



# CALM DURING CRISIS: LEADING SASKATCHEWAN SCHOOLS THROUGH COVID-19

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FUNDING PROVIDED BY:



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TEACHERS'  
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186,000  
STUDENTS

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13,500  
SASKATCHEWAN TEACHERS'  
FEDERATION MEMBERS

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27  
REOPENING PLANS

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8  
SAFE SCHOOLS'  
GUIDELINES

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1  
PANDEMIC

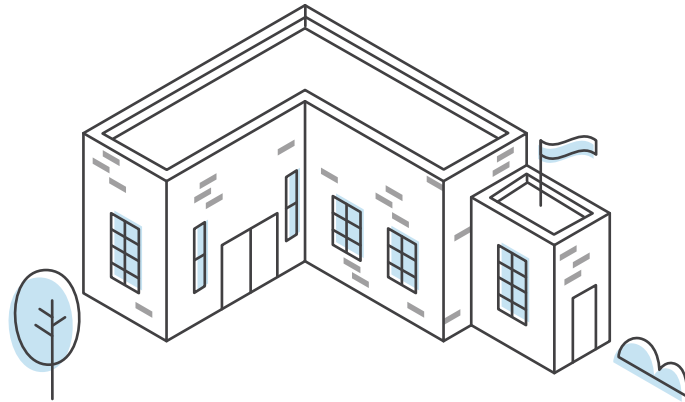


## INTRODUCTION

As Canadian education systems began to reopen schools after months of being closed, principals and vice-principals quickly became the “other first respondents of the pandemic” (Osmond-Johnson, Campbell, and Pollock, 2020). Tasked with operationalizing myriad health and safety guidelines at a moment’s notice in August of 2020 and ensuring the ongoing well-being of staff and students throughout the 2020-21 school year, as Harris (2020) recently noted, “the scale of their effort and the extent of the leadership challenge are colossal and relentless” (p. 2).

Consequently, it is imperative that we examine how we understand effective leadership in the coming months and years and explore how to best support principals as they maneuver within these new understandings. With that aim in mind, the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation engaged in a partnership project with the University of Regina’s Faculty of Education to document the experiences of principals and vice-principals as they led Saskatchewan schools through COVID-19. This report outlines the primary findings of the first year of that project, drawing on data collected from six focus groups conducted with 41 participants from October 2020 to June 2021.

## CONTEXT



Years of research from across Canada has demonstrated that school-based leadership has become increasingly complex (ATA, 2014; 2019; Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2015). Issues of well-being, work-life balance and burnout have all been identified and explored at length. In general, researchers and principals agree – leading schools is often stressful and exhausting work (Stelmach & O’Connor, 2019; Markin & Wang, 2020; OPC, 2017; Walker, 2019). Large-scale research in Ontario, for instance, found that 72.9 percent of surveyed principals do not have enough time to do their work and 80 percent reported often finding themselves in emotionally draining situations (Wang, Pollock & Hauseman, 2018). Similarly, in a survey of over 1,000 school principals in Alberta, 49 percent reported feeling emotionally exhausted just thinking about going to work (Stelmach & O’Connor, 2019).

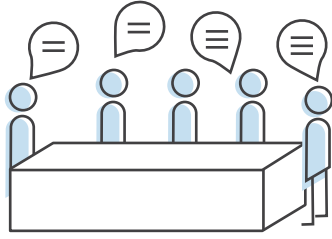
Despite these challenges, however, principals are deeply committed to the students and staff they lead. They endeavour to be instructional leaders and are often conflicted by neo-liberal shifts in principal professionalism “characterized by managerial control, standardization, competition and a focus on assessment” (Stone-Johnson, 2020, p. 3). Relatedly, Stelmach and O’Connor (2019) discuss what they refer to as “moral distress,” where principals feel they are hindered in their ability to “carry out what they know is the right thing to do because of institutional constraints and other factors outside of their control” (p. 1).

