

Mentoring School Principals by Engaging in Well-Being Activities

by

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Abstract

This study explores the implications of stress and burnout on the professional sustainability of school principals and proposes an evidence-based mentoring model as a solution to these issues. A qualitative action research approach was used to first collect baseline data to determine the well-being awareness of five school principals. Mentoring for well-being activities were chosen by the participants and they participated in various feedback, interview, and professional development sessions. Also, they received care packages and inspirational messages after the initial interview. All activities were aligned with the PERMA model, which includes positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. This study argues that implementing an intervention that considers PERMA-aligned activities will improve principals' well-being, reduce burnout, and model appropriate mentoring and professional development behaviors in the school community. This is significant to the future of leadership development by reconceptualizing support for principals as an ongoing investment in well-being.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure Statement

In the preparation of this dissertation, the following Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used: ChatGPT. These tools were used primarily to edit writing and code broad themes from transcribed interviews. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has ensured that all AI-assisted sections have been reviewed and revised for accuracy and appropriate academic style. All AI-generated content was reviewed and validated for relevance, appropriateness, and accuracy before incorporation into the final document to maintain scholarly integrity of this research.

Digital Accessibility Disclosure Statement

This dissertation has ensured digital accessibility to meet WCAG 2.2 Level AA standards, ensuring the content is perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust. This document is structured for screen readers, and all figures, graphs, and images area accompanied by descriptive alternative text.

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The Merton Prayer by Thomas Merton

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

“The Merton Prayer” from [Thoughts in Solitude](#) by Thomas Merton. Copyright © 1956, 1958 by The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani.

First and foremost, I must acknowledge my Lord Jesus for allowing me to have the opportunity to write a dissertation. God’s great grace, wisdom, and unfailing love sustained me throughout this journey. In moments of uncertainty, exhaustion, total desperation and doubt, His strength carried me forward and reminded me that all things are possible through faith. This achievement is a reflection of His faithfulness and the countless blessings He has bestowed upon my life. His sustaining grace and love for me is the only reason I was able to complete this project. I’m not sure why the Lord allowed me the privilege and time to write a dissertation, but I am so glad HE did. The

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I also dedicate this work to all of the educators who have ever felt overwhelmed, exhausted, and somehow unseen. May this research be a reminder that your health and wellness matter, and that self-care is not a sign of weakness, but an essential piece of sustaining effective leadership and creating flourishing schools.

Finally, I dedicate this achievement to the generations of my family whose hard work, perseverance, and sacrifice laid the foundation upon which I stand today. To my grandmother, Lois Finn, whose dedication was evident in her years of service at Wal-Mart and was the hardest working person I have ever known. To my grandfather, Willis Finn, whose work as a truck driver for Floyd and Beasley reflected determination, resilience, and commitment and instilled within me my faith in God. To my grandfather,

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With a heart full of gratitude, I dedicate this dissertation to God, my family, my mentors, and all those who believed in me along the way. This achievement is not mine alone; it is the culmination of the love, faith, sacrifice, and support of generations who

came before me, those who walk beside me today and those who will come long after I am gone...this is all for you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Despite growing recognition of the challenges associated with school leadership, principal well-being has received limited attention in both research and practice (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Wells & Klocko, 2018). Existing support structures primarily emphasize instructional leadership, accountability, and school improvement, often overlooking the personal and professional well-being of school leaders (Grissom et al., 2021). Consequently, many principals experience high levels of stress, increasing workload demands, and burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Mahfouz, 2020). There is a need for intentional professional development and mentoring opportunities that support principal well-being and provide strategies for sustaining effectiveness, resilience, and professional growth. Furthermore, greater awareness and formalized support systems are needed to position principal well-being as an essential component of effective school leadership (Lamula-Mthanti & Msiza, 2023). Mentoring may provide one such support structure, as developmental relationships have been shown to foster psychosocial support, professional growth, and career development, all of which contribute to individual well-being and effectiveness (Adair & Reames, 2025; Reames & Mullen, 2025; Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Background of the Study

Empirical research about the well-being of educational leaders reveals that school principals face a high level of emotional exhaustion, burnout and stress, which negatively affects their physical health and professional performance. According to the Australian Catholic University (2025), school principals have a heavy workload that affects their work-life balance, indicating that they experience a higher level of burnout

and stress than the general population. Similarly, research by Cavallari et al. (2024) reports that the school principal, lecturers, and tutors indicate a lower well-being compared to people in different fields due to poor working and learning conditions and the stress of student outcomes, which accumulates stress and affects their mental health. These research findings prove that educational leaders (principals) struggle with well-being, which can significantly affect their professional performance and student outcomes.

The most significant recurring issue in the literature is the gap between the principal's well-being practices and their personal and professional responsibilities to others. Hayes et al. (2022) reveal that principals forget about their well-being because they prioritize the demands of stakeholders and the pressures of their jobs, resulting in higher stress and fatigue. More studies show that the general population has a good mental state compared to school principals due to insufficient sleep, poor diet, and neglect of physical exercise (Ray et al., 2020). Principals are often neglected, and they have no strategies and frameworks that safeguard their well-being, including preparation and leadership development programs (Adair & Reames, 2026). These results prove that the wellness of the principals in their professional growth lacks proper attention.

Emerging research suggests that principal well-being can be strengthened through intentional support structures grounded in positive psychology and mentoring. The PERMA model provides a promising approach for enhancing well-being, while studies indicate that principals with higher levels of well-being are better positioned to foster positive school cultures and sustain effective leadership (Adair & Reames, 2025;

Reames & Mullen, 2025; Wheeler et al., 2024). Mentoring has also emerged as a valuable strategy for supporting professional growth, resilience, and psychosocial well-being by fostering meaningful relationships characterized by trust, empathy, and dialogue (Elkaleh et al., 2025; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Krishna et al., 2025). Few studies, however, have explicitly examined mentoring interventions grounded in the PERMA model to promote principal well-being, highlighting the need for additional research in this area (Reames & Mullen, 2025).

