professional growth.

In this study, participants frequently discussed their stressors with a notable level of acceptance, describing their mental processes for understanding the complexities of their experiences as part of their daily routines. According to DeMatthews and colleagues (2021), with greater attention focused on principal burnout and self-care, they believe that districts can improve principal retention, which will translate into improved and healthier schools for teachers and students. As Yamamoto and colleagues (2013) concluded, the ability to "use emotion to grow as a person and leader" is a key benefit of emotional processing. An important emotional benefit for principals in this study, unanimously

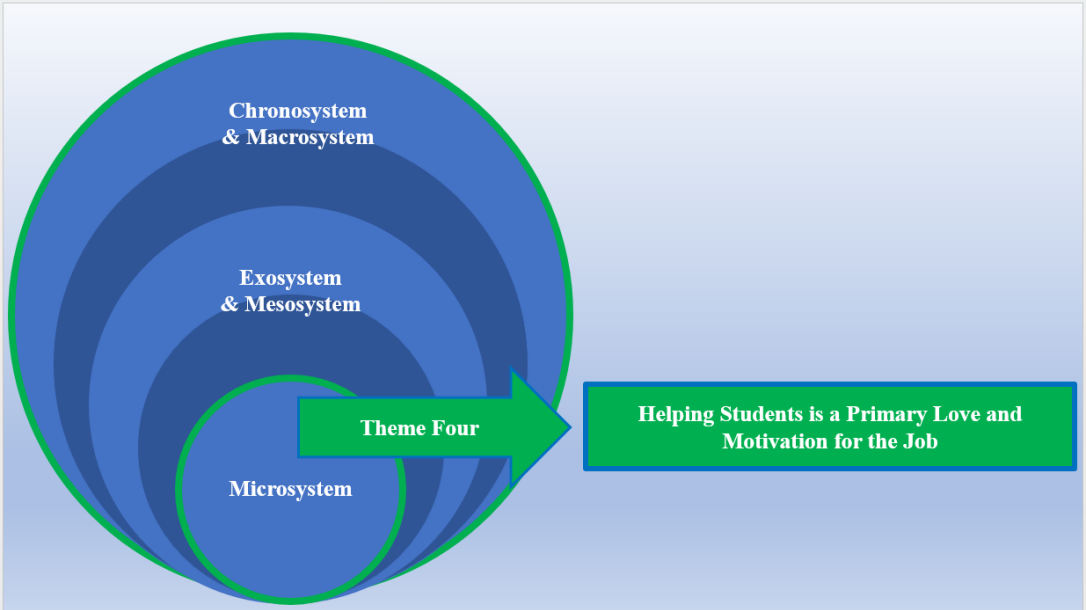
identified, was their love for students as an existential emotion and a driving motivation for both entering and remaining in the principalship.

Theme Four: Helping Students in the Primary Love and Motivation for the Job

Findings from this study show that principals in Vermont schools are motivated to enter and remain in their roles primarily due to the love and fulfillment they derive from helping students. Consistent with the literature, Luebke (2013) found that the decision to remain in a leadership position for an extended period is influenced by several factors, including positive relationships with students, faculty, staff, and superintendents. Existential beliefs, such as faith in god, fate, or some natural order in the universe, are general beliefs that enable people to create meaning out of life, even out of damaging experiences, and to maintain hope (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 77). The concept that "existential beliefs create meaning out of life, even out of damaging experiences, and to maintain hope" reinforces the importance and power of principals' love for students and motivation to help them succeed as essential to Vermont principals making meaning out of their job demands. Principals' love for students is essential to their resilience and job-satisfaction as it reinforces the importance relationships play in schools, at the microsystem level (See Figure 5.5).

