

**PERCEPTION OF DECISION-MAKING ON SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS'  
STRESS LEVELS**

by

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A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Educational Leadership

West Texas A&M University

Canyon, Texas

December, 2022

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## **Scholarly Delivery Framework**

The research focus of the scholarly delivery is on leadership, specifically executive leadership and decision-making, with principals and assistant principals as my primary subjects and the stressors associated with constant decision-making. The first scholarly deliverable is an empirical article titled “Perception of Decision-Making on School Administrators’ Stress Level.” This article focuses on stress levels incurred by constant decision-making and how to manage it. The final scholarly deliverable is a case study article that can be used for teaching doctoral or master’s candidates in the field of educational leadership. The title of this article is “Decision-Making Impact.” The case represents the impact that decisions being made by one person can impact others directly or indirectly. This article provides activities and guiding questions that can be used to analyze decisions and the influence they can have on school or district personnel.

## IRB Approval



### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS Letter of Approval

Dr. Harper:

The West Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal #2022.04.015 for your study titled, “**Perception of Decision Making on School Administrators’ Stress Level,**” meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Use of Human Subjects in Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **May 22, 2023.**

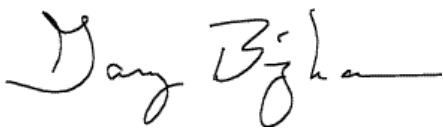
Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A [Continuing Review form](#) along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a [Close out form](#) must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR](#), unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR](#), potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an [Amendment form](#) to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB

- approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate records for 5 years and making them available for inspection upon request.
  8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include the study's IRB number, approval date, and expiration dates in the following format: WTAMU IRB##-##-## Approved: ##/##/#### Expiration Date: ##/##/####.
  9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if applicable to the research being proposed. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

Sixty days prior to the expiration of this proposal, you will receive a notification of the approaching expiration date at which time you will need to submit an [Amendment/Continuation/Close out](#) form.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project. Sincerely,



Dr. Gary Bigham  
Chair, WTAMU IRB



Dr. Angela Spaulding  
Vice President of Research and Co

## Acknowledgements

This 3-year journey has been filled with plenty of work and deadlines to meet. All this would not be possible without the guidance, dedication, and professionalism of our professors at West Texas A&M University. Dr. Klinker was the first professor I met during the initiation of this doctoral program. Thank you, Dr. Klinker, for your encouragement and advice in the beginning stage of this journey. I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Gary Bigham and Dr. Minseok Yang, for their commitment and availability to provide feedback and meetings through zoom. To my committee chair Dr. Irma Harper, I was blessed to have such a dedicated professor. Your guidance, feedback, and positivity were contagious and uplifting. Thank you!

To my family: Andrea, Raul, and Andres, I appreciate your patience when I was unable to be available due to the commitment required in this program. To Chantal, thank you for always being there for me and inspiring me to continue to push through the ups and downs these last 3 years. I love you all!

To my mother, who is the one that has always instilled in us the importance of education: This doctoral degree would not be possible without your hard work and dedication to our family. You set the foundation to make this all possible. You are always there for our family.

A mi madre que es la que siempre nos ha inculcado la importancia de una educación. Este doctorado no sería posible sin su trabajo y dedicación a nuestra familia. Ella puso los cimientos para que todo esto fuera posible. Gracias por siempre apoyar a nuestra familia.

I am fortunate to have great people around me who have unknowingly guided and encouraged me to move from a GED to an Ed.D.

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# **Perception of Decision-Making on School Administrators' Stress Levels**

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## **Author Note**

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The principal and assistant principals (APs) roles are high-profile positions with high expectations from the community they serve. Increasingly placed under scrutiny, principals and APs are under extreme pressure. The purpose of this study is to explore how decision-making can affect an administrators' stress level. **Research Method:** This study used a qualitative design. The phenomena this study addressed was to explore the decision-making process of principals and APs and the effect this process has on stress levels. **Findings:** Several themes emerged from these research questions. The first theme identified was communication. Principals and APs voiced the importance of continuous communication. Collaboration was another theme that surfaced throughout the research. It was an important theme that allowed for all stakeholders to be involved with the purpose of allowing/hearing their input. Problem-solving was the third theme that appeared during the second research question. Stress relief was the fourth theme identified in this study. **Conclusion:** Decision-making can result in conflict, and that conflict can create high levels of stress for the administrators. Principals and APs should have decision-making processes or systems in place to help minimize conflict. Accepting that conflict and stress are inevitable, no matter how structured the decision-making process is, it is important for school administrators to find ways to release their stress.