Problem Statement

The school principal plays a significant role in student performance, the teaching environment, and the school's culture. Prevailing literature reviews, however, reveal that principals have a higher rate of burnout and stress than people in different fields (Tshabalala & Faremi, 2024). Coşkun et al. (2025) claim that school principals often complain about their work demands and how stressful the day has been as leaders with insufficient time. These challenges have made principals feel stagnant in their careers and lowered their personal well-being, adversely affecting the school.

A significant problem affecting the school principal is the lack of a well-structured program that considers the personal and professional demands for the principal. The existing leadership initiatives and training programs highly neglect principal well-being and the welfare of faculty and staff because they tend to focus on their professional accountability, deliverables, and competence. There is a gap in the literature regarding what we can do to reduce stress and align principals with well-being activities embedded into their day which can combat burnout. Principals often struggle to find a work-life balance due to long working hours in which they are tasked to achieve

instructional and organizational leadership objectives, hindering them from being able to maintain practices aimed at personal and professional wellness (Lani & Hezzrin Pauzi, 2024). Recent research has identified the well-being of school administrators as an emerging issue related to burnout (Adair & Reames, 2026; DeMatthews et al., 2021). Avenues to bolster resilience and retention are beginning to appear in the school leadership literature, but much more is left to research to address this gap even though attention to well-being is required in every standard of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL, 2015), which are the standards used to evaluate principals (Adair & Reames, 2026).

The literature reveals a significant gap in leadership preparation and mentoring programs related to principal well-being. While many programs emphasize instructional leadership, organizational management, and career advancement, they provide limited attention to the emotional and psychological demands of school leadership (Connery & Frick, 2021; Murphy et al., 2024). Research has consistently documented high levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout among school principals, highlighting the need for intentional well-being supports (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Wells & Klocko, 2018). There is limited evidence, however, that leadership preparation programs systematically incorporate well-being awareness, mindfulness, resilience-building, or other strategies designed to promote leader well-being (Adair & Reames, 2026). Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). Without structures that address the mental health and well-being of school leaders, principals may be at greater risk for burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished leadership effectiveness (Grissom et al., 2021; Mahfouz et al., 2023).

There is a gap in the literature of actions embedded within professional development to encourage principal well-being practices to sustain the demands of principals' workloads. Regarding professional development, educational leaders need to explore the steps they can take to encourage professional development and well-being. In examining effective principal professional development, Boren et al. (2017) concluded that for principals to be effective, they must be lifelong learners. Obtaining, developing, and securing leadership skills should be a deliberate process embedded into the job demands. Professional development should not be incidental or casual. Instead, effective professional development for principals is a career-long progression of growth. Often, well-being has not been an area of emphasis, and literature now suggests that the flourishing of school principals must be a focus. Well-being is now seen as an urgent priority for school principals.

Active school principals at elementary, primary, and secondary school levels are the most significant target population directly affected by this problem. Principals often prioritize the needs of others, such as the needs of students and teachers, forgetting to take care of themselves. This issue affects their health and negatively impacts the school operation and the education system. Empirical evidence by Leithwood (2021) suggests that the school principal's well-being is directly interrelated to student performance, the morale of the teachers, and the overall learning atmosphere.

This research study will significantly address this issue by providing a systematic shift for the principal's career development that integrates their well-being activities. Using the PERMA model as the conceptual framework, this study endeavors to evaluate whether structural systematic change using activities to promote well-being

promotes well-being in principals, based on their perceptions (Donaldson et al., 2022). This research finding has the potential to create systematic change, restructure the leadership programs, and create awareness among the relevant authorities to ensure that school principal well-being is considered and addressed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative action research study is to explore how the mentoring for well-being framework (Reames, 2025), grounded in the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), supports the personal and professional development of school principals. Participants will include five Alabama school principals representing elementary, middle, and high school settings. Through mentoring sessions and reflective well-being activities, including journaling, self-compassion, and mindfulness practices, participants will examine strategies for enhancing positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. The study seeks to understand how these practices support principal well-being and address challenges related to stress, workload, and burnout.

Research question

This study aims to explore the nature of the school principal's well-being, particularly how they consider their well-being practices in relation to their career growth and mentoring. To achieve this, this qualitative study seeks to answer the following research questions:

Cycle 1 Baseline

1. What mentoring for well-being activities do school principals have in place presently?

Cycle 2 PERMA Mentoring Activities

2. How do school principals describe the influence of mentoring activities on their personal and professional well-being?
3. In what ways does engaging in PERMA-aligned mentoring activities enhance principals' perceptions of their well-being?

The above research questions are directly connected with the problem statement of the study, which is that there is a lack of a well-structured programs that consider the school principal's personal well-being.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses a gap in educational leadership regarding the well-being of school principals. Principal stress, burnout, and attrition have been documented in the literature and this issue continues to affect leader effectiveness and retention (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Diliberti et al., 2024; Mahfouz, 2020). Despite recognition of these challenges, fewer studies have examined structured interventions designed to promote principal well-being within leadership development and professional learning (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Lamula-Mthanti & Msiza, 2023). By exploring mentoring through the lens of the PERMA and Reames' (2025) conceptual framework, this study contributes to the growing body of research that positions well-being as an essential component of effective school leadership (Seligman, 2011).

