

# School Leader Wellbeing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## The 2020 Report

By Dr Helen Kelly



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## Introduction

This report summarises the results of the first ever global research into the wellbeing of schools leaders during the COVID 19 pandemic in 2020. The research was conducted by Dr Helen Kelly, former school principal and independent researcher, writer and speaker on school wellbeing.

How has the work and the roles of senior leaders changed during the pandemic? How has this impacted on the wellbeing of school leaders? How are school leaders coping with the fallout of the global crisis on a professional and personal level? This study provides a snapshot of the experiences of school leaders from around the world, working across all sectors.

The research aims to investigate the impact of the crisis on individual leaders and identify common themes so that we can better understand the challenges that school leaders are facing and consider how these may be addressed during the remainder of the crisis and beyond.

An internet survey was used for data collection. A 37 question survey was distributed via educational leadership groups on a variety of social media platforms. This approach has an inherent bias in that only leaders who wanted to complete it are represented. While respondents from 36 countries and multiple sectors took part in this study, some countries and sectors are much more strongly represented than others. This should be borne in mind when reading the report.

## Summary

The findings suggest a high level of work-related stress among school leaders during the pandemic. This stress is caused by increased workload; daily, complex, logistical problems to solve; constantly changing, unclear guidance and lack of support from government; high levels of anxiety among school communities and poor support for school leaders.

The findings suggest that many leaders have felt overwhelmed during the crisis. They feel their training has not prepared them for a crisis of this magnitude and that the support structures in place have failed them.

The findings suggest that increased stress has had a significant impact on the professional and personal lives of school leaders. Most leaders have relied on a range of coping strategies but for many these strategies have had a limited impact on their overall wellbeing. Eleven months from the start of the pandemic, levels of wellbeing are generally very low.

## Research Process and Participants

### Methodology

An online, anonymous survey was posted on educational leadership groups on LinkedIn (16 groups) and Facebook (9 groups) in October 2020. These groups have a combined membership of over 600,000 school leaders worldwide.

721 leaders completed the 37 question survey. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative data was analysed and a thematic analysis conducted of qualitative data.

### Who are the Participants?

**416 described themselves** as Executive Headteacher, School Director, Head of School, Headteacher, Acting/Interim Headteacher or Principal.

**188 described themselves** as Assistant Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher or Vice Principal.

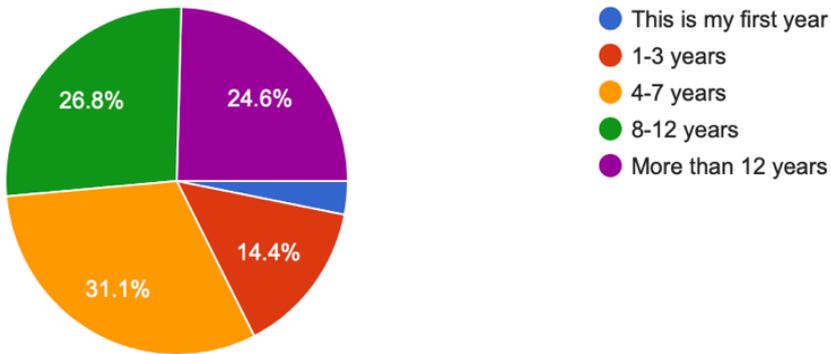
**5 described themselves** as Curriculum Coordinator or Head/Director of Academics/Learning.

**6 described themselves** as Head of Phase or Head of Key Stage.

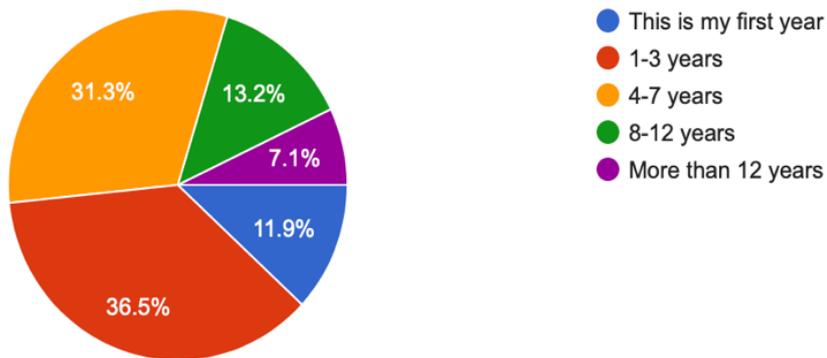
**7 described themselves** as Head of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities or Head of Inclusion.

**70 described themselves** in other roles including Superintendent, Local Authority Lead, School Counsellor, Head of Year, Subject Coordinator, Business Manager, Head of HR and Communications Manager.