*Keywords:* conflict, decision-making, stress, principals

## **Perception of Decision-Making on School Administrators' Stress Levels**

The principals' and assistant principals' (APs) roles are high-profile positions with high expectations from the communities they serve. They enter their roles believing that they are well prepared and ready for any challenge. As they begin to learn about the perplexing responsibilities that their positions entail, pressure begins to increase. Pressure builds in an individual as there is a shift and change in daily challenges (Wilhelm, 1982). This pressure can cause stress and conflict, which may contribute to the attrition rate of principals. The turnover rate for principals is at 20% in the United States, leaving many schools in search of new leadership (Miller, 2013).

Increasingly placed under scrutiny, principals and APs are under extreme pressure. They must work in dynamic, rapidly changing environments and are expected to adapt while remaining composed and positive (Mahfouz, 2020). These administrators experience stress on a daily basis. Different aspects that might cause stress during their daily duties include, overseeing their campus, monitoring classroom instruction, and remaining constant communication with stakeholders (Beusaert et al., 2016). These demands, which add to daily pressure, as well as other various factors, also contribute to an increasing shortage of principals (Howley et al., 2005) and overall low performance (Ten Bruggencate et al., 2012).

### **Problem**

Principals and APs are continually in a decision-making mode that occurs in schools throughout the country. Decision-making is a critical role of principals (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). It is also one of the hardest parts of the job. Bad decisions can cause

irreparable damage, not only to the principals and their careers, but also to the school (Marzano et al., 2001). As their duties and responsibilities change and increase, so should the administrators' tasks to make sure that all needs are being met for their students, teachers, staff, and stakeholders (Wise, 2015). The problem this study addressed was that the principals' and APs' increased stress levels are indirectly and directly a result of the decisions they make.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Principals must make and guide many decisions daily. These decisions have positive or negative consequences, impacting both the schools they lead and the school administrators themselves. This study explored the decision-making process of principals and APs and the effect this process has on their stress levels. The study also examined how these administrators minimize their stress levels resulting from the decisions they make. Research questions in this study included:

**RQ1.** How do principals and assistant principals navigate the decision-making process?

**RQ2.** How do principals and assistant principals manage conflict as a result of the decision-making process?

**RQ3.** What do principals and assistant principals do to minimize their stress levels after their decision-making process?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The framework guiding this study was the decision-making process. The variety of situations and patterns of decision-making is part of an ordinary day (Shaked & Schechter, 2019). Decision-making begins once principals and APs arrive on campus in

the morning, until they leave in the evening, and often overnight with emails and text messages. School administrators encounter unique issues based on the communities they serve (Trimmer, 2014). According to Pink (2019), the day is divided into three stages, a peak, a trough, and a rebound. He believed the best time to make decisions is during the morning, which is considered peak time. The trough is noted as a time in the middle of the day when people are not as alert and less likely to make their best decisions (Pink, 2019). Rebound time is often at the end of the day when students are being dismissed from school. School administrators do not have the luxury to pick and choose when they make decisions; these decisions begin when they step on campus..

In the book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Kahneman (2011) discussed how two systems are present when responding to situations. System one is an immediate response, while system two is when we should take our time and think before responding. With the many decisions that school administrators are tasked with, they could be using system one and reacting without taking time to think about each situation. There can be serious ramifications when decisions are made during the trough, especially in a school setting. Markham's (2020) research on decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged leaders to take time to slow down in order to make better decisions especially during a crisis.

The principal is the campus leader, but even their decisions are challenged. The micromanagement view of how others scrutinize school administrators' decisions affects how leaders make decisions (Olayiwola & Alabi, 2015). Motyl (2019) provided options to help a leader share the responsibilities of decision making. One suggestion is to "delegate down the management ladder". This will alleviate the amount of decisions the

leaders has to make and allow him investigate more pressing matters. Having confidence in your team allows for delegation to occur, and a buildup of leaders will ensue.

### **Review of Literature**

A school administrators' leadership style and past experiences affect their choices (Carlyon & Fisher, 2012). Davis and Wilson (2000) found a strong relationship between school leaders who enable their teachers to assist in decision-making and an incentive to complete tasks. New administrators typically learn to emulate leadership skills and decisions from supervisors and coworkers. Novice administrators should be exposed to different leadership styles and teach them how to consolidate them for effectiveness at their school district.

There should be intent in the selection of how to solve an issue, especially when trying to move a school in a positive motion (Noppe et al., 2013). Even though students are the top priority for administrators, it is still critical for them to think about their staff and their needs. Teachers feel that school leaders should be supportive of student discipline, flexible with planning activities, and care for them (Solomon & Lambie, 2020). However, there are instances when teachers might feel a lack of support. That is when people begin to voice their concerns in different ways. Principals also deal with gossip and rumors from teachers and inappropriate comments (Cherkowski et al., 2015).

