CHAPTER ONE

Educational Leadership in a Culture of Stress

Figure 1.1 Principals, superintendents, and other school leaders present a positive view to the public, but all of them work in situations that place great demands on their professional and personal priorities.

> *It's not that the job takes time . . . it's that it takes time doing things you don't want to be doing: state reports and things. We all want to give time to kids, but too much time is spent away from the kids.*
>
> John Young, *Chicago Tribune,* November 9, 2003

STRESS AND THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

With the daunting projection of 2.2 million teachers needed in the next decade, policymakers and the media have focused on our country's future need for qualified teachers; however, an equally important issue that must be addressed is that of school leadership (Educational Research Service, 1998; Keithwood & Prestine, 2002; Kochan, Riehl, & Bredeson, 2002; Lugg, Bulkey, Firestone, & Garner, 2002; Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002; Spillane & Louis, 2002).

While the debate continues about a current versus a pending shortage of principals (Educational Research Service, 1998; NAESP, 1990; Peterson & Kelley, 2001; Steinberg, 2000; Stricherz, 2001), it is obvious that there is growing concern that time and stress management problems for principals have increased to the point that many qualified individuals do not want to become school leaders. Facing "numerous evenings and weekends at schools, watching extracurricular activities and attending meetings . . . the long hours, the difficulty of meeting underfunded mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act," principals keep retiring on schedule, many schools are left without principals, and school systems are having difficulty replacing "a graying corps of principals at a time when the pressure to raise test scores and other new demands have made an already difficult job an increasingly thankless one" (Steinberg, 2000).

Ferrandino (2001) cites a plethora of reasons for the shortage of new principals: inadequate compensation, job-related stress, and time commitment issues. Of major concern also is the tremendous pressure on principals to meet state-mandated standards, with accountability pressures continuing to increase as a result of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB). States are required to create strong standards for what every student should know and learn in grades 3–8, with NCLB further requiring

school districts to close the achievement gap between students and improve school safety, character education, and teacher preparation. Thus the principal's role now requires instructional leadership, community leadership, and systems management to ensure the success of all students (Ferrandino, 2001; Furman & Starratt, 2002; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Murphy & Louis, 1999; Peterson & Kelley, 2001; Rowan, 1995; Wallace, 1996).

One characteristic evident in high-performing schools is a dedicated and dynamic principal. Strong leadership is essential for effective school reform (Goldring & Rallis, 1993; Murphy, 2002a, 2002b; Murphy & Louis, 1999; Wallace, 1996). That means we must address the factors causing qualified individuals to turn away from the principalship. In their report *Preparing a New Breed of School Principals: It's Time for Action*, Bottoms and O'Neill (2001) have started the "battle cry" to change the school environment, which today can easily be labeled a culture of stress.

STRESS AND CENTRAL OFFICE PERSONNEL

The culture of stress is not limited to the principal in individual school buildings. Often the entire school system can be a culture of stress, and sometimes the stress starts at the central office level. Superintendents, including associate and assistant superintendents, directors, and supervisors, all work in situations that place great demands on their professional and personal priorities. As with principals, superintendents and central office personnel do well in presenting a positive view to the public, and, in fact, most are positive about what they are trying to accomplish. However, in personnel meetings and in private meetings, often the anger, frustration, and related stress can become obvious.

In research presented at the annual meeting of the University Council for Education Administration, Richardson (1999) reported that the superintendents she studied identified the following as their major sources of stress: relationship with the school board, heavy workload demands, public demands and politics, state and federal mandates, and personnel issues. Richardson further elaborated that these major sources of stress have "significant impact on superintendents' personal and professional lives and engender a range of negative feelings" (p. 14), including feeling isolated and, often, powerless.

As with principals, stress has an impact on whether superintendents remain in their jobs. In a 2001 study conducted with over 250 superintendents in Texas, Lowery et al. reported that job expectations have become unrealistic and that educators are less interested in the top role. While there are positive reasons for becoming and remaining a superintendent, negative factors include politics, high demands, and stress (Lowery, Harris, Hopson, & Marshall, 2001). From the abundant literature and from direct observations, we can therefore conclude that although responsibilities and demands may vary from the central office to the individual school level, superintendents, associate and assistant superintendents, directors, and supervisors all experience high levels of stress, much as we find with principals and assistant principals.

LIFE EVENTS AND WORKPLACE STRESS

Personal Stressors

Traditionally, students bring distractions and stressors from outside the classroom setting ("life events") with them to school every day. Principals also have to deal with life event stressors and "social baggage" that teachers bring to school. Principals cannot and should not be required to deal with family problems, street life, or community problems, but often the principal—especially the elementary principal—has to serve in multiple roles, from nurse to counselor.