Figure 5. 5

Theme Four: Helping Students is a Primary Love and Motivation for the Job



Without exception, every principal in this study identified students as their primary reason for entering and remaining in the principalship. This study finds that principals' existential belief of serving students serves as a powerful motivator, enabling them to persevere through stress and meet the demands of their roles. All participants in Leubke's (2013) study cited relationships as a primary factor in their decisions to remain in their positions or seek another, and the strength of many of their relationships was mentioned when asked why they stayed; the tenuous nature of other relationships was mentioned as a factor that could influence them to leave. District leaders influenced principals' retention in ways that were centered on relationships such as differentiating support for individual principals, fostering a collaborative culture, and maintaining supportive relationships with the principals (Cieminski, 2018). While the literature shows principals are influenced by relationships across multiple ecological levels, from the macrosystem to the microsystem, this study extends previous research on the importance

of relationships given that Vermont principals' deep love for their students emerges as an existential belief that serves as a positive factor for job satisfaction and staying in the role. Principals' love for students not only helps them manage and cope with stressful job demands but also provides a source of positive reinforcement and hope when they witness or contribute to positive student outcomes. This emotional connection to their work acts as a sustaining force, driving their commitment and resilience in the face of challenges.

Professional Learning and Development

Adopting trauma-informed professional development can empower principals and schools to manage stress more effectively and create a collective care approach within their communities. Training and preparation programs should focus on strategies such as mindfulness for coping with job-related stress, navigating difficult interactions, and establishing healthy work-life boundaries. Richard and Dixon (2020) highlight the importance of fostering resilience to prevent poor mental health outcomes from adverse responses to crises and long-term stressors. This study extends an emerging body of research that has shown that mindfulness practices for school administrators can result in significant benefits, including a reduction in stress and a sense of burnout (Kim & Pendola, 2022; Mahfouz, 2020; Wells & Klocko, 2018). Additionally, professional development can include leadership coaching, emotional intelligence training, and resilience-building workshops. By enhancing these skills, principal, staff, and communities can improve their well-being and performance, benefiting the entire school community and their students.

Conclusions

This study finds that significant changes in principals' job demands, and primary sources of stress, are driven by a wide range of ecological factors, many of which are beyond a principal's or school's immediate control. These findings emphasize the urgent need for systemic solutions to address the stressful job demands that schools and principals face. Building on previous research, federal policies such as No Child Left Behind include Vermont legislation (Act 77, Act 127, and Act 173) as key drivers of changes to principal job-demands. These policies have significantly expanded principals' responsibilities, requiring them to serve as instructional leaders and building operations managers while also overseeing the implementation of complex state and federal mandates. This study finds that Vermont principals find value in the purpose of equity oriented policies but are negatively influenced by the lack of resources they perceive as appropriate for their implementation, which contributes to their stress. Furthermore, the increasing politicization and polarization of education legislation further complicates their roles, intensifying the challenges of navigating an increasingly contentious educational and economic landscape.

The role of Vermont principals has evolved to encompass managing the consequences of changes in society being interconnected and influencing their job demands in schools. These changes have fundamentally reshaped community culture and school leadership, making their roles increasingly complex and, at times, combative. For instance, while principals are tasked and passionate about fostering inclusive school environments as mandated by policies like Act 77, they must also navigate community values and perceptions that may conflict with these initiatives and values, which leads to

an increase in contentious interactions with adults. This tension between policy requirements and school values coupled with community expectations and behaviors has emerged as a critical source of societal change, manifesting in behaviors that contribute to principals' stress. Consequently, principals must carefully balance stressful job demands with the need to maintain positive community relations.

This study builds on prior research to identify a myriad of factors that influence principals' stressful job demands and contributes to the understanding of ecological systems theory by emphasizing the interconnectedness of these factors and their placement beyond principals' direct control. Among the most significant contributors were the lack of resources and the cultural shifts in societal expectations, behaviors, and communication, all of which have exacerbated the complexity and intensity of principals' job demands.