School administrators meet challenges, and experience high levels of stress while still being a model of ethical excellence. Wells and Klocko (2015) studied how building administrators' responsibilities have morphed into colossal changes in trying to ensure the education of students. Campbell (1987) reinforced that extreme causes of stressors reported by principals include connections with supervisors, relationships with staff,

administration of time, and financial administration (as cited in Wells, 2013). In addition, the lack of others assigned to assist with tasks will lead to added pressure on the principal (Uba-Mbibi & Nwamuo, 2013).

The pressures that administrators experience can be daunting. School administrators are constantly being asked to solve numerous issues that arise (Hancock et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2019). Due to these pressures, the attrition rate of principals is a concern. DeMatthews et al. (2021) explained that maintaining principals in long-term positions benefits a school due to adapting, and getting used to the environment, staff and what is needed to be successful in education. Although school principals play a significant role in meeting high expectations for performance and accountability (Day et al., 2016), national reports and research indicate a significant turnover and instability of principals in the United States (Mitani, 2018).

Conflict and stress are inevitable in the school environment. Proper communication between principals, APs, teachers, students, and all school staff is vital in developing a low-stress level campus. When communication is ineffective, conflicts occur. Along with the same focus, successful communication can eliminate conflict. Putnam (2013) reinforced that the center of conflict resolution was communication. Hocker and Wilmot (2018) stated, “Communication is the medium for conflict management” (p. 2). According to Uzun and Ayik (2017), “There is a relationship between the communication competence and conflict management styles of the school managers, according to teacher perceptions, and the communication competence of the school principals predicts their conflict management styles” (p.177).

School leaders are instrumental to the success of their schools, and their ability to

manage conflict efficiently and effectively is essential to their school's climate and culture (Saiti, 2015). Everyone deals with conflicts in their own way. Administrators with extensive levels of conflict resolution will positively impact the organization internally and externally (Balay, 2006). Complexities of conflicts within a building differentiate by how each person proceeds when encountered with issues or concerns (Saiti, 2015; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). While conflict and stress can manifest themselves as an opportunity for growth and learning, without proper training, principals may not have the tools to help them effectively navigate the various types of conflict (Uzun & Ayik, 2017). Vestal and Torres (2016) stated the complexity of conflict management for principals as this: "The campus leader must often assume the shifting role of boss, friend, advisor, and confidant, while also addressing the pressing needs of the school" (p. 29).

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

This study used a qualitative design. Qualitative research was chosen because it focuses on communication and descriptions of social phenomena (Mayer, 2015). The phenomena this study addressed was to explore the decision-making process of principals and APs and the effect this process has on stress levels. The qualitative strategy used was case study. Case studies are "a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth, a program, event, activity, process or one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2009, p.13). The specific type of case study used was a single case study. Yin (2018) reinforced that if a researcher wants to study one single thing or a single group, a single case study is the best choice. Principals and APs were the chosen case in a single charter school



setting. Interviews were conducted that allowed for an in-depth view of the experiences of the principals and APs. Dyer and Wilkins (1991) stated:

When a single case study is used, the researcher can question old theoretical relationships and explore new ones because of that a more careful study is made. This makes also the researcher to get a deeper understanding of the subject. (as cited in Gustafsson, 2017, pp. 3-4)

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling was used to determine the population of the study. Purposeful sampling enables researchers to identify and focus on elements that are critical to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2013). Principals and APs from elementary, middle, and high schools were the participants in this study. The participants were chosen from a single charter school. This site is a mid-sized charter school with a population of 4,500 students. (Fischler, 2021). Decisions made by these principals and APs are scrutinized by superiors at their district and campus-levels. This process contributes to the job-related stress that the campus administrators encounter. The participants in the study included elementary principals and APs on PK- 5 campuses and secondary principals and APs on 6-12 campuses.

There was a total of nine principals and 12 APs in the chosen charter school. All 21 school administrators were invited to participate in the study. The recruitment process involved emailing and inviting the administrators to participate in the study. Five principals and five APs elected to participate in this study. This sample represented 48% of the administrator population in the school. This was an acceptable response rate due to the availability of the administrators. (The recruitment process was held during the

summer months when some administrators were on vacation.) Once the data were analyzed, saturation was reached and there was no need to ask for additional participants.

(See participant descriptive Tables 1 and 2.)

**Table 1**

*Principal Participant Information*

Participant Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Ethnicity	Highest Degree Level	Years of Teaching Experience before Admin	Years of Principal Experience	Grade levels Overseen by Admin
Principal A	Female	Hispanic	Masters	4.5	14	4 <sup>th</sup> -11 <sup>th</sup>
Principal B	Female	Hispanic	Masters	13	1	PK3-2 <sup>nd</sup>
Principal C	Male	Hispanic	Masters	14	1	3 <sup>rd</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup>
Principal D	Female	Hispanic	Masters	14	4	PK3-3 <sup>rd</sup>
Principal E	Male	Hispanic	Masters	10	3	PK3-5 <sup>th</sup>

