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The Education Promise and Critical Resources in Canadian Schools

Piloting a new pan-Canadian Survey

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Annual Canadian School Survey

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Executive Summary

Canada's public schools are under significant strain, and that strain is limiting both system sustainability and the capacity for innovation. Findings from the pilot of the Annual Canadian School Survey (ACSS), based on responses from 456 principals across Canada, show persistent staffing shortages, unmet student mental health needs, increasing violence and behavioural challenges, and rising conflict with parents. Together, these pressures are forcing principals into reactive crisis management rather than proactive educational leadership.

The ACSS is a partnership between the national nonprofit People for Education and Wilfrid Laurier University's Centre for Leading Research in Education, and was developed in consultation with 13 principals' organizations from across Canada.

Key Findings: A System Under Chronic Strain

While 9 out of 10 participating principals report that their work is highly meaningful and makes a positive difference for children and families, more than half state they lack the resources needed to do their jobs properly and that their stress levels are unmanageable. This survey's findings reveal that chronic system strain and operational scarcity are actively undermining school sustainability and acting as a barrier to the innovation required for schools to deliver on the promise of public education.

In their survey responses, principals said they face a "fire hose" of demands on several fronts that lead to "unmanageable" levels of stress and a persistent focus on "damage control" and "gap-filling" rather than proactive work with students and staff. More than half of principals said they do not believe they have the resources they need to do their jobs.

> It feels like there are metaphorical fires everywhere. It is Oct 1 today when I took this survey and I know most of us in the building already feel burnt out. This is an unhealthy way to run a school system... going one fire to the next... we need to focus on preventing the fires in the first place.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

The survey responses revealed a number of foundational issues that appear to perpetuate chronic strain and limit innovation in schools.

Staff shortages

> We cannot find enough qualified EA's. As we continue to receive students with extremely complex needs, fewer and fewer people are willing to do the work because of the stress, violence, demands, and risks involved.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

- Nearly half of participating principals reported daily or weekly shortages of teachers, leading to the use of uncertified teachers and reduced supports for special education.
- Low allocations and hiring challenges for Educational Assistants (EAs) contribute to staff burnout and unmet needs for students.

Mental health

> Current staffing limitations prevent us from meeting student needs in the most effective way. Educators, while dedicated, are not clinicians or trained specialists, and therefore cannot adequately address issues such as trauma, severe mental health, anxiety, or FASD.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

- Principals said their schools were often the only resource for students dealing with acute mental health challenges who are stuck on long waiting lists or living in regions with few community resources.
- Principals said that the lack of resources such as EAs and specialists, both contribute to, and make it difficult to manage severe student behaviour problems.
- Nearly half of schools report daily or weekly incidents of violence and a third reported psychological violence such as harassment or bullying on a daily or weekly basis. Principals are extremely concerned about the impact of violence and some behaviour issues on students and staff.

Conflicts with parents

> Being accused by parents of not caring about kids, being yelled at by parents on a daily basis...parents who yell at me first without having accurate facts about a situation.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

- Among the survey respondents, only a quarter reported that they never had these interactions. Along with the challenging in-person interactions, more than a third of principals reported being the subject of, or receiving, threatening or intimidating messages from parents / guardians by phone, email or social media at least once or twice a month.

- A key source of conflict was dissatisfaction with available programming, or principals' decisions.

Methodology and Limitations

The pilot ACSS was administered online in both English and French between October 2025 and January 2026 to public school principals across Canada.

Sample Size
Following a rigorous data cleaning process that eliminated blank, incomplete, or independent school responses, the final dataset comprised 456 validated responses (404 English, 52 French).

School Composition
The sample consisted of 65% elementary schools, 19% secondary schools, and 16% combined elementary-secondary schools.

Limitations and Representation
The response rate is not fully representative of the national school landscape and contains a heavy geographic skew toward Ontario, which accounted for 56.4% of the sample despite representing only 34.2% of schools nationally. Manitoba was also over-represented at 16.7%, despite only having 6.1% of schools nationally. Conversely, provinces like Quebec (7.9% of sample vs. 21.1% national), Alberta (6.1% of sample vs. 14.6% national), and British Columbia (2.0% of sample vs. 11.2% national) were under-represented.

While these response rates limit total representativeness, the qualitative and descriptive statistical data reveal important trends in system pressures arising from chronic strain and scarcity, and limited capacity for innovation.