Evidently, principals were operating in a world of conflicting dichotomies, even prior to the pandemic. It is arguable, however, that current conditions of COVID-19 are further pushing on these tensions as principals carry the lion’s share of the responsibility for health and safety policies which they often have had little say in creating. Moreover, emboldened to the expectations others often have of them as stoic and steadfast, principals can be susceptible to “surface acting” (Maxwell & Riley, 2017), outwardly displaying optimism and positive attitudes in times of uncertainty or distress to shield others from carrying the burden. This can further contribute to stress, burnout and compassion fatigue (Crawford, 2007).

Consequently, ongoing support for principals is an area of critical importance, particularly in light of the recent mandate from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (see Anton, 2022) that directed school boards across the province to lift all health restrictions, including mask mandates, stripping individual school boards from having autonomy over local outbreaks.

Within this context, this report highlights several significant findings around the tensions principals in Saskatchewan have experienced leading during the pandemic and raises important questions around the sustainability of current understandings of school-based leadership and principal well-being as we continue to navigate schooling in the COVID-19 era and beyond.

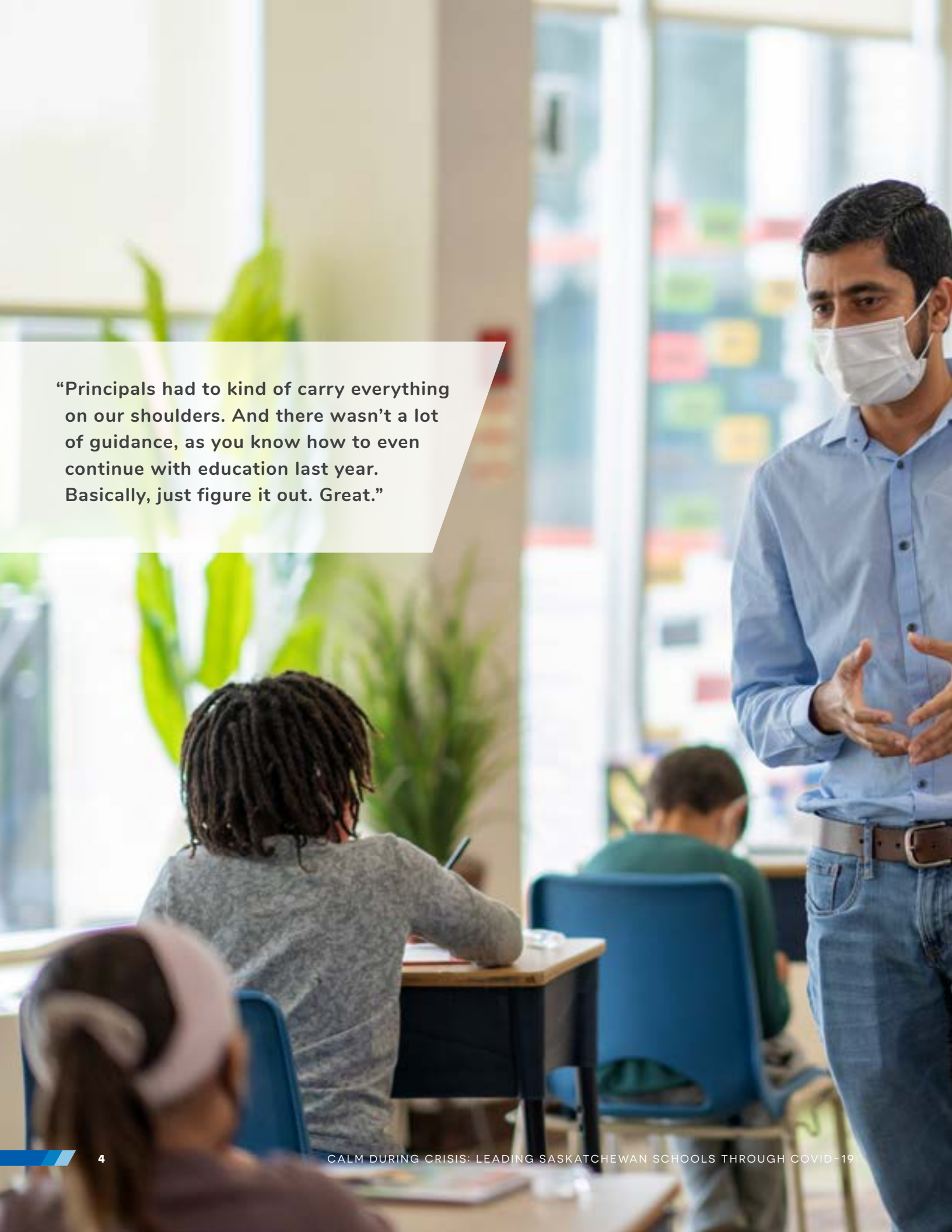




## METHODOLOGY

The project utilized an emergent mixed method design, informed by the voices and needs of Saskatchewan school principals. Data includes six, 60-minute online focus groups with school principals and vice-principals – two general focus groups open to all principals and four targeted forums: one each for women in leadership, new principals (one to three years), principals in the North and urban principals. All groups utilized an open-ended approach to facilitate conversation and sharing amongst the group. Participants received online feedback forms to provide additional commentary and make suggestions for upcoming topics. In total, 41 principals and vice-principals have participated in the project to date.





**“Principals had to kind of carry everything on our shoulders. And there wasn’t a lot of guidance, as you know how to even continue with education last year. Basically, just figure it out. Great.”**





## FINDINGS

### PLUGGING GAPS

Several principals voiced frustrations about the lack of clear guidelines and protocols around maintaining the health and safety of students and staff. This was particularly a strong sentiment in the early months of the 2020-21 school year as leaders grappled with implementing what one participant referred to as “fuzzy policy.”

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*Principals had to kind of carry everything on our shoulders. And there wasn't a lot of guidance, as you know how to even continue with education last year. Basically, just figure it out. Great.*

