Alberta School Leadership Within the Teaching Profession 2019

SEISMIC SHIFTS AND FAULT LINES: EXPERIENCING THE HIGHS, LOWS AND SHADOWS

The Alberta Teachers' Association

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Preface

This research study reflects the interest of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) in better understanding and documenting the work of school leaders within the teaching profession. It continues an ongoing exploration of how school leaders' roles have been changing, the forces influencing their work, and what kind of supports are needed in order to successfully navigate the opportunities and challenges they face.

Previous ATA research studies have identified and examined many factors influencing the work of Alberta's teacher leaders in school and jurisdiction-level assignments. These factors include increasing focus on change leadership, building and maintaining external relationships, changing approaches to instructional leadership, feelings of being "trapped in the middle," and decreasing family and personal time due to work intensification and role complexity. While reinforcing findings from earlier scholarship on the principalship, this 2019 research fosters new knowledge on the increasingly complex work of Alberta's school leaders and member teachers with jurisdiction-level assignments, and documents essential research questions, topics and issues to be investigated in support of school leadership in Alberta.

The findings highlight growing seismic shifts and clear fault lines, and in doing so bring to light the impact of growing challenges such as moral distress where school leaders feel constrained in their ability to do what they know is the right thing to do because of factors outside of their control. The data make clear school leaders' interest in maintaining a unified profession, with nine out of ten Alberta school leaders strongly believing that their ability to fulfill a leadership role is supported and enhanced by being a member of the same professional organization (ATA) as the classroom teachers with whom they work on a daily basis. School leadership in the teaching profession, as experienced in Alberta, is not to be taken for granted, as past (and potentially future) governments have threatened to turn principals from collaborative school leaders (principal teachers) toward a narrow and limiting management/labour paradigm.

I want to recognize those who contributed to this important monograph. The research activity was undertaken and coordinated by Philip McRae (associate coordinator, research with the ATA), and conducted by lead researcher Bonnie Stelmach (professor, University of Alberta) with Barbara O'Connor (doctoral candidate, University of Alberta). This research study was enhanced by review and advice from executive staff colleagues Konni deGoeij, Lisa Everitt, Jeff Johnson and Fred Kreiner, and by Sandra Bit, Joan Steinbrenner and the ATA Document Production staff in preparation of the final report for publication. The collective attention, design, support and analysis provided by all these individuals is greatly appreciated.

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Finally, I want to acknowledge the ATA's Council for School Leadership and the almost one thousand school leaders from across the province who completed the survey and/or attended the regional focus groups. This Association research activity highlights the very clear and strong voices of school leadership in the teaching profession and will be mobilized provincially and nationally to advance the work of Alberta's school leaders within the profession.

Dennis Theobald
Executive Secretary

Principal Investigator Acknowledgements

To the Alberta school leaders who contributed to this study through the web-based survey and/or focus groups: my heartfelt thank you. Now having a window into your professional worlds through these data, I have renewed and newfound appreciation for and understanding of what it meant for you to give time and energy to a process you did not initiate. You are accustomed to responding to others' requests, I have learned, but this one you surely did not have to. I am sincerely grateful for your thoughtfulness in providing responses and written comments on the survey, and for the authentic and engaging manner in which you shared your experiences and knowledge. As an educational researcher, I know that it is the participants who breathe life into a research inquiry. You give this text a body.

My thanks also to Barbara O'Connor, a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Policy Studies, who provided support for this research of inestimable value. I was inspired by how immediately passionate you were about a project you were "thrown" into, and how readily you participated in data collection. As a teacher yourself, the depth of your insights during data collection, analysis and interpretation was a conceptual gift.

Thanks also go out to the Alberta Teachers' Association and, in particular, Phil McRae for expressing confidence in me to conduct this research. Dr McRae coordinated the administration of the web-based survey, a great task that was made seamless and timely, and provided ongoing assistance and insights throughout the study. This research had the guidance of an advisory committee, including Konni deGoeij, Lisa Everitt, Jeff Johnson and Fred Kreiner, whose perspectives and support in moving this research forward contributed to the success of this research.

Bonnie Stelmach
Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta

Highlights and Lowlights: Summary of Key Learnings

In their book, *Teacher Wellbeing: Noticing, Nurturing, Sustaining, and Flourishing in Schools,* Cherkowski and Walker (2018) wrote, "There are light and dark sides of a real life" (p 61). So, too, in research stories, and for this reason, key learnings are summarized as highlights, lowlights and "the shadows," a domain where contradiction and ambiguity reflect the complexity of leaders and the leadership role.

HIGHLIGHTS

School leaders are passionate about and committed to being instructional leaders.

Survey respondents and focus group participants reported that being an instructional leader was the most important part of their role. Most significantly, this is the aspect of their work that brings them joy and satisfaction, and fulfills their sense of purpose and passion. Instructional leadership is where school leaders leave their "heart print" (Cherkowski and Walker 2018, 60).

School leaders philosophically and ethically embrace inclusion as a goal for their schools.

Many examples were provided during the focus group discussions and survey comments about the lengths that school districts, school leaders and teachers go in an attempt to meet all students' needs, even in conditions where financial and human capital are insufficient. Compassion and empathy, even for the most challenging or disheartening situations, were evident.

School leaders appreciate increased supports and resources to prepare them for supporting First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners and families.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC] 2015) called upon educators at all levels to "improve education attainment levels and success rates" and to "[develop] culturally appropriate curricula" (p 2) for Indigenous students. Survey respondents indicated that resources and supports to meet this mandate have improved.

School leaders feel prepared to meet the competencies outlined in the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS).

Survey data and focus group discussions made it clear that the LQS does not cause anxiety or fear among school leaders. If anything, the LQS has reinforced what they believe are the imperatives of school leadership.

School leaders are highly appreciative of the opportunities for professional learning and growth, and crave more pathways for engaging with other school leaders.

School leaders take lifelong professional learning seriously. They benefit from opportunities to learn from and with other school leaders, and express interest in more opportunities for provincial networks, discussion groups and collaboration specifically linking school leaders across jurisdictions.

LOWLIGHTS

Student mental health needs are increasing, and exceeding the type and level of supports that are available to school leaders.

School leaders observe mental health issues affecting more students and at increasingly younger ages, yet they feel ill equipped and underresourced to effectively respond to these students' needs. Significant amounts of teachers' and school leaders' time are invested in trying to address mental health issues. Teachers' and staff members' mental health and wellness is an emerging area of research interest for school leaders (see page 14).

The psychological complexity of classrooms has taken centre stage in school leaders' diversity challenges.

Diversity in classroom composition is not new for Alberta teachers (eg, Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA] 2014b); however, the psychological needs of children are at the forefront of school leaders' concerns. In verbal survey responses and focus groups, behavioural and/or emotional dysregulation, aggression, physical violence and students' mental health needs were the primary challenge. The inclusion policy is exceedingly difficult to implement because resources required to support students with behavioural and/or emotional needs are insufficient or absent, given that teachers and school leaders are also trying to address a range of student exceptionalities (eg, cognitive, linguistic, cultural) that are equally challenging.

School leaders are overworked and emotionally exhausted.

A large proportion of survey respondents report feeling emotionally exhausted when they think about going to their job, and countless written and focus group comments articulated the unmanageability of the job and school leaders' inability to keep up.

Technology has material and emotional impact on students, teachers and school leaders.

It was no surprise that technology continues to impact upon school leaders' workload and, ultimately, their well-being (ATA 2017a). The erasure of time and space boundaries means that school leaders are compelled to address issues emerging outside the physical confines and schedule of school.

Emerging technologies, such as cell phones, social media, e-cigarettes and vaping devices, add to discipline issues. As a consequence of students' digital obsessions, teachers observe the impact in their classroom: students display a lack of sleep and concentration, and they engage in digitally inappropriate behaviour. School leaders face a bottomless e-mail inbox on a daily basis, but moreover, the tools that are intended to relieve their administrative burden often create more work because forms are time-consuming, and multiple systems do not necessarily align with each other.

The Ideal Worker is internalized and normalized.

The Ideal Worker (Kanter 1977) is heralded for sacrificing personal, home and family life for the sake of the job. Although school leaders are concerned about their work–life balance, they are resigned to a frantic pace. Sleep and personal health are sacrificed as work demands invade their evenings and weekends. In focus groups in particular, there was a tone that hinted of apology for complaining about workload, suggesting subconscious complicity in an ideal that leaders intellectually know is not healthy, and yet are emotionally pulled toward.

Parenting is intensifying, and expectations for schools to provide for their children's basic needs are increasing.

While there are many supportive parents, more parents are intensely monitoring their children's lives in ways that are not always constructive, which disrupts the harmony between the school and the home. At the same time, school leaders observe that schools are taking up more parenting roles (eg, providing nutrition, imposing structure, disciplining). This puts pressure on teachers' and school leaders' instructional role.

School leaders live in a constant state of diversion and overwhelm.

Abrupt interruptions, emergent crises, administrative requirements and spontaneous demands from a wide range of stakeholders (eg, parents, community organizations, health agencies, police, corporations) make it difficult for school leaders to feel accomplished at anything. Work–life balance is an illusive dream for most school leaders. The job is viewed as "boundless"; school leaders are "busting at the seams." Endless administrative tasks, policies regarding teachers' assignable time, complex classrooms, technology, and district and stakeholder requests account for days that are fractured and extended.

School leaders are "under-living" their professional lives.

In his book *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life,* Brooks (2019) argues that a focus on individualism that reigns over today's society has resulted in a numbing or ignoring of our passions. In a quest to ensure accomplishment in comparison to others, the need to keep up with tasks overburdens school leaders who admit to having little time to focus on being an instructional leader, coach and mentor, which is their true desire.

School leaders are torn between loyalties to the school district and the local needs of their schools, resulting in moral distress.

School leaders appreciate the initiatives and directions of their school district, but at times feel constrained by policies, protocols, funding decisions, and values that are misaligned with the needs of the school and/or their personal leadership philosophy and values. This impedes school leaders from doing what they know to be the right thing in their context. School leaders frequently feel the weight of living in a "dilemmatic space" (Honig 1996) where they are forced to satisfice (no optimal solution can be determined) rather than optimize. The experience of such constraints is known in the literature as *moral distress* (Hamric 2012).

Rural school leaders feel they do not receive sufficient supports from their district to fulfill their leadership role.

Metrocentric and conventional definitions of school tend to be assumed. Provincial and district policy, funding formulas, procedures and leadership supports frequently fail to meet the needs of leaders who work in small or isolated rural schools and often have alternative arrangements (eg, principal of more than one school). Geography can be a challenge, but so, too, can psychological distance within a district when "outlier" schools do not correspond to characteristics of other schools in the district.

THE SHADOWS

School leaders report that their districts understand the impact of technology on workload, and yet technology is a burden.

While survey respondents mostly agreed that their school district understands and responds to the impact of digital technologies on teachers' workload, verbal responses and focus groups suggested that technology was overburdening them. Some leaders successfully established boundaries for technology use, but there was no indication in the data in this study that district-level strategies encouraged or modelled this.

School leaders feel trusted by their school districts but also report that their professional autonomy is in question.

While most survey respondents reported their school districts trust them, there were also a large number of verbal comments and examples shared in focus groups that suggest a perceived need to "toe the line" or put district priorities into action. School leaders have experienced decisions being overturned, requests denied and concerns going unheard if they do not align with district priorities and expectations.

School leaders frequently feel constrained by factors outside of their control and yet report that they are able to do the right thing.

A majority of survey respondents reported to feeling constrained by factors outside of their control daily, weekly and monthly. At the same time, a strong majority agreed on the survey that they are able to do what they know is the right thing to do in their leadership role.

Women encounter more barriers to pursuing school leadership than men, but it is less clear that they find the job itself more challenging.

On the survey, female respondents selected at a higher rate than males all barriers listed to pursuing a school leadership position, except for financial barriers. During focus groups, women talked about juggling a double role of domestic and professional responsibilities, delaying aspirations to focus on children, and being treated disrespectfully. On the other hand, there was negligible difference between male and female responses on survey questions, including those regarding workload, emotional exhaustion or feeling constrained.

Top Trends and Issues Impacting School Leaders

Survey respondents were asked, What constraints do you experience as a school leader, if any, that make you unable to take appropriate action or do what you know to be right?

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF COMMENTS (N=353)*
District expectations (eg, policy requirements, funding and resources, priorities, professional autonomy)	70
Funding (eg, infrastructure, intersectoral coordination)	54
Complex classrooms (eg, mental health, aggression/violence, inclusion)	47
Parents (eg, parenting skills, abuse, disrespect, personal agendas)	43
Other • Nonflourishing teachers (eg, absenteeism, loss of passion, mental health, hyperfocused on procedural fairness) • Workload (eg, administrative creep, complex classrooms, technology and social media, meetings, district priorities • Conflict resolution skills • Nonurban, nontraditional school needs are overshadowed • Teacher shortage in specialty areas	

*Note: Ambiguous comments were not included to avoid overinterpretation; therefore, there is discrepancy from the total number of comments provided.

Top Identified Areas of Research

Survey respondents were asked, What are one or two topics, questions or issues that you believe should be researched in support of school leadership in Alberta?

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF COMMENTS (N=583)*
Emotionally/behaviourally dysregulated students (impact on staff, students)	236
Trauma and mental health (long-term impact; impact on students' learning, teacher wellness; technology impact on mental health)	230
Complex classrooms (diverse learners, refugees, cultural diversity, ELL, FNMI, poverty)	118
Mental health and wellness of teachers, staff	80

Other

- Workload
- Impact of LQS on instructional leadership
- Innovative structures for professional learning across districts
- Development of Catholic school leadership standards
- Small and rural school issues
- Impact of teaching administrators on effectiveness and workload

*Note: Ambiguous comments were not included to avoid overinterpretation; therefore, there is discrepancy from the total number of comments provided.

The Writing of This Report

This report begins with a contextualization of the landscape of school leadership, followed by a description of the methodology and methods, including research purposes, objectives and questions; conceptual framework; data collection and analysis; a description of the survey respondents and focus group participants; and limitations.

Throughout this report the term *school leader* is used to capture principals, vice-principals, assistant and associate principals, central office leaders, and all various positions of leadership (eg, learning coach). The survey itself uses the term *administrator*, which reflects a historical context.

Discussions of what was learned about trends and constraints and their impact upon school leaders are commingled to create a holistic and realistic account. Numeric results are rounded up to the nearest tenth; any discrepancies in totals result from this.

Suggestions for future research, gleaned and inferred from the survey data and transcripts, are listed at the end of each of the findings sections in what is called, "Compelling Questions to Advance the Research Conversation."

This report culminates with a section called "Pathways of Support for School Leaders."

In celebration and acknowledgment of nonbinary colleagues, students and parents, and for the protection of privacy, the pronouns *they*, *their*, and *them* are used in place of *she/her/hers* and *he/him/his*.

Not Waving but Drowning?[1] The Escalation of Demands, Distress and Dilemmas Among School Leaders

Schools serve at the nexus of shifting cultural, political, social and economic forces. Continuing and emerging patterns and trends that affect learners and their families impact upon school leaders and the profession as a whole. School leaders in particular are expected to be responsive, receptive, adaptive and innovative. They must be champions of change, but at the same time create stability and predictability to counter the pace and depth of societal shifting. This inevitably affects the profession.