**Table 2**

*AP Participant Information*

Participant Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Ethnicity	Highest Degree Level	Years of Teaching Experience before Admin	Years of AP Experience	Grade levels Overseen by Admin
AP A	Female	Hispanic	Masters	10	5	PK3-5 <sup>th</sup>
AP B	Female	Hispanic	Masters	6	1	PK3-5 <sup>th</sup>
AP C	Female	Hispanic	Masters	16	3	PK3-4 <sup>th</sup>
AP D	Female	Hispanic	Masters	10	1	PK3-6 <sup>th</sup>
AP E	Male	Hispanic	Masters	10	1	5 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup>

**Data Collection**

After the participants agreed to participate in the study and submitted informed consent, the data collection process began. After the questionnaires were piloted, they were sent out to participants to gather information on the years of service in education, types of decisions made throughout their workday, stress, and other data. This

questionnaire also had open-ended questions on decision-making and stress experienced by principals and APs caused by the decision-making process. QuestionPro was used to gather these data.

The next stage of data collection was interviewing participants with a semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews include open-ended questions and allow the researcher flexibility in asking interview questions (Merriam, 2009). There were 15 open-ended questions that focused on the research questions. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. The questions in the interview were open-end, to allow the participants to contribute the information needed to convey their thoughts.

After the interviews, member checking occurred. In qualitative research, member checking supports the validity of a study (Candela, 2019). Member checking occurred during the interview to ensure that the participants' responses were recorded accurately. Additionally, interview notes were shared with participants to ensure that there was an alignment between what they said, and the notes that were taken.

### **Data Analysis**

The Framework method (Gale et al., 2013) was used to analyze the data. This framework method incorporated stages that guided the researcher through the process. Gale et al. (2013) incorporated seven stages within the framework method to analyze qualitative studies. The first two stages focused on the transcription and familiarization with the interview and its accurate analysis. The transcription was provided by “Goto meetings”. To secure that the transcripts were accurate, I listened to the recordings and adjusted any “misprinting” that was evident. This process also allowed me to be more familiar with the transcript.

The third stage was coding. I identified codes based on the participants' responses and the meanings they conveyed. The fourth and fifth stage involved "working analytical framework" by grouping the codes that were similar. I used different colored highlighters to help with the segregation of the different groups. Several cycles of coding were administered to identify and compare keywords. The sixth stage involved creating a matrix to map out the coded data. Two matrices were used one for principals and another for AP's. The final stage was interpreting the data to gather the themes of the study.

### **Findings**

The perceptions of decision-making on a school administrators' stress levels were the primary focus of this study. This study's research questions guided the development of the interview questions, and themes emerged from the data collected from the interview questions. The first research question was, "How do principals and APs navigate the decision-making process?" The next research question was, "How do principals and APs manage conflict as a result of the decision-making process?" The last question was, "What do principals and APs do to minimize their stress levels after their decision-making process?"

Several themes emerged from these research questions. The first theme identified was communication. Principals and APs voiced the importance of continuous communication. Collaboration was another theme that surfaced throughout the research. It was an important theme that allowed for all stakeholders to be involved with the purpose of allowing/hearing their input. Problem-solving was the third theme that appeared during the second research question. This process was used when participants discussed how to manage conflict.

## **Theme #1: Communication**

The first theme was communication. This theme was prevalent in all three of the research questions. Communication is important in any company or business, but in education, it is vital since it involves students, teachers, parents, and the community. Principal C stated, “Communication is key; you constantly have to be communicating with everybody. And everybody knows, parents, teachers, students; they are in the loop.” Principals and APs have heavy workloads with all that they must oversee. The principals and APs emphasized that communication was critical in the decision-making process.

Principals and APs voiced the importance of communication with all staff, students, parents, and stakeholders as part of the decision-making process. Principal C stated, “As soon as you find something that is going to happen, or is scheduled to happen, you must find a delivery method of communication.” Making stakeholders aware of decisions made by the state, superintendent, or principal was a priority by most of the participants. “You try to communicate as much as possible with your stakeholders,” mentioned Principal A.

Different forms of communication platforms were used to communicate with all stakeholders. Communication methods included phone calls, emails, mass messaging systems, and a number of online applications. AP A mentioned, “We post events not only on class dojo, but also on Facebook and other social platforms.” The participants voiced that when parents are aware of what is happening in their children’s school, things run smoother.

## **Theme #2: Collaboration**

Collaboration was a theme that related to all three research questions. Anytime decisions are made, there is always a possibility that everyone will not agree with the decision, and conflict arises. The study's participants agreed that the collaboration of all stakeholders could prevent this conflict. This collaboration helps to find a common medium or solution. Collaboration can occur between two people, or a group of people involved in the conflict. AP D suggested, "Getting feedback from your grade level chairs is key; it'll give you a great insight into what is really happening." Collaborative input is critical. Principal E added, "I have different committees in charge of different programs and different systems. We often calibrate, we look at expectations, and then we monitor those plans and decisions."