Implications

Implications for Methodology

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) and Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model for stress and coping (TMSC) were instrumental in identifying and contextualizing the wide range of societal influences impacting Vermont secondary principals. These frameworks provide valuable insights and may serve as effective tools for further exploration of the implications of ecological factors on all stakeholders and secondary schools. TMSC (Lazarus & Folkman,1984) helps identify how secondary school principals process their primary appraisal (e.g., harm, loss, threat, self-esteem, goals), secondary appraisal (e.g., coping skills and resources, future expectancy and control), and emotional experience (e.g., empathy, anger, fear, anxiety, sadness) when

experiencing stressful job demands and whether participants use problem-focused coping (e.g., information seeking, support seeking, accepting confrontation), or emotion-focused coping (e.g., self-blame, wishful thinking, minimization). Understanding ecological factors and their interconnectedness to job-related stress is essential for promoting evidence-based approaches to systemic solutions. Understanding this issue in broader societal context, beyond individual principals or schools, can guide higher education preparation programs, state legislators, educational leaders, and stakeholders in better supporting and preparing current and future principals and school leaders.

Implications for Practice

This case study of Vermont principals suggests that many positive and negative factors influencing principals stem from ecological influences, which are situated outside of the direct control of Vermont principals. Findings indicate that societal changes significantly influence principals' job demands, often leaving principals to manage and cope largely on their own. Findings indicate that principals find support and job satisfaction from various stakeholders showing the importance of collective influence on resilience. Parker (2019) concluded that districts must balance high expectations with a margin of flexibility so that principals can provide the support their campus needs.

There is a need for systemic interventions for collective care, such as Trauma Informed Care (TIC) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Frameworks that can have positive implications for principals and all stakeholders associated with their schools. This study extends research that finds that support from colleagues or supervisors is a crucial factor in mitigating burnout and is a positive factor for principal retention (Cieminski, 2018;

Dejong, 2017; Federici & Skalvik, 2012; Luebke, 2013; Wang, 2018). Solutions must leverage the positive influence of relationships to include cooperation and partnership among all stakeholders and shift the focus from individual self-care to collective care.

Supporting principals should not fall solely on their individual capacity or resources but instead emphasize the strength of relationships working towards a shared responsibility by educational leaders, communities, and society, which I explore further in my recommendations. DeMatthews and colleagues (2021) found that with greater attention focused on principal burnout and self-care, they believe that districts can improve principal retention, which will translate into improved and healthier schools for teachers and students.

A fundamental element for partnerships and community care and support is relationships. Relationships are themes found in several studies pointing to their importance of supporting principals as well as being a source for stress (Cieminski, 2018; Leubke, 2013; Steiner et al., 2022; Wang & Hauseman, 2018). This study extends the importance for schools and districts to prioritize culture and community that prioritize positive and supportive relationships. Peer support provides opportunities to form mutual relationships; to learn how one's history shapes perspectives of self, others, and the future; to move beyond trauma; and to mirror and learn alternate coping strategies (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, pp. 116). This will allow for leadership to be able to support one another and to help ensure a healthy work life balance of their principals. This extends Luebke's (2013) findings that balancing the demands of the job, balancing the job and family life, and responding to managing the

multiple demands of work and home life are crucial factors that influence principals' considerations for staying or leaving.

Implications for Research

Given the need for systemic solutions, it is important that research focuses on evidence-based practices and systems that support collective care. Exploring new research questions to investigate evidence-based models, systems, and strategies for supporting principals and their schools is important to learn how to mitigate stress and burnout in principals and other stakeholders. Principals' job satisfaction is closely related to their personal and organizational well-being and work conditions (Wang & Hauseman, 2018). For instance, future research could examine school-to-community partnerships and identify evidence-based models that have demonstrated positive outcomes in workforce stress management that promotes community. Further, research could assess any connections between these efforts and improvements in student outcomes, providing actionable insights for schools and stakeholders.

Given the impact of technology, research should specifically focus on the impact of technology on principals' roles, focusing on the volume and nature of communication and interactions they experience. This includes evaluating the demeanor of those communications and their effects on principals' stress levels, as well as identifying effective strategies to mitigate negative influences. Such research could offer valuable insights into improving the sustainability of educational leadership and fostering healthier school environments. The strategies, norms and practices that are implemented in public schools could help schools disrupt the negative impact of technological advances in communication imposing requests for rapid responses.