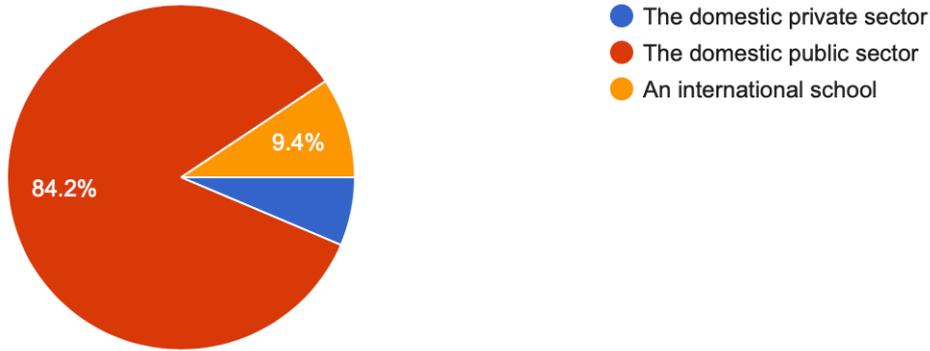
*Duration of Time in Leadership*



*Duration of Time in Current Role*



Sector of School

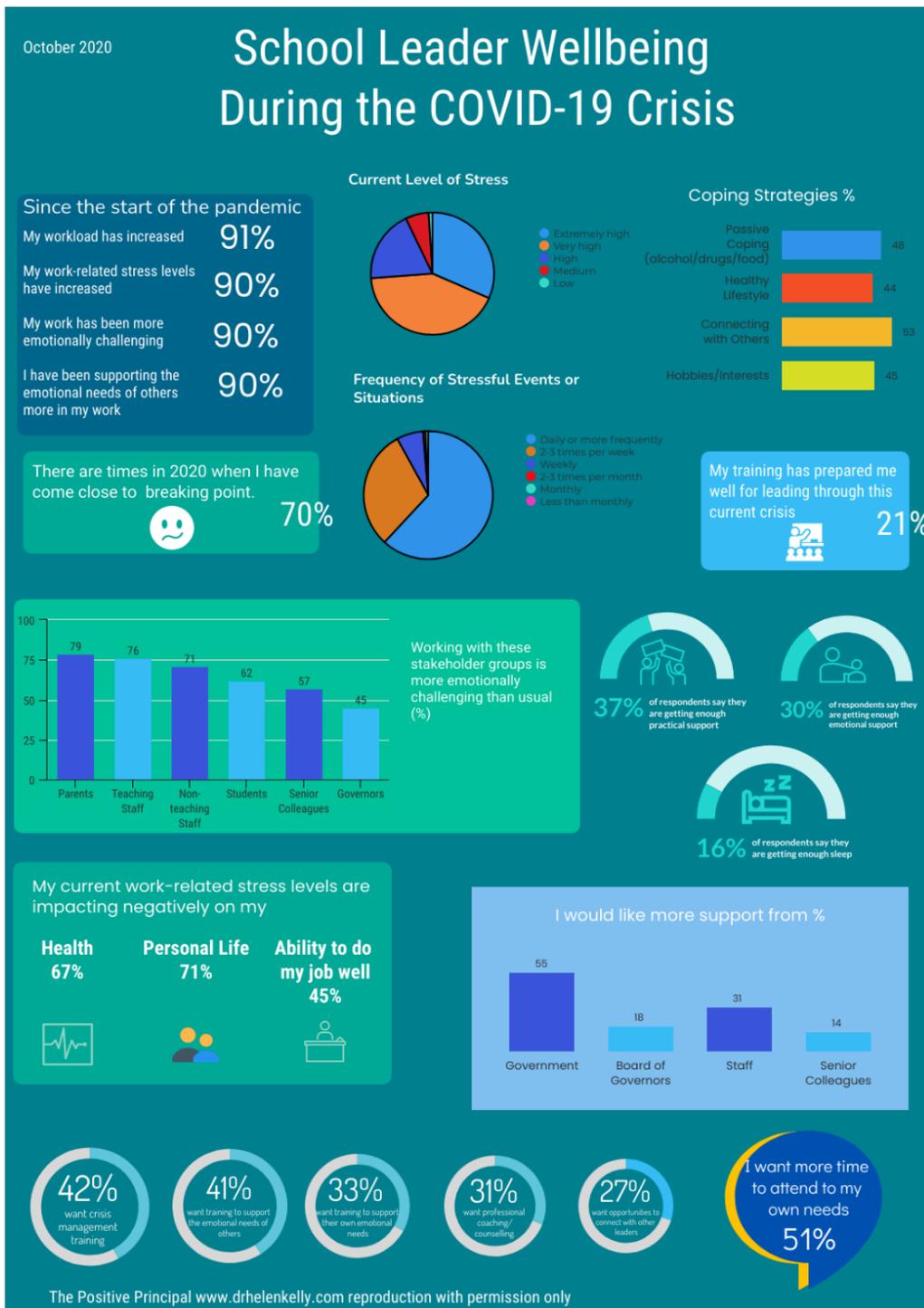


Location of Participants



# Quantitative Findings

## Summary



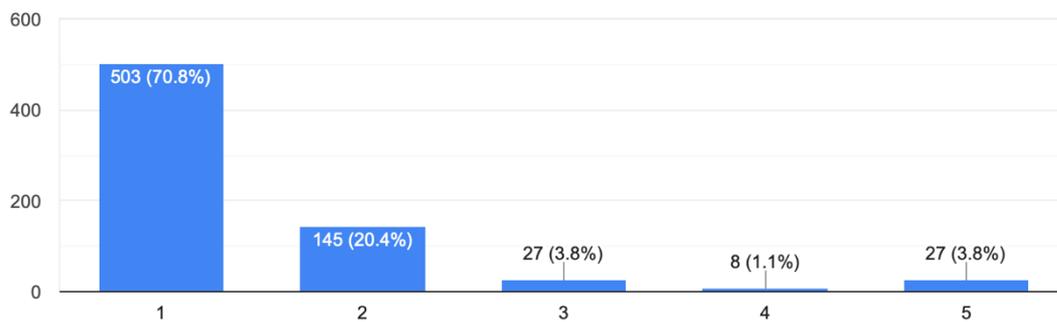
## Breakdown of Quantitative Findings

Responses use a five-point Likert Scale

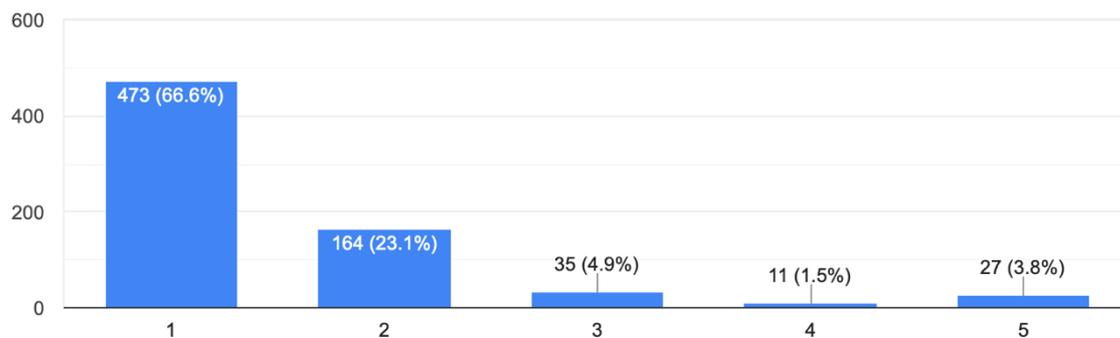
1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

### Workload and Stress During the Pandemic

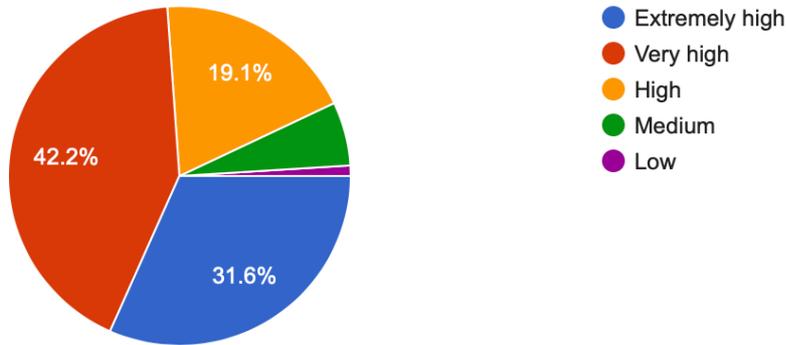
*My workload has increased during the pandemic*