Collaboration is key when dealing with the financial aspects of any school. Principal D stated, "Well, with financial administration, we need to make sure we reach out to our financial representative. We make decisions based on what we have in our budgets, and then take it from there." The financial administration of schools is of extreme importance to school principals; unfortunately, APs are not always in the loop when it comes to budgets. AP D stated, "My principals are the ones that deal with the financial administration at our campus." AP E stated, "I have limited access to that." The AP participants mentioned that they would like to be exposed to the intricacies of school finances.

There will always be conflict as a result of the decision-making process. This conflict could decrease with the use of collaborative decision-making. The study's

participants emphasized that decision-making sometimes causes conflict, and collaboration should be in place to help manage that conflict. Principal C expressed:

There's always going to be conflict; someone is not always going to agree with you and the decisions being made. So, if you have everybody involved, you know students, teachers, and parents, involved in the decision-making process for a particular situation, everybody is going to be informed at the same time.

The participants mentioned several modes of collaboration. Working together in the decision-making process involved all the stakeholders in the school. The principals relied heavily on their grade level chairs from instructional to behavior issues. The participants found that establishing different committees was a way to work together to solve specific issues plus it was a way to help the administrators manage their heavy load of responsibilities.

### **Theme #3: Problem-Solving**

The third theme is problem-solving. It was found in the first two research questions regarding conflict and decision-making. Solving problems is an all-consuming part of the role of an educational leader. Visone (2018) stated, "Building leaders, such as principals, assistant principals, and deans of students, are frequently beset by situations that are complex, unique, and open-ended" (para.1). In order to resolve these problems, the study participants agreed that a problem-solving process needs to be in place. AP C stated, "Conflict arises because of change. When this happens, we need to find a good solution to the problem."

According to the participants, the problem-solving process involved communication and collaboration. Communication and collaboration are critical

components in an effort to find an amicable solution to the problem. These components help alleviate the possibility of conflict. Principal C declared:

Well, there's always going to be a lot of points of view, especially when it comes down to student learning and the results that you want in the classroom. But it comes down to data; what is the data saying? And again, you back it up with the students' best interests in mind.

#### **Theme #4: Stress Relief**

The fourth theme concentrated on stress relief management. This theme represented Research Question three regarding the reduction of stress. The participants focused on physical and mental breaks, as well as professional development and counseling. They discussed the activities they did to minimize their stress levels after the decision-making process. They took physical and mental breaks to minimize their stress levels. Physical breaks included going for walks, or exercising after work. Mental breaks included taking a deep breath or spending time alone at home, or watching television. Principal A stated, "I love to bake; baking allows me to distress." While AP A mentioned, "During work, I take off 5 minutes and walk around the school."

Professional development was also something that principals and APs believed to be important to help them cope with high levels of stress. They agreed that being able to learn the skills that were needed to go through the decision-making process, helped minimize their stress levels. "Staff development on the decision-making process would reduce a lot of the stress," voiced Principal C. Identifying triggers of stress and coping with it was another professional development mentioned by the participants.



Counseling services were the third strategy that principals and APs mentioned that would help manage conflict and stress. The administrators mentioned that they welcomed strategies and techniques to help manage their stress. They recognized that just like their district used counseling to help their students cope with high levels of stress, they too, would benefit as well. Principal B added, “I am sure they have good techniques and strategies that they can teach others, or they can teach us, that we can then, you know, begin to implement when it comes to conflict and stress management.” Administrators, like students, would benefit from counseling services provided by their school district.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary**

This study contributes to the ever-changing education expectations of principals and APs. Changes in education are as constant as the rising of the sun each morning. Some changes occur slowly while others are fast and furious. Depending on the situation, administrators should adapt and accommodate change. Causes of immediate change can come from crises such as hurricanes, tornadoes, pandemics, or earthquakes. The ability to adapt should occur immediately. Some changes are more gradual, such as strategic planning and curriculum changes. These changes require research and long-range collaboration and communication.

The study’s participants discussed how they navigated the decision-making process by having good communication and collaboration with stakeholders. Principals and APs expressed the importance of communication with all their stakeholders to make them aware of what was happening at the school. With those open lines of

communication, they hoped to inform their public and attempt to avoid confusion or conflict. When conflict arose due to decision-making, Principals and APs agreed that communication and collaboration were important to manage it as well as prevent it.

## **Conclusions**

This study investigated the decision-making process of principals and APs. It also explored how principals and APs managed the conflict and stress that resulted from their decision-making. Decision-making can result in conflict, and that conflict can create high levels of stress for the administrators. Principals and APs should have decision-making processes or systems in place to help minimize conflict. Accepting that conflict and stress are inevitable, no matter how structured the decision-making process is, it is important for school administrators to find ways to release their stress.