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A number of participants noted that teachers and parents often received conflicting advice from 811 (the health hotline for people experiencing symptoms of COVID-19), turning to them for guidance. Many voiced concerns regarding their ability to confidently deal with such situations, noting that they were “not a health expert.”

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*I don't create healthcare policy. I do my best to follow it but it's not my role to create it. I'm finding, more and more we're being asked to do that, and I'm uncomfortable with that.*

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As the year progressed, those who dealt with early outbreaks demonstrated more confidence

in managing such situations. For others, whose school had not yet had an outbreak, as the months progressed, their anxiety continued to grow. The anticipation of the unknown was exacerbated for those who were new to their roles as school leaders who were additionally worried about the impressions they were making with teachers and the wider school community.

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I don't necessarily have the confidence to be the leader to pull a school through a pandemic, because I'm only in my second year. So, sometimes, with the protocols and all the changes, I worry that my staff is thinking she doesn't have a clue what she's doing. Which is kind of true, I didn't really have a clue what I was doing. Right?

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Overall, enforcing public health protocols and dealing with the constantly changing and mixed messaging coming from the health authority and school divisions added an enormous volume of work to the daily life of almost every principal in this study. Some commented that their whole day was consumed simply trying to keep the school afloat. Many felt ill-equipped to lead the school through a public-health crisis. As outlined further below, attempting to “be the calm” and “stop the boil” took an immense toll on their personal health and well-being.

## PUTTING OUT FIRES

Principals discussed the challenge of being “in crisis management all the time.” For a number of participants this necessitated more of a managerial and administrative approach that sometimes conflicted with their desire to be collaborative and instructional leaders.

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It's just the year of disappointments, 2020. I'm just trying to wrap my head around that and move on. So, this is not the year I'm going to be the great collaborative leader. This is the year that I'm going to just try and stay ahead of all the protocols. That's it.

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A number specifically noted that they did not visit classrooms and provide pedagogical guidance to teachers in the same manner as they did pre-pandemic.