The study also contributes to the literature by examining how mentoring can be intentionally designed to support principals' personal and professional well-being. Grounded in the Mentoring for Well-Being Framework (Reames, 2025) and informed by mentoring theory, which emphasizes the psychosocial and career functions of

developmental relationships (Kram & Isabella, 1985), the findings may provide evidence regarding the role of mentoring in fostering leadership sustainability. The study extends emerging research connecting positive psychology and well-being with mentoring for school leaders (Adair & Reames, 2025; Reames & Mullen, 2025; Wheeler et al., 2024).

From a practical perspective, the findings may inform the design of principal preparation, and professional development programs that intentionally integrate well-being into leadership learning experiences (Reames & Adair, 2026). Educational leadership faculty, district leaders, and professional organizations may use the results to develop supports that strengthen principals' resilience, effectiveness, and long-term commitment to the profession (Grissom et al., 2021; Lamula-Mthanti & Msiza, 2023). Advancing the understanding of how mentoring for well-being practices can contribute to sustainable leadership and the organizations they serve is an important area of research.

Assumptions

This study is based on several assumptions. First, it is assumed that participants will provide honest and accurate reflection on their experiences with mentoring and well-being activities and that the participating principals will actively engage in the mentoring sessions and PERMA-aligned activities throughout the study. It is assumed that principal well-being can be enhanced through intentional mentoring and reflective practices aligned with PERMA well-being activities. It is also assumed that the mentoring for well-being framework (Reames, 2025) and the PERMA model provide an appropriate lens for examining principals' personal and professional well-being. Finally,

it is assumed that participants' descriptions of their experiences will provide meaningful insights into how mentoring influences well-being and leadership sustainability.

The Action Research Data Collection Procedures

Data was gathered in two action research cycles with various sources of evidence to develop rich, triangulated findings. During Cycle 1, were interviewed to determine baseline well-being perceptions and practices. They then engaged in a professional development training in which they were introduced to well-being activities aligned with the PERMA model's domains (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment), including mindfulness, journaling, appreciation exercises, and strengths-based reflection. The principals chose from the list which activities they would like to try and practiced those activities for several weeks. I met with them for weekly check-ins and gathered their reflections and feedback.

During Cycle 2, the participants visited a second professional development meeting where they exchanged their experiences of the first cycle and discussed other well-being strategies. Data for cycle 2 consisted of interviews, discussion/feedback sessions with the group, check-ins, and observations. The iterative process allowed me to revise professional development activities according to the results of Cycle 1 to be sensitive to the time demands of the participants.

Rationale for Methodology

The research methodology is a qualitative action research approach since the phenomenon of interest, principal well-being, necessitates a detailed investigation of principals' lived experience, perception, and practice (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The main

issue under consideration is that school principals do not have structured professional development opportunities that explicitly incorporate well-being activities in their leadership practice. To address the research questions, I must record the reflections of principals regarding their existing self-care practices, their experiences with new well-being practices, and their attitudes towards how mentoring and professional growth affect their sustainability as leaders. These experiences would not be sufficiently recorded to be quantified using quantitative methods, which would only help measure the tendencies.

Action research is appropriate for this study as it is participatory, cyclical, and improvement-oriented (Mertler, 2021). It enables principals to be actively involved in the professional development processes, to reflect on their experiences, and to give feedback that informs the next round of research. This type of iterative design makes the study descriptive and practical, so the knowledge generated can be directly utilized in the school district to develop leadership development structures further.

School leadership and well-being research studies are moving toward more qualitative and action research designs to represent complex experiences and inform practice. For example, Cherkowski and Walker (2018) employed qualitative inquiry to investigate principal well-being and flourishing. Hayes et al. (2022) employed reflective qualitative research to investigate principal self-care during the COVID-19 crisis. On the same note, Toyama et al. (2021) emphasized using experiential studies to investigate job crafting and well-being in school leaders. These papers indicate that the qualitative designs offer the flexibility and richness required to gain insights into how leaders construct meaning of well-being in their roles as principals.

A qualitative action research methodology was chosen to test the research questions. It leaves the principals' voices, creates context-related knowledge, and provides practice-based suggestions on integrating well-being into leader development.

Definition of Terms

Flourishing- "The achievement of a balanced life in which individuals feel good about lives in which they are functioning well" (Keyes, 2002, p. 201).

Mindfulness-practice that instills the ability for individuals to be present in the moment and without judgement of themselves or others.

PERMA- a theory created by Martin Seligman that proposes that well-being can be defined by the following factors: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011).

P-Positive emotion

E-Engagement

R-Relationships

M-Meaning

A-Accomplishment

Positive Psychology- "The aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 43).

Resilience-the ability to recover and emerge stronger after an obstacle or trauma.

Self-efficacy-one's confidence in oneself to accomplish a goal.

Well-being- Well-being is a multifaceted construct that encompasses an individual's physical, psychological, and social functioning. It reflects the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, a sense of purpose or meaning, and the ability to manage daily activities and stressors effectively (Bautista et al., 2023).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the background, problem statement, purpose, research questions, and significance of the study. The main issue of interest is the absence of formal professional development programs that formally incorporate well-being activities as part of the principal leadership preparation and mentoring. Previous studies have determined that principals are prone to high stress, burnout, and attrition rates, but not much has been done to consider well-being practices in leadership training (Adair & Reames, 2026; DeMatthews et al., 2021). This research examines how principals can be engaged in structured well-being practices as guided by the Reames (2025) framework, using professional development and mentoring. The research questions are centered on principals' beliefs regarding well-being, their experiences with the aligned with the PERMA domains, and how these practices contributed to leadership sustainability.

The research would contribute to the literature gap because it would integrate positive psychology and mentoring frameworks to create a new model of principal professional development. It presents theoretical contributions that bring PERMA to the

educational leadership environment and practical advantages to districts interested in promoting principal resilience and retention.