Recommendations

Rebuilding Trust

Establishing and rebuilding relational trust between principals, staff, education leaders, legislators, and the broader community is an important step towards mitigating stress for all stakeholders. Haines and colleagues (2022) found that strong organizational efforts to foster relationships between educators, families, students, and community partners may help educators mitigate pandemic-related stress. This can be accomplished through the implementation of SEL frameworks such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

> SEL should pervade every aspect of a district's work from the superintendent's office to academics and core priorities, to the classroom. It is a unifying thread to help bring together district priorities, impacting central office staff, school leaders, teachers, students, and families (CASEL, 2024, pp. 1).

Systems and mechanisms that enhance open and honest communication and skills should be encouraged to set realistic expectations, promote mutual understanding, and foster collaboration and school to family connections.

TIC can help communities improve dialogue and improve relationships among stakeholders using evidence-based strategies to help close cultural divides, align goals, address misconceptions to collectively navigate the challenges facing schools. TIC is informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST and uses a social-ecological model to explore trauma and its effects (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, pp. 14). Given the interconnectedness of principals' job demands found in this study through the lens of the EST, TIC is an appropriate intervention to address systemic

resilience. Steiner and colleagues (2022) found that positive school environments and strong relationships with colleagues were key sources of support in stressful times. DeMatthews et al. (2021) stated that principals are professionals leading human-service institutions, which means they need to complete the job functions of the principalship and manage the personal and social dimensions of leading an organization designed to support students, teachers, families, and staff.

Building mutual respect and trust can alleviate some of the stress principals experience from misaligned expectations and societal pressures and build a stronger community when school districts prioritize SEL. Districts can center SEL in strategic planning and in the ways the central office operates, sets policies, budgets for resources to support implementation, provides professional learning, and enacts a vision and long-term plan for implementing, integrating, and continuously improving SEL practices (CASEL, 2024, pp. 1). Furthermore, this trust can be built upon research that shows principals are deeply motivated and invested in their relationships with students and love for supporting student success as a common goal and driving force that resonates with the broader educational community.

District and State Level Support

Advocacy for policy and practices at the district and state levels that prioritize staff well-being is critical to the sustainability of quality education in Vermont can be accomplished through TIC. Trauma needs to be seen through a broader lens a contextual lens integrating biopsychosocial, interpersonal, community, and societal (the degree of individualistic or collective cultural values) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, pp. 14). It is imperative to develop strategies that can provide the motivation for

appropriate policy changes, highlight health concerns, and generate knowledge that can be used to support principals' occupational health and well-being (Wang & Hauseman, 2018). A trauma-aware workplace supports supervision and program practices that educate all direct service staff members on secondary trauma, encourages the processing of trauma related content through participation in peer supported activities and clinical supervision, and provides them with professional development opportunities to learn about and engage in effective coping strategies that help prevent secondary trauma or trauma-related symptoms (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, pp. 13). Such approaches might lead to improved guidelines for reasonable communication practices, contractual hours, limitations on after-hours contact, compensation commensurate with the job demands, and provisions for adequate time and appropriate resources to support schools. Wang and Hauseman (2018) found that because of work intensification, motivating factors (e.g., workplace challenges, recognition from the employer, work demand) and maintenance factors (e.g., external policy influence, organizational support, principals' relationships with teachers, superintendents, and unions) are both having a significant impact on principals' job satisfaction.

Educational leaders should support and encourage mechanisms, resources, and support at the district and regional levels and be considerate about the number of changes they implement. State leaders can establish learning benchmarks, guidelines and goals, as well as provide funding and professional development support to districts and schools and help create the conditions where SEL can thrive at the community, district, and school level. (CASEL, 2024). Cieminski's (2018) study recommended that school district leaders be mindful of the changes, make sure that the expectations regarding

changes were reasonable, and ensure support to principals making those changes. This includes common planning time and collaboration for principals within the district, within their region, and with state level partners. Principals can benefit from professional learning community models to partner to cultivate environments that are collaborative in recognizing, addressing, and supporting systemic factors in running schools and include opportunities to provide time, support, and professional learning to mitigate principal stress and improve work productivity and satisfaction. Integrating TIC into behavioral health services provides many benefits not only for clients, but also for their families and communities, for behavioral health service organizations, and for staff (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, pp. 8). Fostering a supportive ecosystem for principals not only enhances their well-being but also positively impacts the overall quality of education, school culture, and student outcomes.

