UC Berkeley
LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

IMPACT REPORT

SUSTAINING PRINCIPAL RESILIENCE: EARLY INVESTIGATIONS
IN UNDERSTANDING PRINCIPAL STRESS AND SUPPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researchers have turned attention toward principal turnover and its impact, especially in hard-to-staff schools. For example, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Learning Policy Institute recently issued a report indicating that nearly one in five principals leave their position every year (Levin, Bradley, & Scott, 2019). To inform the issue with the perspective of practicing principals, the Principal Leadership Institutes at UC Berkeley and UCLA, with support from the Stuart Foundation, launched a state-wide initiative entitled the Change Maker project, to support the well-being and improve retention of alumni principals. Change Makers includes a small cohort-based model of professional learning that focuses on reflection, networking, and content related to understanding well-being. Then in June 2020, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project developed a first-of-its-kind survey focused on what erodes and supports the resilience of school leaders. Items and questions were informed by the content from the first year and a half of the project.

With nearly 200 responses, survey results indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has magnified stressors and increased overall stress levels for principals across demographic groups. Interestingly, principals employed in their current district for three to five years reported significantly higher changes in stress compared to those who were employed for one to two years in their current district. Leaders of color and multilingual leaders reported higher levels of stress before and during the pandemic compared to their White and monolingual counterparts. When seeking support, principals turn to peers and colleagues, mentors, and friends more frequently than supervisors and other options. Length of tenure appears to correlate with higher feelings of connectedness to school site/ district as well as higher levels of feelings of efficacy. However, responses suggest that high school–level principals with enrollments of 1000 and higher experience feelings of lower self-efficacy. The Principal Resilience Survey suggests that the experience of stress and burnout, as well as effective support strategies, are areas where critical investigation is needed in order to address the broader issues of leader attrition and retention.

Graduates of the Leadership Support Program at UC Berkeley and UCLA participate in Change Makers Convening at UC Berkeley, funded by the Stuart Foundation

BACKGROUND

Researchers have turned attention toward principal turnover and its impact, especially in hard-to-staff schools. In the 2016–2017 school year, the national average tenure of a principal was only four years. Thirty-five percent of principals had worked at their current work site for two school years and only 11% of principals served the same school for more than 10 years (Goldring & Taie, 2018; Levin & Bradley, 2019). Furthermore, in high-poverty schools, the annual turnover rate was 21% (Goldring & Taie, 2018, p. 3). In 2019, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Learning Policy Institute issued a report indicating that nearly one in five principals leave their position every year (Levin, Bradley, & Scott, 2019). In a study conducted by the Learning Policy Institute, Levin, Bradley, and Scott (2019) found that factors such as "inadequate preparation and professional development, poor working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of decision-making authority, and high-stakes accountability policies" all contribute to the high turnover rate. In 2017, the Principal Leadership Institutes at UC Berkeley and UCLA, with support from the Stuart Foundation, launched a state-wide initiative entitled the Change Maker project to support the well-being and improve retention of school principals. Operating in two regional hubs (Bay Area and Los Angeles),

Change Makers has supported principals who are in their third through tenth year in their roles as school leaders by facilitating their engagement in ongoing professional growth and personal self-care.

In 2020, the global health pandemic and state budget reductions, as well as social and political unrest, provided a unique context for understanding issues of leader efficacy and attrition. Thus, in June the Change Maker project decided to develop a first-of-its-kind survey focused on what erodes and supports the resilience of school leaders.[1] The general purpose of the survey was to obtain feedback from a broad group of alumni and other practicing school principals based on the lived experiences of Change Maker participants. The survey also served as program feedback, as 73% of the nearly 200 respondents were graduates of either Berkeley or UCLA PLI. Seventy percent of respondents identified as female, 44% of respondents spoke another language other than English, and 52% were leaders of color (Black, Latinx, Asian American, Mixed Race, or Other).

SURVEY OVERVIEW

Open to all who served as school principals in California during the 2019–2020 school year, the Principal Resilience Survey was designed to identify significant stressors and means of professional support as well as to measure feelings of connectedness, efficacy (self- and district-level), and professional quality of life. Split into five sections, the survey also asked participants to evaluate their responses both prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during it. It used metrics including Likert scales (range of 1 to 5) and open-text responses. While anonymous, the survey also collected significant demographic information in regard to participant background, credentialing process, and current work environment to better understand how principal resilience is distributed across personal and environmental factors within specific contexts and career trajectories.