Introduction: A new, Annual Canadian School Survey and *The Education Promise*

People for Education (PFE) is a charity with a thirty-year track record of promoting evidence-based conversations about the importance of public education and the impact of policy on Canadian schools. The Centre for Leading Research in Education (CLRiE) is a research centre at Wilfrid Laurier University committed to fostering interdisciplinary education research with national and international impact and fostering partnerships that take research beyond university walls.

Over the past eighteen months, PFE and CLRiE have been working together to create a bridge between the research agenda of the Laurier team and People for Education's flagship initiative, *The Education Promise. The Education Promise* is built on the belief that K-12 public education is one of Canada's most valuable, but underappreciated assets. Canada's schools provide an upstream policy solution to some of Canada's biggest challenges—from climate change to economic resilience. However, achieving policy change in these areas requires breaking down silos and building a new, diverse coalition of advocates and experts from both inside and outside the education sector.

In 2025, PFE and CLRiE jointly released a report, *What do we know about Canadian Schools? / Fragmented data and missed opportunities*, which found that, in comparison to most other wealthy countries, Canadian educational data is often incomplete and out of date, difficult to compare across jurisdictions, and rarely linked to data from other sectors such as health or the economy. In particular, the data that are currently available make it hard to understand how policy is shaping reported outcomes and difficult to track progress towards change.

To address this issue, PFE worked with CLRiE and principals' organizations from across Canada to develop a new Annual Canadian School Survey (ACSS). The survey was based in part on the Annual Ontario School Survey conducted by PFE between 1998 and 2024 in Ontario. The goal of the new survey is to provide a vital source of data for academics, policymakers and the public to understand the realities on the ground in Canada's public schools. It can not only provide an opportunity for principals across the country to let the outside world know more about the challenges, resources and activities in their schools, but also provide a way to highlight progress and shape education policy.

A new survey: work in progress

The process of building a new, national survey is incremental and requires engaging educators from coast to coast to coast.

The first step, in early 2025, was outreach to, and consultations with, principal organizations from across Canada. With support from colleagues at Quebec Universities, we met with leaders from 13 principal organizations from across Canada (see Appendix 1: Principal Consultations). Together, we explored challenges and successes they face in their schools, and the types of information they wanted to see shared with the public and external stakeholders to understand the state of schools today and the impact of policy.

Based on what we heard from principals, evidence about educationally important school resources which are amenable to policy change, and the priority areas of *The Education Promise*, we developed a survey tool and obtained permission from the Laurier Research Ethics Board (#9310) to distribute this pilot version of the new Annual Canadian School Survey.

The next step was to pilot the survey in both English and French by sending it to public school principals across Canada. The goal of a pilot survey is for researchers to learn what is working, and not working, for respondents in order to strengthen survey design and dissemination strategies.

A detailed description of our methods and sample is included in Appendix 2: Methodology.

As with many pilots and first attempts at unique projects, the first year of the ACSS had a number of challenges. The information in this report is based on responses from 456 principals from all of Canada's provinces and territories except Nunavut. The response rate is not fully representative of the diversity of Canadian schools. However, the data provides meaningful indication of broad trends, and the qualitative data in this pilot year of the ACSS provides an important first step in understanding the reality in Canadian Schools.

System under strain threatens both sustainability and innovation

In their qualitative responses to the 2025-2026 Annual Canadian School Survey (ACSS), principals paint a picture of systems under strain, where educators are moving from crisis to crisis and coping with significant unmet student needs.

The Education Promise envisions schools more fully capable of embracing their potential as an upstream policy solution for pressing social and economic challenges. Canada's publicly funded schools – attended by more than 90% of Canadian students[1] – could provide the most effective and most accessible place to ensure all students graduate with the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to thrive in a complex world. This includes the skills and habits required to ensure long-lasting mental and physical health, skills to deal with rapid advances in technology, competencies and dispositions necessary to support participation in a democratic society, green skills to address ongoing environmental challenges, and a more equitable distribution of the knowledge and skills required for a fast-changing economy.

Canadian public education already has an excellent foundation to build on. Canadian students are among the top-performing countries in international assessments of literacy, numeracy and science[2] and international organizations often highlight that in Canada, gaps in student performance connected to their socio-economic status or newcomer status, while significant, are less extreme than many other countries.[3]

Our public schools could be centres of innovation and systemic change, allowing them to act as key contributors in addressing Canada's current and emerging economic and social challenges, but principals' responses to the survey should ring alarm bells: first, chronic strain and scarcity are a challenge to the sustainability and success of the current system. Second, that strain and scarcity is a barrier to innovation and systemic change.