Community to School Partnership

Initiatives aimed at educating families, staff, and community members about the roles and responsibilities of principals and schools are vital for fostering understanding and collaboration. A fundamental goal of these partnerships should be connecting and building positive relationships. Two-way partnerships offer schools the opportunities to learn from families, and families the opportunities to learn from schools. Schools can build upon and learn from the strategies that families are already using to support SEL and leverage families' expertise to create more inclusive school environments (CASEL, 2024, pp.1). While there are geographical differences and needs, workshops, informational sessions, and communication campaigns can promote community partnerships grounded in empathy, compassion, and a shared focus on student success

may help to build positive learning communities and promote the type of working conditions that attract and maintain a healthy workforce that will enhance positive student outcomes and benefit all stakeholders and the school community.

By raising awareness of the strengths and challenges that principals and schools encounter, these initiatives can encourage meaningful dialogue and support. More importantly, community partnerships that prioritize student voice, choice, and involvement have the potential to strengthen relationships between schools and families. Through workshops, informational sessions, community celebrations or banquets, and communication campaigns, these partnerships can nurture healthy connections that address school needs while centering on students' growth and well-being.

Additionally, emphasizing the importance of respecting professional boundaries, understanding the complexities of school administration, and keeping students at the heart of decision-making can create a more supportive community environment to enhance resiliency.

> Resilience, the ability to thrive despite negative life experiences and heal from traumatic events is related to the internal strengths and environmental supports of an individual. Most individuals are resilient despite experiencing traumatic stress. The ability to thrive beyond the trauma is associated with individual factors as well as situational and contextual factors (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, pp. 55).

Schools and leadership may actively emphasize the strengths of relationships while working to provide environmental support to foster greater connection, reduce unreasonable demands, and alleviate some of the external pressures that contribute to

principal stress. Families are far more likely to form partnerships with schools when the school's norms, values, and cultural representations reflect their own experiences, it is important for teams to foster a culturally responsive and welcoming school environment and authentically engage families as partners (CASEL, 2024).

Future Research

I recommend replicating this study with additional stakeholders and consider adaptations to the methods and data sources. A mixed-methods design could evaluate additional data points and provide a more comprehensive analysis on the topic. A mixed-methods approach would include quantitative measures to capture a broader range of ecological factors and strategies used, as well as the frequency and level of impact. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches would also enhance analysis and understanding of the challenges and coping mechanisms for principals and provide more insight on the relationship of the findings between factors and individuals as well as similar or divergent relationships between stakeholders.

Recommended data collection methods include a longitudinal study spanning one to three years, utilizing interviews, focus groups, observations, and artifacts such as journals, email examples, email volume, and daily agendas. This approach could provide both deeper insights and specific context or examples that better align with the purpose of this study.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Methodologies, Findings and Factors from Literature Review

Author (Year) Method	Methodology, Design, & Participants	Key Findings & Factors Influencing Principals
Mahfouz (2020) Qualitative	A qualitative study that explores the various stressors school administrators experience and the coping strategies they utilize to manage their stress. Findings show that the various stressors experienced by the school administrators do affect their job performance and their own well-being.	Principals mentioned three main types of stressors related to work, relationships, and time. They also experienced some unpleasant feelings in response to these stressors such as guilt, a sense of unfairness, loneliness, or disappointment
(Parker, 2019) Qualitative	This study was defined as a case study about principals' perceptions of retention and attrition. The boundaries of the case are elementary school principals in Central Texas who have served in the field for five or more years or who left the field within the last two years … (10) Elementary principals from two urban districts and one suburban district located in Region XII of Central Texas who had served at least five years at the same school were the population of the study.	Leadership beliefs, giving and getting support and sharing complex job responsibilities.
(Cieminski, 2018) Qualitative	A qualitative study examined the succession practices of five large school districts in Colorado by gathering the perspectives of principals and school district leaders using interpretive design. They interviewed 18 participants including seven school district/system administrators and 11 school principals.	The importance of stakeholder input, professional development focused on instructional leadership, attention to transition, and a focus on teacher-principal relationships.
(Burres, 2017) Qualitative	The qualitative study borrowed elements of a narrative study through the interview process with nine current or former	Finding balance in the principalship, the impact of health issues, the rewards of being a school leader, and