Given this, there is national concern for the state of affairs among teachers and school leaders, and a keen desire to provide supports to ensure that teaching remains a vibrant and attractive profession. In 2014, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) conducted a survey of 8,000 teachers, principals and other professional staff (eg, teacher-librarians, guidance counsellors) to understand how elements such as class size, assessment, administration, technology and parents were shaping their work and personal lives. From that study, these educators' statements are telling:

> I always feel like I never do enough. Guilt is the biggest problem I face. (Froese-Germain 2014, 38)

> I just can't get it all done. And the stuff I get done isn't up to my personal standard or the school division standard. I want to do better but I just can't. (Ibid, 39)

> I find the most stressful part of this job is that I take home my students' problems; [eg,] if their home life isn't good, I worry about them during the evenings and weekends and wonder what I can do to help more. (Ibid, 45)

There is ample evidence demonstrating that Canadian school leaders feel particularly pressured and compromised in a role that is increasingly complex, fractured and bureaucratized as schools become more diverse (ATA 2014a, 2014b, 2017b; Klocko and Wells 2015; Mitchell, Armstrong and Hands 2017; Oplatka 2019; Pollock 2016, 2017b; Pollock, Wang and Hauseman 2015; Starr and White 2008; Wang, Pollock and Hauseman 2018a, 2018b). The constancy of change, a logical outcome of a continuous improvement paradigm in which educational systems reside today, means that school leaders must navigate around and negotiate with "the new," meanwhile managing "the old" that inevitably lingers in response to change initiatives (Nowak and Vallacher 2019). This aptly describes Alberta's K–12 education context.

Within the last four years alone in Alberta, the Ministry of Education of the previous government undertook provincial curriculum development from K–12, amended the *School Act*[2] to

protect the freedoms of equity-seeking groups (eg, *An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances*),[3] legislated the elimination of fees for instruction and materials, and committed to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action* (TRC 2015). In September 2019, the school principal and superintendency will become certificated roles according to the Professional Practice Standards (Alberta Education 2019b), which were signed to Ministerial Order in February 2018. The Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) (Alberta Education 2019a), specific to principals, assistant principals, associate principals and vice-principals, captures the comprehensive nature of the role and the high expectations to which Alberta's school leaders are held. New for superintendents is the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) (Alberta Education 2019c). The update of the Teaching Quality Standard (TQS) (Alberta Education 2019d) is an additional consideration, given the research on how teacher evaluation systems have the potential to redefine the role of the principal (Neumerski et al 2018). To add to the picture, in April 2019 Albertans elected a new government. Since then, school leaders have been "on watch" to see whether and/or how this new government will redirect or repeal initiatives and statutes that will alter their planning and require new action; school leaders are inevitably at the mercy of funding cycles and legacy-seeking ministries.

Widening the lens, it is clear that concerns regarding school leadership are national and global. In focus groups conducted with 500 principals across Canada, principals reported impacts on their role from sources such as the "almost endless variations in student needs" (ATA 2014b, 10), "diverse family circumstances" (p 10), "stringent accountability measures" (p 11), perceived expectations for "instant, '24/7' communication" (p 11), volatility in the economy, and shifting social and cultural values. Canadian school leaders persist in a state of overwhelm, which raises concerns about recruitment, retention, and leaders' work and career satisfaction.

Similarly, Klocko and Wells's (2015) replication of their quantitative study of over 700 American principals' workload expectations and stressors, first conducted in 2009, found that the key stressors for principals were lack of time to complete their work, increased administrative requirements, failure to keep up with e-mail, and forfeiting of personal time and work–life balance. What is interesting in their study is that in 2009, budget cuts were a primary concern, but in 2012, time scarcity was the key problem.

Oplatka's (2019) recent study of 50 principals in Israel confirmed findings similar to those of Klocko and Wells. Oplatka noted that the lack of time that principals experience results in self-reports of "partial performance" (p 563). Principals admit to satisficing when it comes to task completion; tasks are typically not completed at an optimal level, but rather, time and resource limitations force principals into patterns of hasty work. Further, the increase in multiple, unplanned tasks and abrupt interruptions becomes emotionally overwhelming because principals want to focus on work that "matters," such as engaging with stakeholders, initiating student-focused projects and ensuring that student learning is the centre of it all. And yet, with all that is heaped upon them, the principals in Oplatka's study felt as if they were not doing a great job at anything. Very telling is that it was not the complexity of being a school principal itself that overwhelmed them—they seemed to fully accept

that about the role. Rather, the constant creep of administrative tasks made them feel as though they could not achieve all that was expected of them and, more important, that the overwhelming amounts of administrative requirements diminished their ability to focus on supporting student and teacher learning and growth, which was ultimately what they found rewarding.

Coterminous with the above is an emerging expectation for school leaders to facilitate "global competence development" in students and teachers (Tichnor-Wagner 2019, 2). The concept of global competence requires school leaders to be apprised of world conditions, events, trends and diversity conditions. Global competence requires emotional, social, cultural and cognitive attributes. While it makes sense for school leaders to have both a global and a local lens, it situates them in an infinite web of factors and conditions that ambiguously affect students and teachers, and about many of which they can do little or nothing. Further, in keeping with Eacott's (2011) critique of "adjectival" leadership, the concept of globally competent leadership compels school leaders toward yet another model that promises to capture all that school leaders should be, and presumes (rightly or wrongly) that leadership is an event that can be observed and metrified.

These conditions form the backdrop for this study. The resonance of circumstance across geography suggests that this research is timely and necessary in Alberta and beyond.

Research Purpose, Objectives and Questions

The **purposes** of this study were to

1. gain insights from Alberta school leaders on the nature of their work in the context of continual and extensive change in the education system and society as a whole;

2. understand from the perspective of Alberta school leaders current issues and trends that impact upon the school leaders' role, and how they experience the impacts;

3. identify critical research topics and inquiries for future study based on Alberta school leaders' input regarding what knowledge they feel they need to be excellent leaders; and

4. identify support pathways that will contribute to Alberta school leaders' success in their roles.

With these purposes in mind, the key **objectives** of this study were to

1. provide a provincewide environmental scan of the trends and issues that are sources of vulnerability for Alberta school leaders;

2. document how the issues and trends facing Alberta school leaders are impacting the role and their experience of school leadership;

3. generate a list of topics and inquiries to assist the Alberta Teachers' Association with future planning and coordination of research and professional learning support.

Based on the above, three **research questions** guided this study:

1. What resonances and/or tensions do Alberta school leaders experience in their roles?

2. What factors, conditions and trends do Alberta school leaders identify as impacting their role?

    a. How do the identified factors, conditions and trends affect the way they experience their leadership roles?

2. What research-based knowledge and support pathways do Alberta school leaders believe they need to be successful in their role, given the current environment?

Conceptual Framework—Moral Distress and Dilemmatic Space

An alarming and concerning finding from the Alberta Teachers' Association (2014b) study on the future of the principalship in Canada is that the pressures and demands of the role have a demoralizing effect on school leaders. This has been confirmed by other researchers, who describe school leaders as vulnerable to contexts of multiple and competing demands of stakeholders, public scrutiny generated through accountability mechanisms, the contradictory forces of globalization and individualization, and the intensification of parent involvement with its concomitant threat to professionalism (Biesta 2004; Crozier 2019; Mitchell, Armstrong and Hands 2017; Pollock 2017b; Pollock, Wang and Hauseman 2015). Such conditions lead educators to make statements such as those cited at the beginning of this report from the Canadian Teachers' Federation (Froese-Germain 2014). There are signs that not only stress, but moral *distress* characterizes educators' experiences.

Moral distress has been defined by Hamric (2012) as "a form of distress that occurs when one knows the ethically correct thing to do, but is prevented from acting on that perceived obligation" (p 167). Institutional and other constraints lie between knowing the right thing to do and being able to do it.

Moral distress receives research attention primarily in the health professions (eg, Dodek et al 2019). Although the concept is not given much attention in the educational domain, a study of moral distress among school nurses is an exception. In their study, Powell, Engelke and Swanson surveyed 307 practising school nurses in North Carolina using a revised Moral Distress Scale (MDS-R) (Hamric, Borchers and Epstein 2012) and additional questions that focused on moral dilemmas. Overall, 97.3 per cent of school nurses experienced moral distress. Among 14 sources of moral distress, 6 were related to workload and lack of time. Not having time to provide care to students with chronic illness, for example, was the highest source of moral distress, with 64 per cent of school nurses reporting this experience. Other sources of moral distress were the lack of resources and referral services. As a moral dilemma, lack of time had an effect size of 0.6 when correlated to moral distress, which was the highest among 14 moral dilemmas correlated. Lack of time to provide care because of workload and lack of time to provide care to students with chronic illness both registered effect sizes of 0.58. These findings are significant because moral distress leads to moral dilemmas, and it is in this dilemmatic space that educators reside (Fransson and Grannäs 2013).

The concept of *dilemmatic space* is attributed to Honig (1996). Unlike ethical dilemmas, which occur in situ, and are specific and time bound, Honig sees dilemmatic spaces as the "terrain of [teachers'] existence" (p 259). Dilemmatic spaces are constructions that are ongoing and changeable because they are in flux with social conditions. Dilemmatic space affects all teachers, but it affects all teachers differently. Put simply, dilemmatic space is the reality of a variety of options pitted against a multitude of expectations from groups with different perspectives (eg, teachers, students,

parents), and no one clear or perfect answer. Situations emerge as dilemmatic because of how one interprets the context in which one is situated, and how the elements correspond to or clash with one's professional identity. Values intersect and collide in parent–teacher interactions, policies, discipline strategies, inclusion, digital citizenship, budgeting, facilities planning, risk management, professional learning … values are at play in everything, and school leaders are at the centre of it all.

Because this study was concerned with both the impact of trends on school leaders' experiences and the nature of the impacts, moral distress and dilemmatic space were appropriate lenses through which to explore these survey and focus group data. Importantly, school leadership is viewed as an ethical and moral enterprise (Branson and Gross 2014). Framed by these concepts, the interpretations presented in this report should give pause, and raise questions of the health and sustainability of school leadership in the teaching profession.

Methodology and Methods

The overarching aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the state of affairs in school leadership provincially, and to give some "phenomenological attention" (Schwandt and Gates 2018, 344) to school leaders' experiences. The study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick 2006), a methodology engaging a quantitative data collection phase followed by a qualitative one. A mixed-methods approach considers the unique contributions of quantitative and qualitative data, while addressing inevitable shortcomings of both (Poth 2018). A critical advantage of a sequential explanatory design is that following the quantitative phase with a qualitative one affords an elaboration of the quantitative data. In this study, a web-based survey was followed by focus groups.

WEB-BASED SURVEY

A simple descriptive approach (Mertens 2015) was used to conduct the survey. In this approach, the survey is a one-time event intended to describe a sample of the population at a single point in time. Since this study was an environmental scan of the landscape of school leadership in Alberta, a simple descriptive approach was suitable.

Using a convenience sampling procedure based on teacher convention boards, 2,200 school leaders from publicly funded Alberta schools were invited to complete a web-based survey over a three-week period in March and April 2019. School leaders were defined by Alberta's Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) (Alberta Education 2019a). Accordingly, *principal* included those who served as school principal as defined in the *School Act*, as well as assistant, associate and vice-principals. *School jurisdiction leader* included staff members who are required to hold a teaching certificate to fulfil their leadership functions other than the superintendent or chief deputy superintendent. The 2,200 school leaders who were invited to participate in the survey represented approximately 50 per cent of all school leaders in Alberta's publicly funded schools, according to the last updated records held by the ATA.

The survey employed both four- and five-point Likert scales (eg, strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) and open-ended verbal responses (see Appendix). The response rate was 43 per cent. Among the 954 surveys that were completed, 73 per cent (n=699) were fully completed and 27 per cent (n=255) were partially completed.

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS OF WEB-BASED SURVEY RESPONDENTS

This section provides insight into the characteristics of school leaders who completed the web-based survey. Most respondents were from school districts that attended teachers' convention in Edmonton or Calgary, as illustrated in Figure 1.
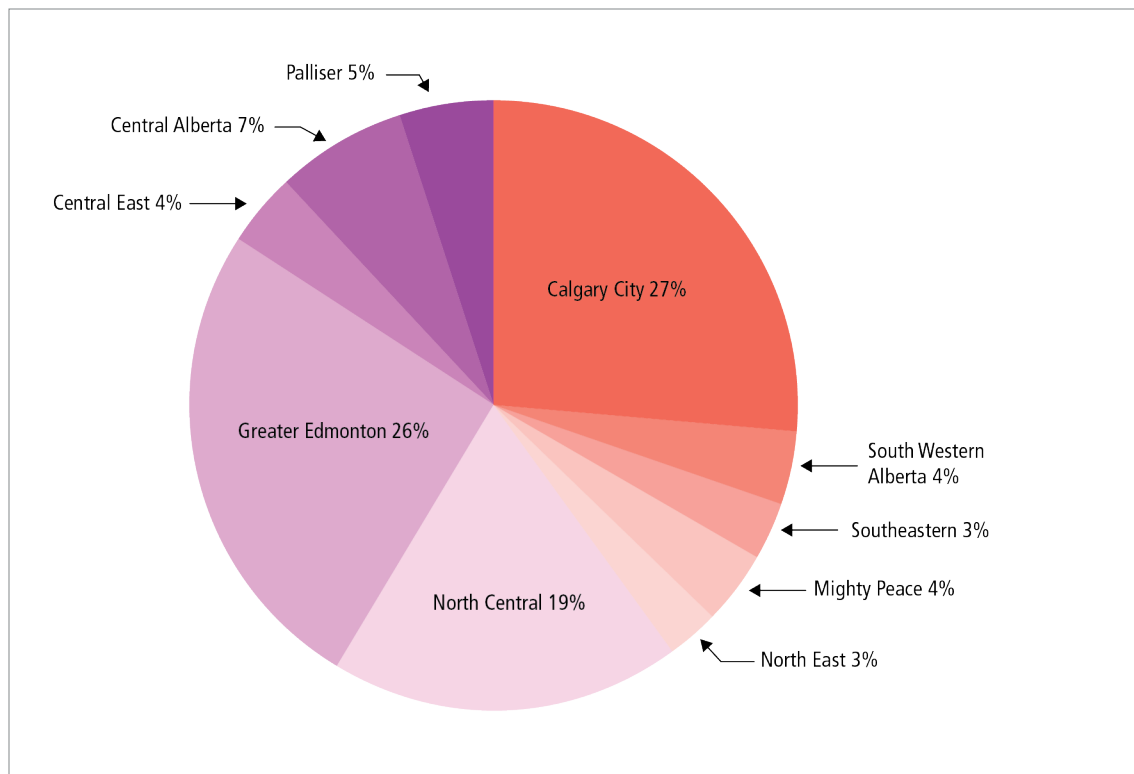
Figure 1. Participant frequency distributed by teachers' convention board