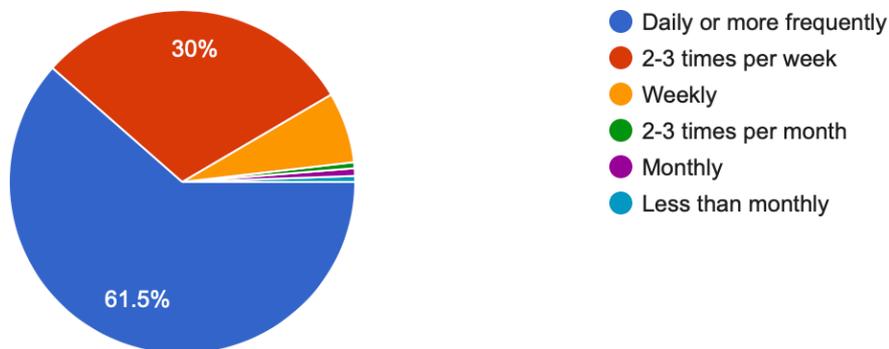
*My work-related stress levels have increased during the pandemic*



*Current Stress Levels*



*Frequency of Stressful Events or Situations*



*What Respondents’ Have Found Challenging in Their Own Words*

“Juggling everything at once. The additional workload COVID has added is unmanageable.”

“No real rest of wind down time as something is constantly happening.”

“My workload has gone from immense to unmanageable.”

“Having large volume of communication from parents, often in the evening.”

“It feels like you are working 24 hours a day with having to manage and juggle everything.”

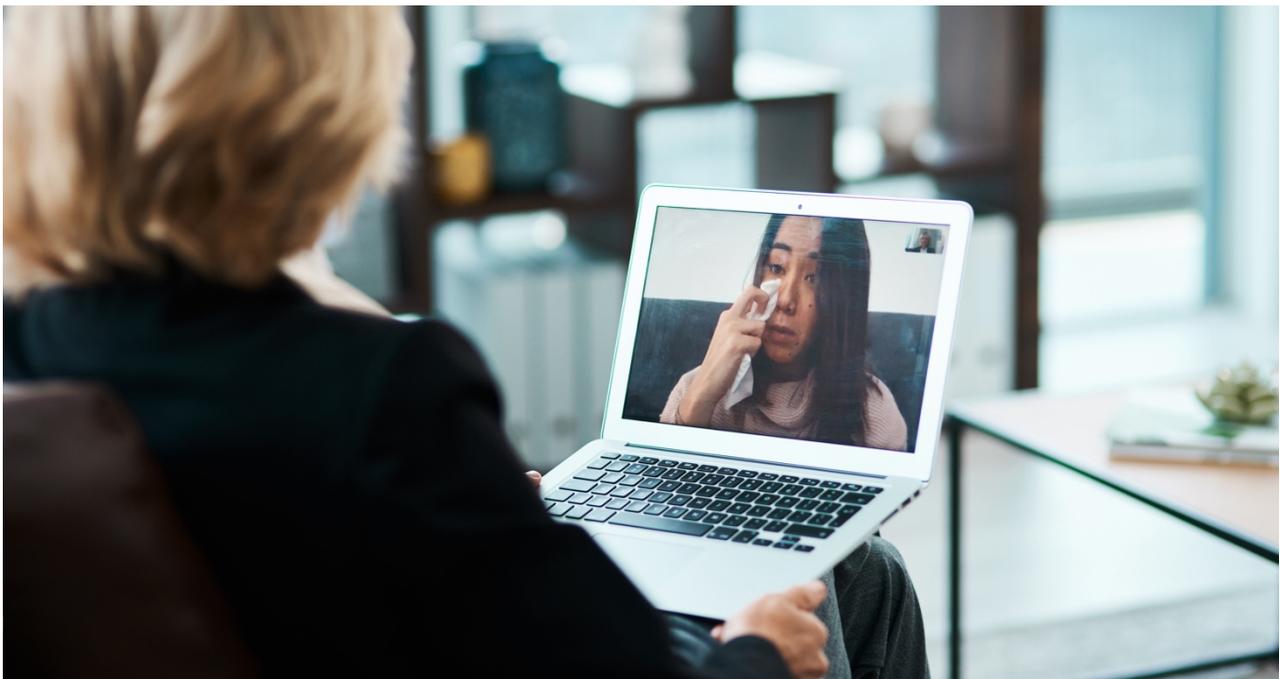
“Managing the vastly increased safeguarding issues with ‘normal’ workload.”

“Building in additional planning required for risk assessments and compliance whilst maintaining usual expectations of my role.”

“Not having enough hours in the day to do everything and being exhausted.”

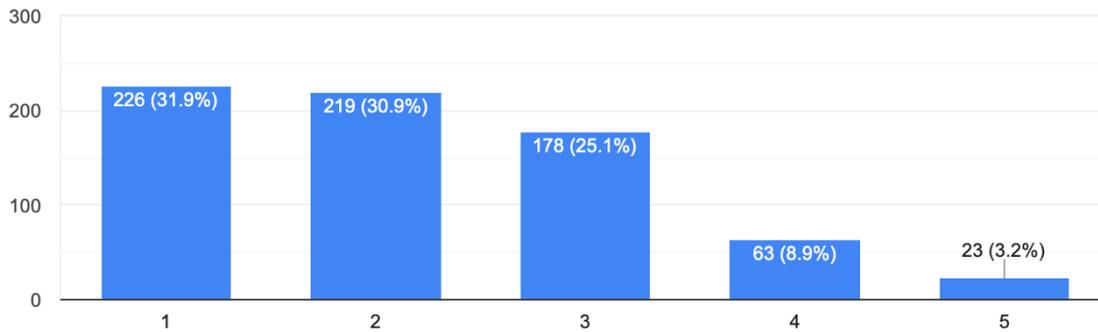
“The expectation that senior leaders need to work through every holiday and weekend just to keep on top of the guidance.”

“The number of high importance tasks which all need to be done at the same time( ensuring wellbeing and academic progress of children, curriculum, remote learning, keeping parents happy, SEF, SIP, updating website, educating , covering staff due to COVID absences.”

