Elementary Principals Worry More About Student Well-Being Than a Decade Ago

By Denisa R. Superville on July 27, 2018 5:07 PM - EdWeek

Elementary school principals say they are very worried about the rising numbers of students with emotional problems. They are concerned that more students have mental health needs. They also rank family poverty, school safety, and students' lack of effective supervision at home as high on their list of anxieties about student well-being.

A new survey of elementary principals and assistant principals captured those top issues—which in many ways mirror the broader public mood in 2018. The survey’s results were published recently by the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

The once-per-decade survey, which has been conducted since 1928, provides a snapshot of the principalship—from tenure and job satisfaction to salary and professional-development.

It also shows trends of how the profession—and how principals view their job and challenges—has changed over time and through various education reforms.

Ten years ago, in the 2008 report, for example, students' social-emotional needs did not rank among the top 10 student issues about which the majority of principals expressed "high" or "extreme" concern.

But this time around, the top 10 issues all reflected deep-seated worries about the well-being of children:

- Student mental health;
- Student poverty;
- Management of student behavior;
- Lack of effective adult supervision at home;
- Safety and security of students;
- Bullying through social media;
- Student homelessness;
- Emotional bullying;
- Child abuse; and
- Student stress over self-identity

Among school and staff issues, elementary school principals say that teacher shortages and difficulty hiring teachers are areas of concern. Teacher performance and effectiveness, teacher and staff morale, and teacher resistance to improvement also round out the top concerns that principals would label as "high" and "extreme."

A little more than half of respondents—50.6—reported "very high" or "high" morale. Fifty-five percent said they planned to retire as soon as they were eligible to do so.

Principals say there is a high or extreme level of need for professional development in improving student performance; improving staff performance; understanding technology; time management; using social media; and school improvement.

The principals and assistant principals who responded in the survey work in traditional public, charter, and private schools, though the majority were from regular public schools.

What does the average elementary school principal look like in 2018 based on the survey? She’s a 50-year-old white woman, with 10 years of experience as an elementary classroom teacher and seven years running her building. She also works on average 61 hours a week, up from 56 hours in 2008, according to the survey.

The NAESP urges caution in interpreting the findings. For one, the 893 respondents to the survey was small—representing less than one percent of all elementary principals.