Most respondents were those who had a school leadership role only (49 per cent) (see Figure 2). The next largest group of respondents were those who had both leadership and teaching duties (39 per cent). Central office leaders constituted 6 per cent of the respondents. Six per cent of respondents identified "other" as their role. This group was prompted to describe their role verbally. Examples of leadership roles in this category included department head, classroom leader, learning and instructional coach, curriculum consultant, technology leader, and principal at more than one school.
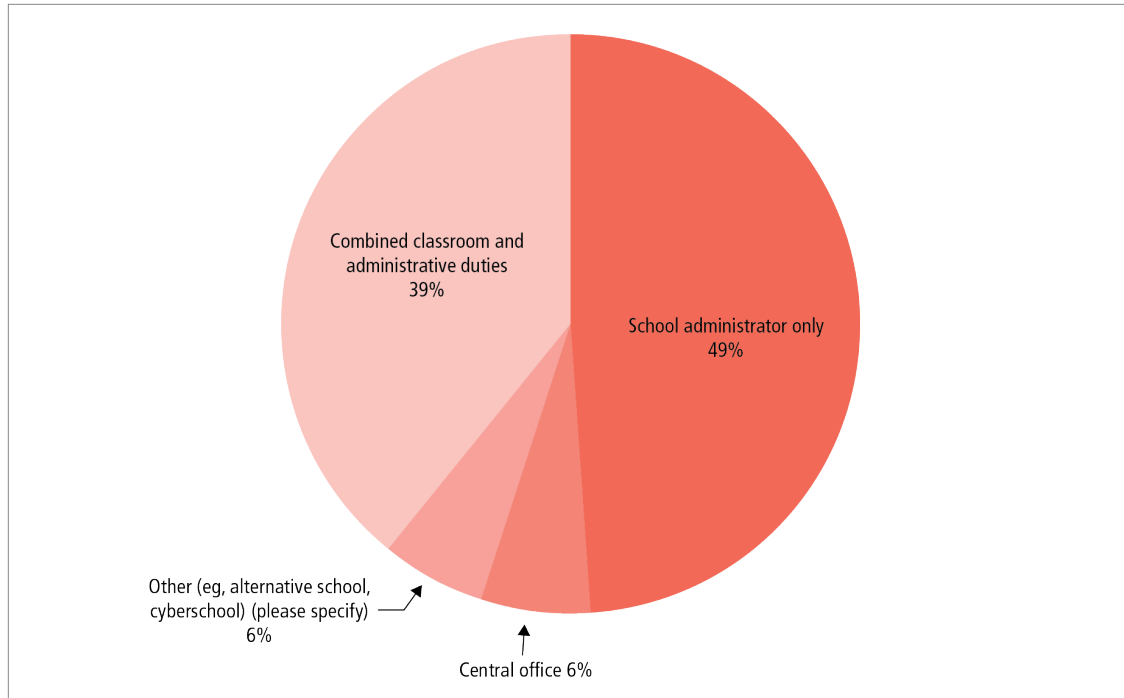
Figure 2. Role identified by survey participants

The response rate for urban and rural school leaders was similar. The number of respondents from urban school contexts was 364, while the number of respondents from rural school contexts was 321. A notable difference among urban and rural respondents was that a larger percentage of rural respondents had classroom duties in addition to their school leadership duties. Fifty-one per cent of rural respondents had classroom duties in addition to school leadership; only 37 per cent reported to having school leadership duties only. By comparison, only 29 per cent of urban school leaders had classroom duties in addition to their school leadership duties; 61 per cent reported to having a school leadership role only (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of urban and rural school leaders with and without classroom duties

SCHOOL CONTEXT	ADMINISTRATION ONLY (%)	COMBINED CLASSROOM AND ADMINISTRATIVE DUTIES (%)
Urban (n=364)	61.4	28.9
Rural (n=321)	37.2	50.6

Many respondents (39 per cent) had over 10 years of experience in formal leadership. Figure 3 represents all categories of experience of respondents.
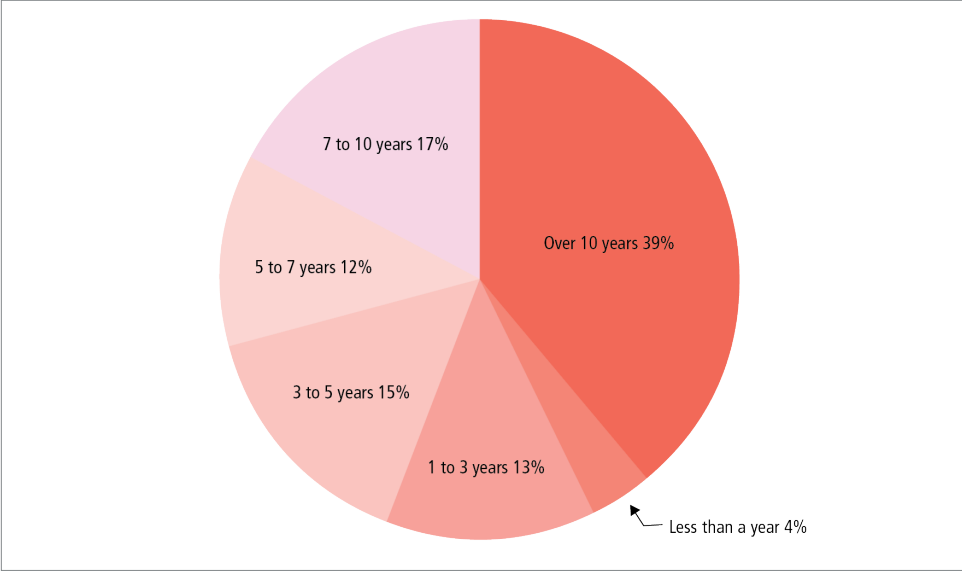
Figure 3. Participant frequency distribution by years in formal school leadership role

More school leaders who self-identified as female completed the survey (58 per cent) compared to school leaders who self-identified as male (38 per cent). Four per cent preferred not to identify, and 0.1 per cent indicated that their category was not listed (See Figure 4).
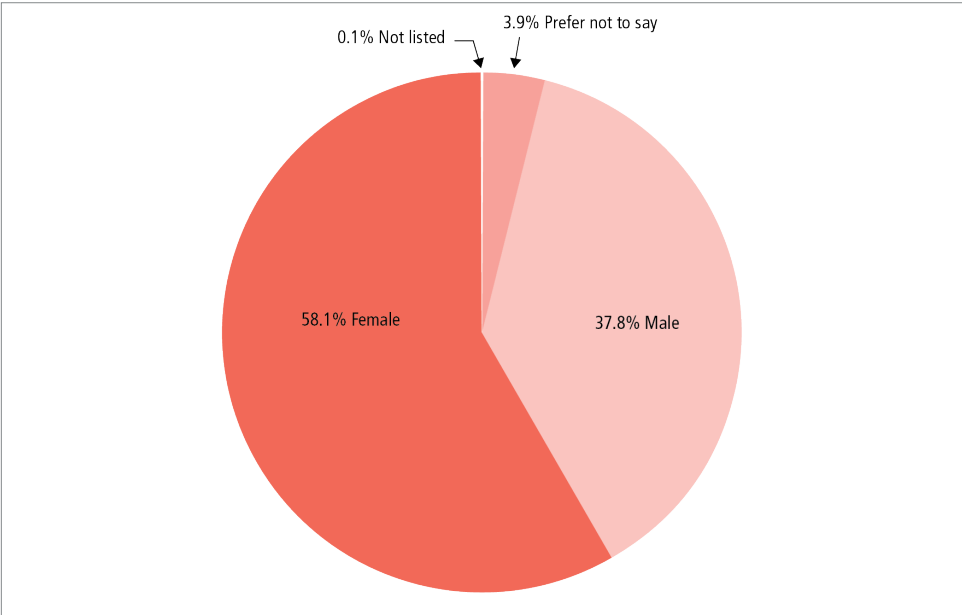
Figure 4: Participant frequency distribution by identity

Almost 80 per cent of respondents were 41 years of age or older. The largest number of respondents came from those between 51 and 55 years of age (25 per cent). Generally, the younger the age group, the fewer the number of respondents. Compared to the 51 to 55 years age bracket, participation by older age groups declined considerably. Table 2 displays participation based on age groups.

Similarly, the highest percentage of responses came from school leaders who had more than 20 years of teaching experience. Forty-three per cent of respondents had more than 24 years of teaching experience. Twenty-four per cent of respondents had 20 to 24 years of teaching experience. The next highest group of respondents was from those with 15 to 19 years of experience. There were no respondents with 1 to 4 years of teaching experience. Overall, 86 per cent of respondents had 15 or more years of experience (see Table 3).

Table 2. Participation frequency distribution by age

VALUE (AGE)	PER CENT	COUNT
25 and younger	0.1	1
26–30	0.3	2
31–35	3.8	26
36–40	10.2	70
41–45	19.5	134
46–50	23.6	162
51–55	24.7	170
56–60	11.9	82
61–65	5.4	37
Over 65	0.4	3
	Totals	687

Table 3. Participation frequency distribution by years of teaching experience

VALUE		PER CENT	RESPONSES
1–4 years		0.4	3
5–9 years		2.6	18
10–14 years		11.3	78
15–19 years		19.2	132
20–24 years		23.5	162
Over 24 years		43.0	296
			Total: 689

In sum, the sample was well represented by school leaders with and without teaching responsibilities, and those from urban and rural school contexts. The sample was overrepresented by

- those who identified as female,

- those with over 10 years of experience in a formal leadership role and

- those with more than 20 years of experience in the teaching profession.

FOCUS GROUPS

At the end of the survey, respondents had the opportunity to register to participate in one of four focus groups:

- April 16, 2019, held in Edmonton

- April 25, 2019, held in Calgary

- April 30, 2019, held virtually

- May 13, 2019, held in Banff, in conjunction with the uLead Conference

In total, 14 school leaders participated in the focus groups representing public, Catholic and alternative schools, and unique leadership positions from urban, suburban and rural contexts. Among these 14 were leaders representing small schools where they were lone principals, leaders in large schools where they had the support of an administrative team, and leaders in alternative arrangements in which they were principal at more than one school. Eight female and six male school leaders contributed to the discussions. Except for one focus group dominated by male participants, most focus groups were composed primarily of females. Their experience in school leadership ranged from 3 to more than 20 years. Their careers in the teaching profession ranged from 7 to 30 years. The level of experience in school leadership ranged from 3 to 24 years. Like the survey respondents, most focus group participants had 20 or more years in the teaching profession. The exceptions were those for whom teaching was a second career, but the minimum years of experience in the profession among those was 7 years.

Except for the virtual focus group, which was slightly shorter, the focus groups lasted for 90 minutes. The conversations were audiotaped for the purpose of transcription. Focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, with some licence taken to ensure grammatical polish. At the end of the transcript e-mailed to the participants was a summary of preliminary interpretation of thematic elements emerging from the focus group. Participants were asked to respond to these thematic summaries as well. Transcripts were returned to participants within a week for the purpose of member check (Lincoln and Guba 1985), which is a strategy used in qualitative research to ensure that a researcher's interpretations align with the intention of study participants. Three respondents provided editorial comments, which were included in the final transcript, and two others confirmed that the transcripts reflected the conversation. This rate of participation in member check is typical.

LIMITATIONS

Web-based surveys are convenient and cost effective, afford quick access to a large group of participants, and garner fast responses (Mertens 2015). Response rate can be problematic (Lefever, Dal and Matthíasdóttir 2007), however, and given the onslaught of surveys not only in the educational arena but from other sectors seeking public opinion, this was a potential limitation. How respondents interpret constructs in survey questions also cannot be discerned.

Focus groups also have strengths and limitations. Because participants interact with each other in focus groups, conversation may be more organic, leading to richer data (Janesick 2016). The limitation, of course, is that one does not have the opportunity to drill down to the individual level to glean more contextualized understanding. Nonetheless, in tandem, the data collection methods complemented and strengthened the data and findings. Finally, researchers are biased, as this is the human condition. Thus, every way of seeing is a way of not seeing the data. The limitation from this is that not all who participated in or who read this research will see themselves here, or they will see themselves incompletely. No research study is exhaustive.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Survey data were examined for trends, patterns and contradictions. Cross-tabulations were completed to gain insights into the potential impact of gender identity, role, school context, age and years of teaching experience. On some items there were notable differences on responses from females, those who were school leaders with classroom duties, those with alternative roles and those in rural contexts. Where significance permitted, nuances based on cross-tabulations were reported.

Qualitative data were examined in multiple ways. Open coding was first used to honour the richness of the data (Saldaña 2013) in verbal comments on the survey and focus group data. Words or phrases were highlighted to break down the data to get an overall sense of trends and issues. Using inductive content analysis (Krippendorff 2004), words and phrases from verbal comments on the survey that spoke to trends and issues were examined for frequency and organized in tables. While counting is not germane to qualitative approaches to analyzing data, this was applied to get a sense of strength and magnitude to meet the needs of a jurisdictional scan.

All qualitative data were considered through structural and provisional coding (Saldaña 2013) as a final step, in which the data were examined for "commonalities, differences and relationships" (p 84). The results of content analysis and coding were integrated to create themes.

Considering the constructivist and relativist underpinnings of the notion of dilemmatic space and moral distress, a second stage of analysis was used to "story" the data, using Maietta's (2006) sort, sift, think and shift method. Maietta describes this approach as "diving in" and "stepping back." In

the diving-in step, transcripts were read and memos written to capture "pulse quotes" from each focus group regarding the leadership challenges and experiences. This method of analysis encouraged a nonlinear approach to the data through periodic memoing and diagramming, with a central focus on creating a constellation of meaning from the pieces of data identified as insightful.

Storylines of School Leadership

> *[School leadership] is a relational job, not a procedural job.*
> —Focus group participant

A principal in one of the focus groups provided the above description. It was an indelible statement. The disassembling and reassembling of data can create a false impression that findings are inorganic elements outside of the human sources that brought them into existence. But data are relational. Presenting *storylines* instead of findings or themes reflects a deliberate attempt to emphasize that these data are a narrative of the human experience of school leadership, not a result of cold, analytic processes. Moreover, in reading and rereading more than 2,100 verbal comments, 100 pages of focus group transcripts and more than 100 items on the web-based survey, it is clear that even coaxing the data into separate storylines is an arbitrary move; it makes most sense for the reader to understand these as entangled, layered and mutually reinforcing.

Katina Pollock, who has extensively researched school leaders' work lives in Ontario, wrote in an article for the EdCan Network, "When it comes to supporting well-being in the public education sphere, principals tend to be an afterthought" (2017a, 1). Hopefully, breaking methodological convention in this subtle way has the power to bring school leaders into focus through the lives they live rather than the "stuff" they do. Six storylines aim to do this:

- The emotional and social complexity of classrooms
- Working with (and against) parents
- Technology and the parallel universe of social media
- School leaders: overworked and under-well
- School leaders: "under-living" their professional lives
- The internalization and normalization of the Ideal Worker

THE EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL COMPLEXITY OF CLASSROOMS

Honestly, the inclusion problem is exhausting … My AP [assistant principal] and I spend hours and hours each week with two or three students with severe emotional and behavioural issues in reg ed, resulting in workplace violence (us being hit and kicked etc) and classmates being hurt as well.

–Survey respondent

There is not a week that goes by that we are not in some type of crisis mode with my counselling team.

–Focus group participant

Alberta implemented an inclusive education policy in 2015, acknowledging that "every learner has unique needs" (Alberta Education 2018, 37). All levels and nature of exceptionalities—from gifted to severely challenged in physical, emotional and social ways—are more likely to be mainstreamed than they would have been in the past. What impacts school leaders most is not the cognitive or language exceptionalities, but rather the complex emotional and social needs of students. This is not to suggest that cognitive complexities do not create challenges, but rather that behavioural and emotional needs are on the rise and taking up much of school leaders' time and energy. As one survey respondent wrote, "It is not class size that is an issue, it is the complexity of students that we serve." While it is difficult to track down current statistics on mental health of Alberta students, an intervention program study conducted with 3,244 Grade 6 to 12 students in Red Deer reported baseline data of 30 per cent of students in Grades 9, 11 and 12 with a significant number of anxiety symptoms. In every grade between Grade 6 and Grade 12, 15 per cent had frequent symptoms of anxiety (Silverstone et al 2015).

In the study being reported here, 67 per cent reported that classroom composition has become more diverse and challenging or has remained the same, with urban school leaders reporting slightly worse conditions (see Table 4). Table 4 shows how school leaders reported on the composition of classrooms in urban and rural contexts.