	administrators, in two Piedmont North Carolina school districts.	advice they would give to new administrators.
(Luebke, 2013) Qualitative	This qualitative study explored the institutional factors, personal characteristics, and work-related relationships of high school principals that led to their longer-than-usual tenure in their positions. Data were gathered from interviews with ten high school principals who had served in their positions for a range of 8 to 23 years, much longer than many high school principals today. The participant pool included 13 white males and 1white female.	Institutional factors, personal factors, work-related relationships.
(Sogunro, 2012) Qualitative	Through interviews with 52 principals in Connecticut for about 2.5 years.	Unpleasant relationships and people conflicts, time constraints, and related issues, crises in the school, challenging policy demands and overwhelming mandates, budgetary constraints and related issues, fear of failure, and negative publicity and dealing with media continuous frustrations and challenges.
Makler (1992) Qualitative	Qualitative case study of 20 male principals, half of which left the principalship at the time of the study.	Job satisfaction, decision making authority, relationships with stakeholders, and the influence of respect or recognition they received, and how this influenced their decision to stay of leave.
(NAASP, 2022) Quantitative	The development of the *NASSP Survey of America's School Leaders and High School Students* was assisted by nine current school leaders and NASSP members and nine National Honor Society students from across the United States. Gotham Research Group, an independent research firm, developed and administered the survey. It was conducted online from June 5 through June 23, 2022,	One out of two school leaders said their stress levels were so high that they were considering a career change or retirement.

	among a nationally representative sample of 1,000 principals and assistant/vice principals in middle and high school and 1,000 8–12th grade students enrolled in school for the 2021–22 school year.	
(Grissom, 2021) Quantitative	Reviewed research published since 2000 on principals and student, teacher, and school outcomes. They began with a systematic search of journal databases and grey literature sources, which yielded an initial return of more than 4,800 documents that they then individually screened and processed.	Classroom instruction, compete for students in public and private school choice environments, and pay close attention to equity as a stand-alone policy and professional goal.
(Levin, 2021) Quantitative	The NASSP and the LPI collaborated to develop this national principal study, administered by WestEd. In 2019, LPI surveyed a stratified random sample of 424 secondary school principals selected to represent U.S. secondary schools by community type, size, percentage of students of color, and percentage of students eligible for the federal lunch program.	Working conditions, compensation, high stakes accountability, decision making authority, professional learning.
(DeJong, 2017) Quantitative	Using new survey data compiled from 176 secondary principals across a state in the Midwest United States.	Unreasonable expectations, managing difficult stakeholders, problematic work/life balance, and lack of support.
(Federici & Skaalvik, 2012) Quantitative	Principal self-efficacy was measured by a recently developed multidimensional scale called the Norwegian Principal Self-Efficacy Scale. Burnout was measured by a modified version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Job satisfaction and motivation to quit were measured by two scales developed for the purpose of this study, respectively. Participants in the study were 1,818 principals from the population of Norwegian	Self-efficacy, positive relationships to job satisfaction, motivations to quit related to burnout.

	principals. Data were collected by means of an electronic questionnaire.	
Ngari et. al., (2011) (Quantitative)	The study adopted an ex post facto research design. The population comprised 336 secondary school administrators (28 principals, 28 deputy principals and 280 heads of departments) in the 28 secondary schools in the study area. A random sample of 134 administrators (18 principals, 18 deputy principals and 98 heads of departments) from 18 secondary schools was obtained. Primary data were collected using a questionnaire. The collected data were then processed and analyzed by both descriptive and inferential statistics using Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The study established that the school administrators experienced stress in their work. Of the respondents, 54.5% recorded high levels of stress resulting from their school workload and other responsibilities.	Based on the study findings, three key recommendations were made. There is need for stress management techniques and strategies for school administrators regardless of their administrative level.
(DeMatthews et al., 2021) Mixed Methods	Used a mixed methods design, which involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data first and then exploring the implications of the quantitative data with a qualitative survey (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The first phase, survey data were collected from the population of principals in one large urban school district in the Southwestern US to assess levels of burnout, secondary trauma, and workplace attributes. In the second, qualitative phase we used an open-ended survey with all principals to better understand how working conditions, secondary trauma, and coping strategies related to burnout.	Job-related stress and burnout are factors that can limit principal effectiveness and lead to untimely turnover.