In order to interpret these responses, we examined the descriptive statistics of the data and conducted an independent samples t-test and multiple regression analyses on SPSS. The descriptive statistics were used to better understand the characteristics of the dataset, such as average responses and demographic breakdowns; the independent samples t-test was used to compare the averages of the variables; and multiple regression was used to analyze the associations between certain demographic factors and the measures at focus.
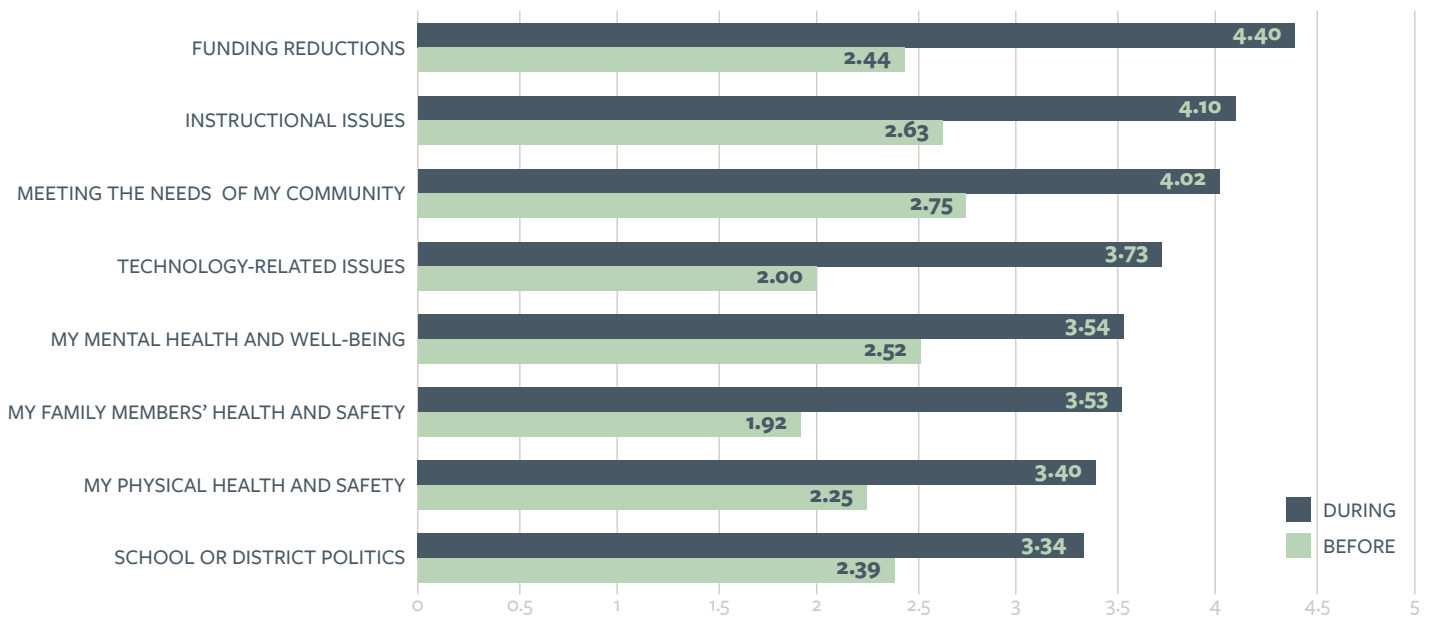
KEY FINDINGS

The pandemic has increased overall stress levels for all demographic groups. Prior to the pandemic, respondents indicated that leading stressors were "meeting the needs of my community," with an average score of 2.75; "instructional issues," with an average score of 2.63; and "my mental health and well-being," with an average response of 2.52 out of 5.