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I love to get in and team teach with my staff and get into classrooms and mix and mingle and jump in and help when I can, and I'm just finding myself having to be cautious with trying to respect cohort lines and respect those bubbles.

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In some cases, this was the result of the additional time required to deal with new tasks such as monitoring isolation rooms, coordinating communications to parents, and attending to the logistics of contact-tracing and remote learning when there was an outbreak. This was particularly challenging for some new principals.

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I pictured myself in classrooms all the time supporting teachers and just being very present. But that definitely hasn't happened.... I don't even have time.... Because I'm too busy doing other things.

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Others expressed hesitation about putting too much pressure on teachers around instruction given the health concerns raised by staff members who were afraid of contracting the virus and experiencing high anxiety about having another person in their room.

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I don't want to be the spreader in the building. I don't want to be the one that's been in every classroom and has been a close contact in one room.

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Adding to their hesitation was the feeling that teachers were already worried about student achievement and showing signs of stress and burnout themselves.



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There's a huge, huge stress and anxiety level in our building that is just simmering.... And it just feels like we're always trying to stop the boil as administrators and just try to keep everyone level.

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A number of participants did note, however, that the pandemic necessitated a more human approach to leading schools, rooted in a strong ethic of care.

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I am liking the growth I'm seeing in myself as a leader in terms of being a more responsive leader. Rather than trying to do everything, I'm letting my staff help me more, which is good.

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For some this enabled them to foreground well-being and support teachers and students in a more holistic manner. As the end of the school year approached, however, participants began to express concerns about the upcoming school year. They specifically noted the push to address learning gaps and wondered whether the return to "normal" would result in an untenable focus on "catching up," at the expense of student and teacher well-being.

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Here we are, again. End of June and we're planning for August and no discussions about revisioning school. Everything is about how we can return to "normal," and I don't want to do that.

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## PLACING OTHERS FIRST

While it was clear that they were worried about a number of work-related issues, the vast majority of the principals in the study were hesitant to discuss the impact of the pandemic on their own well-being. Rather, when asked what they needed to be better supported, their responses tended to focus on the needs of others - better support for teachers, more hand

sanitizer for classrooms, committed funding for staffing.

While this is a strong demonstration of the commitment they exhibited toward their staff and students, it is important that principals pay attention to their own health and wellness and ensure their needs are being addressed. Like the safety warning on airplanes, school leaders need to put their own oxygen mask on first, before attempting to aid others. Contrary to this, however, the notion of needing to model calm amidst the crisis was evident throughout many of the focus groups.

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I feel a sense of forced positivity.... I have to walk around with a smile on my face and say, Yep, we can do this, everybody's going to come out okay.

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This is the one year that I've had to fake it the most.... Like yeah, we're putting on masks, as though you have this stuff down, on your own, you know.

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Some openly acknowledged that they understood the importance of self-care but struggled with the concept. Work-life balance was elusive for many.

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I would love to answer and say I've done something for myself. But I truly can see that it was very, very hard for me to find time to do anything for myself, because we just tried to keep the school afloat.

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When further probed, some participants did discuss personal well-being strategies. In particular, those who had established networks of principal colleagues spoke at length about the value of those relationships and tended to feel better supported and able to cope with the stresses of the pandemic in a more adaptable manner.

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It really has been leaning on each other in terms of our principals' group... just reaching out and asking questions, whether that's about scheduling to future planning around what the next level this is going to look like or what does release of restrictions look like or on and on and on.

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Likewise, those who did not have strong professional networks lamented not having someone they could bounce ideas off of or be reassured in their approach. Some noted that, as the principal, they served in that capacity for others, but wondered who they could go to for advice.

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I'm an island, I'm the only administrator here. There are days where I go home, and I feel like I'm losing my mind.

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Others went on to share that they struggled to show such vulnerability for fear that they would be perceived as weak or unable to lead confidently. This was particularly evident in the focus groups with new principals and with women in leadership.

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You kind of just keep it all down and you kind of just act like you're managing everything just fine. And there's no weakness here. There's no nothing. I'm strong. I'm good.