(DeMatthews, 2019) Mixed Methods	An explanatory sequential mixed-method design guided the study, which involved collecting and analyzing quantitative data first and then further exploring the implications of the quantitative results with in-depth interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In the first, quantitative phase of the study, survey data were collected from a sample of principals within one large urban school district along the US-Mexico border to assess whether secondary trauma, burnout, and personal accomplishment were related to school context, student demographics, and principal demographics. The second, qualitative phase was conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative phase to identify critical events and cases that affected principal emotions.	Pressures from parents and community members with unreasonable demands, overload from too many meetings, and unrelenting job expectations, unsatisfactory or underperforming teachers, and uncooperative or incompetent administrative support staff.
(Wang, 2018) Mixed Methods	Logistic multiple regressions were used in the analysis of survey data that were collected from 2,701 elementary and secondary school principal members of the Ontario Principals' Council in Ontario, Canada. Approximately1,423 valid cases were used in data analysis.	External policy influence, organizational support, principal relationships with teachers, superintendents, and union.
(Honig, 2006) Literature Review	Provides the most up-to-date and comprehensive review of contemporary research in education policy implementation.	Pressure to improve student achievement.

Appendix B: Qualitative Interview Protocol

Name:_____ Location:_____

Current Title:_____ Date:_____

Before the Interview:

Hello. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I am Andrew Conforti, a doctoral student in The University of Vermont's College of Education and Social Services Doctoral Program for Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. The purpose of this study is to inform the educational community, local and state policy makers, and higher education leaders and programs about the perceptions and experiences of current and former principals' job demands to highlight the impact of job-related stress and factors that influence principals' decisions to stay or leave their positions. As a current high school principal, I have always been interested in the impact of stress on schools and what makes leaders stay in or leave the field. It is my hope that the results of my study can help positively impact the field of leadership retention.

Our interview should take less than 45 minutes. Thank you for completing the consent form and submitting it to me. I will be taking notes throughout the interview and want to remind you that the interview is being audio recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. Your identity will remain anonymous, and confidentiality will be protected at all times. This is a voluntary interview, and you can decide to stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Principal Interview Protocol

Principal Interview

Background:

1) What is your educational and professional background?
2) Why did you get into education and being a principal? How long have you been a principal?

Research Question 1: How do various ecological factors influence job-related stress on secondary school principals?

3) What is about your job that generates the most stress for you?
4) How does job related stress influence your job satisfaction, your health, or your ability to do your job at a level that you would like?
5) How often do you feel stressed on the job?

EST:

6) How does federal and state policy influence job related stress for principals? (i.e., NCLB, Act 173, Act 77)
    a. How does budget or education funding impact your job demands and job-related stress?
    b. How does national, state, and or local politics and polarization influence the schools' culture and climate and job-related stress towards your efforts to support (stakeholders) students and teachers with equity-oriented issues?
    c. How do administrator, teacher, and student evaluation and accountability influence job related stress for principals?
7) How do interactions with stakeholders, students' teacher's admin assistants, or families contribute to job related stress?

Research Question 2: How do secondary principals in Vermont manage job-related stress and burnout?

8) What factors would you say have the greatest influence on mitigating or managing job-related stress?
    a. What strategies or tools do you use to manage stress? How often, and how effective?
9) Could you decipher between examples of stress that are more emotional versus more problem focusses? (i.e., meeting with an angry parent versus, raising achievement scores).
    a. Do you find those two examples to differ in terms of impact on your stress levels or job satisfaction? Which have a greater impact on job-related stress?

Research Question 3: Why do secondary principals stay or leave their positions?