Conditions for innovation: insights from the literature

There is extensive research, in education[4], management[5], and public administration[6] about what is required to sustain and spread innovation. It points to key features of environments conducive to innovation: a pro-innovation culture, access to knowledge through research and external partnerships, resources – including time and money – and drivers for change[7]. A system that is stretched thin does not provide that environment.

When principals consistently report – as they did in the 2025-26 ACSS – that they face a "firehose" of issues, "cannot manage" expected workload, and that they are consumed with either crises or paperwork at the expense of creating learning conditions that work for all students, it is a problem. When they further report they are routinely seeing students' needs going unmet, that situation undermines the existing capacity of our education systems to contribute to meeting social goals like supporting equitable student and population health or boosting social mobility and a strong economy.

Principals recognize this challenge. For some, their greatest satisfaction comes through work to see their schools adapt and evolve. One elementary school principal described their greatest satisfaction this way: "Supporting educators to improve instructional practices, grounded in evidence-based strategies, to foster deeper learning and measurable growth is especially rewarding." For that principal, there was a direct connection between bringing in evidence to support change and building the conditions where every student can flourish. Another elementary school leader agreed that their principals' work is most meaningful when they have time for "Instructional leadership leading to changes in pedagogical practices that improve the learning environment for students."

Despite the desire to learn and improve, among the survey participants there was widespread agreement that educators, and principals specifically, are "frequently responding to urgent issues, implementing damage control, or filling in gaps rather than having time to be proactive". As one elementary school principal reported, in the context of health supports, "People are burnt out [and] so less willing to take on new projects." Rather than a culture of innovation, under these working conditions, there was frustration with top-down mandates, such as "the nearly constant demands from Board level and Ministry level."

The central work: making a difference for students and families

The survey asked a number of detailed questions – drawn from both our principal consultations and the research literature– about staffing and well-being. We also asked principals to tell us in their own words what made their jobs meaningful and satisfying, what made them frustrating or demoralizing, and about their successes and challenges as leaders.

Principals' comments make it clear that the heart of their work and their job satisfaction is making a difference for students and their families, especially those who are most vulnerable.

> The most meaningful part of my work is seeing students grow, academically, socially, and emotionally, through the collective efforts of dedicated staff, families, and community partners... Creating conditions where every learner feels valued, capable, and supported in their success gives true purpose to my work.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

Another elementary principal describes finding greatest satisfaction “when we are able to make a difference for a student who is struggling, either with learning or behaviour needs; when we are able to provide an environment where children experience joy, and where their identities are affirmed every day.” Another highlights a sense of meaning in “Seeing families and students feel truly connected to something bigger than just education - they have a home and have rebuilt trust in the education system.”

Public schools in Canada serve 5.5 million students across thirteen distinct systems[8]. School systems are among our largest public institutions we have, and many structures and processes are designed to reflect that scale. Yet despite principals’ awareness they are contributing to important systemic outcomes, many principals find the greatest meaning in their work in contributing to the success of students as individuals, especially those with challenges. As one principal wrote, their work is most meaningful “[w]hen a student who has struggled starts to figure things out. For example, a student who is non-verbal in grade one finding ways to communicate without words to join in games during recess, and other students accepting him."

These principals are not outliers. Though principals highlighted many challenges it is notable that 9 out of 10 principals in our sample report said they ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that what they do makes a difference for children and families.

Asked, at the end of the survey, whether they had anything they wanted to share, many principals emphasized a sense of pride and affection for their schools, students and communities:

> This is an exceptional place. Our school community is warm and welcoming. Our students are brilliant and care about their education. Our students also are very disadvantaged and will likely not meet their full potential because of the barriers stacked against them. We need to do better to help them reach their potential. We need help.
>
> *- Secondary School Principal*

The tension reflected in this comment, between the strong sense of purpose and community coexisting with acute moral distress, was among the strongest messages we received from principals.

The majority of principals who participated in the survey expressed concerns that they are unable to act on their professional values or provide the level of care, inclusion, and educational leadership they believe students and staff require. While the vast majority participating in the ACSS report that their work makes a positive difference for students and families, more than half reported that they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that they have the resources they needed to do their jobs properly, or that their levels of stress were manageable.