The study is organized in the following way: Chapter 2 entails a thorough literature review of stress, well-being, resilience, professional development, positive psychology, and mentoring. Chapter 3 explains the action research study methodology, research design, respondents, instruments, and procedures. Chapter 4 provides analysis and findings, and Chapter 5 discusses findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to investigate how consistent stress influences school leader burnout and how professional development focused on school

leader well-being could diminish the attrition rates. Using the PERMA model as a lens, professional development can be reframed with an organizational routine that includes the characteristics of effective professional development based on the Mentoring for Well-Being Framework (Reames, 2025) that has the potential to bring about change that comes from within organizational routine: “Change that is a result of engagement in the routine itself” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 92) This review further focuses on the literature on professional development activities, explaining in detail the conceptual framework which addresses the major concepts mentioned above. Activities based on the PERMA model domains are explored through the well-being lens. It is imperative to create strategies and activities to combat stress and improve well-being if school leader career longevity and flourishing are to be achieved.

Stress and Burnout

Lazarus and Folkman’s Transactional Model of Stress defines stress as arising when “environmental demands tax or exceed the adaptive capacity of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress exposure refers to the occurrence of a potentially stressful event. This event is often referred to as a “stressor.” This construct can also consider the frequency and severity of potentially stressful events over time. Stressors may be external events that are either “major life events” (e.g., divorce) or “daily hassles” (e.g., traffic). Increasingly, however, stress research has suggested that stressors may also be “internal,” such as when a past event is remembered or re-lived (i.e., rumination) or when there is anticipation of a possible future stressor (i.e., worry). “When such internal stress exposure occurs and is persistent, it has been termed ‘perseverative cognition’ (Brosschot et al., 2006). Furthermore, a repetitive thought

(RT), the tendency to think about specific topics over and over, combined with its psychological impact based on content, emotional tone, and cognitive processing style, is more strongly associated with distress and maladaptive outcomes (Segerstrom et al., 2003). The frequency and severity of stressors over an extended period yields profound implications for the principal, including health issues, burnout, and increased attrition rates.

Current Definitions and Descriptions of Stress and Burnout

A longitudinal study conducted by Australian Catholic University (ACU) and Deakin University, with support from the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) and others have collected data since 2011 from roughly 2,000–2,500 school leaders annually, including primary and secondary sectors. Topics included in the study include workload, stress, violence or threats (from students, parents, staff), mental health, burnout, and intentions to quit. The study recently found, “Compared to the population average, Australian school leaders report higher emotional demands and large effect sizes for burnout, sleeping troubles and stress, with these factors experienced across school sectors and types and regardless of school location (Australian Catholic University & Deakin University, 2024). Many principals feel that their current workloads are unreasonable, reporting that they cannot complete the full range of work expected of them (Gorrell & Nobile, 2023). A school principal’s daily demands are daunting.

The two greatest sources of stress cited by Australian principals are the sheer quantity of work and a lack of time to focus on teaching and learning, which have consistently been identified as key sources over the last decade. This indicates

that the dual expectations of managerial and instructional leadership tasks cannot be balanced successfully. (Gorrell & Nobile, 2023, p. 242)

According to RAND Education and Labor and the National Education Association (NEA), teachers and principals report worse well-being than other working adults, especially among Hispanic/Latinx teachers, mid-career teachers, and female teachers and principals (Steiner et al., 2022)

Principal and teacher well-being is a matter of immediate concern for principals and teachers themselves and for the students they teach. Stress on the job can negatively affect educators' physical health, and poor teacher wellness and mental health are linked with lower-quality student learning environments and with poorer academic and nonacademic student outcomes. (Steiner et al., 2022, p. 22)

The study also suggested that it is vital to the principal and teacher workforce and their long-term health to examine educators' well-being in relation to their working environment, their intentions to stay or leave their positions, and the stress they endure. (Steiner et al., 2022).

Because principals spend so much of their day caring for others, they often neglect caring for themselves. This leads to compassion fatigue, where those caring for others become emotionally and physically drained. Although this has always been a concern, principals serve as caretakers to their entire communities. The fatigue associated with this can have consequences in their personal and professional lives, which includes burnout if they do not address their own well-being (Boyatzis, 2006). Along with the frequency of “stressors” coupled with “compassion fatigue,” it is no

wonder the attrition rates of school principals are high. Principals have ignored their needs and often neglected their well-being, causing their overall health to plummet (Hayes et al., 2022).

Stress Recovery/Restoration: Teaching Resilience

By teaching principals how to be resilient and follow well-being activities through professional development, school principals' attrition rates could decrease. One key component of assisting school principals with managing stress is a process known as stress recovery. By teaching principals how to bounce back from a stressful day and by providing them with activities to use in a moment of stress or after a period of stress, they can learn tools such as learning how to unwind or the importance of sleep restoration to increase resilience in the face of daily challenges. Although not a conventional measure of stress recovery, learning to combat pre-sleep arousal—cognitive (brain refuses to slow down, ruminating on the past) and somatic arousal (too much caffeine, exercising too late in the day)—appears promising in considering how individuals can “wind down” following stress exposure (Williams, 2009). Learning to decrease pre-sleep arousal can be conceptualized as end-of-the-day stress recovery. If pre-sleep arousal is not decreased, it becomes an independent risk factor for the development of insomnia, which is associated with higher neuroticism and lower conscientiousness (Gurtman, 2014).

The term “stress restoration” was coined to capture the critical processes that “refresh, buttress, and repair various forms of cellular damage” in the context of stress (Cacioppo & Berntson, 2006, p. 96), with sleep explicitly described as a critical stress restoration process. In other words, stress-related sleep disruption is hypothesized to

be a pathway to health outcomes. Sleep serves many biological functions necessary for maintaining brain function and health under stress (Zada, 2019).