10) What are the biggest factors that make your job fulfilling?
11) Have you ever thought about leaving your position or the role or education? Why or why not?
    a. What are the most important factors that contribute to wanting to leave?
    b. What are the most important factors that contribute to wanting to stay?
12) How does job related stress contribute to wanting to stay or leave?
13) How do relationships, changing tasks/goals, fulfilling different roles, work/life balance, and or health issues influence your job satisfaction and decisions to stay or leave?

Educational Leader Interview

Background:

1) What is your educational and professional background?
2) Why did you get into your role? How long have you been this role?

Research Question 1: How do various ecological factors influence job-related stress on secondary school principals?

3) From your perspective, what do you think influences principals job demands and or job-related stress?
4) How do you think job related stress influence principals job satisfaction, health, or ability to do their job at a level that is expected of them?

EST:

5) How do you think federal and state policy influence job related stress for principals? (i.e., NCLB, Act 173, Act 77)
    a. How do you think education funding impacts job demands and job-related stress for principals?
    b. How do you think national, state, and or local politics and polarization influence the schools' culture and climate and a principal's ability to support students and teachers with equity-oriented issues?
    c. How do you think mandates on administrator, teacher, and student evaluation and accountability influence job related stress for principals?

Research Question 2: How do secondary principals in Vermont manage job-related stress and burnout?

6) What factors would you say have the greatest influence on principals mitigating or managing job-related stress?

7) How do you think principals effectively manage job-related stress
8) What supports or resources do you provide to principals to help them manage job-related stress?
    a. How effective are those strategies or resources?
        i. How often are they utilized?
    b. Do you find those two examples to differ in terms of impact on your stress levels or job satisfaction?

Research Question 3: Why do secondary principals stay or leave their positions?

Are you concerned with principals' longevity? Why or why not?

What have you observed or experienced that causes you concern for principal turnover?

What have you observed or experienced that gives you hope for principal longevity?

What type of trends have you seen in the application pool for principals in Vermont?

Appendix C: Qualitative Codebook and Definitions

Code Name	Code Description	Files	References
Society	A community, nation or large group of people having common culture, traditions, collective experiences. Including parents, care givers and stakeholders.	14	149
Changes	Make (someone or something) different; alter or modify.	14	136
Stress	A state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances.	14	276
Too Much	Something too difficult, tiring, or upsetting that goes beyond a person's capacity.	14	158
Responsibilities	A thing that one is expected or required to do as part of a job, role or legal obligation.	14	185
Teaching and Learning	The process of supporting teachers and student learning/outcomes	14	67
Policy or Laws	A course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, business, or individual.	14	112
Equity	Supporting historically marginalized groups/students and or the values related to supporting all students from a social justice and equity lens/act/policy etc.	11	32
Resources	Money, materials, staff, or assets that can be used to function affectively.	14	123
Perception of principals' role	The ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses or concept regarding the meaning of being a principal.	14	125
Relationships	The way in which two or more concepts, objects, or people are connected, or the state of being connected.	14	121
Behavior	The way in which people act. Experiencing or dealing with conflict or emotional experiences of others.	14	104
Technology	Advances and influences of technology, including communication and social media	10	42
Email	Communication method that uses electronic devices to deliver messages across computer networks and cell phones.	10	27
Covid	Events or impact related to the Covid-19 Pandemic	10	15
Work Life Balance	The harmonious or conflicting personal and professional relationship.	11	48
Thought / Coping process	Deal with and attempt to overcome problems and difficulties	14	229
Support	Giving assistance to self/others in a functional or emotional manner	14	119
Staying or leaving	Factors that contribute to staying or leaving the principal role.	13	79

Love for the job	The pleasure, motivation, and satisfaction for the job.	11	51
Motivation	The reason or reasons one has for acting or behaving in a particular way.	12	43
Students	A person studying or attending school		
Humor	The use or state of mind of making light or bringing levity	3	6
Health	A person's mental or physical condition.	10	34
Exercise	Physical activity that can improve your health and fitness	6	7
Time	The indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole.	12	54
SEL	The process of supporting teachers and student learning/outcomes related to social emotional learning and awareness.	14	67