Schools on fire? Short-term staffing challenges fuel classroom challenges

Many principals wrote about almost insurmountable challenges of keeping up with the demands of the job. For an elementary school principal, their greatest frustration was simply "the fact that I cannot keep up with the never-ending demands of the job. It is not humanly possible to do all of the tasks administrators are assigned to do in the time we are given." A secondary school principal writes about having to contend with a "firehose of competing high stakes issues all coming at once." These findings are consistent with other Canadian research documenting growing work intensification as a critical challenge for school leadership.[9]

> It feels like there are metaphorical fires everywhere. It is Oct 1 today when I took this survey and I know most of us in the building already feel burnt out. This is an unhealthy way to run a school system... going one fire to the next... we need to focus on preventing the fires in the first place.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

In the principal consultations that were part of survey development, challenges with staffing ranked as one of the top two concerns of principal leaders across the country, alongside concerns about student well-being and behaviour, discussed below. These perceptions are supported by Canadian and international research,[10] reports by educators' organizations[11] and an Auditor General,[12] and by the responses from our principals.

The primary concern that arose in both the qualitative and quantitative data in the survey were *short-term* staffing problems. Almost half of the participating schools reported they faced daily or weekly shortages of teaching staff. The problem was even more acute for other school staff, such as educational assistants or office staff, where almost two-thirds of schools face daily or weekly shortages.

Short term staffing problems – those associated with staff absences or leaves – were highlighted as a major pressure affecting the work of principals' and programming in schools. When qualified substitute teachers are unavailable, principals reported using a wide range of strategies. They divert teachers from other responsibilities including class preparation and specialist supports, combine classes, school administrators themselves teach classes, and many use uncertified teachers.

Responses to the survey suggest that all of these strategies have an effect on student learning. There are questions about the ability of uncertified teachers to deliver planned curriculum and instruction, and teachers without prep time are challenged in lesson planning and providing meaningful feedback. A particular concern highlighted in the data is that these strategies disproportionately affect more vulnerable students – those with special education needs and additional language learners, whose specialized supports are diverted.

One elementary principal described how the inconsistent availability of supply teachers can have a meaningful impact on students' readiness to learn: if a teacher is absent for several days and no consistent occasional teacher can take on the classroom, students can struggle with adjusting to new classroom norms from day-to-day. This can result in more children acting out in the classroom, further disrupting learning for the whole class. Another elementary school describes their greatest frustration as "Trying to fill all the educational assistant gaps for student support and watching all of us scramble and try to make things work." Another highlights, "Overwhelmed staff with unsafe special education and behavioural issues."

The urgent work of trying to avoid these gaps in staffing represents a significant additional pressure for principals, and poses significant challenges to the school system:

> ....the amount of time I have to spend re-organizing schedules because there is insufficient coverage (teachers and EAs). Essentially, I check the absence system at 5am every day and start to play, at 7pm I am texting and emailing possible people to fill... Often 'covering the school' starts at 5am and is not done until 10am.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

> 6:00 am every morning we are trying to fill jobs that went unfilled in [HR platform]. It takes over an hour to staff the school most days. It is not sustainable, it starts my day off in a horrible way.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

More generally, one elementary principal noted, "It is difficult to have meaningful work experiences when it's a constant battle to fill job absences and run short-staffed multiple times per week."

Principal comments also made it clear that not only were staff absences creating challenges, but also that unfilled staff positions and losses of non-teaching staff were contributing to their frustration and demoralization:

> We cannot find enough qualified EA's. As we continue to receive students with extremely complex needs, fewer and fewer people are willing to do the work because of the stress, violence, demands, and risks involved.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

> EAs are understaffed and this results in increased absenteeism and burnout of the existing complement of staff; basic safety and personal needs are barely being met.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

> Limited budgets, losing 16 staff members (EAs) from this school alone due to changes to Jordan's Principal funding changes. Our students with complex needs were thriving with Jordan's Principal EA support and now our complex needs students are not thriving and there are so many disruptions in class the learning for all has decreased. Staff are managing behaviours more often than they are teaching.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

A mounting problem of unmet student mental health needs

Challenges with staffing are layered onto challenges facing students, in particular, urgent and growing mental health challenges and problematic behaviour, including violence. At times, it can be a vicious cycle.

The evidence on worsening mental health challenges facing young people has been consistent and discouraging.[13] Worryingly, Canada is doing worse than most other wealthy countries in terms of youth mental health – with a recent UNICEF report ranking Canada 19th out of 36 countries overall.[14]

Principals report that their schools are not just on the front line, but too often they are the only resource available for extended periods of time to support students struggling with their mental health.

In the health care system, emergency departments are recognized as a pressure point because they are required to respond to the urgent needs as they present themselves – EDs cannot turn people away when resources are stretched. Similarly, educators report that they have no choice but to cope with the more chronic unmet needs of students – and often families – in the face of shortcomings of other services.