## ***Research Questions***

**RQ1. How do principals and assistant principals navigate the decision-making process?** With the array of responsibilities placed on school administrators, being a leader is the tip of the iceberg (Wise, 2015). This study identified that principals and APs had to have different systems in place to communicate and collaborate with stakeholders. It endorsed Beyer and Ruhl-Smith's (1999) findings that administrators should collaborate with others who can assist when looking for the best course of action to benefit the school setting. Communication was important in having an open rapport with students, teachers, parents, and community members. They communicated to all within the school community about decisions that were mandated by the state, or their central office of administration. This collaboration was important to help avoid potential conflict.

The two themes that were evident during the interview of principals and APs were communication and collaboration. These are what the principals and APs used when they navigated the decision-making process. They collaborated with teachers, staff, students, and stakeholders before making important decisions. This made it easier to gain buy-in from all those involved. Once decisions were made and agreed upon, then communicating them to all stakeholders was the key.

**RQ2. How do principals and assistant principals manage conflict as a result of the decision-making process?** Anytime decisions are made, there is always a possibility that some will not agree with the decision, and conflict could arise. Therefore, it behooves education administrators to adapt and fulfill the needs of all in their building (Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz & Pashiardis, 2021). Principals and APs used communication, collaboration, and problem-solving processes to manage conflict as a result of decision-making. As with the first research question, the participants felt that communication and collaboration were important, but it was equally important to have a problem-solving process in place. Since conflict needs to be resolved, having the problem-solving process in place was crucial to overcoming or alleviating it.

Principals and APs managed conflict as a result of the decision-making process by doing three things. First, they focused on communication, collaboration, and problem-solving process. Having good communication in place with all stakeholders may decrease conflict. Collaboration among administrators, school staff, and stakeholders to make decisions and have buy-in is an excellent way to manage and or prevent conflict. Administrators also stated that when conflict arose, having a problem-solving process in place was a good way to manage that conflict and find a resolution. All principals and

APs said that student safety and learning were at the top of their problem-solving priority list.

**RQ3. What do principals and assistant principals do to minimize their stress levels after their decision-making process?** The study found that principals and APs do similar things to reduce stress levels after the decision-making process. The fourth theme in this study concentrated on stress relief and some of the techniques to minimize stress levels. These breaks, physical or mental, helped them disengage from the constant decision-making. Some of the stress reducing activities occurred in the workplace, while others were taken place after working hours at home or at other facilities. Professional development and counseling on decision-making, collaboration, problem-solving, and managing stress were mentioned by principals and APs. Their mental and physical health could suffer due to poorly managed stress. As a principal's job loses its attraction, those knowledgeable about education are voicing their concern about a principal's workload and health (Walker, 2020).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The strengths of this research was the use of the qualitative approach. The interviews with the school administrators gave insight into their lives which gave a realistic approach to this research. This realistic approach allows other administrators to benefit from the findings. Another strength of the study was the charter school setting. This is a unique setting and will contribute to the literature which is dominated by public school settings. Another strength is the relevance to school administrators in the K-12 educational charter school setting. Educational administrators are constantly making decisions that will have an effect on their staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders.

Those decisions create conflict that causes mental and physical stress for the administrators.

The study is limited to a single, unique context, which creates limitations in the possibility the results would be transferable to another context. The study interviewed administrators from only a single charter school. Interviews were administered to principals and APs at a charter school is a limitation because it may not be transferrable to traditional public schools.

### **Implications and Future Recommendations**

The turnover rate for principals is 18% in the United States, and about half of the new principals leave by the end of 3 years (Superville, 2022). The findings of this study could help increase the physical and mental health of principals, therefore, helping the retention of administrators. Having current information focused on administrators' decision-making and stress at K-12 levels could help administrators navigate their own decision-making process. These findings are important for administrators, schools, and policy practices.

Implications for this study include findings that can change the professional development that principals and APs receive. Just like teachers receive professional development based on the grade level they teach and their content, administrators also need support. Administrators' professional development should include decision-making, collaboration, problem-solving, and stress relieving techniques. When administrators are properly trained, similar to teachers, they are able to apply it in their daily duties.

Ongoing counseling similar to what students receive should be available for administrators. School leaders could benefit from the social and emotional learning that

trained district counselors can provide. School policy should be changed to accommodate this support area for their administrators.

Based on the findings, future studies could focus on the effect that decision-making, collaboration, and problem-solving professional development can have on school administrators. It could investigate how an administrator's decision-making and stress levels decrease when receiving decision-making and stress management professional development. Future studies could also be initiated through a quantitative approach. This would allow for more information regarding the frequency of conflict and the effect it has on the administrator. It would also be interesting to replicate this study with public school administrators to see if the findings change.