During the pandemic, two of the top stressors remained the same, but at elevated levels. These were "meeting the needs of my community," with an average response of 4.40; followed by "instructional issues," with an average response of 4.10. The third highest stressor, "funding reductions," had an average response of 4.02. Some principals elaborated on these stressors in open-text responses, stating that "funding reductions were extremely stressful as we had to process laying people off midyear," and "instructional issues are what keeps me up at night. Knowing that so many students missed so much instruction makes me stressed for next year." Another change of note is that "my family members' health and safety" moved to the top eight stressors during the pandemic. These responses present an interesting contrast, as two stressors ("meeting the needs of my community" and "instructional issues") remained constant, and issues of "funding reductions" superseded "my mental health and well-being" during the pandemic. Figure 1 provides a comparison of the top eight stressors before and during the pandemic by average response.
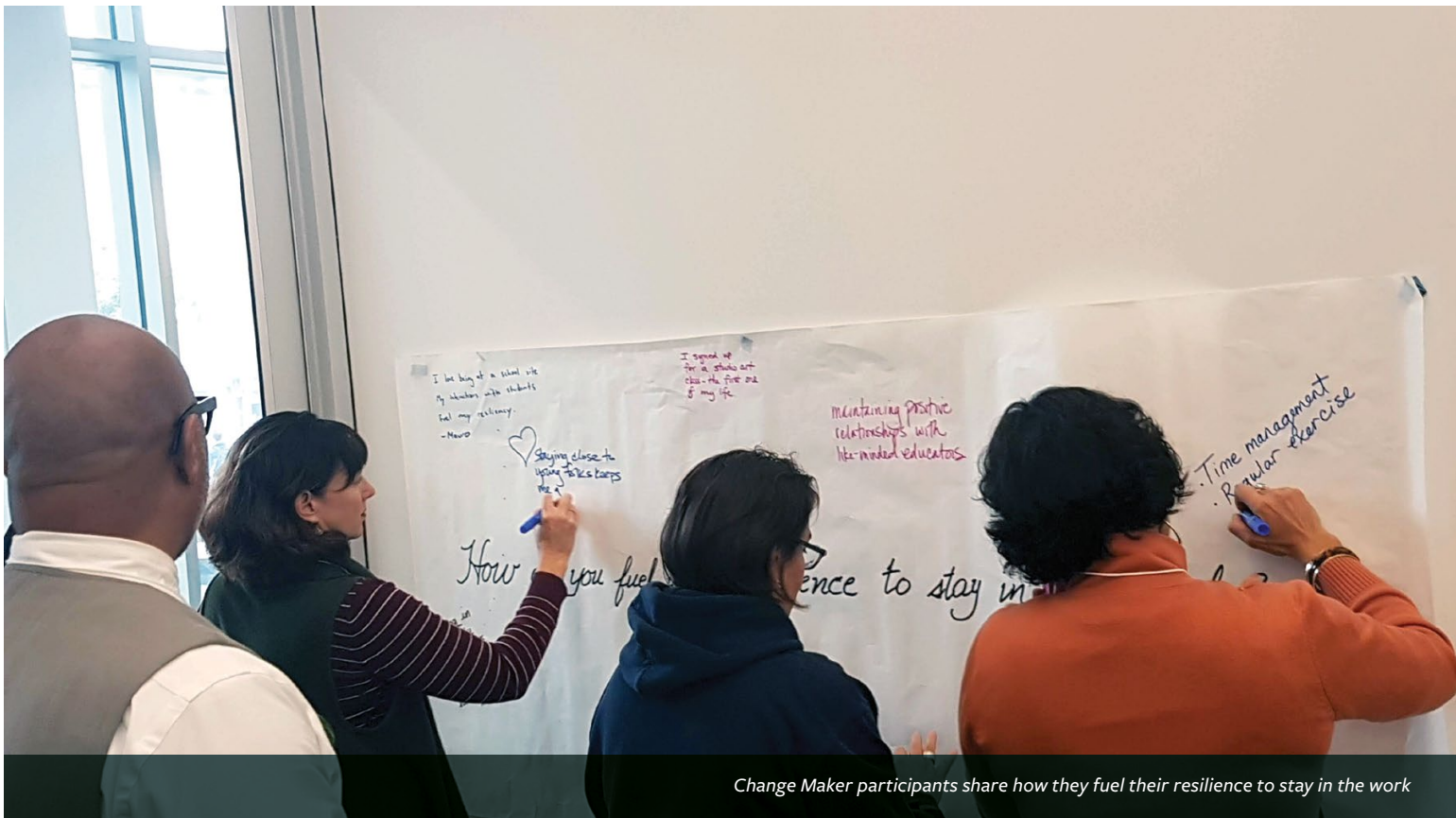
Change Maker participants share how they fuel their resilience to stay in the work