The issue of being the main source of mental health service provision for students recurs again and again in principals' comments:

> Community mental health supports are available but have a 2+ year wait list. This is completely not helpful when students are in crisis so it's up to us to support the student as best we can.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

> Mental health support for students remains the top priority. There are few supports available other than what the school can provide. Very long wait lists.
>
> *- Secondary School Principal*

> [Our school is] located in a resource desert. Families can't access support.
>
> *- Secondary School Principal*

> Trauma is a daily occurrence in the North. We have limited resources to help all generations.
>
> *- Elementary/Secondary School Principal*

Schools have a distinct role in supporting students' mental health. However, by and large, schools are not staffed to provide mental health care, even though many feel compelled to do so. According to the principals in our survey, they do not have the resources they need to support the mental health of students. Two thirds of participating principals disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "my school has the resources necessary to support student mental health."

As one elementary principal wrote,

> Current staffing limitations prevent us from meeting student needs in the most effective way. Educators, while dedicated, are not clinicians or trained specialists, and therefore cannot adequately address issues such as trauma, severe mental health, anxiety, or FASD. With growing class sizes, staff are increasingly overextended.

Another elementary principal said, more generally, “We aren't mental health professionals and ... mental health professionals are hard to access. We need more in school supports for well-being and mental health.”

A key element of providing adequate services in schools is the availability of specialized staff, alongside guidance counselors and others. However, most of the schools in our sample did not have regular, scheduled access to psychologists, social workers, or child and youth workers. More than a third of principals reported no connections with external mental health supports, including things like providing referral priority, programming, or supporting joint planning for students with serious needs. Some schools are innovating by using funds from external sources, such as Jordan’s Principle, which is intended to equalize access to services for First Nations children and youth.

This ongoing strain of mental health resource shortages represents a serious ongoing challenge that undermines schools’ sustainability and adversely affects student learning. As one principal wrote, “This situation compromises both staff wellness and student well-being. Staff absences or leaves create emotional distress for students, who may feel unsupported, anxious, and insecure. These conditions have a direct and negative impact on student learning outcomes.”

Lack of specialized resources contributing to challenging behaviour and violence

The lack of professional supports – alongside the short-term staffing challenges, and low availability of EA supports reported above – is also identified by principals as a key factor that contributes to challenging student behaviour. Nearly half of the survey participants reported they had to deal with incidents of physical violence daily or weekly, and about a third reported daily or weekly incidents of psychological violence, such as harassment, threats or bullying.

For principals, this is a resource issue. One elementary school principal commented, simply, that “Lack of resources to support needs results in violence and aggression towards staff.” Another principal observed that over the past five or six years, there had been an increase of violence in their school. They had observed professionals offering specialized supports and planning for students with heightened needs creating an environment that was, at times “clinic-like.” However, ultimately:

> We need more experts in schools consistently to help build capacity with school staff to meet and support the needs of students. I am concerned for students who witness aggressive and violent behaviour towards staff and students, as we evacuate classrooms when students throw objects, attack students and staff, tip over furniture and escape. Watching this happen regularly can affect a child greatly over time.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

The impact is also felt on school leaders:

> The constant strain of feeling that we don't have enough support for students with behaviour/spec ed needs, and the huge amounts of time that I personally spend supporting those students (which then leaves me with very little time for all of my other responsibilities).
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

These conditions are, ultimately, contributing to challenges that threaten the sustainability of existing programs and wears on staff.

Growing strain in school–parent relationships

Based on our principal consultations, the survey included questions about whether and how often principals were having in-person interactions with parents or guardians that involved physical violence, threats, or intimidation.

Among the survey respondents, only a quarter reported that they never had these interactions. For nearly a third, these kinds of negative interactions were happening as often as once or twice a month, or more. Along with the challenging in-person interactions, more than a third of principals reported being the subject of, or receiving, threatening or intimidating messages from parents / guardians by phone, email or social media at least once or twice a month.

These interactions were highly stressful for principals and several identified relationships with parents and guardians as the most frustrating and demoralizing part of their work.