Research Note: Life Events and Stress

One study of stressful life events focused on events that occurred to more than half the students in each school studied. The researchers identified three life events that were present in the top six for every school: (1) death of a close friend or relative, (2) money problems experienced by the family, and (3) change in relationships with "people you know" (Plunkett, Radmacher, & Moll-Phanara, 2000). When students are stressed and upset, their behavior usually deteriorates, with teacher and principal stress levels increasing proportionally. Principals also have to deal with the life event stressors that teachers bring to school.

The principal's personal stressors are also at work during the day: car accident, illness of a family member, divorce, debt, trouble with in-laws, changes in living conditions, financial situations,

death of a loved one. Even though personal stressors were not created in school, each stressor still may affect a principal's overall performance.

Non-Instructional Responsibilities

Handling discipline problems; dealing with gangs and school violence; completing excessive paperwork; attending too many meetings in and away from school; and implementing constantly changing federal, state, and local mandates are viewed as detriments to instructional leadership by most school principals. Also on this list: dealing with irate parents and trying to survive in a high-stakes testing environment. These are managerial tasks, but when they occupy most of the time the principal needs to spend on instructional leadership, they can and do trigger stress.

Other stressors come from feeling harassed by superiors, from fielding too many complaints from teachers about additional assignments or lack of support, or from fears of increasing teacher absenteeism and a dwindling pool of capable substitutes. Each of these stressors not only affects the principal's health but can also flow negatively toward faculty, staff, and even students.

Research Note: Role Uncertainty

High levels of anxiety may be created by increased demands or a greater degree of role uncertainty. A principal's ability to make decisions may be impaired when ability to concentrate is reduced. Principals may experience a feeling of panic or a sharp loss of confidence in leadership ability. With prolonged exposure to the anxiety of role uncertainty, principals may reach an exhaustion threshold, commonly described as feeling "drained."

Finding and Keeping Qualified Teachers

Many principals work 10–15 hours per day during the summer trying to find teachers to fill open positions. Still, many schools in the United States start September with vacant positions.

Principals are stressed when teachers are stressed. Most new teachers enter the ranks with enthusiasm, but more than 20%

of them leave the profession within the first three years, with predictions showing that 50% will leave after five years and 80% after ten years (Boreen & Niday, 2000; Gold, Thornton, & Metules, 2001; Queen, 2002; Streisand & Tote, 1998). It is also our experience that a much greater number of today's teacher education graduates awarded teaching licensure or credentials do not go into teaching. Many teachers are lured by businesses and industries promising higher salaries and better benefits, a healthier work environment, and lower levels of job stress. This phenomenon, in combination with the demographic of more than one half of practicing teachers reaching retirement age within the next five to ten years, means that schools are experiencing growing teacher shortages at just about every level and in every subject area.

Principals who accept nonqualified teachers—those who are changing careers or rebounding from corporate and government downsizing—often find stress levels increasing once those teachers reach the classroom and discover the stigma that "anybody can teach" is a false and frightening claim. Unprepared to teach specific content areas, or lacking basic teaching skills, many of these recruits may not be willing to work through the early and largely overwhelming "hands-on" induction and training programs necessary to get them through their first year in the classroom (Boreen & Niday, 2000; Gold, Thornton, & Metules, 2001; Queen, 2002; Streisand & Tote, 1998).

School Reform

Always complicating workplace stress is the assumption of school reformers that teachers, principals, and central office personnel are the problem and the reason for mediocre school performance. Teacher and principal "bashing," "teacher-proof" instructional reforms, and mandatory reports of "annual yearly progress" are all signs that the wrongs of education and even society are being attributed to incompetent, inconsiderate, and self-serving teachers, principals, and administrators (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Queen, 2002). That is truly a culture of stress.

Research Note: Finding and Keeping Qualified Teachers

According to the 2003 Kappan Gallup Poll, the public believes that getting (75%) and keeping (87%) good teachers are both problems for the schools. The researchers compared these findings to 1969 when respondents rated getting (52%) and keeping (42%) good teachers as problems. In a related question, 45% of parents with children in schools gave the local schools where their children attended a grade of C or lower, compared to 55% of individuals without children. A large percentage (70%) of the public who responded to the survey knew "from a fair amount to nothing at all" about the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. This is a stressful point for principals in that it is becoming more difficult to get and keep good teachers, and it will become even a greater problem because NCLB requires that every classroom be staffed with a teacher who is certified or licensed by the 2005–2006 school year.