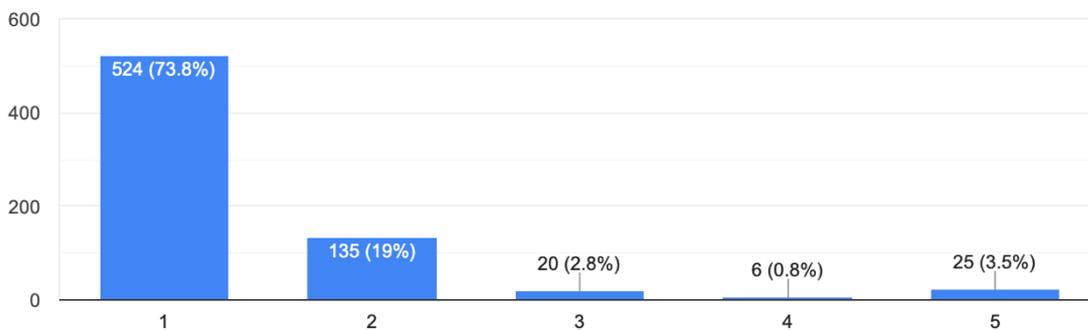


## Emotional Demands Since the Start of the Pandemic

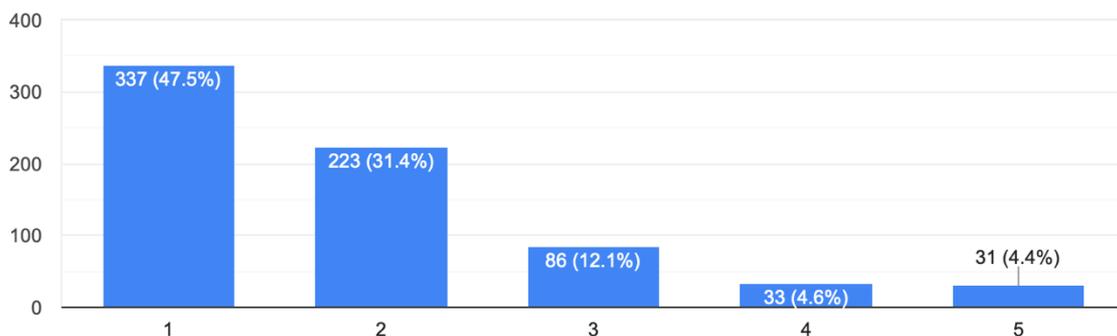
*I am supporting the emotional needs of others more since the start of the pandemic*



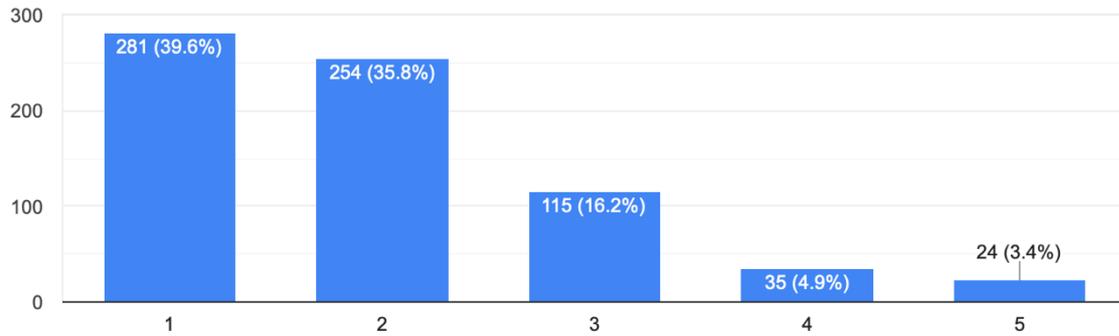
*My work with students/pupils has become more emotionally challenging*



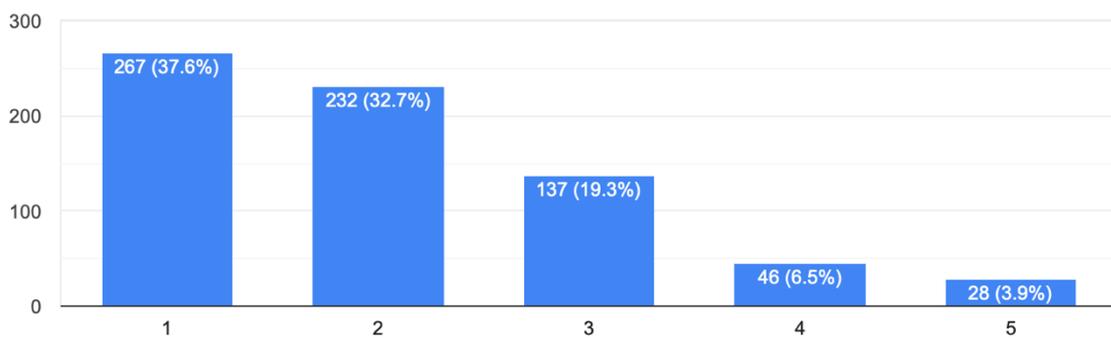
*My work with parents has become more emotionally challenging*



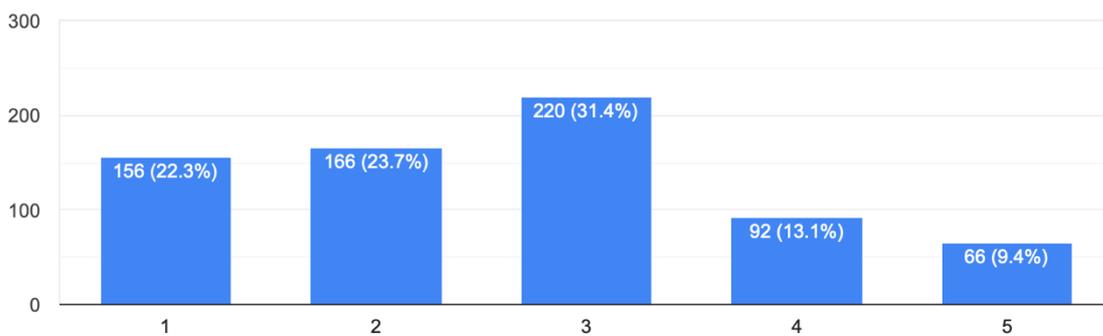
*My work with teaching staff has become more emotionally challenging*



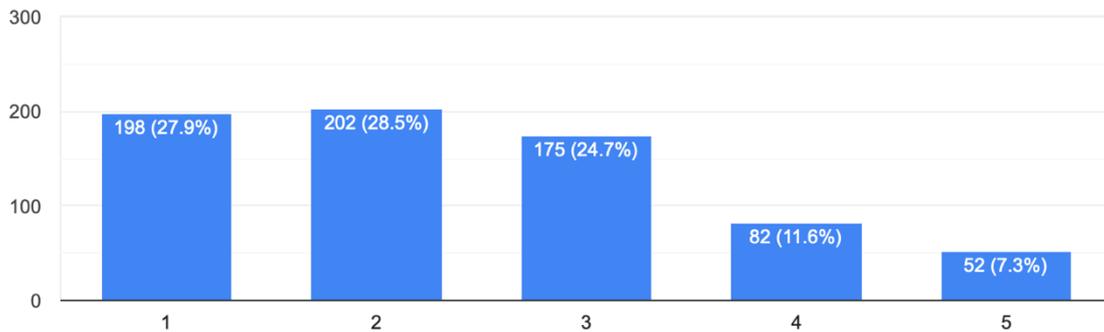
*My work with non-teaching staff has become more emotionally challenging*



*My work with the board of governors/directors/trustees has become more emotionally challenging*



*My work with senior colleagues has become more emotionally challenging*



### *What Respondents' Have Found Challenging in Their Own Words*

“Being everybody's "rock!"”