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## **Decision Making Impact**

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## **Abstract**

When a rural school district hires a new superintendent with a personal agenda, ideologies, and decisions that clash with school leaders, turmoil is on the horizon. Mark Smith, a principal at Seaside high school, is backed into a corner, having to choose from implementing the new superintendent's agenda or continuing to do what has worked for his school. What he decides to do will impact his future as well as the future of the school district.

*Keywords:* decision making, principal leadership, stress,

## **Decision Making Impact**

Seaside is a rural school district with a high dropout rate and a large number of economically disadvantaged students. In addition, 80% of their students are identified as English Language Learners. For the previous 15 years, the Seaside school district had a superintendent, Dr. David Leader, who brought many positive changes. He positively affected the whole community and moved the district toward a specific goal; high school students were graduating with college hours and/or associate degrees. After 35 years of service to his community and 4 years of military duty before that, Dr. Leader was ready for retirement. He felt mental fatigue creeping in as he went about his daily duties. After seeking assistance from a professional counselor and talking to his family, he knew that it was time to step aside.

The end of the school year was fast approaching, and so was the search for a new superintendent. The Seaside school board decided to look far and wide for a replacement. After months of searching, reading resumes, and initial interviews, they finally had three candidates to from which to choose. Following intense deliberations among school board members, the board finally decided on a sole candidate. However, that candidate was offered the position of superintendent on a four to three majority vote by the seven member board of directors.

## **Case Study**

The incoming superintendent, Dr. John Urban, came from a larger school district about 500 miles away. His ideologies were different, and he had a personal agenda, or so it seemed to Mark Smith, the high school principal who had been at Seaside high school for 20 years. When Dr. Urban met with principals, during the first week on the job, to



inform them of their heightened expectations, roles, and responsibilities, Mark Smith was convinced that his new superintendent had a different agenda. He was not at all concerned with high school students graduating with associate degrees or college credits. He wanted to reduce the budget and, at the same time, increase expectations for faculty and boast about how his changes would improve the district.

Finally, Principal Smith had had enough. He asked Dr. Urban, “How is the reduction in budget and increase in expectation going to impact staff morale?” Dr. Urban took a moment as if no one had ever questioned him before. And perhaps they had not. Principal Smith saw him preparing to *draw a line in the sand*. Dr. Urban finally responded, “Make it work because we are all replaceable, Mr. Smith.”

The new superintendent’s decision-making revolved around his agenda, which was to get back to the district where he was an assistant superintendent. He began making immediate changes; he pushed out central office staff to bring in his own people. Principal Smith saw all the changes going on around the district and the over-exposure of the new superintendent on television and social media. He made the decision to go against the wishes of his new boss because that was the only way to keep the positive morale on his campus that he had worked so hard to achieve.

Mr. Smith decided to reduce expenses where he could and continue with the same expectations for his staff that he had in place for years. Being a leader who believed that staff morale could have a positive impact on his students, he made sure that there were minimal changes at his school. While his peers felt and reacted to the superintendent’s pressure, he continued with business as usual. Other principals began to pressure their

staff, just as they had been pressured. They demanded immediate change and extreme results ASAP. As the saying goes, “As pressure is applied at the top, it trickles down.”

The principal began to have teachers coming into his office with concerns about how expectations would change in the school district and at the campus. For the next few hours, his office resembled a revolving door of people bringing concerns to him. As he met with his staff individually, they voiced similar concerns. He assured them that his decisions would always be based on what was best for his students and that any changes would be minimal and gradual. The weight and stress associated with his constant decision-making to put his staff at ease and going against his current supervisor were beginning to take their toll on him mentally and physically. Deep down, he felt that he was doing the right thing.

The following Friday, while at a football game, Mr. Smith had parents walking up to him and asking about how having a new superintendent that was narrowly elected was going to change their school. One parent was concerned about the new superintendent coming from a large district and would not know how a rural district had different needs. The principal assured each parent that he made the decisions at his school and would continue doing what was right for his community. He felt the weight of his school and community on his shoulders as he thought about what to do next. Mr. Smith knew that for every action, good or bad, there was an equal reaction. He began thinking, “What are my options if my actions focused on the best interest of my students are viewed negatively by our superintendent, and he attempts to dismiss me from employment by the district?” At that same time, a meeting was occurring in the superintendent’s office. The board

members reminded him, “Make sure that our agenda is at the forefront of your decision-making; otherwise, we can make you disappear the same way we made you appear.”

Mr. Smith called a staff meeting, and his message was clear, “We must continue doing what is best for our students and our community.” He wanted to believe his message, and he yearned for things at his school to remain the same. He knew it would be up to him to lead the charge, but somehow, through all the changes, word got back to the superintendent about his defiance, and a one-on-one meeting ensued.

The superintendent reminded the principal during that closed-door meeting, “I am the executive leader of this school district, and what I say goes. If you wish to do things your way and make your own decisions, you should consider moving to another district.”