In addition, sleep and other stress processes are reciprocally related; inadequate sleep predicts poor emotion regulation (Palmer & Alfano, 2017), emotional stress reactivity (Hasler & Troxel, 2010), and subsequent stress-related increases in pre-sleep arousal (Williams, 2013). Restorative sleep is an essential aspect of sleep quality that is associated with executive function, daytime functioning, and objective and subjective pre-sleep arousal in healthy, young adults (Tinajero, 2018). Resilience and sleep are interrelated. Sleep allows for recovery from high demands, compassion fatigue, and restoration of the physical and emotional health of the school principal (Walker, 2023). A key factor in teaching resilience is the importance of quality sleep habits.

Beyond the processes that characterize the broad construct of stress (i.e., exposure, reactivity, recovery, restoration), there are daily experiences thought to buffer the experience of stress. Daily uplifts or positive events can mitigate the effects of stress. The benefits of embedding daily uplifts based on their unique preferences and personality traits, resilience techniques are embedded into the workday by teaching school principals. “Personality may be associated with such established stress buffers” (Leger, 2020; Sin & Almeida, 2018). Although prior research is limited, recent studies have found that personal choice and preference are related to more frequent and enjoyable daily uplifts or positive events (DeMeo, 2023, & Klaiber, 2022), with some evidence that openness is also associated with daily positive event frequency (Klaiber, 2022). The current study sought to examine comprehensively personality associations with daily uplifts. Teaching school principals how to navigate stressors and find their

own personal daily uplift, coupled with adequate sleep, shows evidence that resiliency activities can be a valuable source for teaching principals to bounce back. “It is imperative that faculty of administrator preparation programs and upper administration within school districts pay attention to and address the damage that stress can do to future and current administrators. Intervention and support can be provided through such mechanisms as professional development, discussions with peer groups, and journals to reduce the likelihood of attrition” (Fields, 2005).

Well-Being

Well-being is much more than just mood or satisfaction. “Well-being is not just about happiness, but about flourishing, which consists of five elements: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA)” (Seligman, 2011). The role of a school principal is emotionally and cognitively demanding, often marked by high levels of stress, isolation, and role overload. As the leader, culture-shaper, and community liaison, the principal must balance the needs of students, staff, parents, and district mandates. There is a need for growing attention to the well-being of school leaders as a foundational component of both leadership sustainability and school effectiveness (Leithwood, 2021).

Well-being is not simply the absence of distress, but the presence of positive functioning. This includes emotional balance, resilience, meaning, and supportive relationships (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011). For principals, research reveals psychological well-being is directly associated with increased job satisfaction, decreased burnout, and more effective leadership (Mahfouz, 2018). Leaders who

experience well-being are better equipped to make complex decisions, build relational trust, and lead their schools through change.

In a longitudinal study of school leaders in Australia and Ireland, Beusaert et al. (2023) found principal well-being was positively predicted by social capital, especially connections outside the school. This suggests that meaningful support networks and professional collaboration play a protective role. Additionally, principals with higher emotional intelligence and self-awareness reported lower stress levels and professional efficacy (Floman & Brackett, 2025). Despite the importance of well-being, school principals often work in environments that do not prioritize their personal health. Time scarcity, policy pressure, accountability metrics, and the emotional toll of staff and student support contribute to a culture of overextension (Riley, 2018). This culture can lead to compassion fatigue, presenteeism, and leadership attrition, ultimately impacting student outcomes and school climate (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

School districts should be called upon to create support structures for their principals through mentoring and coaching that focus on self-care, health, and overall well-being. “Shifting that notion to help school administrators realize the need for self-care as a crucial element for conserving resources to be able to attend to the needs of others is important. Self-care must be part of their professional self-understanding to improve principal well-being” (Hayes et al., 2022). The findings from this research also explore the demand to offer training in mindfulness, self-care, and well-being for principals. In reviewing these results, districts should create support structures for their principals through professional development activities, mentoring, and coaching, focusing on self-care, health, and well-being. “We also argue that care (care for others

and care for self) must become part of the culture of the school district and the campus. This culture of care needs to be intentional and nurtured, so principals feel empowered to allow themselves to unplug, disengage, and turn off work to improve their well-being” (Hayes et al., 2022).

A study titled *The Self-Care Practices of School Principals* found school leaders work longer hours, are more sleep-deprived and dehydrated, have poorer diet practices, exercise less regularly, and spend less time with their friends and family than the general population. The findings also suggested that administrators struggled to find ways within their control to improve their self-care behavior and offered suggestions regarding how the job structure might be changed to facilitate improving the health of school leaders (Pijanowski & Lasater, 2020). The study also concluded that future school leaders are trained in curricular, financial, and managerial aspects of the job, but there is little training related to their personal care within preparation programs, student internships, or mentorship programs. New administrators will prioritize activities they perceive as necessary for success; thus, preparation programs must educate future leaders on the serious consequences of poor self-care, not only for the individual health of leaders but also for their ability to lead schools effectively. Moreover, shifting the perceived locus of control toward individual leaders could be facilitated by providing them with realistic strategies to promote self-care and requiring that future principals engage in these activities as part of their preparation and internship experiences.

There is a clear need for school leaders to create a vision for the overall health of every person in their school, to execute systems for sustaining physically and emotionally healthy students and staff, and to lead by modeling those behaviors

through their own visible self-care. It is within this context that districts will likely be emboldened to demand and monitor the positive self-care practices of administrators in the same way they are expected to be instructional leaders, moral role models, and exhibit the highest standards of professional norms. (Pijanowski & Lasater, 2020).