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As the year progressed, participants were more open to verbalizing their own needs. Maintaining a positive attitude and "being the calm" had clearly taken a toll and participants were less inclined to demonstrate surface acting. The brave faces from September were visibly exhausted by June and participants were clearly struggling to reconcile what had been an emotional and trying year.

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I'm emotionally exhausted. I don't know how else to say it.... I don't think I've ever felt so tired at the end of the day and I don't think I've ever looked forward to a break so much.

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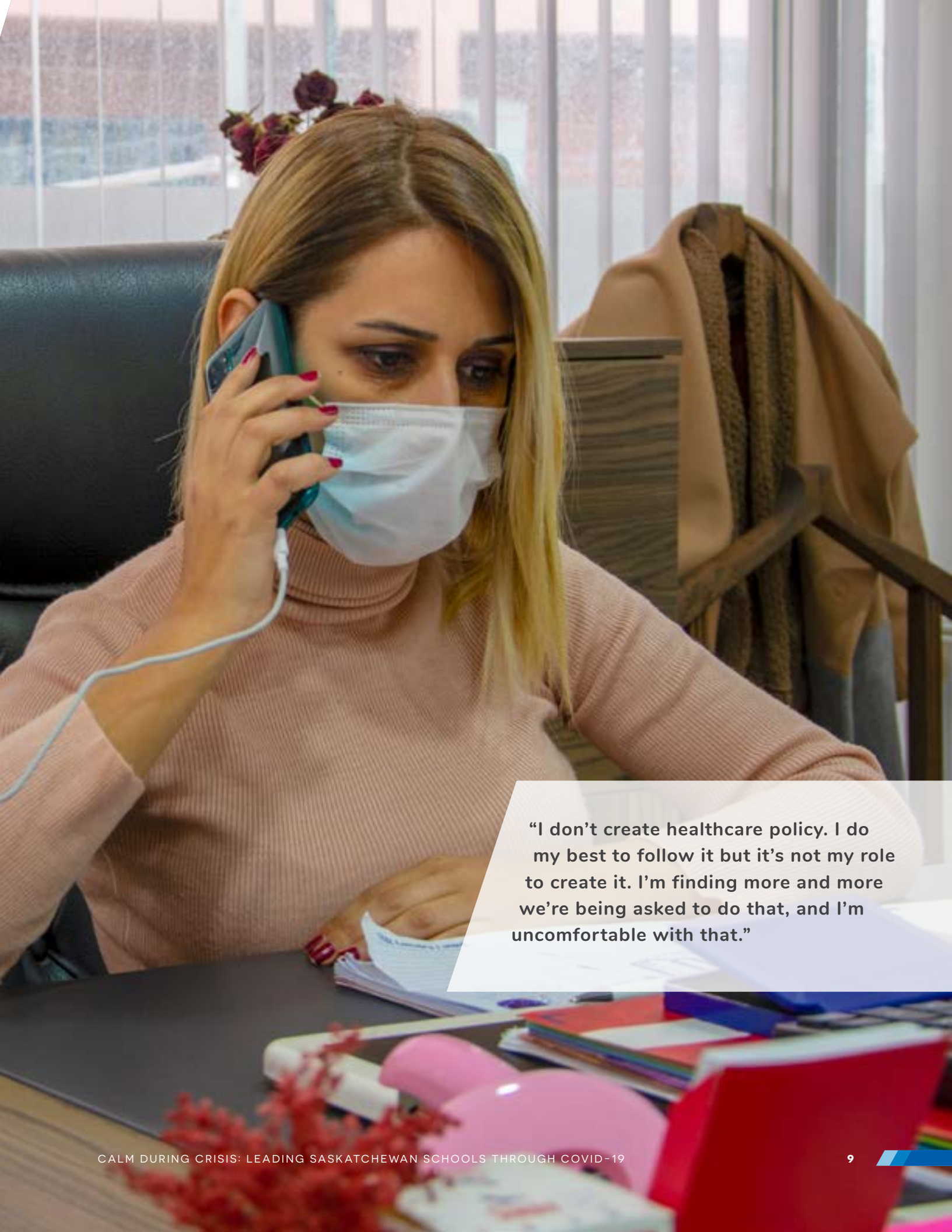
They noted that they had been "given no grace" around their regular workload expectations and were overwhelmed by all the things they had to clue up by year-end.