Table 4. The composition of classes in the school

	OVERALL (%)	URBAN (%)	RURAL (%)
Significantly worsened	21	25	17
Somewhat worsened	46	46	45
No change	30	25	35

The report of central office leaders is dramatically different in the category of "significantly worsened" compared to school leaders and school leaders with classroom duties, although there is similarity in response in the categories "somewhat worsened" and "no change," as depicted in Table 5. The further one is from the classroom, perhaps, the less severe the situation might look. This survey result and interpretation should be read with caution, considering that central office leaders were a small percentage of respondents in the survey.

Table 5. Comparison of roles regarding classroom composition worsening

	ADMINISTRATOR ONLY (%)	ADMINISTRATOR WITH CLASSROOM DUTIES (%)	CENTRAL OFFICE (%)	OTHER (%)
Significantly worsened	21	23	11	17
Somewhat worsened	47	43	42	49
Significantly and somewhat worsened	69	66	53	69
No change	30	29	40	22

Mental Health, Aggression and Violence

Student mental health issues, especially trauma and anxiety, were top concerns in this study, receiving the most verbal comments in the survey and being a primary focus of constraints that leaders talked about in focus groups. "The mental health seems to be prevalent in every single child in some way, shape or form," said one principal from an urban district; "it's interesting to see right from kindergarten kids that have anxiety." Another principal corroborated this: "We have 80 kindergarten kids. Forty-five of them are in trauma." And yet another: "Last year, we had four intakes into the hospital with kids with suicide ideation, and this year we had 28."

The reports on aggression in the school and school community are also telling, with 52 per cent reporting it to have somewhat or significantly worsened. Women report higher in this category (see Table 6).

Table 6. Overall, female and male responses to aggression worsening in school

	OVERALL (%)	FEMALE (%)	MALE (%)
Significantly worsened	13	14	11
Somewhat worsened	39	42	35
Significantly and somewhat worsened	52	56	46
No change	38	36	40

In *The Canadian School Leader: Global Forces and Future Prospects* (Alberta Teachers' Association 2017b), 70 per cent of respondents noted an increase in students who suffer from psychological trauma, and increased incidents in all psychological disorders listed including eating disorders, substance abuse, personality disorders, attention deficit disorders, and mood and anxiety disorders. This has consequences for teachers and school leaders. In Wilson, Douglas and Lyon's

(2011) study, 80 per cent of teachers experienced student violence. More recently, a Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) (2018) news release regarding a public presentation of results of a pan-Canadian survey reported that 41 to 90 per cent of surveyed teachers experienced violence, with women, elementary school teachers, and teachers working in special education or in low socioeconomic and/or metropolitan areas experiencing more violence. It is one year later and not only is the trend continuing, but a notable amount of qualitative comments from this study are signalling potential effects on other students who are emotionally and socially stable. School leaders are beginning to question mainstreaming. This comment is worth quoting at length:

> I have had a parent in my office saying that their child suffered in the "regular" classroom because of the actions/learning needs of a student with severe emotional needs. I always quote the *School Act* and inclusion policies as the "pat answer." But the parent asked "At what point do [the other child's needs] take precedence [over] my own child's needs? Where's the balance?" As unpopular and politically incorrect as it may be, I find myself asking the same thing. (Survey respondent)

Out of 583 verbal responses to the question of research needs, 355 were about mental health. A significant proportion of comments (24 per cent) regarding constraints that impede the role of a school leader spoke directly to inclusion, concern for teachers' safety because of violent students, and inability to help students with mental health needs because of funding and structural constraints. School leaders are ethically caught between valuing and honouring students who may be at a disadvantage because of exceptional needs, and other students who deserve the same level of care and attention. Inclusion, particularly of students with conditions that lead to aggression and/or violence, has become the subject of national debate. For example, following on the heels of Alisa Siegel's documentary, "Hard Lessons" (Siegel 2019), CBC's Michael Enright has featured a five-part series on *The Sunday Edition* (www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition) over the last few months. In those podcasts, elementary school teachers reported being hit with a shovel, being held "hostage" by an elementary-aged student who declared that no one could leave the classroom, and dealing with children's aggression on a daily basis. At the same time, teachers were reticent; afraid of repercussions from their school board, teachers either refused an interview or demanded that they remain anonymous. Inclusion is clearly a dilemmatic space for school leaders, and it is difficult to imagine that they are not experiencing moral distress.

Additional Complex Factors

Consider this description of an elementary school classroom:

> [Out of 24 students] 13 are ESL students. So that's half your class you're trying to program for at a low English level. You've got two children in there that are coded as gifted kids. Then you have one student with Tourette's and one with a diagnosis of autism … Are other classrooms much different? Not a whole lot. (Focus group participant)

The negative trend regarding student mental health exacerbates the already complex conditions of classrooms. Survey data also revealed a perception of decline regarding students' overall readiness to learn, and the number of students living in poverty. There was also a high percentage reporting "no change" in these areas, which may be indicative of a previous negative state. Readiness to learn was somewhat worse in rural contexts (see Table 7).

Table 7. Readiness to learn and students living in poverty with urban and rural comparison

STUDENTS' OVERALL READINESS TO LEARN			
	Overall (%)	Urban (%)	Rural (%)
Significantly worsened	8	9	7
Somewhat worsened	44	39	47
Significantly and somewhat worsened	52	48	54
No change	40	42	38
PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS LIVING IN POVERTY			
Significantly worsened	6	6	7
Somewhat worsened	45	46	45
Significantly and somewhat worsened	51	52	52
No change	47	46	47

Whereas almost half of respondents reported no change in poverty among students, an update on child poverty in Alberta published by Edmonton Social Planning Council in 2018 (Abt and Ngo 2018) documented a 23.4 per cent increase in child poverty across Canada from 2006 to 2016. The rate of increase in Alberta during that time period for children 0 to 17 years of age was 17.7 per cent. This means that more than 1 in 6 children live in poverty in this province. Given the known negative impact of poverty on school achievement and completion, and on mental illness, a majority report of "no change" does not mean the crisis is over.

Similarly, 62 per cent of respondents reported that there was no change to supports for English language learners (ELL), which does not necessarily indicate that the state of affairs regarding linguistic diversity is in good condition, either. Worth noting is that 18 per cent of rural respondents indicated that supports have somewhat worsened. This makes sense, considering that immigration to Alberta between 2011 and 2016 was almost as high or higher in rural communities compared to urban. For example, the percentage increase in immigration in Calgary and Edmonton was 5.2 per cent and 6.8 per cent, respectively. In Brooks, Alberta, the immigration increase was 10 per cent, and in Wood Buffalo it was 6.8 per cent. The top three origins of recent immigrants in 2016 were Philippines, China and India (Statistics Canada 2017). The most recent immigration patterns from

war-torn countries like Syria most likely suggest that cultural and linguistic diversity are components of complex classroom conditions. Again, while 21 per cent reported that supports have somewhat or significantly improved, central office leaders have a more promising outlook, with 30 per cent reporting improvement in supports for ELL learners.

There are various factors perceived to impact students. This school leader's comment provides a comprehensive view:

> … poverty, Dad lost his job. We were doing good for 10 years and we have this great big dip. And now we have drugs, alcohol and psychological abuse that has started because of a lot of things … or the family falls apart, or divorce.

In affluent communities stress is equally concerning because parents pressure their children to achieve at a level to ensure admission to high-ranking universities. Immigrant students are also affected by these pressures, as noted by this school leader during a focus group:

> [The pressure] also comes from our recent arrivals in Canada … they came here for that purpose, so some of those students experience an extreme sense of responsibility to their family to do well.

It was somewhat surprising that Indigenous education received little mention (15 written survey comments, and raised in only one focus group) given the provincial and national commitment to improving school experiences for these children and youth. When Indigenous education was discussed, "effects of [intergenerational] trauma and the mental health needs" were described as "gloomy," as "people cannot get their feet underneath them before another thing happens" (Focus group participant). While 62 per cent of survey respondents felt that resources for First Nations, Métis and Inuit had somewhat or significantly improved, it may be that respondents interpreted *resources* to mean curricular or classroom resources. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) has clearly documented that the deficit of supports for Indigenous children and families remains a significant concern.

All these reports of the emotional and social complexity of classrooms mirror the Canadian scene. The journal of the Canadian Association of Principals' spring 2018 issue, "Hot Topics in Education" (https://cdnprincipals.com/archives/), featured articles on mental health, inclusion and suicide prevention.

Lack of Funding and Appropriate Resources to Address Students' Mental Health Needs

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (2013) cited studies suggesting that 14 to 25 per cent of Canadian children "experience significant mental health issues" (p 1). Because children and youth spend a significant amount of their day in school, schools are identified as a key strategy for responding to students' mental health needs (Mental Health Commission of Canada 2013). Yet, *The State of Inclusion in Alberta Schools* (ATA 2015) reported that resources and supports for inclusion had been declining since 2007.

In the study reported here, the perception of school leaders was that because of funding models and cuts, lack of integration between education and other ministries such as health, and diagnostic requirements, students with exceptionalities continue to be ineffectively and insufficiently supported. Rarely did school leaders report having excellent support and/or access to resources for addressing complex needs, although a couple of focus group participants did consider themselves an "anomaly" in this regard. One principal reported having "EAs [educational assistants] in every classroom." But at the other end of the spectrum was a principal who had to step into a classroom as an EA. This went on for five months. This was not the only example of school leaders looking after dysregulated students "while they wait for the services of the system to assist them" (focus group participant).

A verbal comment on the survey described a student with severe physical needs, low language skills and aggressive tendencies: "We are expected to support [them] in a reg class of 20 students?" The writer further explained the response for requests was often "There is no room" and "They don't have the right diagnosis." With insufficient support from the province or district, school leaders lack agency to combat the problem. Given that 62 per cent of survey respondents somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, "My school district is planning strategically for all the future growth in the complexity and diversity of classrooms," it may be frustration with the lack of wrap-around services to support students that accounts for the tenor of the qualitative data. Leaders from central office had a somewhat more positive view of the situation, given that 42 per cent reported that students' and families' access to support for mental health has significantly or somewhat improved. Tables 8 and 9 provide insights into the overall state of affairs.

Table 8. Access to support for mental health

	OVERALL (%)	ADMINISTRATOR ONLY (%)	ADMINISTRATOR AND CLASSROOM DUTIES (%)	CENTRAL OFFICE (%)	OTHER (%)
Significantly worsened	14	14	16	14	10
Somewhat worsened	31	33	30	30	30
No change	31	34	32	14	42
Somewhat and significantly improved	17	17	14	31	12

Table 9. Supports for students with special needs

	OVERALL (%)	ADMINISTRATOR ONLY (%)	ADMINISTRATOR AND CLASSROOM DUTIES (%)	CENTRAL OFFICE (%)	OTHER (%)
Significantly worsened	16	14	19	13	22
Somewhat worsened	34	34	37	20	29
Significantly and somewhat worsened	50	48	56	33	51
Somewhat improved	15	15	12	22	12
Significantly improved	2	2	2	9	0

School leaders are worried about the impact that students' mental health has on teachers, and that teachers' deteriorating mental health is a "secondary effect of trauma" (focus group participant). Teacher absences were a common concern, as was an observation that teachers are losing their passion and too often emphasizing procedural rights. One school leader indicated that they were being "taken to task for absenteeism in [their] building," explaining that their school context was more challenging than most. Another focus group participant described an increase in teachers "saying no" to taking on tasks that are outside their classroom duties. School leaders empathized with teachers' "compassion fatigue" and their need to take time away, but that created additional stress because substitute teachers were reportedly not available a lot of the time. Again, principals reported filling in because of a lack of substitute teachers. It is clear that the trickle effect of complex classrooms carves multiple tributaries leading straight to the principal's office.

Given mounting concerns about the social and emotional complexity of classrooms, a focus group participant forecasted a rise in charter schools. On May 22, 2019, Her Honour, Lois Mitchell, Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, delivered the throne speech. Among the plans for the legislature is the presentation of the *Choice in Education Act*, which will "renew the Alberta Advantage in education by restoring and expanding the choices available to parents and children" (Government of Alberta 2019, pgph 54). Competition already impacts school leaders' work, they suggested, and so this creates urgency for redressing the negligible way many schools are supported to address the complex conditions of the classroom.

Compelling Questions to Advance the Research Conversation

1. How does inclusion impact upon all students academically, socially and emotionally? For whom is inclusion most effective as a learning and social arrangement?

2. What are the secondary effects of students' mental health challenges on teachers and school leaders?

3. What effective models of school-based intervention and support for mental health might support school leaders in their roles?

4. Which provinces or international jurisdictions employ exemplary models of interministerial collaboration (eg, education, health)?

5. What are the impacts of complex classroom conditions on substitute teachers' willingness to teach?

WORKING WITH (AND AGAINST) PARENTS

In policy documents and research on the topic, parent involvement follows a somewhat romantic plot. A discourse of partnership dominates, and is premised on the assumption that all parents are ready and willing to collaborate and cooperate with the school. Much academic literature argues that it is teachers and principals who need to be more hospitable to parents (Pushor 2007), to respect and honour "parent knowledge" (Pushor 2015), and to challenge their comfort zones and engage with parents on their own terms and on their turf (Cremin et al 2015). Indeed, Alberta's Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education 2019a) and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education 2019c) include among the indicators an expectation that school leaders work effectively with parents. Many school leaders appreciate the many parents who work alongside them to support students. There is a darker side to this relational work, however.

The support by many parents is beautiful. The lack of support and the violence …? *—Focus group participant*	*Parents are not modelling parenting.* *—Focus group participant*	*I am counselling parents who are lost …* *—Survey respondent*

On their own, the survey data on the item regarding the working relationships with parents/ guardians are ambiguous. As noted below in Table 10, 26 per cent feel that relations have worsened, but 24 per cent feel that relations have improved, and 50 per cent indicate that relations have not changed.

Table 10. Working relations with parents/guardians

Worsened	26%
Improved	24%
No change	50%

Further investigation into the written survey comments and through focus groups suggested that "no change" might reflect a continuing trend toward troublesome parents. For example, issues relating to parents was the fourth-highest category in the written responses to the question, What constraints do you experience as a school leader, if any, that make you unable to take appropriate action or do what you know to be right? Table 11 illustrates that parents are almost as constraining as complex classroom conditions.

Table 11. Significant categories of constraint

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF COMMENTS (N=353)
District expectations, policy requirements and relations	70
Funding (eg, infrastructure, intersectoral coordination)	54
Complex classrooms (eg, mental health, aggression/violence, inclusion)	47
Parents (eg, parenting skills, abuse, disrespect, personal agendas)	43
Working with teachers (absenteeism, mental health, rights-driven, "lost the desire to be great" [survey response])	29
Workload	26

Parent Aggression and Abuse

In a study of 536 teachers at all grade levels in Pennsylvania, Fisher and Kettl (2003) found that 56 per cent of teachers believed violence or the threat of violence impeded the quality of education they provided to students. Elementary teachers were more likely to be afraid of parents. The likelihood of aggressive or violent interactions with parents was widespread, even among suburban schools. According to an article in *Professionally Speaking*, a publication by the Ontario College of Teachers, parents have more opportunities via e-mail to be aggressive with teachers (Myers, nd). In this current study, however, aggression and abuse that were discussed were direct, rather than digital.

In focus groups, participants shared experiences with parents yelling, being aggressive and threatening violence. Female school leaders were more likely to feel vulnerable. And though the most egregious physical threat was experienced by a male school leader, it was not unheard of for female school leaders. Parents were described as "sometimes scary" with "expectations and demands [that are] overwhelming" (focus group participant). This principal provided another example:

> I was afraid sometimes. And I have had to sit up and say, "This meeting is over unless you stop screaming at me. It's over." … Because the verbal abuse you get when they come in just blaring— and you are like, oh my gosh, right?

