

Why Don't We Care More About the Humans Who Work in Schools?

By Annie Kidder

Principals in Ontario schools are dealing with increasingly unmanageable levels of stress, and it's not readily apparent that the public, politicians or policymakers care.

In their responses to People for Education's 2023-24 Annual Ontario School Survey, 61 per cent of Ontario principals disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "My recent levels of stress at work feel manageable." A further 58 per cent disagreed that their school had the resources necessary to support the mental health and well-being of school staff. These results have been worsening every year since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Ontario numbers correspond with findings from across Canada and internationally. For example, a report from 2022, based on a survey conducted by the Rand Corporation, found 85 per cent of principals in the United States were experiencing job-related stress, compared to 35 per cent of working adults in other professions. There are equally worrying reports from Ireland, Australia and Poland, all pointing to high levels of burnout and stress among school principals.

The perfect storm of stress

A number of factors have combined to create a perfect storm in our schools: fallout from the pandemic, staff

Time to connect the dots

These days, we are faced with headlines about climate change, polarization, failing democracies, labour market gaps, declining productivity, homelessness, the spread of misinformation and the growing gap between rich and poor. But the headlines and public dialogue consistently miss one possible answer to our social, economic and sustainability challenges: stronger, more effective public education.

Strong public education benefits both individuals and society, and it could provide upstream solutions to many of our societal challenges.

Individually, people with higher levels of education are more likely to live longer and healthier lives, earn more, navigate changing jobs, participate in civic life by voting and volunteering, and less likely to participate in the spread of misinformation.

Socially, more highly educated countries have higher GDPs, are more equitable, have greater levels of civic participation, pay higher taxes, have lower costs for social services and have the potential for higher levels of productivity, innovation and global competitiveness.

Public education could play a key role in our collective futures. However, it can only play that role effectively if we recognize – and back up with effective policy and