“Managing staff anxiety alongside their increased workload.”

“Supporting the wellbeing of staff and pupils whilst receiving much of the blame for all the changes that have taken place (whether or not they are within my control).”

“Distressed educators who needed to be listened to.”

“Ensuring continuity of learning while emotional well-being seems to hang in the balance for everyone.”

“Trying to remain positive or at least pretend it’s all going to be okay for other staff.”

“Coping with the mental health needs of children, parents and staff. As a result, my own has significantly deteriorated.”

“The most significant challenge was likely dealing with parents, who were increasingly stressed by needing to work (also from home in many cases) and support their children in learning.”

“Managing everyone’s different emotional levels around COVID as well as trying to get on with the day job of running the school.”

“Staff feeling isolated and suffering with mental health challenges.”

“Staying strong for everyone.”

“Reassuring everyone about being safe and supporting the emotional needs of staff and parents when I don’t felt safe myself and I’m also going through this myself.”

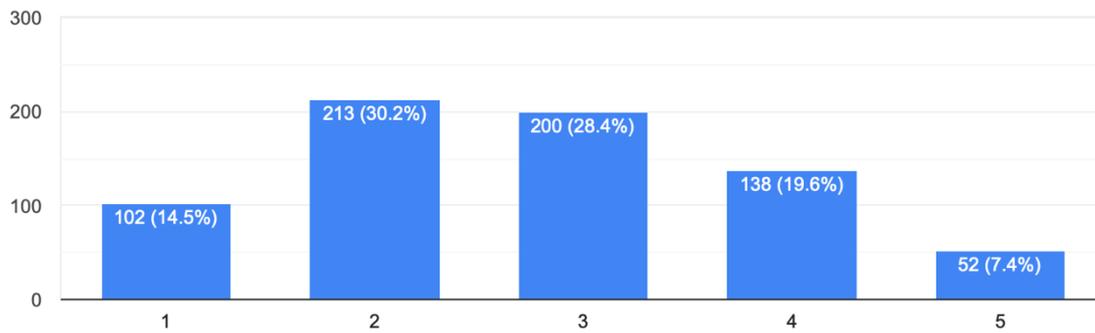
“Reassuring and keeping my staff safe. Their mental health and wellbeing has most definitely been the most challenging.”

“Managing everybody's stress levels whilst also holding everything together.”

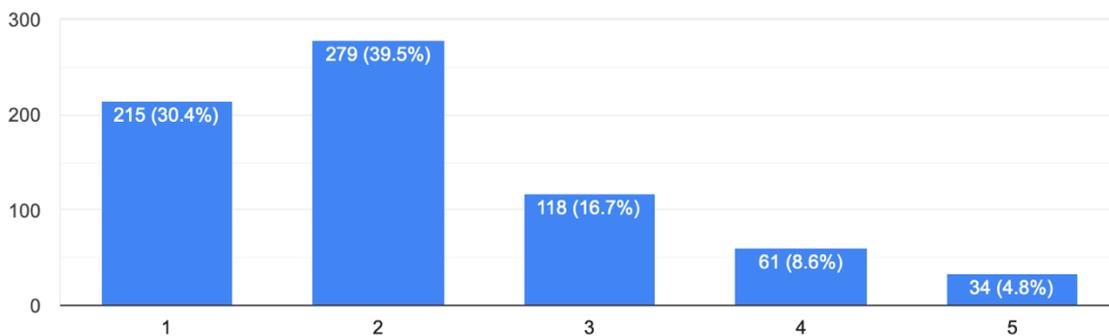


## Impact of Current Stress

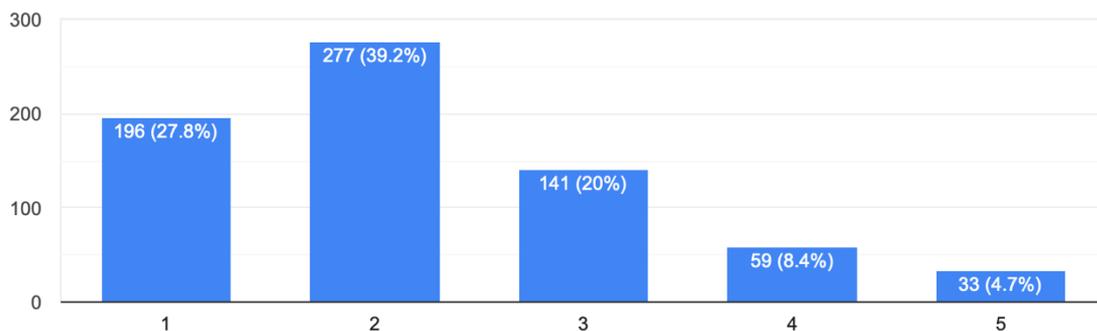
*My current stress is impacting on my ability to do my job well*



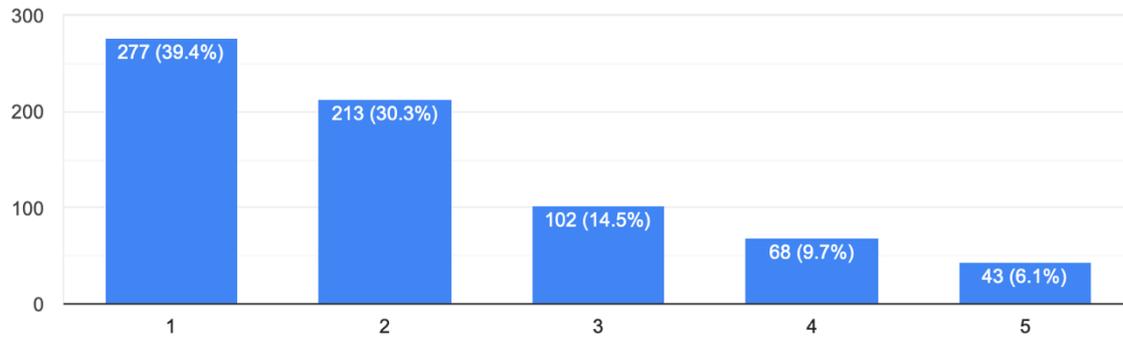
*My current stress is impacting negatively on my personal life*