FIGURE 1: TOP EIGHT REPORTED STRESSORS BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC

Stressor	During	Before
FUNDING REDUCTIONS	4.40	2.44
INSTRUCTIONAL ISSUES	4.10	2.63
MEETING THE NEEDS OF MY COMMUNITY	4.02	2.75
TECHNOLOGY-RELATED ISSUES	3.73	2.00
MY MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	3.54	2.52
MY FAMILY MEMBERS' HEALTH AND SAFETY	3.53	1.92
MY PHYSICAL HEALTH AND SAFETY	3.40	2.25
SCHOOL OR DISTRICT POLITICS	3.34	2.39

High ratings of multiple stressors emphasize the personal, managerial, and systemic issues school leaders contend with. As one principal indicated, "My mental health has been tested this school year with so many difficult situations that have arisen. The pandemic has only deepened my concern for myself. Honestly . . . it's the first year I've thought about leaving the profession."

Overall results also suggest that the pandemic has spiked levels of stress among all school leaders. Figure 2 illustrates the significant shift in the levels of stress, where average stress levels went from 2.23 out of 5 before the pandemic to 3.40 during the pandemic. This represents a 52% increase in the levels of stress from before the pandemic to during the pandemic, displaying the significant role that the pandemic has played in adding to the stress levels of school leaders.

> Outwardly, I am considered a strong, courageous and optimistic leader. However, at times, I wear many masks. This is not always visible. When removed, oftentimes, I feel vulnerable, isolated and overwhelmed. There are also unintended consequences that impact me both personally and professionally. This includes, at times becoming a workaholic to get it all done and unintentionally alienating my family in the process. This leads to feelings of, "Is it worth it?"

> I am exploring the need for an *Espacio Sano*, (a sane space). This is an emerging concept in my research project. It is defined as a place where school leaders can openly engage in using testimonios (storytelling) and attend to personal and professional self-care so that we can fortify each other to be social justice leaders.

Reflections by Change Makers on leadership challenges and resilience-building strategies

FIGURE 2: DENSITY OF STRESSORS BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC
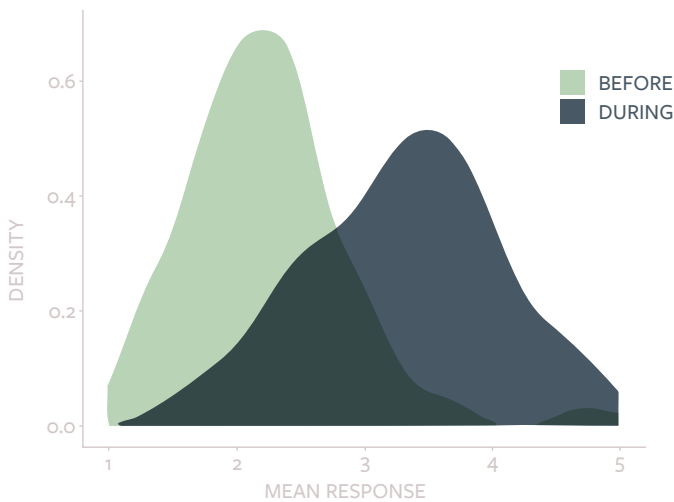
The disaggregation of the data by specific demographic groups indicates that certain groups of leaders experience more stress than others—both before and during the pandemic. Significant findings also emerged when data was disaggregated by years of tenure. Across the board, we saw a consistent pattern in which principals who have been working for a three to five year period in the role, at that district, or at the school experienced higher levels of stress than those who had been employed as a principal, at the district, or at the school for one to two years or six or more years.

For example, multiple regression analyses found that those who have been employed as a principal for three to five years had significantly higher levels of stress (average rating of 2.47) before the pandemic, compared to those who had worked as principal for one to two years (average rating of 2.18). Furthermore, we found that principals who had been employed at their current district for three to five years continued to have significantly higher levels of stress (average rating of 3.52) during the pandemic than those who had been employed at their current district for one to two years (average rating of 3.02). These results, when calculated in percentages, indicate that principals with three to five years of experience had 13% higher stress levels prior to the pandemic than those with one to two years of experience and 17% more during the pandemic.