To learn more about the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, visit www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml.

To learn more about teacher training, visit The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education at www.ncate.org.

STRESS AND THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

What happens in a culture of stress? A *culture* may be defined as a pattern of beliefs, values, and practices, shared by a group or organization. Culture basically defines how things are done. *Stress*, clinically defined, is the sum of the biological reactions to any adverse stimulus, mental or emotional, internal or external, that tends to disturb the organism's balance or homeostasis. And leadership *burnout*, whether it affects principals, superintendents, or other leaders, can be viewed as a state of chronic stress—physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from an inability to cope effectively with the daily stresses of leadership over an extended period of time. Generally, people under stress can be irritable, anxious, angry, or sad, but chronic stress may lead to immune responses that cause severe problems throughout the body.

Research Note: Stress and Your Health

The immune system's connection to bodily systems results in a significant correlation between stress and health, with negative stress linked to psychological, cardiovascular, respiratory, and physical trauma. Psychological and somatic complaints by principals include fatigue and weakness, blurred vision, irritability, sensitivity to weather, dizziness, malaise, and depression. Dysfunctional cardiovascular systems may cause palpitations, hypertension, arteriosclerosis, and coronary artery disease. Stress on the musculoskeletal system can cause back difficulties, cervical tension, and headaches. Respiratory system dysfunctions include repeated upper respiratory infections, bronchial asthma, and hyperventilation. Lastly, physical trauma may include lacerations, bruises, head injuries, seizures, and deafness.

The Immune Response

When it works correctly, the immune system controls our defenses against infectious disease by attacking foreign substances that are not naturally part of the body. Not confined to one organ or one site in the body, the immune system is everywhere, providing an assortment of specialized cells that occupy the skin, eyes, nostrils, lungs, and the lining of internal organs.

When a part of the body gives a "distress" call, the immune cells charge to the problem area by route of the lymphatic system. Thus acute stress activates the immune system. Many health professionals use the term "distress" to identify stress that is considered negative and to differentiate it from stress that is considered positive. But even positive stress can cause problems if not balanced. Think of the holiday season, a wedding, or the birth of a child. The body really does not know the difference and attempts to return to a state of balance and homeostasis as quickly as possible.

Acute Stress

The body reacts each time it encounters a stressor. There are three basic stages in the stress response:

- Stage 1, Alarm, refers to the body mobilizing for "fight or flight."
- Stage 2, Resistance, in which the individual combats the stressor. Through purposeful action, the individual attempts to reduce the stressor by using coping tactics.
- Stage 3, Exhaustion, in which unrelieved stress can turn into burnout.

The immune response causes changes within the body. Adrenaline starts to flow throughout the body. The heart rate begins to accelerate. An increase in blood pressure and blood clotting occurs. And while these other body functions are speeding up, the digestion system slows down.

Aspects of immune function may be bolstered by bursts of short-term stress. But when stressful situations become chronic, the immune system may falter and health problems may follow.

Research Note: Viral Infections

Studies have shown individuals who tend to be unhappy, measured by psychological testing, were more likely to have recurrent cold sores. Higher levels of antibodies to herpes viruses were common in people under various kinds of stress. High antibodies to herpes indicate a sign of low immune function. Consistent and convincing evidence shows that stress can affect the body's control over herpes virus infections.

Chronic and Prolonged Stress

According to researchers in psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), prolonged stress can lead to a decrease in immune function, and excessive immune system activity can lead to autoimmune disease, whereby immune system antibodies mistakenly identify the body's healthy cells as foreign invaders and attack. Life-threatening organ damage and chronic inflammation can then cause psychological, cardiovascular, respiratory, and physical traumas. Stress even reduces our resistance to bacteria and viruses, making us more susceptible to the common cold.

Psychological and somatic symptoms of chronic stress may include fatigue and weakness, blurred vision, irritability, sensitivity to weather, dizziness, headaches, insomnia, upset stomach,

chronic back pain, skin rash, menstrual problems, malaise, and depression. Autoimmune disorders linked to chronic stress include rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), and type 1 diabetes.

If exhaustion levels are not relieved once acute stress has transformed to chronic stress, burnout follows. Principals who reach the burnout stage usually are completely drained emotionally, physically, behaviorally, mentally, sexually, and spiritually.