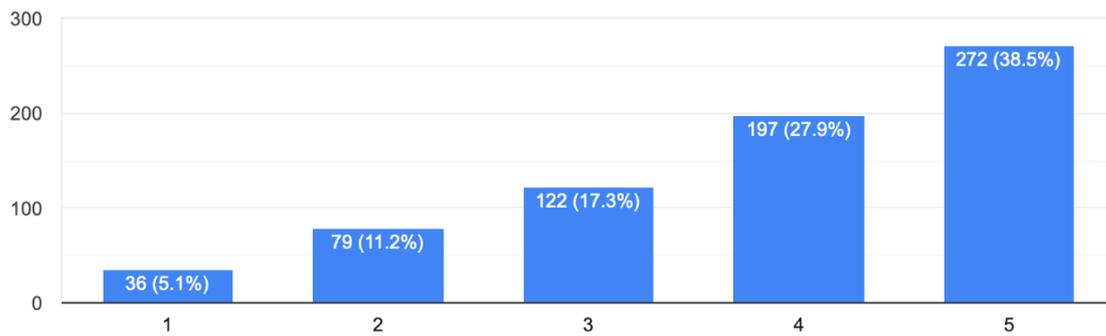
*My current stress is impacting negatively on my health*



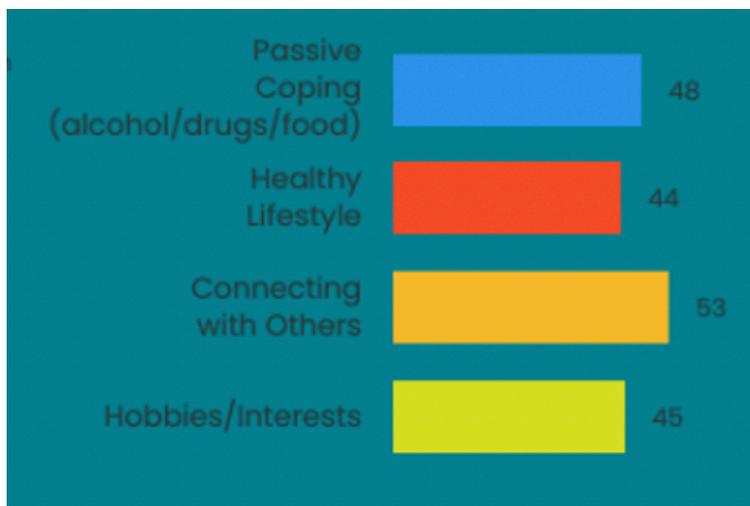
*I am getting enough sleep at the moment*



*There have been times during 2020 when I have felt close to breaking point*



*I am using the following strategies to help me to cope*



### *What Respondents' Have Found Challenging in Their Own Words*

"I have completely disregarded my own well-being for the benefit of others and without proper LA support."

"Being everything to everyone and my own family (and kids) being neglected."

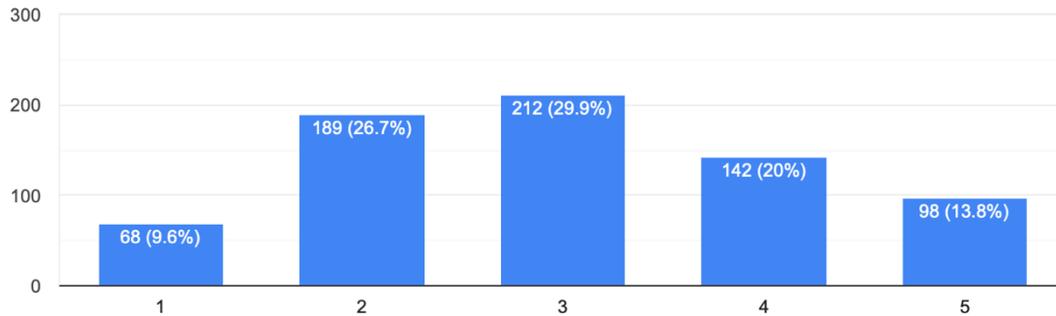
"All of it... balancing my own life with COVID-19. Basically, my personal life is wholly compromised, my partner neglected. I want out."

*"The hardest challenge has been putting on a brave face and leading every day when some days I'd rather stay in bed and cry."*

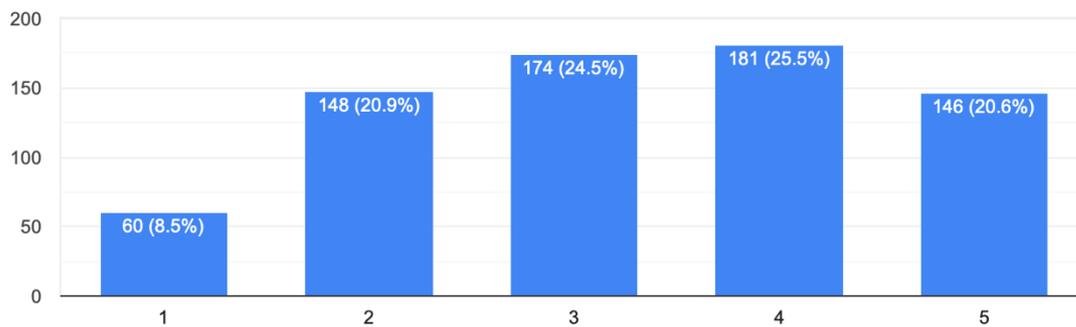


## In-school Support

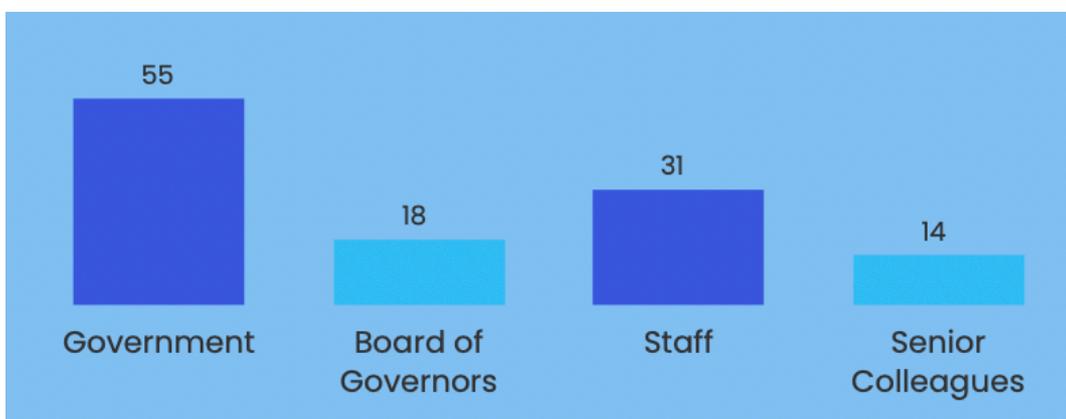
*I am getting enough practical support in school at the moment*



*I am getting enough emotional support in school at the moment*



*I would like to receive more in-school support from (%)*



*Other support needs*



*What Respondents' Have Found Challenging in Their Own Words*

“Supporting others constantly whilst not having time to support myself.”