Additionally, our analyses found that multilingual leaders reported significantly higher levels of average stress before the pandemic (average rating of 2.34) compared to monolingual leaders (average rating of 2.12). Furthermore, multilingual leaders continued to display significantly higher levels of average stress during the pandemic (average rating of 3.45), when compared to their monolingual counterparts (average rating of 3.17), and leaders of color also

demonstrated significantly higher levels of average stress during the pandemic (average rating of 3.43) compared to White leaders (average rating of 3.16).

Principals were also asked to rate commonly available supports on a Likert scale (1–5 range). In the area of professional support, we found that respondents turn to peers and colleagues (4.24 out of 5), mentors (4.01), and friends (3.89) more frequently than supervisors (3.29) and other options. Figure 3 provides a ranked list of average levels of professional support usage.

> PRINCIPALS WITH 3–5 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE HAD 13% HIGHER STRESS LEVELS PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC THAN THOSE WITH 1–2 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE AND 17% MORE DURING THE PANDEMIC.

It is as if I have a ton of things half done, spinning tops that I have to balance and try not to let fall. Part of my reflection is that I tend to get like this, tons of projects start and I almost become paralyzed by unscheduled time. I am starting to see and value having more things scheduled, even this on my calendar to tell me to write right now!
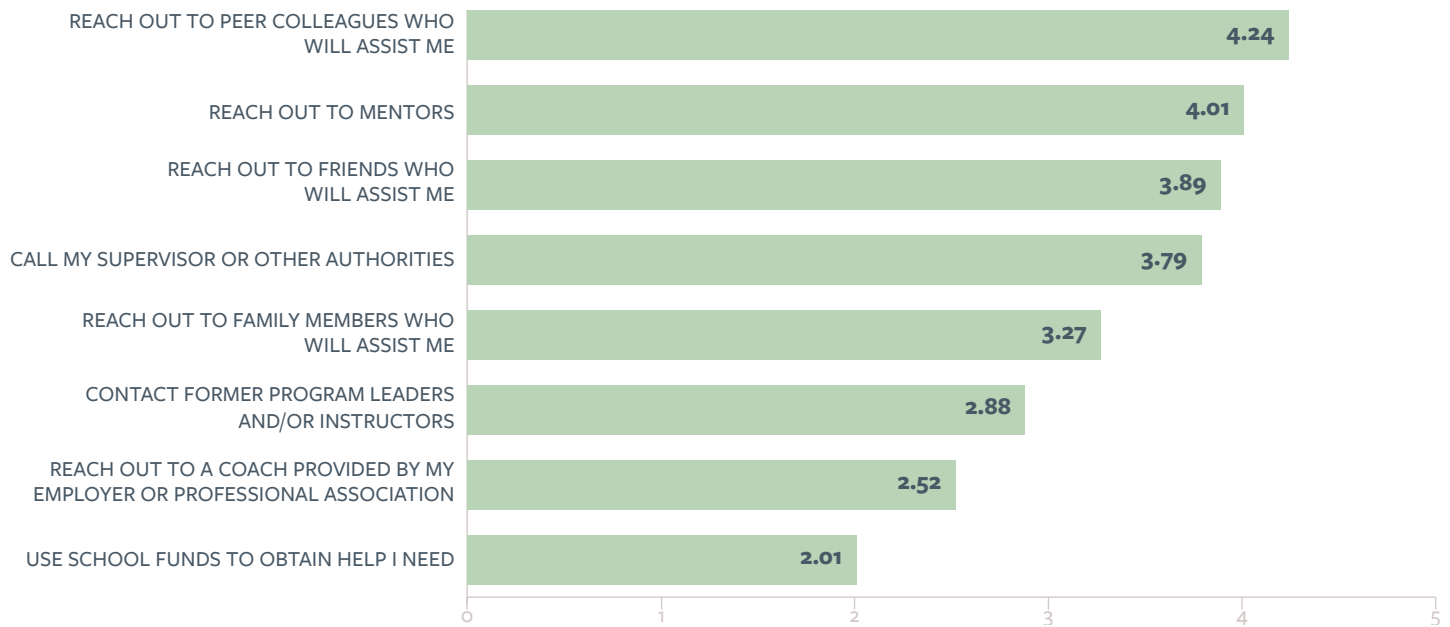
How are you a community leader?

