


STRESS REDUCTION FOR THE SELFLESS

Educators must take care of
their own well-being first using
social-emotional strategies

BY JAMES A. BAILEY AND RANDY WEINER





You glance at your emails and the stack of phone messages demanding a response, but you stay motionless, staring off at nothing. Brain fog—you remember it. It's the same thing you felt when the COVID-19 pandemic was first unleashed in 2020. "This year was supposed to be different," you say to yourself.

But it's all back: families upset about their children falling behind, new staff replacing teachers who retired or quit. And as for you? Overburdened and exhausted, you don't know what to do or where to turn.

Throughout the pandemic, articles and reports on teacher burnout regularly grabbed headlines. However, the well-being of principals was discussed infrequently—strange, considering how critical principals' well-being is to a school's potential to thrive.

When schools reopened, principals experienced even more stress as student learning gains from the previous year were lower than average and expectations for support from teachers and families were higher, taxing leaders' limited energy.

SUSPENDING SELF-CARE

Principals commonly think they must put student and staff needs ahead of their own as acts of selfless, caring, and effective leadership. Unfortunately, this belief fore-stalls the opportunity for school leaders to develop their own daily SEL practice and strengthen their leadership.

Recent interviews conducted with principals for an SEL research project substantiate this norm. A common observation goes something like this: "Professionally and personally, we really put a lot of pressure on ourselves to show up and be consistent, dependable, organized, and prepared. And sometimes we do that at the expense of taking care of ourselves." Sound familiar?

In order to help effectively, school leaders must first take care of themselves. Leaders who neglect their own emotional health can produce devastating consequences for students, families, and the learning community. This is reflected by the following statistics:

- The yearly principal attrition rate is approximately 20 percent, according to "Principal Attrition and Mobility," a 2018 Department of Education report.
- Roughly 90 percent of school principals feel responsible for everything that happens to students, according to the Texas Education Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin.
- 75 percent feel that their job has become too complex, say University of Pennsylvania scholars Michael C. Johanek and Ken Spero, and at least 50 percent feel "great stress" weekly.

Many job stressors existed before the pandemic, yet what Johanek and Spero called the "silent crisis of leadership in education"—the toll that leading change can take on a person's psyche—continues to go unnoticed. And given the persistent pandemic challenges schools face, many principals will continue to experience chronic stress, mental health issues, and perhaps a desire to leave the profession.

Yet, shockingly few district-level supports or programs exist to reduce principal burnout. "There's no real institutional structure or support for leaders to develop their social-emotional skills," says one principal. "You're on your own, I think, for the most part. This is work that's pretty personal and private, that you have to do and not rely on work to provide it for you."

There is, however, good news. In the work we do with leaders around the country, we accept the constraints school leaders face but question the view that there aren't opportunities for school leaders to help themselves. It is possible to create a daily SEL practice—essentially your own "oxygen mask"—that makes you far more likely to flourish.



POSITIVE SPIRALS

The pandemic exacerbated the extreme stress school leaders already faced. Against this backdrop, principals should see the necessity of developing their SEL skills for well-being. When principals frame their responses to stimuli as only fight or flight, they are at risk of succumbing to negative emotional spirals. However, the field of positive psychology—one of the research bases for SEL—studies human thoughts, feelings, and behavior, focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses to foster optimal function in life.

Positive psychology finds that focusing on positive processes and emotions can minimize the impact of negative emotions while building psychological resources such as resiliency and patience. Likewise, studies suggest that focusing on positive emotions broadens awareness, leading to novel thoughts and actions that also build psychological resources.

Fredrickson calls this the “broaden and build” theory of positive emotions. As recognition of positive emotions increases, an upward, inspirational spiral can propel leaders away from merely surviving and toward thriving. Embracing positive spirals provides a useful context for a deeper exploration of the CASEL competencies of self-awareness and self-management.

1. SELF-AWARENESS

A metacognitive process, self-awareness asks school leaders to understand their internal lives and the impact of thoughts and feelings on physical and mental health. In particular, positivity enhances a leader’s display and use of emotions and explanatory style.

Recognizing and reframing thoughts might be the principal’s greatest coping mechanism.

Emotions. Emotions are signals to act. Negative emotions such as fear or anxiety spur survival instincts. The human mind is naturally negatively biased, but too much focus on negative emotions can lead to unproductive downward spirals. Researchers estimate that a 5-to-1 mix of positive to negative emotions can lay a foundation for flourishing.

Joy, gratitude, interest, hope, pride, inspiration, awe, and love are the most common positive emotions. These don’t just appear in people’s lives, however; leaders must seek them out daily, intentionally noticing joyful moments or celebrating the inspiration students, family, colleagues, and outside resources engender.

Similarly, a simple, short, daily gratitude exercise such as journaling, identifying three things that you appreciate about yourself, or writing a thank-you note to a trusted mentor, teacher, or colleague prompts reflection on the positive. Making these practices routine can increase positivity, decrease stress, and enhance mental health for school leaders and their communities.

Explanatory style. Self-awareness of how one sees and explains the world can help principals improve their leadership practice. Pessimists tend to see bad events as permanent, pervasive, personal, and uncontrollable, encouraging a downward spiral. Such thinking carries the risks of increased anxiety, depression, and even cardiovascular disease.