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The division is not taking anything off our plate, I still have to evaluate my teachers, I still have to fill in learning improvement plans, I still have to expect the learning improvement teams to go on as usual. There's absolutely nothing being taken off our plate.... it just doesn't seem fair, right, or even healthy.

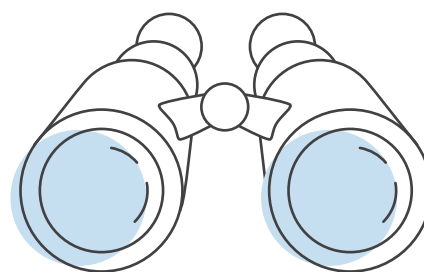
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Their optimism waning, they were already worrying about the upcoming school year and wondering if the summer would bring any sort of reprieve.



**“I don’t create healthcare policy. I do my best to follow it but it’s not my role to create it. I’m finding more and more we’re being asked to do that, and I’m uncomfortable with that.”**





## IMPORTANT INSIGHTS AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

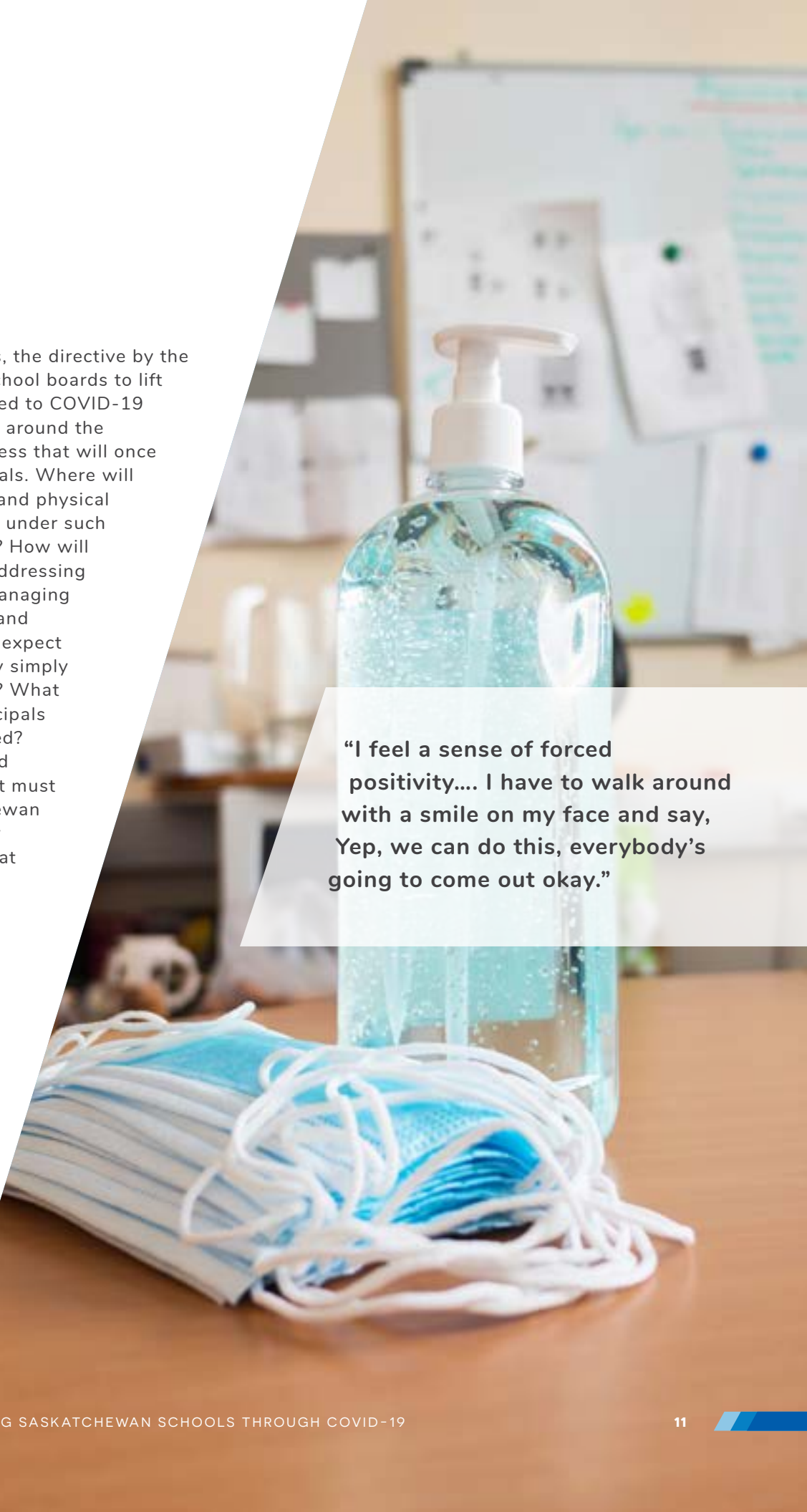
It was clear from this study that principals across Saskatchewan have experienced a roller coaster of emotions as they grappled with leading during the pandemic. Overall, old tensions around workload intensification, burnout, and professional expectations were being felt in new and more profound ways. For the most part, participants attempted to handle the ebb and flow of the constant churn of change and were largely successful in adapting for the short term. Longer term, however, the findings of this study raise concerns around school leaders' ability to continue to absorb the increased stress that accompanies leading schools during the pandemic.