Something I recognize like, I came in [to] education... wanting to be a part of like every single movement. And also at one point someone just pushed me and said, education is your movement and you got to be committed to that. Like health care will fall in line, all these other things will, education is your movement.

Additional reflections by Change Maker participants

Sitting in my office, I wonder if there's a point at which I [will] feel I've got the hang of this, or if every day I will feel as unsettled and ineffective. At the end of days like today, thoughts rush into my mind about things I should try, people I need to follow-up with, and additional concerns that I have, and all of them often recede from my memory as quickly as they came, like the last particles of a wave fizzling in the sand. This stands in stark contrast to the organizational system I planned to employ just 6 weeks ago. The most frustrating part of where things stand for me is the predictability of it all.

In this context, critical resiliency was not about my capacity to adapt to a (racist) environment; it was about my capacity to change an environment to be less racist through my leadership and protection of students and families who needed it most.

FIGURE 3: REPORTED USE OF PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Category	Value
REACH OUT TO PEER COLLEAGUES WHO WILL ASSIST ME	4.24
REACH OUT TO MENTORS	4.01
REACH OUT TO FRIENDS WHO WILL ASSIST ME	3.89
CALL MY SUPERVISOR OR OTHER AUTHORITIES	3.79
REACH OUT TO FAMILY MEMBERS WHO WILL ASSIST ME	3.27
CONTACT FORMER PROGRAM LEADERS AND/OR INSTRUCTORS	2.88
REACH OUT TO A COACH PROVIDED BY MY EMPLOYER OR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION	2.52
USE SCHOOL FUNDS TO OBTAIN HELP I NEED	2.01

Participants reported lower rates of using district resources, including funds or appointed coaches as well as former program leaders and/or instructors. In reflecting on what has changed since the pandemic, one principal reported that "I only reach out to my fellow principals. It has brought us such growth! I feel my district support is too overwhelmed right now."

Length of tenure appears to significantly relate to higher feelings of relational and community connectedness to school site/district as well as higher levels of feelings of efficacy. For connectedness, principals who had worked at the same school for six or more years (average rating of 4.54) reported significantly higher rates of connectedness than those who had been employed at the district for one to two years (average rating of 4.19). Similarly, principals who had been employed as a principal for six or more years (average rating of 4.41) rated higher in connectedness

than those employed at the same school or as a principal for one to two years (average rating of 4.23). Despite these significant differences, the overall rating for levels of connectedness was relatively high across the board.

In terms of self-efficacy, principals who have worked at the same school (and therefore district) for six or more years had higher levels of self-efficacy (average rating of 4.30) than those who had been employed at the district for one to two years (average rating of 3.79). Additionally, those who had been employed as a principal for six or more years (average rating of 4.15) also displayed significantly higher levels of self-efficacy than those who had been employed as a principal and at the school for one to two years (average rating of 3.82). However, responses suggest that high school–level principals (and in turn, principals of schools with a larger number of students and stakeholders) experience feelings of lower self-efficacy.