“Living alone away from family and friends but leaving my baggage at the door in order to support my whole school community without any personal support.”

“Emotional support for everyone with none in place for me at the top of the tree. The lonely office is even more lonely.”

“As the only person in leadership at our small school, I could really do with someone telling me I’m doing okay too!”

“No break at all since it started. Expectation to work during calendar breaks.”

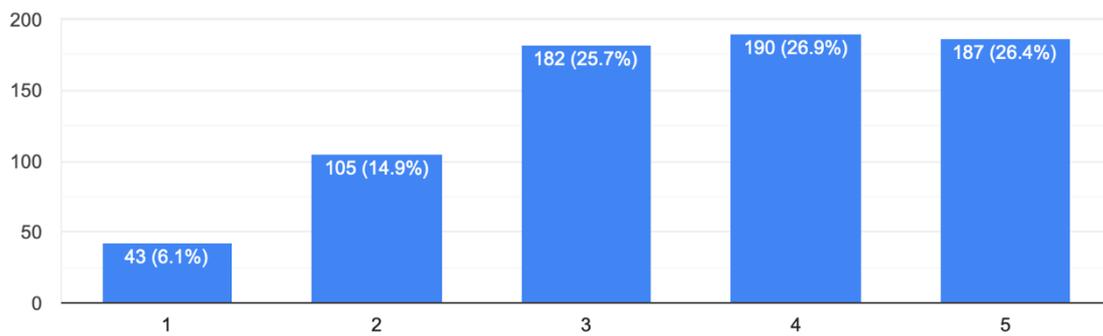
“Leading a school of stressed out educators while being a stressed out leader.”

“Feeling and being isolated and alone as HT in a small school with no other leaders.”

“Lack of mental health support from board.”

## Effectiveness of Training and Training Needs

*I feel that my training and experience has prepared me well for the current crisis*



*I would like to receive the following training*



### *What Respondents' Have Found Challenging in Their Own Words*

“Having the answer to significant Health and Safety issues with no training and limited guidance. Making my school as safe as it can be for all the children and staff.”

“I’m a teacher not health care or health and safety expert. It’s just exhausting and so worrying- what if I get this wrong. Big responsibility! If a member of staff dies - not sure if ever sleep again.”



## Qualitative Findings

Respondents were asked to describe what has been the most challenging for them. The following additional themes emerged, illustrated in the respondents' own words.

### **Confusing and Shifting Guidance from Government**

“It’s been very, very confusing with mixed messages from government. It feels like I’m planning for something unknown, blindfolded and hand tied behind my back!”

“Dealing with the constant changes at short notice and trying to get it right!”

“The quickness of changes to implement as soon as you have set up the last change!”

“The fact that the district’s plan is horrible and unsustainable. The fact that I have to do double the work because they couldn’t create a plan that actually works. Telling me I need to completely reprogram the school because of COVID testing. It’s all about communicating and their information streams are severely lacking.”

“Trying to keep up with the endless changes to guidance, implementing it and trying to keep everyone up to date.”

“Late responses and directives from the government. Timing of information released has been appalling and very inconsiderate. The amount of information has been overwhelming as the government has changed its mind and issued new directives.”

“Lack of clear guidance and decision making from the authorities. Typically decisions are made for local schools and then negotiated for international schools. So dealing with miscommunication from the authorities is challenging and this is an area we have very little control over.”

“The sheer volume of information and then distilling it to give our families relevant and clear information to support their child’s education.”

“The sheer uncertainty of the context of shifting guidance and moving goalposts from government when the reality is we can operate, are doing so and are doing so exceptionally well across the industry. Unhelpful and late interventions from DfE and inept provision from DfH have been nothing but incompetent.”

### **Logistical Problem Solving**

“Being a project manager and not a leader in education. I can't remember the last time I had a teaching and learning conversation.”

“Making sure we systematically offer the best programme and support for all, from the students quarantined locally, those on campus, those quarantined remotely and those who have not made it back yet.”

“Providing remote learning as most children have no access other than parents phones and laptops are not available for all. Also few have internet access at home.”

“Having enough staff to provide sufficient cover for PPA and breaks in each bubble. We’ve had to abandon after school club for now because it wasn’t viable in bubbles.”

“When a bubble (year group) closes having to juggle delivering packed lunches to free schools meals children, delivering home learning packs to those who do not have WIFI or adequate IT resources, dealing with parental queries about self-isolation, supporting on-line learning via Teams and trying to complete my leadership role.”

“Managing social distancing in school for both children and adults. Managing parents access to the school site, especially for those in need of emotional support.”

“Preparing for reopening; logistics; dealing with worried staff; preparing for cases; dealing with symptomatic children.”

“Managing staff and students on different continents and time zones.  
Welcoming new and returning students to school while still supporting some  
with virtual learning.”

“Disruption of staff and pupils being constantly in and out of school due to  
diagnosis, awaiting test results or isolation.”



## Responsibility for the Health and Safety of Others

“Pressure of keeping the whole school community safe and feeling like I need to be a COVID expert, whereas in reality I’m just a human being with a family who loves working with children and teachers.”

“Staying in control of something we have no control over.”

“Feeling the responsibility of keeping everyone safe whilst still ensuring that the children are catching up where they should be.”

“Ensuring everyone is safe. We had staff in the critically vulnerable list who were shielding. Making sure they feel and are as safe as possible is a huge worry! In addition half of my staff are over50, a third at 60 ish!”

“Workplace Health and Safety as relates to teachers/staff in their roles. Every day being in fear of what will happen if we have someone get seriously sick or die. Feeling a tremendous weight of the responsibility of keeping everyone safe.”



## Managing Competing Needs from Different Stakeholder Groups

“Getting a parent board to realize that teachers can only take so much.”

“Supporting teachers who are stressed and feeling overwhelmed, while also attending to parent requests (when reasonable) for a quality learning program.”

“Balancing parent expectations with what staff are able to manage and produce.”