The principal argued by saying, “My students are the reason I make the decisions that I do.” He reminded the superintendent, “You are here by the narrowest of margin, one vote. May I remind you that the community was not thrilled by your selection? Elections are coming up, and the school board that selected you might be on their way out!” Dr. Urban asked him, “Are you threatening me?” Principal Smith exclaimed, “Sir, you can take that however you want!”

### **Teaching Notes**

Principals are expected to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations and community experts, budget analysts, faculty managers, special program administrators, as well as guardians of various legal, contractual and policy mandates and initiatives (Eckman, 2018). Their ability to lead and make decisions for their staff is an essential part of their leadership responsibility. Principals are seen as the ones that make decisions

in their school, but we seldom get to see the policies, concerns, and directives that come from the central administration office. Principal leadership is widely regarded as playing a significant role in school effectiveness and improvement (Zheng et al., 2017). They feel like a middleman who takes orders from the central administration office and is expected to implement them at their campus. As such, their staff will question what is being channeled through their principal, and they do not always have the answers to all the questions being asked.

Principals try their best to juggle the central administrative office directives and school culture while operating a successful campus. The stressors that accompany being a principal and having to make critical decisions or implement directives that are out of their control can be a challenge. There are several challenges and *behind the scenes* work that many do not realize. Constant changes in administrative staff, policies, reforms, evaluation systems, procedures, curricula, programs, proposals, plans, schedules, technology, and other initiatives often impede real improvement (Mahfouz, 2020). These are some issues and job responsibilities that school staff, students, parents, and stakeholders are not always aware of when they see decisions being made by principals. School leaders who impact student outcomes are open to change, and embrace new ideas and challenge the status quo whenever it impedes the school's mission (Busch et al., 2009).

Acting as the middleman between the central administration office and the school they lead; principals are also responsible for unforeseen issues and concerns. Student safety is at the forefront of the biggest concerns at a school. School shootings and the pandemic are at the top of the list. Before the pandemic, school shootings were just one

thing that kept principals up at night. Attempting to juggle their responsibilities and thinking of ways to keep their school safe by having measures in place has always been a concern. When the COVID-19 pandemic came out of nowhere, it wrenched everything principals believed about teaching. The issues faced were unlike anything that school systems had seen before. As if holding high expectations for staff performance, communicating instructional goals, developing school goals, and systematically observing teachers' instructional methods (Provost et al., 2010) were not enough, new job responsibilities immersed. When schools temporarily stopped in-person attendance, most were forced into an online environment or paper packet-driven instruction (Tran et al., 2020). Leaders had to make sure that every child had electronic devices, connectivity, or student home learning packets. Principals saw themselves as individuals continuing to learn and grow in their role, while at the same time supporting others' growth as well (Sterrett & Richardson, 2020). They needed to know the digital platforms available for remote learning and provide professional development for their teachers. And on top of all this, they needed to be the captain that steered their ship in the right direction without any hesitation.

As leaders, we all respond differently to the stressors that accompany our daily decisions. Principals' responses could also be different according to the characteristics of the schools they serve (Mitani, 2018). Their response or lack thereof will often dictate the severity of the stress that is accumulating. Different levels can range from mild to chronic. When we think about stress, we can think of it like a balloon; the more stress a person has, the more air is inside the balloon. Once the balloon is filled to capacity, there is no more room to fit any more air. When the balloon runs out of space, two things can

happen; it can suddenly pop, or when it makes contact with a sharp object, it can explode. Being able to release some of the air, or in this case, stress is one way for that balloon to avoid bursting. A well-balanced principal never allows stress to accumulate because he or she is always finding a way to release and decrease their stress level. Some of them have things they like to do to release stress, but others do not make the time or effort to unwind and relax. That inability to release stress allows for buildup and can affect a person physically and mentally. Health care specialists are becoming increasingly concerned about chronic stress because it has been associated with a variety of health problems, including muscle tension and pain, memory loss, suppression of the immune system, and even damage to the heart and other organs (Boylard, 2011).

### **Discussion Questions**

- What are the reasons that a school district would have to search for a new superintendent “out-of-district” instead of promoting from within?
- Should the school board have intervened to stop all of the changes that the new superintendent was implementing? Why or why not?
- If Dr. Urban was trying to return to his former district, why was he bringing in his own people to Seaside?
- What options does an administrator who is experiencing conflict have? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these options?

### **Class Discussions**

- Divide the class into groups of three and discuss the different ways that Mr. Smith could have approached the situation. Explain why that would have been a better option.

- Split the class into two groups, one labeled pros, and the other cons. One group will provide the pros of giving principals autonomy in leading their school how they see fit. The other group will give the cons of giving a principal autonomy to lead their school.
- Give the students 10 minutes to write about who they think is the villain in the case narrative and why? Then, they will present and defend their position to their peers.

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