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Contact: Diane.Shinn@dc.gov, 202-727-8991

Survey: DCPS Principals Are More Stressed Than National Counterparts

Respondents are troubled by one-year contracts, lack of control over funding, burdensome paperwork, and one-size-fits-all promotion requirements

WASHINGTON, September 4, 2018 – Many D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) principals—who are worried about keeping their jobs, want more control over school funding, and have to squeeze mountains of paperwork into jam-packed days—are more stressed more often than their national peers, according to a survey released today by the Office of the District of Columbia Auditor.

The Auditor surveyed 108 elementary, middle and high school principals to dig deeper into graduation-related issues highlighted in the Alvarez & Marsal audit conducted for the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. In January the State Board of Education (SBOE) asked ODCA to examine “the institutional conditions and culture that have allegedly created an education system that prioritizes appearances and outcomes data over genuine improvement.”

The survey was conducted by Untold Research with 47 principals participating, a 43% response rate. The report, including cross tabulations and an appendix with topline responses, can be found on the [ODCA website](#).

While 20% of principals nationally said in a similar survey by MetLife they feel under “great stress,” almost every day, 54% of the D.C. principals in the new survey said they feel that way. “The District has invested enormous resources in time and money to improve educational outcomes and we hope policymakers look carefully at the survey results,” said Kathy Patterson, D.C. Auditor. “Principals are key to student success and those surveyed have serious concerns about the pressure we’re putting on them today.”

The undue stress could be why two-thirds (67%) say they are “very likely” (40%) or “fairly likely” (27%) to leave their current principal role within DCPS in the next five years and seek a similar position elsewhere. When probed, reasons for this fell into four main, but overlapping categories: lack of support from the Central Office; lack of job security; lack of a work/life balance; and, overall, unrealistic expectations from DCPS leadership.

Funding, but no control

Some 72% of the respondents cited funding as their greatest concern: not the amount per se but, rather, that they are not able to allocate funds for priority needs at their individual schools. Seven in 10 principals say they want more control over their school’s finances. For example, one principal reported that he is required to have a full-time Spanish teacher on staff when a reading specialist position would better serve his students. This principal feels he could fully fund all the programs to make his students successful if he was given funding to distribute as he saw fit instead of having to abide by pre-determined expenditures.

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In a written response included in the ODCA report, Interim Chancellor Amanda Alexander said, “DCPS is committed to ensuring that our principals receive the supports they need to be successful and that our work as a district is informed by school leader voice and feedback.”

Graduation and promotion requirements

By and large, principals feel the graduation and promotion requirements should not be one-size-fits-all and DCPS needs to consult with individual principals to determine appropriate and realistic goals, taking into consideration the school’s population, resources, and needs.

The earlier Alvarez and Marsal audit concluded that DCPS teachers and school leaders face “institutional and administrative pressures” that contributed to “a culture in which passing and graduating students is expected, sometimes in contradiction to standards of academic rigor and integrity.” Patterson noted that the DCPS principal survey, including elementary and middle as well as high schools, “shows that the same kind of pressure flagged by Alvarez & Marsal is systemic throughout DCPS.” OSSE is monitoring DCPS’s response to the audit findings.

One-year contract consternation

Another concern was the impact of one-year employment contracts, a vestige of the D.C. Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority, the “control board” brought in when D.C. was close to bankruptcy. Experienced educational professionals say it takes between 4-7 years to change a school and the 1-year contracts make it nearly impossible for leaders to bring about meaningful change.

Richard Jackson, president of The Council of School Officers (CSO) issued a statement upon the release of the survey, urging the Mayor and DCPS leadership to:

- Implement the findings of this study by completing a new principal contract that would provide adequate and equitable school-based funding
- Demonstrate a commitment to the retention and support of principals through providing individualized professional development
- Support and standardize the implementation of three-year minimum principal contracts.

“These systemic adjustments would be an outstanding first step and assure the students and residents of the District, DCPS’s commitment to actual school reform and growth,” Jackson said.

Among the report’s other findings are that:

- Nearly all (91%) feel they spend far too much time writing reports and doing other paperwork.
- A majority (61%) of principals would like to have more control over the curriculum and instruction at their schools, particularly at the high school (83%) and elementary school (71%) levels, as well as have more control when it comes to removing teachers (54%).
- Two-thirds (67%) of the respondents find the Insight surveys and responses useful in creating a strong learning environment. The Instructional Culture Insight survey is used by more than 1,300 schools across the country—including DCPS—to improve their talent management practices and build schools that are exceptional places for teaching and learning.

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