“Balancing workload for teachers whilst providing a broad and balanced curriculum for children at home.”

“Parents expect same number of contact hours, and teachers’ schedules are extremely heavy. Likewise students at home are disengaged, but parents still expect school to be responsible for students’ learning and performance.”

“Having to provide online / home learning provision for our youngest learners in Nursery and Reception where it is almost impossible for the children to access learning independently. There was always push back from parents that this was not value for money which was very hard to disagree with for this age bracket.”

"Managing workload for staff, expectations of parents, while making it meaningful for children. "

“Balancing financial needs of the board (commercial) and parents (compassion).”

## Pressures of Continuing with School Improvement

“Pressure to have school improvement plans up to date, show impact etc when trying to just keep going. . . would love to walk away but can’t afford it.”

“My SIP demanding evidence of curriculum leadership from middle leaders.”

“Having to keep doing all the normal things on top of running the school eg SDP SIP SEND paperwork, worrying about/preparing for OfSTED.”

“Trying to continue to do everything that is normally expected and required while dealing with a significant increase in Safeguarding and COVID related issues. And the pressure of knowing we are due a full OFSTED and possibly as soon as Jan 21.”

“The pressure to continue school improvement, whilst managing everything related to the pandemic. Also dealing with disciplinaries, performance issues, appeals and restructuring staff due to budget. With the possibility of an Ofsted / HSE visit too. Completely overwhelming and beyond stressful.”

Forcing staff to do lesson observations, book looks, performance management, curriculum subject plans

“Fear of Ofsted looming when focus should be on children and staff wellbeing following a pandemic.”

## Dealing with Anger and Aggression from Others

The level of judgement and critique our teachers have been subject to and the sometimes threatening behaviour from frustrated, and often desperate families.”

“Keeping calm when being continually used as a dumping ground for others.”

Often they take this out on you as a senior leader. Trying to cope with restraints of guidance that doesn't suit them. Quite a few have been very aggressive.

Parents not following the guidelines and then swearing at you when they disagree.

“Being the punchbag for people’s anxieties.”

“Everyone...I mean, EVERYONE is angry...all.the.time.”

“Negativity from the press towards the profession.”

“Parents - not being rational, shouting, much more emotional.”

## Conclusion

This study highlights the main findings on school leader stress and wellbeing during the COVID 19 crisis 2020. Leaders from 36 countries took part in the study, from state, private and international school sectors. Despite the varied contexts in which they lead, the respondents highlighted similar challenges and there is evidence to show that their experiences have been broadly similar.

School leaders have experienced very high levels of stress, beyond what they would consider normal for the job. This stress has been caused by a number of key factors. While leading through the global pandemic is challenging for leaders in all sectors and at all levels, school leaders face a set of unique challenges. While millions of employees around the world continue to work from home, in many countries schools remain open, representing the largest multi-generational community gatherings. Facilitating such gatherings, ensuring they are as safe as possible and dealing with the anxieties and fears of their communities represents a monumental set of challenges for school leaders.

Many school leaders have felt unprepared to deal with a crisis of this nature. They also feel that the level of support provided for them by government and within school, has been inadequate.

Many school leaders are struggling to cope. The normal coping strategies that they employ to manage their work-related stress is failing to have sufficient impact for many. 6-9 months after the start of the crisis, a large number are overwhelmed and exhausted. This should be of concern to governments, boards of governors/trustees/directors and parents.

At the time of writing this report, an end to the pandemic is in sight with the first doses of the vaccine having been administered in the UK this week. However, we are told that it will be many months before the world returns to normal. School leaders need increased support if they are to push on through to the end of the crisis without a significant impact on their wellbeing, the effectiveness of their leadership and their desire to remain in the profession. 47% of 2,061 headteachers who took part in a survey in England in November 2020 said they are now less likely to remain in school leadership for as long as initially planned as a result of the coronavirus pandemic (National Association of

Headteachers, 2020). There is anecdotal evidence that this sentiment is shared by school leaders around the world.

## Recommendations

Considering the wide scope of this study, it is hard to make universal recommendations that cover every context. However, the following immediate recommendations should be considered.

- The provision by government of clear, consistent guidance for schools communicated in a timely manner.
- The provision by government or boards of governors/trustees/directors of increased practical support for school leaders in attending to logistical problem solving. This could take the form of increased on the ground support from local government/education authorities or the formation of COVID task forces within schools or across clusters of schools.
- The establishment of a culture of school leader self-care on the part of boards of governors/trustees/directors and others overseeing the day-to-day running of schools, with an emphasis being placed on school leader wellbeing and ring-fenced funds to support this.
- The provision by government or boards of governors/trustees/directors of funds to facilitate professional one-to-one coaching for all senior leaders and the provision of time to access coaching sessions.
- The establishment by government, trade unions/professional organisations or boards of governors/trustees/directors of peer support networks for school leaders and the provision of time to access these networks.
- Steps taken to protect leaders' evenings, weekends and holidays to allow for proper recovery. The timing of communications from governments and boards of governors/trustees/directors and the deadlines given for actionable directives plays a large part in this.
- An honest and open dialogue between leaders and their boards of governors/trustees/directors or others responsible for setting the strategic direction of the school, to establish more realistic expectations for school improvement during the remainder of the 2020-21 school year (or first half of 2021-22 for southern hemisphere schools).
- A moratorium on all school inspections/accreditation visits until at least autumn 2021 in countries still struggling to contain the virus.

- The provision by government or boards of governors/trustees/directors of funding to allow increased access to mental health professionals to support the emotional needs of school communities.

In the longer term, governments need to evaluate how the role of the school leader has evolved in recent decades to become more demanding and less sustainable for individual leaders. The role should be reconceptualised to ensure it fits the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. The provision of funding for new roles in schools to support the day-to-day running of these complex organisations would be a welcome step. Where this is not possible, effective distributed leadership models can empower those beyond the traditional senior leadership team, spread the workload and provide strong collaborative cultures within schools or across clusters of schools. The training of school leaders needs a complete review. In addition to crisis management training, enhanced “whole-leader training” should be provided to address the real challenges of modern day school leadership, including the demands related to increased mental health concerns in schools. In addition, the provision of networks of school counsellors and other mental health professionals to support this is much needed.

“Juggling so many very important ‘balls’ and knowing that dropping anyone of them will have a negative impact on the safety and well-being of staff, children, parents and/or me.”

Dr Helen Kelly is a former school principal, independent postdoctoral researcher, writer and speaker in the field of school wellbeing.

[www.drhelenkelly.com](http://www.drhelenkelly.com)

For further information please contact Helen Kelly [theposprincipal@gmail.com](mailto:theposprincipal@gmail.com)