What are parents yelling about? Academic progress or potential is one issue. In a focus group one principal noted that sometimes parents have unrealistic expectations for their children, and this can be a source of conflict unless parents eventually heed the teacher's judgment about their children's abilities. But the same principal also remarked that most of the parent concerns they deal with are not related to academics: "It's more about—my child feels like you hurt their feelings. Or my child feels like you were yelling at them … more of our parent complaints definitely focus on how the teacher … is *perceived* to be treating the child."

Exacerbating the problem is the perception that there are few or no consequences for parents who mistreat school leaders or teachers. While some report that "our board has been so supportive in those processes" (focus group participant), not all could count on this. Consequently, as this survey respondent wrote, "it leaves teachers and leaders feeling very unsupported and at the 'mercy' of a tantrummy adult." A potential reason for treading lightly around difficult parents is the fear that they will "go public" (focus group participant) and inflame an already contentious situation via social media.

Intensification of Parenting

According to Crozier (2019), the intensification of parenting is "driven by competitiveness and self-interest and has counterproductive outcomes for many parents and teachers and children" (p 326). Doepke and Zilibotti (2019) have a similar thesis, suggesting that an economic imperative to ensure their children are successful in school and life propels parents into a parenting style that is excessively attentive and managerial. Along this vein, *The Economist* reported that among 11 wealthy nations, including Canada, the amount of time parents spend with their children has doubled ("Parents now spend" 2017). Doepke and Zilibotti, who also reviewed Canadian data on parent trends, found that much of the time parents spend is on school-related activities. An online news article (Global News Edmonton 2018) suggested that helicopter parents, who hover over their children and are ready to dive in to save them from harm, have evolved into lawnmower parents, considered more detrimental to their children's health because they rush in to mow down obstacles before their children have a chance to address them. Digital technology enables them to do this from a distance.

A survey respondent wrote, "Parental expectations and demands are overwhelming, and they too often are narrowly focused and not on the big picture. They do not understand or sometimes even care about the impact on the school community as a whole—only focused on their child." This reflects intensive parenting. For example, "parents come in complaining about another special ed student that is distracting the teacher away from their child learning" (focus group participant). On the other side of the scenario, parents of children who have been violent to the point of the teacher having to evacuate the rest of the class will think first, and sometimes only, about their child's needs despite the damage they have caused. Naturally, these situations are emotionally complex for both teachers and parents. The point, as Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) has argued, is that the particularistic outlook of parents clashes with educators' universalistic concern for all children. Navigating the "complex and tender geography [of the] borderlands between families and schools" (p xi) can be rewarding or punishing.

Further, school leaders observe that parents' level of respect for and trust in teachers has deteriorated. Lack of trust was articulated by a school principal who shared an alarming example during a focus group:

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> The thing that bothers me currently with parenting interaction with school is parents who come in with a cell phone. They want to record your conversation. Or kids coming to school with these things sewn into their clothing that records conversations throughout the day, and parents can pick it up over the Wi-Fi, and stuff like this. This brings a new dynamic … when you are being recorded with a parent, you are just thinking they are just going to bring back a transcript of things you said. But a conversation is more than a transcript.

A litigious mindset is a consequence of mistrust. Attempts to thwart inappropriate parent behaviour are in vain because "if you do shut them down, they report you." School leaders talked about instances where parents bypassed them to report straight to the superintendent.

It is shown in research that there are parents from equity-seeking groups who lack confidence and the social capital to influence in the educational arena (eg, Garcia 2019; Kroeger 2019), but it is increasingly the case that parents have considerable power. A call to the media, a tweet or petition has resounding impact; cases in Alberta have led directly to legislation through these channels. To further emphasize this point, California's Parent Empowerment Act of 2013, a "parent trigger law," makes possible for petitions with "51% of parents at low-achieving schools [to] force closures, [replace] staff, or [convert] to charter" (Auerbach 2019, 357). Indeed, parents are being positioned as policy levers. Parents are better informed than ever and are increasingly vocal. If one considers that the Alberta School Councils' Association recently passed resolutions (Alberta School Councils' Association 2019) to advocate for funding for accredited mental health professionals and guaranteed in-school access to mental health supports, for example, this can be beneficial. But school leaders are somewhat wary of the individual interactions: "When you need those parent meetings, you never know what you are going into" (focus group participant).

Parents' Expanding Expectations of What the School Should Do for Their Children

A school leader quoted in a 1991 study about the experiences of Alberta teachers on long-term disability complained:

> I think that society is putting a lot of pressure on teachers because the school is expected to do a lot of things that the home should be doing, and whether homes did do it in the years gone by is another question. The point is—now they're expecting the schools to do it. (Jevne and Zingle 1991, 152)

In that same study, another school leader said, "We are social workers, we are counsellors, we are psychologists, we are mothers, we are fathers …" (Jevne and Zingle 1991, 152). The situation is sadly similar today.

It is the addition of digital technology that has added to the parent docket for school leaders. While parents are on the one hand hyper-vigilant about monitoring their children from cradle to convocation (think baby monitor to cell phone) (Faircloth 2014), they are, at the same time, ironically

perceived as not exercising parental authority or guidance when it comes to their children's digital lives. One school leader said, "We have to be the parent at school, and [cell phones] have to be locked up. This wears on school leaders emotionally who end up feeling like the police because of the bad habits … I don't wake up at 5:30 in the morning saying, 'Can I look at a guy's leg just to see if he has a cell phone in there?'"(focus group participant).

On the survey, 65 per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that their school district understands and responds to how digital technologies impact the health and well-being of students. This is somewhat contradictory, since the qualitative data suggested that few school leaders felt supported by technology policies aimed at controlling students' cell phone use. Some claimed parents voraciously challenged such policies, discouraging school boards from pressing the issue.

The inevitable concern is that parents' lack of oversight regarding students' technology use impacts upon children's readiness to learn, adds discipline matters to a school leaders' day and, in more complicated cases, leads to inappropriate or criminal behaviour. Although school leaders did not point to concrete evidence, the question of how technology itself impacts parenting was raised. This is an apt question considering McDaniel's (2019) recent summary of research on the impact of parents' cell phone use on child outcomes. He coined the term technoference, defined as the everyday intrusions and interruptions of devices in our face-to-face interactions (p 74). Apparently, technoference committed by parents is common during parent–child interactions. When parents are distracted by their cell phone while with their children, children feel less warmth from them, lowering the quality of the relationship (Stockdale, Coyne and Padilla-Walker 2018). Technoference causes children to exhibit more negative behaviours (McDaniel and Radesky 2017).

This survey comment captures the challenge facing school leaders, and brings to light how trends intersect (eg, mental health, parents) and complicate the leadership role:

> Teachers and leaders are asked to take on the roles of parents at times. The workload more than anything is too much because we have to worry about feeding kids, their mental health, plus do all the paper work, anecdotes and planning. It is too much sometimes.

Compelling Questions to Advance the Research Conversation

1. What is the impact of digital technology on parenting?

2. In what ways does digital technology enhance and/or impede parent–teacher relations?

3. What factors and/or trends are impacting upon parenting skills?

Digital Technology and the Parallel Universe of Social Media

Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.
—Melvin Kranzberg, cited in Harris 2014

I have noticed a change in the types of discipline situations we have based on the complexity of online situations of kids' use of technology and, to some extent, parents' use of technology, staff use of technology … that has created a whole different pillar to my job.
—Focus group participant

I find technology devastating to our children and our families, and we are becoming more and more antisocial.
—Focus group participant

Results of their survey of 70 principals in Ontario led Pollock and Hauseman (2018) to describe digital technology as a double-edged sword. While e-mail affords the benefits of convenient and expedient communication, allows principals to complete communications from home and creates an audit trail, these same benefits pressurize an already demanding role by blurring the boundary between work and home, confirming expectations for constant availability and instant response and increasing the volume of communication and its archives. Principals in the Ontario study reported spending 11 hours every week on e-mail.

In a pan-Canadian study, *A National Study of the Impact of Electronic Communication on Canadian School Leaders* (ATA 2017a), it was found that principals spent a third of their work week and 5.8 hours on nonwork days processing e-mail. An Alberta study including 31 principals who logged their activities for a week indicated the average work week was 58.5 hours (ATA 2014a).

One focus group participant in this study said that technology has added two hours to their day, and many talked about a 60-hour work week, which included evenings and weekends. If one considers the findings of the ATA's Canadian study regarding electronic communication among school leaders cited above, a third of a 60-hour work week devoted to e-mail would amount to 20 hours. Assuming an 8-hour work day, this means more than two days are spent on e-mail.

Considering the above, no wonder the work day for school leaders has leached into their evenings and weekends. The following comments from focus groups indicate how digital communications and technology affect school leaders' workload:

I didn't have time to stop and check my e-mail. I am too busy putting out fires and meeting the needs of everyone else, so I can only go through e-mails and send them out in the evening because that is the only quiet time I have. (Focus group participant)

While I am away from the building … I feel like I have to catch up on everything either on my cell phone … or when I get back into the building … I am finding the hours, my days are much longer than they were when I started this job five years ago. (Focus group participant)

Most of my discipline problems come from my junior highs being on their technology. (Focus group participant)

Forty-nine per cent somewhat or strongly disagreed that their school district understands and responds to how technology impacts leaders' workload, while 52 per cent agreed, as noted in Table 12 below.

Table 12. My district understands and responds to how technology impacts leaders' workload

	OVERALL (%)	URBAN (%)	RURAL (%)
Strongly disagree	14	17	10
Somewhat disagree	35	37	32
Somewhat agree	45	42	49
Strongly agree	7	5	9

While these data seem to contradict the qualitative responses, it is not entirely clear whether respondents interpreted "understands and responds" as one unit, or if they responded to "understands" (they believe their district understands/does not understand the magnitude of the problem) separately, and "responds" (they believe their district has/has not attempted or succeeded at alleviating the problem) separately. When asked about this in focus groups, some school leaders indicated that there were failed attempts by their districts to rein in digital communications, as noted in this exchange during a focus group:

Speaker 1: About five years ago [the school district] tried to reduce the paperwork mound, and they were going to reduce the number of e-mails that came to principals. And that lasted four months—

Speaker 2: Thirty seconds!

Speaker 1: And it's right back up and again. I would say it starts from the top.

If boundaries existed, they were self-imposed. One principal, for example, removed their work e-mail from their phone during summer vacation. It was rare, however, that school leaders employed such a strategy for themselves.

The Parallel Universe of Social Media

"The fallout from social media use in the school community places a significant burden on administrators' time" (ATA 2017a, 41). This trend, identified two years ago in the ATA study, is not only continuing but is also expanding. A focus group participant described social media as a "parallel universe," suggesting that it erodes physical space and time boundaries: "Now we never get to be away from a problem because what happened last night at eleven o'clock becomes our problem at eight o'clock" (focus group participant). Further, school leaders are not just responding to social media; some are monitoring the language through software programs and forecasting how social media events might affect the school.

One of the perceived challenges with social media is that children are becoming owners and users of digital technology at younger ages, and do not have a deep understanding of the consequences of their digital behaviour. Thus, the realm of potential issues with discipline, mental health, cyberbullying, anxiety, conflict and health problems (eg, lack of sleep) practically covers the lifespan of schooling from kindergarten to Grade 12. A focus group participant observed

> By Grade 4 and Grade 5, and definitely by Grade 6, we're talking about at least 50 per cent of our population that children have already been given their own technology, whether it's a phone or an iPod or some sort of iPad—some sort of technology that they have access to. So then there is that constant chatter all evening long.

This school leader's observation corresponds with data on technology trends with children:
- The average age of American children to receive their first cell phone is 10.3 years (Influence Central 2016).

- Thirty-nine per cent of American children got their first social media account between 10 and 12 years of age, and 11 per cent when they were younger than 10 (Influence Central 2016).

- The rate of mobile media usage for American children between 2 and 4 years of age increased from 39 per cent to 80 per cent between 2011 and 2013 (Canadian Paediatric Society 2017).

- Six- to 11-month-old infants "use a touch screen daily" according to a study in the United Kingdom (Canadian Paediatric Society 2017, 462).

All of the risks associated with youths' engagement with social media, such as cyberbullying and online harassment, sexting, and anxiety (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson 2011), were raised in some manner in this study. For example, one school leader said, "We have kids in the hospital over the cell phone threats." Furthermore, the galloping pace at which new apps are generated in the social media sphere may be another thing with which school leaders feel they have to keep up. Even those who are tech savvy report feeling out of the loop when they try to keep up with social media apps. Since the release of *A National Study of the Impact of Electronic Communication on Canadian School Leaders* (ATA 2017a), the popularity of e-cigarettes has given rise to vaping, the inhalation of an aerosol through e-cigarettes, vape pens and other devices. Vaping devices are constantly evolving; one of the most recent

inventions—JUUL—looks like a USB flash drive and comes in a variety of flavours (Center on Addiction 2018). Cleverly disguised and easy to hide, it is popular with American middle and high school students. It is no wonder that vaping was reported in the current study to be the latest discipline issue in schools.

A top concern regarding technology for school leaders is the known and unknown negative effects of screen time on children's development and their ability to learn. Digital devices act as both stimulant and sedative (Harris 2014). One said, "I hate to say this, but often the only time you really see them sit still is when a teacher will put on a video as a part of the learning … if the teacher is talking or reading, there's a lot of squirming going on." Special chairs, therabands and fidget spinners are now as common as pencils and paper in today's classroom. By the time they reach adolescence, students are well adjusted to *compound distraction*, "a predetermined atmosphere of distraction wherein sustained, meaningful interaction feels awkward and unwelcome" (p 212). School leaders notice that children do not make eye contact with strangers in social situations, and that they cannot sit still. If compound distraction is normal for children, this perhaps explains why. What emerges from all of this is that schools are adding social skills to their curricular and extracurricular work. There is the sense that if parents are neglecting to teach such social skills to their children, it is up to the school to do it.

As Table 13 shows, most school leaders in both urban and rural contexts believe their school districts know and are addressing how digital technologies impact the health and well-being of students (65 per cent). This is a more positive perception than how school leaders felt about their district's awareness of and response to how digital technologies affect their workload.

Table 13. My district understands and responds to how digital technologies impact the health and well-being of students

	OVERALL (%)	URBAN (%)	RURAL (%)
Strongly disagree	8	10	6
Somewhat disagree	27	25	28
Somewhat agree	52	54	51
Strongly agree	13	11	15

Because social media can be used to heighten or discredit a school's reputation, school leaders are required to Tweet, post, Snapchat and so on. This can also be a "good stressor," but it adds to school leaders' workload just the same:

> We are expected to celebrate and share [successes] with our school Facebook page, our school Instagram page … It is a constant—I don't want to say 'struggle,' because it is not always a struggle, but the good stressor piece, that also takes time in a way that it didn't use to when you had your monthly newsletter, right? … That pressure or expectation to be communicating with everybody all the time.

Knowing the damaging effects of social media, school leaders also work to mitigate negative press:

> It is about branding … and getting the message out there first. You get to tell it from your perspective. If you leave things hanging out there, people make up the story around it, and sometimes you end up getting slammed in the process. We know that our relationship with our community is better when we are telling the story, because at least we are talking about the good news as well.

As indicated in the quote, school leaders readily admitted that "there is quite a bit of competition" among schools, even within the same school district, so enrolment creates the imperative to manage the message with parents and other community members.

Compelling Questions to Advance the Research Conversation

1. What is the prevalence of incidents of discipline with students relating to digital technology use and social media in Alberta schools? What ages are least/most impacted?

2. What does the research say about the impact of students' social media use on their mental health?

3. How is the use of digital technology and social media changing interactions between and among teachers, students, parents and school leaders?