Optimists see bad events as temporary or local, and neither personal nor permanent. Optimism launches a positive spiral, protecting mental and overall health. Self-talk can provide a simple intervention that acknowledges your sphere of influence (or lack thereof) and sets realistic expectations: “I’ve done all I can, and even though things didn’t go as planned, I won’t let it sap my energy,” for example. Leaders can combat an inclination toward pessimism by exploring alternative explanations that might suggest a more positive reality.

2. SELF-MANAGEMENT

Self-management follows self-awareness, focusing on the capacity to self-regulate the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that self-awareness reveals. Two prominent social-emotional areas that support leaders’ mental health include impulse control and stress management.

Impulse control. When self-awareness of emotions is low, impulse recognition might also be low, leading to poor self-management. Impulse control addresses emotional regulation, inhibiting bad choices related to stimuli that typically produce negative emotions. Too often and without realizing it, individuals might take action based on anger, which can metastasize into habitually downward-spiraling behavioral patterns over time.

Simple, positive techniques to self-manage these impulses include recognizing triggers and planning ahead to prepare a different response. Triggers might include people, events, words, and even nonverbal cues; by recognizing them, leaders can increase awareness of their impulses, appraise them in the moment, and slow down negative responses. Delaying triggers creates opportunities for more positive spirals to emerge.

Think about what sets you off—it could be anything from gum-chewing to interruptions to the fear of missing out when you see others post their vacations on social media. Knowing what produces negative thoughts in yourself can help you avoid those triggers, “own” the feelings they produce, and counter negative thoughts when they (inevitably) arise.

Stress management. All principals feel stress; the job gets more taxing each year. So, recognizing and reframing thoughts might be the principal’s greatest coping mechanism. To launch more positive spirals, deploy well-known recovery strategies on a short- and long-term basis. For instance, Navy SEALs train using “box” breathing (counting to four on the inhale, a breath-hold, the exhale, and another breath-hold; repeat) to quickly control stress.

In the long term, mindfulness practice can increase overall happiness and reduce the risk of cardiovascular

Core Concepts: Wellness

- Principals often place student and staff needs ahead of their own, when they should be developing their own daily SEL practice to cope with the daily stresses of the job.
- Emphasizing positive processes and emotions can minimize the impact of negative emotions and build psychological resilience.
- Self-awareness and self-management strategies are just as important for school leaders’ effectiveness as they are for children to apply in the classroom.



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disease. Other positivity-oriented strategies include affirming personal values or writing down positive aspects of a stressor. Accepting more self-compassion can also help mitigate high stress levels over time.

3. FORWARD TO FLOURISHING

COVID-19 laid waste to principals' collective mental health and continues to do so, with issues significantly increasing across all ages, genders, and races. Of course, much of principals' stress existed prior to the pandemic, but the emotional ups and downs of designing new systems overnight took their toll.

To move from languishing to flourishing, we recommend seizing this opportunity to evolve from knowing what you should do toward actually doing it. Adopting a daily SEL practice infused with positivity is an effective way to alleviate stress and avoid burnout to become an even better school leader. You can implement the following practices starting now:

- **Reflect on the positives daily.** It is a natural survival instinct to lean toward the negative. Intentionally fight that instinct and look for successes, no matter how big or small. There are small victories all around you.
- **Seek positive explanations for actions or events.** Practice perspective-taking and empathy to help illuminate the well-intentioned reasons that explain what's going on in your school.
- **Define and slow your triggers.** You know what sets you off; anticipate triggers and mitigate your reactions. For example, you might schedule more demanding meetings or tasks early in the day, when you're more emotionally capable of handling high-stress situations.
- **Breathe intentionally.** A few minutes of intentional deep breathing can help reestablish a calm state. Check out the book *Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art* by James Nestor for guidance.

Leaders who flourish perform at high levels individually and socially, and students, teachers, and families need principals to be their best, healthiest selves. To get there, start by putting your own oxygen mask on first. ●

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*"I heard many birds chirping."
"I felt the warm sun on my skin."
"I picked a lemon from my tree and
smelled the aroma of the peel."*

Those were some of the comments shared by school leaders who were asked to go to an outdoor space for a moment of "forest bathing"—the practice of going to a forest, park, or other verdant space to engage all of the senses in a moment of self-care. This was just one of many activities in which I and other administrators engaged during the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) Wellness Wednesdays professional development sessions last year.

In times of uncertainty, disconnectedness, and elevated stress, it is more important than ever to tend to our own health and well-being. Like people are advised to put their own oxygen masks on first before assisting others when flying, most educators tend to help others first. It's a core value that attracts them to the profession.

LAUSD's human resources division funded Wellness Wednesdays professional development for administrators with the sole purpose of providing a protected space for principals, assistant principals, and other administrators to meet virtually and engage in wellness activities that deepened their self-care practices. Their time and commitment were recognized; participants received compensation for attending.

The 110 administrators met for one hour once a week for 10 weeks to engage in activities focused completely on improving their own well-being. Practices included intentional breathing, stretching, chair