Burnout

While all educational leaders are subject to high levels of stress and burnout, we believe that leaders in the principalship, often termed an "undoable position," are major candidates for burnout. With today's abundance of chronic stressors—dealing with teachers over state versus local curriculum standards, controlling inappropriate student behavior, reinforcing the importance of reaching school test goals, calming irate parents, attending numerous meetings, working with budget issues, and writing reports—it does not take long for today's principal to reach the state of exhaustion known as burnout. There are conflicting reports, but something like 50% to 75% of principals view educational leadership at the school level as the most stressful job in education.

To Learn More . . .

Visit www.niaid.nih.gov and www.webdoctor.com to learn more about how the immune system works.

In other words, as an educational leader you can become sick in a school building or district office that is stressful. And all school buildings and central offices are stressful. Therefore, *you have two choices:*

- Use precautions or plan activities to prevent or eliminate the adverse stimuli, or
- If unpreventable, you must counteract the adversity to reach life balance or return to a state of homeostasis.

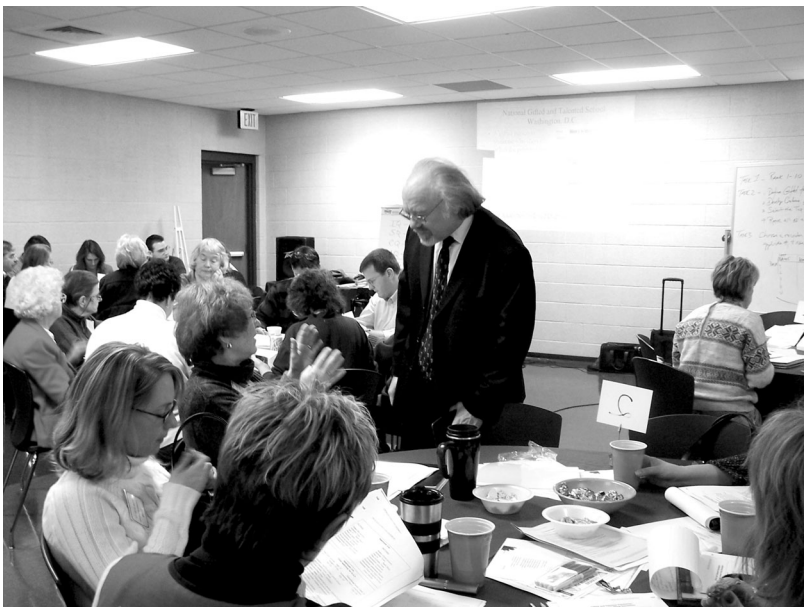
Figure 1.2 Principals can bring stress reduction activities to their school, including group meditation as shown here. Other activities include relaxation training, physical exercise, health and wellness programs, and time management seminars.

REDEFINING THE CULTURE OF STRESS FROM A HEALTHIER PERSPECTIVE

High demands in a changing society will continue to cause great stress for educational leaders. It is imperative that all school leaders begin to examine the effects of the culture of stress so they can begin the process of reclaiming their time, priorities, and good health.

Educational leaders should not work alone when managing the culture of stress in a school or district. From the central office to the school office, each leader can and should specify and clarify prescribed roles and expectations so that subordinates can operate within those roles most effectively. This also means that school

Figure 1.3 Principals and teachers can work together to reduce stress at school and in the classroom. Good strategies for principals include seeking input in goal setting and decision making, providing social support time for faculty and staff, and developing settings that promote superior mentor/mentee relationships.



boards can and should ensure that the workload is appropriate for superintendents.

In the school building, we have found two main strategies whereby principals can help change the culture of stress. The first is by helping to manage reactions to stress, both for themselves and their colleagues and staff. Principals can bring relaxation training, opportunities for physical exercise, health and wellness programs, and time management seminars to their schools, and all of these are activities that *the principal should attend* (see Figure 1.2).

Second, principals need to think about how their administrative actions may be creating unnecessary sources of stress. Setting unrealistic deadlines for the completion of tasks and failing to communicate adequately give rise to avoidable problems. Instead principals should aim to establish clear guidelines and responsibilities;

seek input in goal setting and decision making; provide social support time for faculty and staff; and develop settings that promote superior mentor/mentee relationships. Principals can make great partners and can learn with teachers as they provide these services. Principals and teachers can work together to reduce stress at school and in the classroom (see Figure 1.3).

Systems of social support are essential for managing stress. Even something as simple as sharing problems, exchanging solutions, or engaging in social activity with colleagues can help dissipate feelings of stress and turn them into the feeling that "We are in this *together*."