4. How have the impacts of technology and social media created the demand for facilities and other structural changes (eg, therabands, fidget spinners, classroom reconfiguration)? How much of their own money are teachers and school leaders investing to accommodate these needs?

SCHOOL LEADERS: OVERWORKED AND UNDER-WELL

All I do is work.
—Survey respondent

Today, I just wanted to get one thing done. Just one thing done.
—Focus group participant

Never felt lonelier.
—Survey respondent

In a letter to the Canadian portal of *The Conversation,* an independent source of news and views from academics and other members of the public, an Alberta teacher wrote, "Educational leaders need to watch out for the job-induced heartbreak when teachers are forced to navigate educational turbulence—the destabilizing of professional practice by policies or reform outside the educators' control" (Kendrick 2019, pgph 16). Kendrick wrote about teachers being at risk of "occupational heartbreak" (pgph 23) because the lack of time and resources to provide for the multiple and complex needs of students, the lack of consultation when authorities make educational decisions, and the "toxic level of emotional labor" (pgph 22) they experience erodes their spirit for teaching and blurs the reason they entered the profession. School leaders are similarly situated, and for similar reasons.

In this study, 61 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that their workload was reasonable. Sixty-nine per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they have sufficient time to complete their role as an instructional leader (see Table 14).

Table 14. Workload

My workload is reasonable	61% disagree
I have sufficient time to complete my role as an instructional leader	69% disagree

Forty-nine per cent feel emotionally exhausted when they think about going to their job. Fifty-one per cent feel constrained in their ability to do what they know is the right thing to do because of factors outside of their control (see Table 15).

Table 15: Moral distress

I feel emotionally exhausted when I think about going to my job	49% agree
I feel constrained in my ability to do what I know is the right thing to do because of factors outside of my control	51% agree

On the question of feeling "caught in the middle" or constrained from doing what is the right thing to do because of factors outside of their control, 45 per cent experience this several times a week and month, and 41 per cent experience this several times a year. Overall, 95 per cent experience constraints several times, whether that is within a year, a month, a week, a day, or an hour. Only 5 per cent reported feeling constrained once a year (see Figure 5).
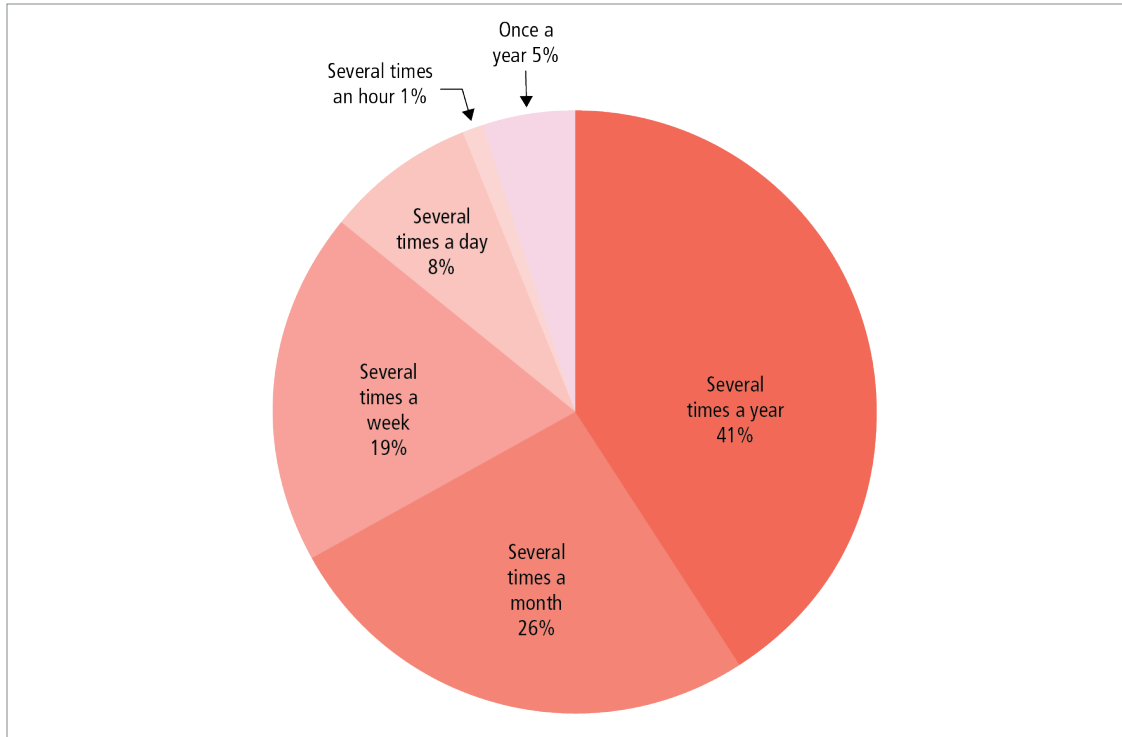
Figure 5. Frequency of feeling constrained by outside factors

One piece of data seems to contradict this worrisome picture. On the question, "I often feel like I am able to do what I know is the right thing to do in my leadership role," 75 per cent agreed or strongly agreed. Examining the qualitative data, one principal's comment suggests a possible explanation:

> One of the things we are probably good at is problem solving, and even though our problems we are discussing today … Even though they are bigger and more complicated than they used to be, we tackle them because we believe that our skills that we have and that we have honed through experience can make schools and communities better places for others. That sounds like a textbook response, but I really believe that we do our 12-hour days because we think we can solve problems. And we can.

Elsewhere in the qualitative data, the state of overwhelm and feeling like one cannot do the job they want to do is palpable. This quote is exemplary for capturing moral distress (Hamric 2012) as a consequence of a heavy workload:

> There are too many responsibilities for one or two administrators to handle in a complex school. If we are to take on the most important work of instructional leadership with effort and rigour, then some of the other responsibilities and accountabilities must go. Otherwise we are stretched

for time, and our "managerial" work can happen only after all other staff have left for the day, meaning that we work long into the night. If we are to be good leaders and models for our staff, our MH [mental health] and well-being must be cared for … I LOVE my work. But doing this much (60 hours per week) is not healthy or sustainable for myself or my family. Every day I hear more and more administrators saying the same things. (Survey respondent)

Sources of Constraint

Table 16 illustrates various sources of constraint for school leaders. These categories were created from the qualitative comments on surveys and focus groups. Workload was created as a single category based on direct statements that invoked this or related terms, but as it has been argued in previous sections, all categories ultimately contribute to increasing and fracturing the school leader's role.

Table 16. Significant categories of constraint

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF COMMENTS (N=353)
District expectations, policy requirements and relations	70
Funding (eg, infrastructure, intersectoral coordination)	54
Complex classrooms (eg, mental health, aggression/violence, inclusion)	47
Parents (eg, parenting skills, abuse, disrespect, personal agendas)	43
Working with teachers (absenteeism, mental health, rights-driven, "lost the desire to be great" [survey response])	29
Workload	26

Living in a State of Diversion

Much research examining workload among school leaders views it through the lens of work intensification (eg, Ballet, Kelchtermans and Loughran 2006; Pollock, Wang and Hauseman 2015; Wang, Pollock and Hauseman 2018a, 2018b). This is clearly what school leaders are experiencing in Alberta:

Workload of leaders continues to bust at the seams. People are just exhausted. I'm very concerned about our current state of affairs.

—Survey respondent

> *The job is boundless and I am committed to doing it well—so it consumes way too many hours.*
> —Survey respondent

One school leader commented, "The role of the principal continues to expand into many, many more realms of responsibility from OH&S [occupational health and safety] to … transportation." The amount of legal knowledge that a school leader needs was also mentioned.

What is perhaps more debilitating is the *nature* of the way the work unfolds. School leaders' work does not actually *unfold* per se, as that suggests a linear fashion that lends itself to order and completion. Rather, the school leader's day is often characterized by constant and abrupt interruptions, and an "ever receding horizon" (Smyth 2017, 9) of administrative tasks. School leaders work in what Brooks (2019) calls a "state of diversion" (p 19).

All the storylines discussed so far—complex classrooms, parents, technology—create a storm of demands of their own. School leaders know "[their] schedule is not [their] own" (focus group participant). Their day is dictated by emergent crises, unexpected demands from multiple stakeholders, and unplanned critical events arising from the external world (eg, natural disaster, death, social security cheques delayed, provincial election). This state of diversion leaves school leaders with "the feeling of not doing a great job at anything" (survey respondent).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors mirror our conceptual thoughts. Metaphors were sprinkled throughout the transcripts and survey comments, providing insight into how school leaders think about their role. School leadership was like a game of Whack-a-Mole—the mole "comes up in September and actually never gets down … sometimes it does not even go down in June" (focus group participant). Focus group participants used the words *buffer*, *funnel*, *sieve*, *conduit*, *scapegoat*, *cheerleader*, *police*, *parent* and *firefighter*, and the phrase *ducks in water*. School leaders were juggling balls and spinning plates. They were the absent distant relative that no one wants to engage with, and the last stop for all decisions. When asked during one focus group which ball gets dropped, the answer was, "Our health. Our time."

The reality of how their personal lives and health are being sacrificed and jeopardized hit home for some. When talking about a wellness workshop, one principal shared that in eight areas of wellness they realized they were "actually managing" in only one.

Although during focus groups it was mostly female school leaders who talked about long evenings at work, lack of sleep and emotional impact, the survey data regarding reasonable workload for male and female respondents were surprisingly equal. In both groups, 60 per cent disagreed that their work load was reasonable.

Neither was time in a leadership role revealing on the survey, although focus groups did suggest that experience helped female leaders to "compartmentalize" stressful situations at school so that they did not "take it home" with them. Another said, "I used to want to do it all … if everything is a priority then nothing is."

This is not to suggest that male school leaders did not feel pinched and emotionally affected by the nature and amount of their workload. They, too, were frustrated by initiative cycles that interrupted plans that were going well, having to be on top of social media and the amount of work they had to put in to accommodate policy changes. And fathers of young children experience guilt and/or loss when their job takes them away from spending time with them.

A group that warrants attention are those school leaders who also have classroom duties. Numerous comments during focus groups and in the survey suggested that because the leadership role was so freighted with managerial tasks, teaching added stress. An assistant principal who teaches 85 per cent of the full-time equivalent stated that scheduled preparation time often disappeared because "[they] have to do all this other administration." They may experience tension, however, between wanting to do well as a school leader and wanting to maintain a connection to the classroom.

Seventy-four per cent of school leaders with classroom duties disagreed that they had sufficient time to complete their role as an instructional leader, compared to 68 per cent of those without classroom duties (see Table 17). The focus group data provided a different perspective, as having to teach and fulfill formal leadership was frequently raised as a considerable challenge.

Table 17. Workload by role

	OVERALL (% DISAGREE)	ADMINISTRATOR ONLY (% DISAGREE)	ADMINISTRATOR WITH CLASSROOM DUTIES (% DISAGREE)
My workload is reasonable	61	62	63
I have sufficient time to complete my role as an instructional leader	69	68	74

Even though research conducted on rural teaching principals in Alberta and Manitoba (Wallin and Newton 2014) suggests that rural school leaders' roles are compounded by teaching responsibilities, the percentage differences between urban and rural respondents on the survey regarding workload and instructional leadership were slight. On workload, 58 per cent of rural respondents disagreed that they had a reasonable workload compared to 63 per cent of urban respondents. On instructional leadership, 72 per cent of rural respondents disagreed that they had sufficient time compared to 67 per cent of urban respondents (see Table 18).

Table 18. Workload by urban and rural respondents

	OVERALL (% DISAGREE)	URBAN % DISAGREE)	RURAL (% DISAGREE)
My workload is reasonable	61	63	58
I have sufficient time to complete my role as an instructional leader	69	67	72

Assistant, associate and vice-principals are another group with unique circumstances. In keeping with Mitchell, Armstrong and Hands's (2017) qualitative study of 25 vice-principals in Ontario, Alberta school leaders were impacted by structural uncertainties, primarily because their role is not defined in the *School Act* as is that of principals. In this study, 66 per cent of school leaders with classroom duties reported that their leadership role was clearly defined, compared to 77 per cent of those with administrative duties only. Comments were made on the survey requesting inclusion of vice-principals in the *School Act* and/or a clearly defined job description.

Additionally, assistant, associate and vice-principals felt as thought they are at the whim of the principal, with no confidence to challenge them. They also felt lonely and removed from their teacher colleagues without feeling fully drawn into the leadership rank. As one survey respondent wrote, "As an assistant principal, I can provide ideas, but ultimately the principal is the one that makes the final decision, even if I did not agree with it." Not having their own support systems or mentorship arrangements in their district to talk about their specific experiences exacerbated the feelings of isolation and limited agency.

Principals, too, experience a cultural dilemma whereby their identity was in question. Even as part of the same professional association as teachers, one focus group participant said, "We are not seen as teachers … sort of … and really not." Principals see themselves as situated between the district and teachers, often acting as mediators. Despite the popularity of the distributed leadership discourse, hierarchy is entrenched. Principals know "the buck stops here" (focus group participant). As Sir Edmund Hillary has said of Everest, "When you're climbing at high altitudes, life can get pretty miserable" (as cited in Bierema 2016, 120).

Despite feelings of loneliness and separation, in the survey, 83 per cent of respondents with and without extra classroom duties agreed that they can easily seek advice from others in school leadership if they choose to, with negligible difference between them (see Table 19). Principals have the reported advantage of more mentorship and training, compared to those at the assistant, associate and vice-principal rank.

Table 19. I can easily seek leadership advice from others in school leadership if I choose to

	OVERALL AGREE (%)	ADMINISTRATOR ONLY (%)	ADMINISTRATOR WITH CLASSROOM DUTIES (%)
I can easily seek advice from others in school leadership if I choose to	83	85	82

Bauer, Silver and Schwartzer (2019) note that isolation is "less a structural reality than an emotional response to one's experiences as a school leader" (p 386). They further suggest that since principals are responsible for all administrative and instructional imperatives, they are making more decisions in isolation. In a focus group, one principal said that even with "amazing supports in our board … We are it … the last stop." In addition to being decision makers, principals buffer teachers from initiatives to curb their workload. They are the "conduit between board policy, district office initiatives … translating that into meaningful actions or initiatives for the schools' teachers to impact student learning" (focus group participant). They have to accept when "parents are mad at [them], teachers are mad at [them], kids are mad at [them]" (focus group participant). They are holding the funnel to "squeeze out this little bit of whatever [they] can" (focus group participant). They are the "last to leave and clean up" (focus group participant). Though they concede that some of these things are "small," they reportedly "take a toll" and can add up to a "thankless" and "heartless reality" (focus group participants).

Compelling Questions to Advance the Research Conversation

1. What programs and strategies can be put into place to relieve school leaders from the overburden of excessive managerial and administrative tasks?

2. What is an appropriate balance between teaching and leadership responsibilities?

3. What might a graduated formula of teaching responsibilities for assistant, associate and vice-principals look like?

4. What mentorship and coaching structures and programs might support the unique needs of principals and assistant, associate and vice-principals?

5. What does the research say about the effectiveness of a coprincipalship?

6. To counter the work intensification narrative, in what areas are school leaders flourishing?

7. What is the role of hope in school leaders' work?

SCHOOL LEADERS: "UNDER-LIVING" THEIR PROFESSIONAL LIVES

Eighty-three per cent of survey respondents feel prepared to meet the competencies outlined in the Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) (Alberta Education 2019a). It was inspiring to repeatedly hear during focus groups and to read in the survey comments that school leaders have a strong desire to be instructional leaders. Unequivocally, school leaders aspire to fulfill this role. Sadly, they struggle to do so. Brooks (2019) would argue they are "under-living" their professional lives because so little time is left for them to live their true passion.