A study titled *Flourishing School Leadership: Perspectives of Canada's Outstanding Principals* highlights the conditions, behaviors, mindsets, and characteristics that are critical for the well-being of school administrators. This study explores how some principals experience flourishing at work, which is characterized by optimal functioning, feeling good, and achieving a balanced life. To achieve and sustain a healthy well-being, this study concluded, "for school leaders to be able to support others in experiencing and developing these capacities, they need to experience and develop them first (Dutton, 2006). This research reveals that principals need to develop the skills necessary to flourish in this area, possess a healthy self-care routine, and flourish with positive well-being. "When school leaders flourish, they can help teachers, staff, and students achieve their fullest potential. Principals must embody and be true examples of flourishing to show and support positive impact in schools" (Cherkowski & Walker, 2020). This phenomenon is called a positive social contagion, where one's flourishing causes or leads to others' flourishing, creating an upward spiral. The upward spiral is grounded in self-care routines to improve well-being. Simply watching the principal flourish allows everyone to flourish. "Relationally rich positive practices, with positive emotions underlying the interactions between members, enable the social and

emotional contagion that promotes the flourishing of all within an organization” (Cameron & Wilderom, 2011).

By developing and implementing school policies and practices that directly address the principals’ well-being and needs, support their development, and encourage collaboration in schools, we can enable leaders to manage their work-life balance better and thus remain well. There is a gap in the literature on how to teach principals to develop well-being plans to improve well-being so that others can witness them flourishing and move towards a state of flourishing for themselves.

The reciprocal nature of flourishing, when administrators attend to creating conditions and structures for others in the school to flourish—can lead to increased principal well-being in return and result in a growing sense of flourishing among all individuals in a school setting. (Kutsyuruba, 2024)

Another study in Finland revealed that by crafting structural job resources and challenging job demands, principals may actively shape an optimal work environment regarding basic psychological needs, which contributes to well-being (Toyama et al., 2022). Increasing structural job resources and challenging job demands predict increased work engagement and reduced burnout via satisfying basic psychological needs. Additionally, by crafting structural job resources limits need frustration, which positively predicts work engagement and negatively predicts burnout. This study revealed that by teaching school districts to craft jobs for principals and provide structural resources to prevent burnout and increase well-being, you can shape a job into an optimal work environment. “Our findings suggest that principals may benefit from engaging in crafting structural job resources and challenges. To promote principals' job

crafting, the school board could consider incorporating an intervention for job crafting into the principalship education program. By learning the concept of job crafting and its optimal practices, principals may be encouraged to change job characteristics better to fit their own characteristics for well-being” (Toyama et al., 2022).

Supporting principal well-being requires systemic and personal strategies. Districts can implement mentoring programs at the system level, reduce administrative overload, and offer leadership coaching focused on psychological resilience. At the individual level, principals can benefit from practices such as mindfulness, self-compassion, journaling, and strengths-based reflection. These activities have been shown to enhance emotional balance and buffer against burnout (Zessin, Dickhäuser & Garbade, 2015). Embedding well-being into leadership development frameworks can create a more sustainable model of school leadership.

Professional Development

Professional development aims to enhance knowledge, skill sets, instructional practices, and professional growth related to real-world contexts. Professional development is a continuous process spanning from formal and informal training, which takes the shape of mentoring, coaching, peer collaboration, and reflective practice within the scope of the practitioners’ work environment. Professional development refers to training, formal education, and/or advanced professional learning intended to help clinicians, teachers, researchers, and administrators improve their professional knowledge and effectiveness (Hilty et al., 2019).

In a study completed in the Netherlands titled, *The growing insight in the importance of school leadership for the quality and development of schools and their*

pupils (Huber & Muijs, 2010) state the following, “Effective school leadership development is highlighted by researchers, practitioners, and political representatives as essential if schools are to meet future requirements and fulfil their mission to enable all students the possibility to cultivate and achieve their educational as well as personal goals.” Again, there is a gap in the literature in finding and implementing professional development for principals. Swedish schools have noted a challenge in finding how school leaders can be strengthened in their professional roles. In fact, reporting from Sweden (Hallerström, 2006) reported, “research has shown there is an absence of structured continuous professional learning for experienced school leaders, specifically collective learning with other school leaders” (Hallerström, 2006). Taken from another Swedish study (Seiser, 2017), school leaders emphasized the importance of being a part of professional networks to enable professional development. “The importance of arranging conditions for teachers’ continuous professional learning is often discussed, but rarely is the talk about the school leaders’ continuous professional learning” (Seiser, 2017). Furthermore, studies have shown that school leaders often lack arenas to meet and exchange essential issues and topics (Aas & Vavik, 2015). There is a need as well as a gap to highlight the importance of professional learning for school principals about their overall well-being to increase the longevity of the principal’s career while improving the overall social welfare of the school itself.

The mentoring for well-being conceptual model (Reames, 2025) is based in two positive psychology concepts, mentoring and well-being. The model suggests that well-being for individuals and organizations can be addressed through mentoring. Learning partnerships and social connection form the outer rim of the model while psycho-social

and career development (Kram, 1985) are represented as the areas where mentoring for well-being can occur. For the present study, mentoring processes and structures includes the activities which can be used to support well-being.