> Being accused by parents of not caring about kids, being yelled at by parents on a daily basis...parents who yell at me first without having accurate facts about a situation.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

> Parents - sense of entitlement - being yelled at, being told I don't know how to do my job.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

> Parents on social media who don't know the whole story and say we are doing nothing.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

> The amount of times parents make defamatory and slanderous comments on social media.
>
> *- Elementary/Secondary School Principal*

> When parents feel they can bully the school into making decisions for their and their child's benefit, regardless of following the 'rules' or not.
>
> *- Secondary School Principal*

> The lack of parental understanding for what schools are capable of managing and supporting. We can't be all things to all people at all times, despite that being what society demands of us.
>
> *- Elementary School Principal*

The main reasons principals gave for the parent/guardian conflicts were dissatisfaction with supports or accommodations, which are typically tied to resources, and disagreement with decisions about their child (discipline, class changes, referrals, report cards). A very small minority said that the conflicts were connected to what was being taught in school or schoolwide initiatives, symbols or events.

Issue Spotlight on Innovation Constrained: Implementing National School Food Program

The introduction of the National School Food Program is a helpful illustration of the impact of the scarcity discussed in this report and an example of where critical policy and program innovation is running up against systemic strain and stress.

For many years, especially in low-income communities, schools in all parts of the country have worked with charities and others to support students' basic needs with different types of school food initiatives, supported by some provincial, territorial and city funding. In 2024, for the first time, the federal government got involved, and a five-year, $1 billion national school food program was announced.[15] There was a broad social consensus about the need for such a program, and key elements of enhancing children's health, providing educational opportunities and connecting to local food systems.[16] By 2026, through different agreements with provincial and territorial governments, the school food initiative was moving towards implementation.[17]

Research shows high potential for school food programs to both boost children's immediate health by meeting nutrition needs, and, over time, improve their understanding of healthy eating, especially when there is a link between healthy food programs and learning.[18] While school food programs are traditionally viewed through the lens of student health, their implementation is often determined by on-the-ground in-school operational resources and staff time.

In our sample, the vast majority of schools had at least some kind of school nutrition program providing food.

Principals' comments highlight the wide variety of ways in which healthy food programs are currently structured across Canada, from "apples available" or snacks three times a week, to daily hot meals, from prepared meals being delivered to "wonderful volunteer baking in our kitchen". For many principals, food programs are a central aspect in supporting schools' role as the centre of community and a key component in addressing student poverty.

Yet in some schools, the logistics of supporting school food programs are complex. As one elementary principal noted, "With a small staff, it is difficult to manage the funding applications, picking up food from the Food Bank and grocery stores, and taking the time to pack lunches and snack bags for classes every day." For some, their food program simply can't keep up, for example:

> We have a snack program funded by our school board, but students still *often* come to school without breakfast – our problem is getting kids to eat at home before coming to school when parents are gone off to work. So they do not eat till our first lunch which is their first meal and then they all want an afternoon snack as they are hungry again and we do not have the funds to give them a large snack or really a lunch.
>
> *- Elementary/Secondary School Principal*

While they recognized the importance of school food programs, almost all the participating principals reported that implementing the programs has been challenging. The most common challenge reported by schools is staffing the programs. While public funding has been provided, at the school level, principals still report that applying for the needed funds are a challenge for their program – adding to the paperwork and administrative burden they struggle with.

The challenges described by some principals with the implementation of school food program are emblematic of the overall level of pressure schools are facing, even when additional resources and supports are made available. Ultimately, the innovation will be institutionalized when more principals can make comments such as this elementary school principal, “The province funds our nutrition program, and the food is delivered to the school. It works well.”

Conclusion

Schools are a critical social and economic asset for young people today and for Canada’s future. However, the survey data in this report suggest that the status quo in schools – particularly, challenges in staffing and student supports but also growing tensions between home and school – has the potential to adversely affect student learning and to limit necessary innovation.

Canada’s policy challenges are urgent, and it is reasonable to hope that one of our largest public investments in the future – public education – is linked to the development of meaningful, broad-based solutions. Yet, as this report illustrates, any meaningful effort to envision a school system that is better positioned as an upstream solution to Canada’s pressing social and economic problems must take into account the reports of educators about the pressures they face.

Appendix 1: Principal Consultations

Between January and April 2025, the Annual Canadian School Survey (ACSS) Co-Directors met with representatives from principals' organizations across Canada. The purpose of these consultations was to understand which issues were most important to principals and to get principals' input on what questions might be included in a unique and new pan-Canadian survey of schools. A hoped-for side benefit of the principal consultations was to build relationships with these key educational stakeholders across Canada.