Change Makers engage in cross-campus round-table discussions about how their colleagues' reflections resonate with their own experiences as leaders
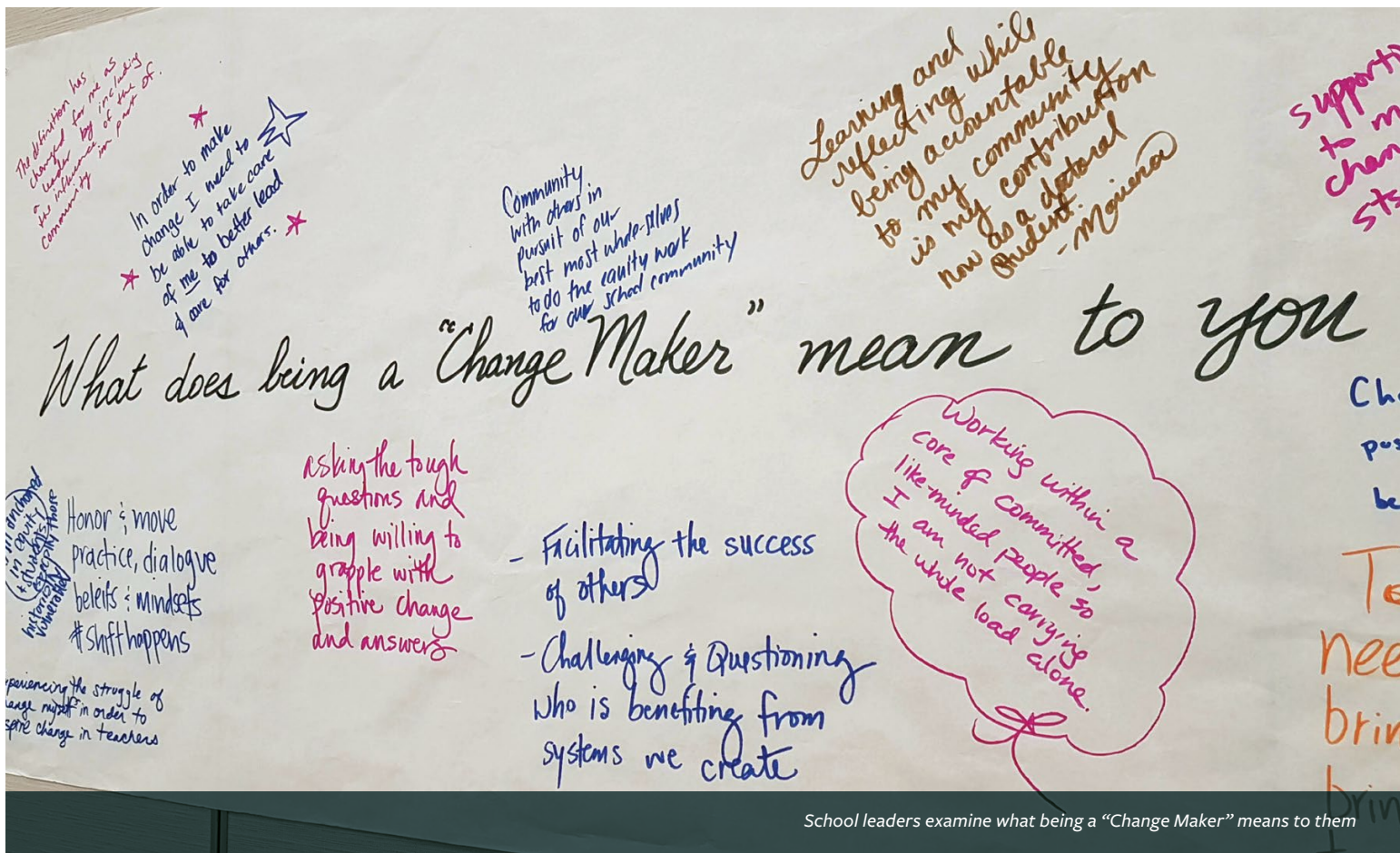
School leaders examine what being a "Change Maker" means to them

NEXT STEPS

The Principal Resilience Survey suggests that the work of a school principal is stressful across demographic groups including race, gender, and school composition. Additionally, specific groups of leaders, such as multilingual leaders, leaders of color, and those in the three to five–year tenure length, experience even higher stress. More investigation is needed to more deeply understand the results in this report. Finding ways to effectively support principals is critical to reducing burnout and attrition. For example, how can multilingual leaders and leaders of color be effectively supported? What effective supports have been developed? Why are they effective?

Participant responses suggest that professional circumstances such as increased networks and mentorship may contribute to the resilience of some principals. How can more supportive networks and mentoring be developed? How can employers, professional associations, and preparation programs play a role?

Finally, the Principal Resilience Survey responses support other studies that indicate a need to focus on supporting principals more closely during their third through fifth years, a time when burnout and attrition is most likely. What professional support is available for principals of three to five years in tenure? What are the workforce dynamics that may lead to greater stress for this group?

Given the enduring pandemic and opening of California schools in distance format during the start of the 2020–2021 school year, the Change Maker project will continue to investigate issues of principal resilience. Next steps include expanding the use of the survey while continuing to investigate how to support leaders through work with our alumni. Together, these two approaches will inform how districts, policy makers, and preparation programs can combat leader attrition in service of California's most underserved schools and students.

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