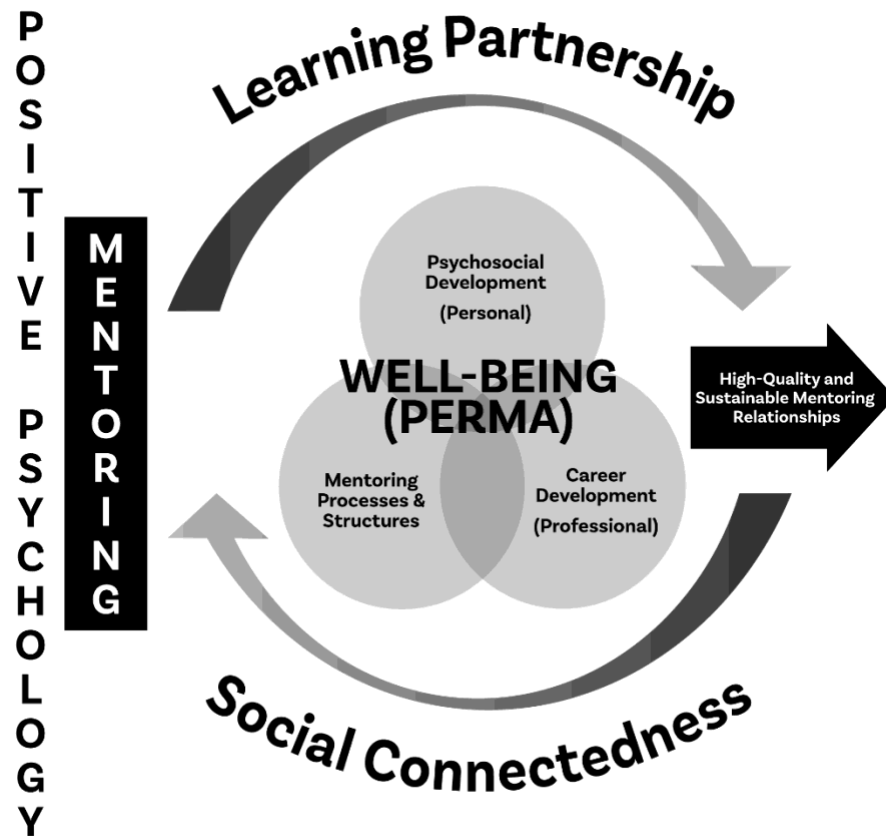


Figure 1. Mentoring for well-being conceptual framework.

Mentoring

Recent research has reframed mentoring for school leaders as more than a technical transfer of skills. Wheeler et al. (2024) describe informal mentoring as an innovative practice for promoting principal well-being. Mentoring relationships provide principals with a confidential, trusting space to process stressors, build resilience, and

develop positive leadership habits. Similarly, Adair and Reames (2025) emphasize that mentoring for well-being must be intentionally designed to address principals' psychosocial needs across career stages, not just for novices. This means selecting mentors who are attuned to self-care, emotional intelligence, and positive psychology practices. Reames and Mullen (under review) extend this idea by examining activity engagement for novice principals' well-being through mentoring. Their findings show that incorporating structured well-being activities (mindfulness, gratitude, journaling) within mentoring sessions produces measurable gains in novice leaders' sense of flourishing. Together, these studies show that mentoring can function as a scaffold for self-care and professional sustainability rather than purely instructional or managerial support.

Learning Partnerships and Social Connectedness

Mentoring literature also underscores the importance of learning partnerships and connectedness. Reames et al. (2025) present an Alabama mentoring program that intentionally builds relational networks among principals. This program pairs leaders across school levels and encourages regular reflective dialogue and mutual support, counteracting the isolation many principals report. The study highlights how a networked mentoring structure increases principals' sense of belonging, connectedness, and psychological safety, key ingredients of the PERMA "Relationships" and "Engagement" pillars. These findings support embedding mentoring within professional learning communities and peer networks, allowing principals to draw on collective wisdom and reduce feelings of isolation.

Positive Psychology Theory

Positive psychology is a science that utilizes the scientific method to understand human thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Positive psychology theory concentrates on what makes individuals, groups, and communities flourish. Overall, positive psychology aims to understand, discover, test, and promote circumstances allowing individuals to survive and thrive. By thriving, individuals would communicate and flourish to improve a system's balance (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). "Positive psychology focuses on well-being, happiness, flow, personal strengths, wisdom, creativity, imagination, awe, and characteristics of positive groups and institutions (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019). The ideas centered around positive psychology are not new. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) in his greatest philosophy on virtue, mortality, and what it means to have a good life argued that happiness is the highest good for all of humanity (Mason & Tib, 2009). Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato believed people would become authentically happy when they pursued a life of virtue. In a movement following the ancient Greeks, utilitarians determined that happiness is the abundance of positive feelings and pleasures. Stemming from their conclusions, modern-day positive psychology theory combines hedonic and eudemonic well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Hedonic happiness focuses on high levels of positivity and low levels of negativity. By creating feelings of positivity such as gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love, these pleasurable emotions result in happiness. Spurring from happiness yields success and improved well-being. Eudemonic well-being focuses on creating meaning and purpose in life (Huta & Waterman, 2014).

Professor Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania is the creative force behind the modern-day positive psychology movement (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019). Seligman was appointed president at the 107th annual American Psychological Association (APA) convention in 1999. As president of the APA, he shifted pathologically focused psychology into positive psychology. Seligman has become a leader in championing positive psychology theories around the world. A considerable amount of his work has gained support and research funding to incorporate positive psychology theories and practices into daily life. “The message of the positive psychology movement is to remind our field that psychology is not just the study of disease, weakness, and damage but also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is fixing what is wrong and building what is right. Psychology is not just about illness or health but about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. And in this quest for what is best, positive psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, self-deception, or hand-waving; instead, it tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems human behavior presents in all its complexity” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Positive psychology is the science of well-being and optimal functioning. There is a focus grounded within the theory on the scientific method. The rich history of Greek philosophy, humanism, and mental health allows leaders to incorporate positive psychology theories into daily practices. By using positive psychology theories and incorporating these ideas into daily life, a person, group, or community can work harmoniously to enhance well-being. Allowing for the flow of positive psychology

theories and engaging in activities designed to enhance well-being sets the stage for systems to flourish.