Consultations were conducted in the language of the principal organization – either English or French, and the groups consulted included:

- The Canadian Association of Principals
- Northwest Territories Teachers' Association – School Administrators' Council
- Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation – School Based Leaders
- Manitoba Teachers' Society Council of School Leaders
- Ontario Principals' Council
- Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario
- Nova Scotia Public School Administrators' Association
- Newfoundland and Labrador School Administrators' Council

Through informal networking and reviews of researcher profiles, we identified two academics who were willing to serve as Québec/ franco-canadienne leads. Mélissa Villela, from Université du Québec en Abitibi Temiscamingue and another Quebecoise researcher played an integral role throughout the survey development process, including spearheading outreach to and leading consultations with the following organizations and individual French education principals from Alberta and British Columbia.

- Association des directions et direct-adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes
- Fedération québecoise des directions d'établissements d'enseignment
- Association québécoise du personnel de direction des écoles
- Association montréalaise des directions d'établissments scolaire
- British Columbia Principals' and Vice Principals' Association – French Language Working Group

In the consultations, participants were asked to describe both the most exciting work and the biggest challenges occurring in their schools. They reported a wide variety of successes and challenges across broad ranging areas, but across all the conversations some common themes emerged. The table below includes the major themes that were mentioned across multiple regions.

The most exciting work happening in schools	The biggest challenges facing schools
• Experiential and work-integrated learning • Evidence-based literacy • Professional learning and pedagogical improvement • Centring student voice • Truth and reconciliation work • Equity and anti-racism work • Working with technology	• Increasingly complex student needs, including issues of violence in schools • Staff shortages and workload concerns • Mental health of students, staff, parents • Student absenteeism • Parent and advocacy group engagement / conflict • Lack of resources (both in schools and in other systems such as health) • Volume of curriculum / policy changes

During the consultations, principals were also asked to suggest specific questions that could be asked in some of their highest-priority areas. Some examples of questions suggested by principal representatives included:

- Mental health supports and resources
  - How many teachers are in the building without students assigned to them for the day (FTE)?
  - Are there currently any students who are waiting for counselling or mental health support? If yes, how many?

- Absences / lack of substitute teacher coverage
  - How often do you have staff absences and do not have substitute coverage? (Daily / Weekly / Monthly / Never)
  - Do you have any uncertified teachers in teaching roles? If yes, how many?
  - How many teachers in your school will be retiring in the next two years?

- Evidence-based literacy instruction (elementary only)
  - Does your school use structured literacy intervention (e.g., UFLI) or balanced literacy instruction, or do teachers individually decide? (Structured literacy intervention / we use balanced reading / teachers individually decide)
  - Do teachers in your school use a common assessment for early literacy? (e.g., DIBELS, CORE phonics)
  - If yes, are the results reported to anyone outside of the school?

- Work-integrated learning (secondary only)
  - Does your school offer coop courses?
  - Does your school offer apprenticeship opportunities into the trades?

Appendix 2: Summary of methods and sample

The Annual Canadian School Survey was developed iteratively and in consultation with multiple stakeholders in advance of the October 2025 launch. Below is a brief description of the process to develop, disseminate, and analyze data from the survey.

Survey development

There were a number of criteria explored in developing the survey items:

- Relevance for the overall purpose of the survey: An Annual Canadian School Survey could provide pan-Canadian data about school programs and resources to pinpoint differences, promote cross-jurisdictional learning on policy impact, and provide evidence to support the development of pan-Canadian strategies for change.
- Connection to the four themes in The Education Promise: health; citizenship and democracy; economy and skills; environmental learning
- Responsiveness to principals' key concerns, identified through consultations below
- Items should both have demonstrated educational importance and be amenable to improvement through change in policy or practice (e.g., alignment with educational inputs associated with the U.S. National Academies of Science Monitoring Educational Equity)
- Ease of response for principals (short, concrete, answerable "without leaving their desks")

Ultimately, the final survey instrument included multiple-choice and open-ended questions and provided to principals online in a Qualtrics form.

Principal Consultations

Between January and April 2025, the Annual Canadian School Survey (ACSS) Co-Directors met with representatives from principals' organizations across Canada. The purpose of these consultations was to understand which issues were most important to principals and to get principals' input on what questions might be included in a unique and new pan-Canadian survey of schools. A hoped-for side benefit of the principal consultations was to build relationships with these key educational stakeholders across Canada. (See Appendix 1 for findings)

Research Ethics

When the survey was completed it was submitted to the Laurier Research Ethics Board and was approved for dissemination (REB Approval #9310). Conditions of the approval were that we use publicly available email addresses and that the first step in answering the survey was that principals accept a lengthy informed consent statement.