The LQS requires school leaders to demonstrate nine competencies in their practice:

1. Fostering effective relationships

2. Modelling commitment to professional learning

3. Embodying visionary leadership

4. Leading a learning community

5. Supporting the application of foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit

6. Providing instructional leadership

7. Developing leadership capacity

8. Managing school operations and resources

9. Understanding and responding to the larger societal context (Alberta Education 2019a, 4–7)

Ironically, despite only one competency focusing on management (Competency 8), the data in this study suggest that school leaders feel consumed by the managerial function of their role.

> *I am supposed to be coaching and supervising and growing people.*
>
> *It is my favourite part of the job, but it has become so miniscule.*
>
> *At one point I taught a class just to get back to some sense of making a difference.*
>
> —*Focus group participants*

Behavioural Ambidexterity

Behavioural ambidexterity is a concept that has been applied to the corporate sector and refers to "the capacity to simultaneously demonstrate exploitation and exploration across a business unit" (Raiden, Räisänen and Kinman 2019, 1). Compliance with external regulations coupled with the expectation to be innovative accounts for this in the business sector. This term has migrated into studies of academic culture to exploring how the expectation for academics to be both compliant and creative in their teaching and research affects their performance and well-being. This concept transfers well to school leadership, for it conjures questions of agency, professionalism and autonomy, all of which are antecedents to performance and positive well-being. Because school leaders are bound by

a triumvirate of leadership, management and administration, they are necessarily caught between autonomy and freedom, control and accountability.

Fifty-three per cent of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that they have sufficient support to manage their leadership role. But a significant proportion—35 per cent—disagree. Rural survey respondents disagree at a higher rate than urban survey respondents. For example, 72 per cent of rural respondents disagree or strongly disagree that they receive sufficient supports to manage their leadership role, compared to 37 per cent of urban respondents (see Table 20).

Table 20. I have sufficient support to manage my leadership role

	OVERALL (%)	URBAN (%)	RURAL (%)
Strongly agree	9	9	6
Agree	44	44	18
Disagree	25	27	45
Strongly disagree	10	10	27

One reason rural respondents may not feel supported is that they are more likely to be in lone leadership roles because schools are smaller. As was discussed in focus groups, school leaders in small schools and rural schools felt disadvantaged because the assumption that a smaller student population meant a less demanding leadership role did not take into consideration that complexity intensifies the demand on the leader, regardless of student count. Interestingly, school leaders in large schools felt similarly disadvantaged, feeling that the financial compensation did not match the extent of work required to successfully lead a large school.

Professional Autonomy Vis-à-Vis External Directives

Frostenson (2015) conceptualizes professional autonomy in three ways. "General professional autonomy" (p 22) exists when teachers have the ability to influence the "general organisation or control principles of the school" (p 22), such as how student learning is measured and reported. The pathways to certification under the Leadership Quality Standard is an example that may be applied to school leaders. A second form of professional autonomy is "collegial professional autonomy," which Frostenson defines as "the collective freedom to influence and decide on practice at a local level" (p 23). Decentralization or centralization of budgets or hiring exemplifies this for school leaders. Individual autonomy is a third type of professional autonomy. For teachers, this means such things as the ability to decide on pedagogical approaches or the structural arrangement of their classrooms. For school leaders, it may be tied to their individual leadership practices, such as how they collaborate with teachers, how they structure their day or the decisions they make about their own leadership path. In this study, there were instances where it was clear that school leaders experienced all three

forms of professional autonomy, but there were considerable constraints that impeded or prevented this. Essentially, this throws agency into question.

General Professional Autonomy

General professional autonomy is related to teachers feeling as though they have professional judgment over the principles that guide the school (Frostenson 2015). A survey item that relates to general professional autonomy is how standardized testing is used to assess school performance. On the statement, "My school district takes a balanced view regarding the role of standardized testing in assessing school performance," 76 per cent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Twenty-four per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Table 21). The issue did not come up in focus groups and did not appear on survey comments.

Table 21. My district takes a balanced view on standardized testing

Agree and strongly agree	76%
Disagree and strongly disagree	24%

Provincial policy impacts school leaders' sense of autonomy and, moreover, whether they feel they are able to work toward goals for their schools in a manner that is right and meaningful for them. As indicated earlier in this report, 82 per cent of survey respondents feel prepared to meet the competencies of the Leadership Quality Standard. Since many school districts have been using previous iterations of the LQS as an orienting device (see Bedard and Mombourquette 2016), the new mandate is generally welcome. Questions of financial cost of completing graduate courses is somewhat of a concern, however.

Provincial funding and program decisions are constraining and a source of moral distress, as noted in this survey comment: "I am constantly caught in the position where what we want to do and know we should do is limited by what we have in the bank." For example, Alberta's legislation to reduce school fees created considerable work for school leaders. Provincial collective agreements, namely compensation for principals, is also seen as inequitable. Principals of both large schools and small schools feel undercompensated for the amount of work they are required to do. This is compounded for school leaders who also have classroom duties, as was previously mentioned, prompting one survey respondent to suggest that teaching loads should be restricted "before additional compensation is required … too much work is being done at home outside regular hours." Another respondent suggested the development of "a leadership collective agreement that school boards have to follow to ensure school leaders are not being overworked." Provincially set limits to teachers' instructional and assigned time was also frequently raised. Unintended consequence of the restrictions meant that some school leaders meticulously recorded teachers' time (eg, to the minute) and, to avoid breaching the allowance, often took on whatever needed to be done. As an example, one principal said, "If you can't find a coach—somebody has to coach. I coached three teams this year." The challenge for one

principal, as stated in a focus group, was "trying to create something meaningful" with timetabling that also does not violate the "instructional hours and assignable time clause." In addition, it became a question of fairness because principals' time is not protected or restricted through the collective agreement. Some said they do not even have time to stop to have lunch, which leads back to the concern about their physical and mental health, workload and the sense of accomplishment, and the overall manageability of the leadership role.

Along similar lines, dealing with issues of teacher professionalism and competency is perceived to involve "arduous" processes. This was frequently noted in focus groups and on the survey, such as the following:

> If a teacher is struggling with their teaching practice and many supports have been provided for them, but they are not fulfilling their responsibilities or obligations to the profession, it is difficult to remove those individuals from the profession. This is a difficult topic, because we want to be sure to fully support our teachers and give them opportunities to improve their practice, but then when consistent poor practice is ongoing, it is an extremely onerous process to remove that teacher from their duties. (Survey respondent)

Two issues arise from this. First, the frequency of this issue raises alarm regarding teachers, and raises the question of how the complexity of their role is negatively impacting them. Second, principals feel that even when they follow due process, the amount of energy that goes into it does not alleviate the problem, and children are ultimately impacted.

Stress from overload is one matter, but the deeper concern from a general professional autonomy viewpoint is that macro policy forces school leaders to give short shrift to the instructional leadership role, having "miniscule" amounts of time to do it as the quote prefacing this storyline indicates.

Collegial Professional Autonomy
Collegial professional autonomy refers to the ability to influence and make decisions on issues that affect the collective in their local environment. A survey respondent wrote, "I sometimes feel torn between my loyalty to the district and the teachers I supervise." While many enjoy strong and "amazing" supports from district leaders, and they want to support district initiatives, they feel there are sometimes too many initiatives and not enough time to fully implement them and see the benefit, or district initiatives are perceived as misaligned with school contexts. School leaders feel compelled to protect their teachers from "initiative fatigue" (focus group participant) that results when district frequently mandate schools to get behind a new idea.

Being able to make decisions for the school is an important aspect of school leaders' professional autonomy. School leaders are sometimes frustrated with top-down decisions, as in these examples:

> The superintendent went out and found an idea and said, "We are going to do this," but what does that look like? What are the expectations? What do we need to see in the classrooms to actually

> satisfy you that this is happening? What's the principals' job? Is it to make that happen? And when it doesn't, what do we do about it, if anything? (Focus group participant)

> There are certain expectations that come down from the board that don't necessarily align with best practice in our school setting … You figure out a way to make everything else fit in, but … you feel it is just not the best use of your time as an administrator. (Focus group participant)

A comment from the survey indicates pressure to conform to ideological biases at the district level:

> They make it clear what they want/don't want even while telling me it is my decision to interpret policy and admin procedures (usually once I provide my interpretation, they tell me why I should interpret differently). (Survey respondent)

Principals who work in alternative schools, such as cyberschools, and those with arrangements that require them to oversee more than one school feel especially mischaracterized according to traditional contexts. They are constantly pulled between wanting to align with the district and knowing that the district requirements or administrative procedures do not make sense for them. Another issue evolves out of administrative requirements, like reporting systems or procedures for documenting learning needs. One survey respondent described a 600-page administrative procedures manual. These elements create work situations that make it difficult for school leaders to authentically engage in instructional leadership.

Policy like centralized budgeting is another area that may impede school leaders' professional autonomy. During a focus group, a principal shared the example of marked funding:

> My staffing was pretty much in place by the time this money showed up … I could have made a lot of use in other areas around supporting children with special needs in the school … Our district has decided it can only be used for staffing … it is constraining to say that I have to put it all there … we talk about differentiation of instruction, but there is no differentiation of schools within a jurisdiction, and that can be constraining as well.

Formulas applied from central office are sometimes perceived to create inequities among schools within districts in areas such as class size, too. Additionally, the desire for school leaders to be "fiscally responsible" to avoid duplication or overlap within the district, and still meet the learning needs in their communities is another area where school leaders sometimes feel tied. Nonetheless, 74 per cent of survey respondents agreed to the statement that their school district is committed to equity that ensures that learning needs of all students are met.

Collaboration was a priority for many school leaders. On the survey, 67 per cent reported that they have sufficient opportunities to work collaboratively with their colleagues if they choose to. Professional learning opportunities provided by the district seem to be in a healthy condition, although there are some areas that suggest school leaders' professional autonomy is in question. At a

negative extreme, one school leader indicated that their district did not schedule time for collaboration, and so they worked it in as best they could. Another was denied a professional learning opportunity, being told they were "hired to be in the school." On the positive end, school leaders believed professional learning opportunities were plentiful, accessible and valuable at both the provincial and district level—so much so that this sometimes resulted in a school with many substitute teachers in the classrooms. One principal in a focus group reported perfect attendance for his staff on only four days over the course of a year. Overall, however, this area of professional autonomy seems to be in a healthy state, with 33 per cent reporting that access to professional development for teachers has improved and 49 per cent reporting no change.

Individual Professional Autonomy

Frostenson (2015) defined *individual professional autonomy* as individuals having jurisdiction over their own practices, such as how they teach or how they lead. Deciding to pursue a formal position in school leadership is an individual choice; control over one's career is a matter of individual professional autonomy. The survey asked respondents to indicate barriers to their pursuit of a leadership position. Overall, the top barriers were the following:

- Not wanting to leave the classroom and/or student learning environment (33 per cent)

- Being an administrator takes too much time (29 per cent)

- Too many responsibilities at home (28 per cent

- Not feeling prepared to take on the multiple responsibilities required to be a successful administrator (28 per cent)

- Don't want to impact good relationships with colleagues (18 per cent)

- Securing a leadership position is easier for men (16 per cent)

- Financial limitations (15 per cent)

Male and female respondents rated some of these barriers differently, as Table 22 shows:

Table 22. Barriers to pursuing school leadership by identity

BARRIER	FEMALE (%)	MALE (%)	OVERALL (%)
Not wanting to leave the classroom	32	37	33
Being an administrator takes too much time	25	35	29
Too many responsibilities at home	30	28	30
Not feeling prepared to take on the multiple responsibilities required to be a successful administrator	27	27	27
Don't want to impact good relationships with colleagues	17	20	18
Securing a leadership position is easier for men	30	0.4	16
Financial limitations	11	21	15

As one can see, school leaders' commitment to students is unequivocal. Both male and female respondents rated "not wanting to leave the classroom" as the top barrier to pursuing leadership. This speaks to school leaders' desire to work directly with children and youth. And while it has been made clear that it is challenging for them to keep up with the demands of their role, some seek the classroom as a space where they have efficacy, as noted in this comment that was cited at the beginning of this section: "At one point I taught a class just to get back to some sense of making a difference."

In both groups, 27 per cent selected "not feeling prepared to take on the multiple responsibilities required to be a successful administrator." There were notable differences between male and female school leaders in how they perceive barriers, however, as shown in Table 23.

Table 23. Top five barriers to pursuing leadership by identity

RANK	FEMALE	%
1	Not wanting to leave the classroom	32
2	Too many responsibilities at home	30
3	Securing a leadership position is easier for men	28
4	Not feeling prepared to take on the multiple responsibilities required to be a successful administrator	27
5	Don't want to impact good relationships with colleagues	17

RANK	MALE	%
1	Not wanting to leave the classroom	37
2	Being an administrator takes too much time	35
3	Too many responsibilities at home	28
4	Not feeling prepared to take on the multiple responsibilities required to be a successful administrator	27
5	Financial limitations	21

Gender issues were most comfortably talked about in the all-female focus groups. Women admitted to delaying formal leadership to raise children. Some acknowledged that their districts had made progress addressing the gender gap, but observations of who occupies system leadership in particular suggests to them that there are still improvements to be made. Furthermore, hesitation to ask for help for fear of compromising perceptions of their competency was raised, pointing to the "glass cliff" that Ryan and Haslam (2005) use to describe the precariousness of leadership when women do get into the role. Some male school leaders said they were aware of women who discounted themselves as being

"too late" in their careers to pursue school leadership opportunities. Thus, for female school leaders, gender may intersect with age.

Survey respondents were also prompted to list other barriers to pursuing leadership positions. By far the most common perception was that district processes were "vague" or "unfair," that decisions "lack transparency," or that favouritism is at play. Comments such as having to follow a "party line" suggest that ideological conflicts get in the way for some. The requirement of a master's degree was entangled in workload issues for this respondent:

> Successful master's completion while teaching seems only possible for teachers with an in-home support structure (spouse/family pick up the domestic slack) allowing for the teacher to do weekend master's work … As a single person, I do not have the support at home to do my master's and still have clean laundry, cooked food, clean home, class pre/marking time etc. This literal lack of time to do everything has held me back from getting my master's.

While gender has a long history in the study of educational leadership (eg, Bierema 2016; Reynolds 2002), the plight of nonattached or unmarried individuals seeking or currently serving in leadership positions has not been touched upon, at least in educational research.

A final point to be made about individual professional autonomy has to do with assistant, associate and vice-principals. There were many comments in the survey suggesting that those who work with principals sometimes feel at odds with their principal colleagues. Opportunities to contribute their ideas are limited, or their ideas are thwarted. Further, despite having good relationships, they do not know "who to go to … to hash out that messiness." Because the survey did not have a separate category for assistant, associate and vice-principals, it is impossible to correlate the qualitative comments with survey data on relevant items.

Compelling Questions to Advance the Research Conversation

1. To what extent do male and female school leaders experience professional autonomy differently?

2. What district and school conditions and/or factors contribute to school leaders fulfilling their goal to be instructional leaders?

3. How can school leaders' work be designed to ensure they have more opportunity to control their work and choose more often what they consider meaningful and legitimate in the realm of instructional leadership?

4. To what extent does the implementation of the Leadership Quality Standard support school leaders' ability to be effective instructional leaders?