Despite opening comments that “things are going better than expected” and “we are doing pretty good, all things considered,” as discussions continued, participants in every focus group eventually revealed significant concerns around mounting pressures and ongoing struggles. This was particularly evident in the focus groups that took place later in the spring and into June, where expressions of exhaustion, burnout, and fatigue were commonplace. It was clear that participants were beyond the point of surface acting and were eager to give voice to the sentiments they were reluctant to openly share with their staff or senior division leadership.

The seeming paucity of access to ongoing and targeted support for principals is also troubling, particularly in light of their hesitance to ask for assistance for themselves. In this manner, the notion of the stoic and unwavering school leader must be problematized. Rather, leaders must feel confident in demonstrating vulnerability, advocating for their own needs in addition to the needs of others. This proved to be particularly difficult for new principals and some of the female principals who participated in this study.

Further contributing to the challenges principals faced during the pandemic was the increased workload associated with managing ‘fuzzy’ COVID protocols. Participants consistently voiced concerns about their ability to confidently lead schools through the pandemic amidst often conflicting health information. For the most part, participants did not perceive this to be a part of their role, nor did they feel they were the most well-suited to answer the daily barrage of health-related questions they received from parents and staff alike. Navigating public health risks sometimes overshadowed instructional leadership, causing a misalignment for some participants with their preferred manner of leading. Stelmach and O'Connor’s notion of ‘moral distress’ permeated many of the focus groups.

Considering these findings, the directive by the Ministry of Education to school boards to lift all health restrictions related to COVID-19 raises significant concerns around the workload and resulting stress that will once again be placed on principals. Where will principals find the mental and physical resolve to continue to lead under such demanding circumstances? How will they support teachers in addressing learning gaps while still managing nebulous issues of health and safety? How much can we expect from principals before they simply buckle under the pressure? What happens to schools if principals are unwell and unsupported? These are all important and unanswered questions that must be considered if Saskatchewan schools are to successfully navigate the transitions that lie ahead.



**“I feel a sense of forced positivity.... I have to walk around with a smile on my face and say, Yep, we can do this, everybody’s going to come out okay.”**

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