With over 500 school boards in Canada, each with their own individual research approvals process, seeking board permission to conduct research would have been prohibitive. In our view, a confidential, voluntary survey of school leaders which did not seek out personal information about students or individuals should not require board level permission. Laurier's REB did not make board approvals a condition of ethical research.

Survey dissemination

Using the Open Database of Educational Facilities (ODEF), researchers created a comprehensive list of all public schools in Canada (14,328). A bilingual research team reviewed the school authority names (e.g., school board or districts) and school names of the 18,858 educational facilities to identify and remove ineligible schools from the ODEF list. Ineligible institutions included post-secondary institutions, early childhood education centres, federally operated schools, separate schools, private schools, and schools hosted in institutional settings (e.g., hospitals, rehabilitation facilities). Following this cleaning process, we determined that there were 14,328 public schools in Canada at the time of the publishing of the ODEF (in this case, December 2024), though it is likely that this number fluctuates a small amount annually as schools close and are built.

Principals' publicly available email addresses were obtained by searching for publicly available datasets of principal or school email addresses and by using formerly publicly available contact information from Open Data Ontario. These were merged with the ODEF using school identification numbers (where available), or else school postal codes or phone numbers. After eliminating duplicates, we had a list of 14,649 principals. Note that this count is larger than the total number of public schools (14,328) because it included both school emails and principal emails.

In September 2025, principal organizations across Canada were notified that the ACSS would be sent to principals in their jurisdiction and invited to share results. Targeted emails were also sent notifying 805 Ontario principals who had participated in the 2023-2024 Annual Ontario School Survey, that the ACSS was coming. On October 1, 2025, invitations were sent by Mailchimp in French to 2,854 principals and in English to 11,795 principals in every Canadian province and territory. The surveys were sent in the language of instruction. On October 6, principal organizations were provided with draft messages to send to their principals encouraging them to participate in the survey.

Reminder emails were sent to 14,327 principals on October 24 – at that time, principals from both the Ottawa District School Board and the Ottawa Catholic School Board were removed from the list at the request of the boards because they survey had not gone through their research approvals process. Reminders went out again to 4,219 principals on November 14; 14,176 November 28; 14,033 principals on January 21 and a last reminder to 14,006 on January 26. Over the course of October and November, 2025, research team members followed up with targeted phone calls to 321 schools in provinces with relatively low response rates (175 calls were made to schools in Quebec, 54 in British Columbia, 46 in Prince Edward Island, and 43 in Nova Scotia, and a handful in other provinces). The purpose of the phone calls was to ensure principals had received the survey and to answer any questions. As an incentive, People for Education offered that a $100 gift card would be awarded to one principal from each jurisdiction.

Surveys were completed online via Qualtrics in both English and French between October 2025 and January 2026. Survey responses were disaggregated to examine survey representation across provinces and territories (see table below).

Data Cleaning Process

At the closing of the survey, the English version (ACSS) had 811 responses, and the French version (SAEC) had 104. Through the cleaning process, the original dataset of 915 responses was cleaned down to 456 responses (English N= 404 , French N= 52). Blank and mostly incomplete responses were deleted as were responses from independent schools.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using inductive analysis. Researchers read responses and coded emergent themes in each set of data (i.e., the responses to each of the survey's open-ended questions). The quantitative analyses were based on descriptive statistics. All data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0 statistical software. All survey responses and data are kept confidential and stored in conjunction with TriCouncil recommendations for the safeguarding of data.

Province or Territory	Frequency	Percent of schools in sample	Percentage of schools in Canada
Newfoundland and Labrador	9	2.0%	1.8%
Nova Scotia	1	0.2%	2.5%
Prince Edward Island	2	0.4%	0.4%
New Brunswick	10	2.2%	2.2%
Quebec	36	7.9%	21.1%
Ontario	257	56.4%	34.2%
Manitoba	76	16.7%	6.1%
Saskatchewan	16	3.5%	5.1%
Alberta	28	6.1%	14.6%
British Columbia	9	2.0%	11.2%
Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut	12	2.6%	0.8%
Total	**456**	**100%**	**100%**

The above frequency table shows the number of responses from each province and territory as well as how the number of responses compares to the expected frequency from the overall population. The survey could be completed in either French or English; 89% of the surveys were completed in English and 11% in French. This reflects a slight under-representation from the actual proportion of French-language schools in Canada. In terms of types of schools, 65% were elementary, 19% secondary, and 16% elementary-secondary.

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