THE INTERNALIZATION AND NORMALIZATION OF THE IDEAL WORKER

> *Seeing those bits of success—that is what I call "the addiction." That's what drives us. When you see that little glimmer of hope.*
>
> —*Focus group respondent*

The Ideal Worker is a concept that emerged in the 1950s, when capitalism had begun to take hold (Kanter 1977). Before then, work commonly happened at home, and so the concept or challenge of work–life balance did not exist. With the emphasis on paid labour, work became defined as something that happened outside of the home. With work and home separated, and an increasing concern for productivity brought on by marketization, the ideal worker emerged as someone who sacrifices family for the sake of the job, and keeps domestic affairs confined to the home. This was unproblematic for men, since it was women who were likely to be at home full-time.

In this zeitgeist, workers privately compare themselves to their coworkers, and self-assess their performance to match the pace and production of others. Breaks and vacations portend laziness. While this might seem an exaggeration, an article in the *Huffington Post* (Abedi 2014) cited research showing that 26 per cent of Canadians do not use their paid vacation days; 40 per cent do not take vacation because they have "too much work to do" (pgph 3), and 13 per cent simply do not want a vacation. At the same time, the article cites research that found that 93 per cent of Canadians think it is important to take a vacation to be happy. So why the disconnect? From a broader society level, the Ideal Worker is the modern-day sorcerer who insidiously brings us into a state of overwhelm (Schulte 2014). We are socialized into overworking as the standard and as a sign of success, but at the expense of health and overall contentment.

In 1991 Jevne and Zingle wrote, "We know teaching is a profession which chronically invites individuals and systems to overextend. We don't appear to know how to say 'No!'" (p 239). Thirty years later, conditions have not changed. School leaders are tirelessly there "for the kids."

Repeating the survey results on workload, instructional leadership or constraints, for example, is likely unnecessary at this point. The picture is clear: work–life balance is an illusion for school leaders. But more alarming, perhaps, is the uneasy resignation to this, and the perceived lack of a comfortable or easy remedy. Being "crazy-busy" is the new normal.

Communication technology is the handmaiden of the Ideal Worker and this crazy-busyness. The social imperative to remain connected is subtly reinforced through strategies such as autocalls during the dinner hour, and radio and television programs that encourage listeners and viewers to register an opinion by phoning, e-mailing, posting or "following." The 21st century is indeed a participatory culture (Jenkins 2006) and, as Kessler (2019) argues, "developments in big data, AI

[Artificial Intelligence], and virtual/AR [Augmented Reality] will not only expand the potential for our engagement, they will also obligate us to engage in new ways" (p 53). The ubiquity and expansion of communication modalities makes demands of its subjects. For instance, mobile access to the job makes it easy for school leaders to respond to communications even when away from the building; school leaders ensure that they are never truly absent. Except for the rare examples of school leaders who made conscious decisions to rein in emails or focus on their physical health, school leaders are doing everything they can (and more) for the sake of their students and teachers. The adoption— consciously or not—of the Ideal Worker in the realm of school leadership is a territory that has not been trodden in the research. It is a concept worth considering.

"The addiction," as noted in the quote at the start of this storyline, is an apt description. School leaders search for the "nuggets" in the most trying times. For example,

> At the end of the day sometimes I have [more than 1.5 hours] drive home, and I look across the prairies and I go, you know that was a really great day. We had some drama here and a screaming there, but look at all the other stuff that happened.

School leaders epitomize optimism, but they also say, "You only have so much of yourself to give" (focus group participant). The paradox of knowing this and yet continuing to give more is a sign of the Ideal Worker. Adopting an apologetic tone or rationalizing that children matter more when talking about their overworked lives is symptomatic. Further, the Ideal Worker is a moralized concept. Consider these focus group comments:

> I almost hate to say my piece because it seems so small in comparison.

> Now I just sound like I'm feeling sorry for myself.

> I still feel that passion and I may sound like I am complaining a little about some of the things that are going on in the school and in the profession. I still do feel that sense of wonder through the eyes of a child when they learn a new concept … it's just that sometimes it is nice to be able to vent a little bit about the challenges in the profession.

There are implications for the health of individuals, but also to the health of the profession. Recruitment of principals was noted as a concern in a focus group. The "career vice-principal" is apparently emerging. Discouraged by the expectations of the job, vice-principals do not seek promotion. Vacancy in the principalship is one concern that arises from this, but there is also the worry that aspiring leaders will not have opportunities to get into the succession chain, and the generation of new ideas from creative and passionate educators will be snuffed out. This is a storyline the teaching profession does not want to be written.

This storyline of the Ideal Worker is not intended to be apocalyptic or to disparage school leaders for their bottomless and endless giving. School leaders in this study were professionally forthcoming and

arguably vulnerable about life in the dilemmatic space of school leaders. Moral distress, a term that they may not choose, is an experience that should not be masked. And if the data do not lie, there will be readers nodding their heads and struck by the veracity of this narrative. This research report is a clarion call and, above all else, an articulation of gratitude for and thanks to the school leaders of the province of Alberta.

Compelling Questions to Advance the Research Conversation

1. What contributes to a culture of authentic distributed leadership? What entrenches hierarchical thinking? (Eg, "I'm the last stop.")

2. How can professional autonomy of both system and school leaders be protected and enhanced?

3. What can be learned from other professions regarding the ability to advocate for financial and other support?

4. What are the self-caring practices of school leaders?

5. To what extent do school leaders feel they have "permission" to engage in self-care?

Pathways of Support for School Leaders

Unequivocally the participants in this study are exemplars of modelling professional learning and growth. They are committed to improving and honing their art. They are highly appreciative of opportunities in the form of workshops and conferences sponsored by the Association, and they seek out learning in many other ways. Notably, they benefit from learning from each other, and they crave more opportunities to do so.

Given the nature of challenges, it is no surprise that they want to learn more about things like mental health, how technology impacts students' mental health and how to address exceptional learning needs in increasingly complex and diverse classrooms. They also want more support helping teachers who are struggling in adverse conditions to hold up their professional mandate, as well as how to work effectively with adversarial parents. They want continued support in competencies related to the Leadership Quality Standard.

Study participants were forthcoming with pathways that can continue to support them in their leadership roles, as well as new areas for the Association to consider:

- Support group for principals' mental and emotional health
- Mentorship with colleagues from other school districts, including the following:
  - Networks and/or cohorts for consulting with others across the province
  - Cohorts organized by career stage (eg, first-/second-year school leaders)
  - Cohorts for learning consultants and other school leaders in nontraditional roles
- Bursaries or other forms of financial support to attend professional learning and to take courses
- No-registration-fee learning opportunities (eg, Leadership Essentials conference)
- Mentorship specifically for new and continuing assistant, associate and vice-principals
- Leadership discussion board
- Job shadowing
- Flexible work days
- Supports for LGBTQ staff
- Supports for Catholic educators
- Summer training sessions
- Workshops to support the First Nations, Métis and Inuit competency

- Workshops on managerial tasks (eg, timetabling)

- Workshops on how to manage stress

- Website that serves as one-stop shopping for all leadership opportunities

- Research; access to research/readings

- Resources to support new leaders (online)

- Additional locations for hosting workshops (accommodate those outside Edmonton)

A specific question was asked about programs the Association could sponsor or support that might help women to further develop their leadership skills. Table 24 shows the results.

Table 24. Supports for women in leadership

Establishment of mentoring networks connecting female administrators and/or female Association leaders across the province	64%
A summer conference training session for women in leadership	50%
Sessions at the ATAs uLead conference that focus on gender and leadership	48%
Supporting and publishing the work of teachers studying women in leadership in Alberta	29%
A standing committee on the status of women	22%
The development of a corps of teacher volunteers who would work with locals to support women in leadership	17%

Final Question, Final Answer

We are being asked to do it all with very little and it's reached a tipping point.

—*Survey respondent*

There's so much on my plate … I have been in a leadership role for [x] years and I am about done.

—*Survey respondent*

The conclusion to this research report may be best articulated through one question and one answer:

Question: What will be done?

Answer: Something must be done.

The key message from the data in this study is that the current state of school leadership in the teaching profession in Alberta is, as these participants have stated, not healthy or sustainable. School leaders are not waving, but drowning.

Endnotes

1. "Not Waving but Drowning" is a poem by Stevie Smith first published in 1957. See reference to Smith (1983).

2. *School Act*, RSA 2000, c S-3. Available at www.qp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/s03.pdf (accessed July 16, 2019).

3. *An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances* came into effect on December 15, 2017. Available at www.assembly.ab.ca/ISYS/LADDAR_files/docs/bills/bill/legislature_29/session_3/20170302_bill-024.pdf (accessed July 16, 2019).

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Appendix A

SECTION I: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Your current assignment

    ☐ School administrator only ☐ Combined classroom and administrative duties ☐ Central office

    ☐ Other (e.g. alternative school, cyber-school) (please specify)

2. Type of school authority in which you are employed

    ☐ Public ☐ Separate ☐ Francophone

3. How do you identify?

    ☐ Male ☐ Not listed

    ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to answer

4. Your age

    ☐ 25 and younger ☐ 41–45 years old ☐ 56-60 years old

    ☐ 26–30 years old ☐ 46–50 years old ☐ 61-65 years old

    ☐ 31–35 years old ☐ 51-55 years old ☐ Over 65

    ☐ 36–40 years old

5. Your overall teaching experience, including current year

    ☐ 1 – 4 years ☐ 10 – 14 years ☐ 20 – 24 years

    ☐ 5 – 9 years ☐ 15 – 19 years ☐ Over 24 years

6. How long have you been in a formal school leadership role?

    ☐ Less than a year ☐ 3 to 5 years ☐ 7 to 10 years

    ☐ 1 to 3 years ☐ 5 to 7 years ☐ Over 10 years

7. Teachers' convention that you attend

☐ Mighty Peace   ☐ Northeast

☐ North Central   ☐ Greater Edmonton

☐ Central East   ☐ Central Alberta

☐ Palliser   ☐ Calgary City

☐ South West   ☐ Southeast

SECTION II: THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

8. Use the scale below to indicate the degree to which the following conditions have changed this school year compared with last.

1—Significantly worsened   2—Somewhat worsened   3—No change
4—Somewhat improved   5—Significantly improved

a.	The size of classes in the school	1	2	3	4	5
b.	The composition of classes in the school	1	2	3	4	5
c.	Support for students with special needs	1	2	3	4	5
d.	Access to computers and other digital technologies	1	2	3	4	5
e.	Access to print resources and textbooks for students	1	2	3	4	5
f.	Access to professional development for teachers	1	2	3	4	5
g.	Resources available for field trips	1	2	3	4	5
h.	Requirements of teachers to supervise and undertake other assigned tasks	1	2	3	4	5
i.	Students overall readiness to learn	1	2	3	4	5
j.	Aggression in the school and/or school community	1	2	3	4	5
k.	Working relationship with parents/guardians	1	2	3	4	5
l.	Access that students and families have to mental health services	1	2	3	4	5
m.	Expectations to report student progress to parents	1	2	3	4	5

n.	Resources and supports for First Nations, Métis and Inuit foundational knowledge	1	2	3	4	5
o.	Support for English-language learners (English as an Additional Language)	1	2	3	4	5
p.	Number of students who live in poverty	1	2	3	4	5

9. Thinking about the current school year, to what extent do you agree with each of the following statements:

1—Strongly disagree   2—Disagree   3—Not sure   4—Agree   5—Strongly agree

a.	I work in a supportive environment which enables me to help our students achieve their potential	1	2	3	4	5
b.	My school leadership role(s) are clearly defined	1	2	3	4	5
c.	I have sufficient time to complete my role as an instructional leader	1	2	3	4	5
d.	I feel my workload is reasonable	1	2	3	4	5
e.	I receive sufficient support to manage my leadership role	1	2	3	4	5
f.	I have sufficient opportunities to work collaboratively with my colleagues if I choose to	1	2	3	4	5
g.	I feel like I am encouraged to continually improve my teaching skills	1	2	3	4	5
h.	I often feel frustrated when I think about solving problems in my role	1	2	3	4	5
i.	I often feel emotionally exhausted when I think about going to my job	1	2	3	4	5
j.	I can easily seek advice from others in school leadership if I choose to	1	2	3	4	5
k.	I often feel like I am able to do what I know is the right thing to do in my leadership role	1	2	3	4	5
l.	I feel prepared to meet the competencies outlined in the Leadership Quality Standard	1	2	3	4	5

10. The following questions assess the extent to which you feel your school district supports your work as a school leader. Using the scale below, indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements:

1—Strongly Disagree   2—Somewhat disagree   3—Somewhat agree   5—Strongly Agree

a.	My school district has a high level of trust in its school leaders	1	2	3	4
b.	My school district has a commitment to equity that ensures that the learning needs of all students are met	1	2	3	4
c.	My school district makes it a priority to support inclusion	1	2	3	4
d.	My school district is planning strategically for all the future growth in the complexity and diversity of classrooms	1	2	3	4
e.	My school district understands and responds to how digital technologies impact the heath and wellbeing of students	1	2	3	4
f.	My school district takes a balanced view regarding the role of standardized testing in assessing school performance	1	2	3	4
g.	My school district understands and responds to the impacts of digital technologies on school leaders' workload	1	2	3	4

11. What are one or two topics, questions, or issues that you believe should be researched in support of school leadership in Alberta? (Note: Thing of "big ideas" such as understanding the effects of inequality or trauma on students/staff, rather than more immediate functions such as understanding of specific policy or regulations). (Verbal response question)

12. What kind of support(s) have you received when pursuing a school leadership position (select all that apply)?

☐ Encouragement from my colleagues   ☐ Encouragement from my family and friends

☐ Access to cohort groups and training for leadership positions   ☐ Mentorship opportunities through my school or school board

☐ Financial support to further my post secondary education   ☐ Mentorship opportunities through my local or provincial Association

☐ Other—Write in (Required)_____

13. When pursuing a position as a school leader, which of the following barriers did you encounter? (select all that apply)

☐ Being an administrator takes too much time Not wanting to leave the classroom and/or student learning environment

☐ Being discouraged from applying to become an administrator

☐ Don't want to impact good relationships with colleagues

☐ Financial limitations

☐ Lack of support from my colleagues

☐ Lack of support from my family or friends

☐ Not feeling prepared to take ono the multiple responsibilities required to be a successful administrator

☐ Securing a leadership position is easier for men

☐ Securing a leadership position is easier for women

☐ Too many responsibilities at home

☐ Uncomfortable with having to supervise adults

☐ None of the above

☐ Other—Write In (Required) _____

14. Alberta teachers have been involved in a sustained effort to improve teaching and learning conditions in Alberta schools. The following question will assist the Association in planning future advocacy and political action. Using the scale below, indicate your level of agreement with the following statement:

1—Strongly Disagree   2—Somewhat disagree   3—Somewhat agree   5—Strongly Agree

| I feel constrained in my ability to do what I know is the right thing to do because of factors outside of my control | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

15. How often do you feel "caught in the middle" or constrained from doing what is the right thing to do because of factors outside of your control?

☐ Once a year

☐ Several times a year

☐ Several times a month

☐ Several times a week

☐ Several times a day

☐ Several times an hour

16. What constraints do you experience as a school leader, if any, that make you unable to take appropriate action or do what you know to be right? (Verbal response question)

17. Are there any other opinions, comments or questions that you would like to share with your Association? (Verbal response question)

18. What kinds of programs could the Association sponsor and support that might help women to further develop their leadership skills (check all that apply)?

  ☐ Establishment of mentoring networks connecting female administrators and/or female Association leaders across the province

  ☐ A summer conference training session for women in leadership

  ☐ Sessions at the ATA's uLead conference that focus on gender and leadership

  ☐ Supporting and publishing the work of teachers studying women in leadership in Alberta

  ☐ A standing committee on the status of women

  ☐ The development of a corps of teacher volunteers who would work with Locals to support women in leadership

The Alberta
Teachers' Association