PERMA

The PERMA model developed by Seligman (2011) provides the theoretical backbone for these mentoring innovations. Adair and Reames (2025) explicitly integrate PERMA into their mentoring framework, showing how positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment can be intentionally cultivated in leadership development. For example, mentoring sessions that include gratitude exercises (positive emotion), strengths-based reflection (engagement), peer networking (relationships), values journaling (meaning), and SMART goal setting (accomplishment) help principals experience the full spectrum of well-being. These structured activities also align with Reames and Mullen's (under review) findings that active engagement in well-being routines within mentoring relationships enhances novice leaders' capacity to flourish.

Psychosocial Development / Personal Mentoring Processes and Structures

Psychosocial development in leadership refers to building resilience, self-awareness, and a professional identity grounded in well-being. Wheeler et al. (2024) and Adair and Reames (2025) both argue that mentoring processes should include regular reflection on work–life balance, stress management, and meaning-making. Reames et al. (2025) show how program structures, such as scheduled group sessions, confidential peer dialogues, and guided activities, create predictable routines that normalize self-care among principals. These psychosocial mentoring structures support

the PERMA pillars by embedding positive habits into the professional role, making self-care an organizational routine rather than an optional add-on.

Career Development

Traditional career development programs for principals emphasize instructional leadership and operational management. The studies above show that these programs must now evolve to include well-being as a career-sustainability skill. Adair and Reames (2025) explicitly discuss flourishing “across career stages,” showing that mentoring for well-being benefits both novice and veteran principals by reducing burnout risk and increasing job satisfaction. Reames and Mullen (under review) highlight that early-career engagement in well-being activities through mentoring creates long-term habits that sustain leaders. By blending career skill-building with well-being routines, districts can develop principals who are competent, resilient, engaged, and less likely to leave the profession.

Mentoring Principals specifically for Well-Being

Mentoring has long been regarded as a critical strategy in the professional development of school leaders, particularly for novice principals navigating the complexities of educational leadership (Daresh, 2004). However, as the demands placed on principals continue to intensify with increased accountability, emotional labor, and systemic challenges, the traditional focus of mentoring on instructional leadership and administrative competence is no longer sufficient. Contemporary frameworks now advocate for mentoring programs that explicitly support the well-being of principals, recognizing that personal flourishing is foundational to sustainable and effective leadership (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Well-being-driven mentoring extends beyond technical guidance to address leadership's emotional, psychological, and relational dimensions. Well-being-focused mentoring relationships offer a safe space for principals to process stress, reflect on challenges, and reconnect with their core values and purpose (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). Research in positive psychology supports the idea that well-being is not merely the absence of distress but the presence of psychological resources such as optimism, resilience, and meaning (Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2011). Mentoring can cultivate these resources when intentionally designed by nurturing trust, empathy, and professional identity development.

Effective mentoring for principal well-being is grounded in relational trust and reflective dialogue. This allows mentees to explore their leadership practice through a human-centered lens. Mentors serve as compassionate listeners and guides who model emotional regulation, ethical decision-making, and balance between professional and personal roles (Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2009). These mentoring relationships can help principals develop what Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017) call psychological capital. Psychological capital is a composite of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism. All of these factors are shown to buffer stress and enhance leadership performance.

Additionally, mentoring for well-being contributes to leadership sustainability by reducing isolation and reinforcing a sense of belonging within the profession. The emotional toll of leadership can lead to burnout and attrition if left unaddressed, especially for principals beginning their career (School Leaders Network, 2014). Well-being-oriented mentoring alleviates this risk by offering continuous emotional and professional support that nurtures confidence and inner stability.

Mentoring programs should be intentionally structured with well-being as an explicit goal to be most effective. This includes selecting mentors with strong interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence, providing training in positive psychology principles, and embedding opportunities for reflective practice, mindfulness, and peer connection (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018). In doing so, schools and districts can foster a leadership culture that values care, resilience, and the sustained growth of school principals. In summary, “Mentorship is a professional working alliance in which individuals work together over time to support the personal and professional growth, development, and success of the relational partners through the provision of career and psychosocial support” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

The PERMA model of well-being describes a multi-dimensional approach to define what it means to flourish in life. PERMA constructs include positive emotion (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A). The PERMA model, developed by Martin Seligman (2011), is a comprehensive framework in positive psychology designed to explain the key components of well-being and flourishing. It identifies five core elements that contribute to a fulfilling and meaningful life.

Positive Emotion: This element involves experiencing pleasurable feelings such as joy, gratitude, hope, and contentment. Positive emotions broaden an individual’s thought-action repertoire and build enduring personal resources (Fredrickson, 2001). For example, expressing gratitude daily or savoring small moments can increase positive emotions. School principals often face high-pressure situations. Cultivating positive emotions through practices like mindfulness, gratitude journaling, or

recognizing small daily successes can improve mood and reduce burnout (Seligman, 2011). For example, principals who intentionally celebrate teacher and student achievements can foster a more optimistic outlook.

Engagement: refers to being fully absorbed and involved in activities that match one's skills and challenge level, often resulting in a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When people are engaged, they lose track of time and experience deep satisfaction. Activities like playing a musical instrument, sports, or creative arts often foster this state. Principals thrive when they are deeply involved in meaningful leadership activities that align with their strengths and passions, such as mentoring teachers, improving curriculum, or fostering innovative programs. This deep engagement creates a flow state that increases job satisfaction and energy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Relationships: Meaningful and supportive social connections are crucial for well-being. Positive relationships with family, friends, and colleagues provide emotional support, increase feelings of belonging, and buffer against stress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For instance, spending quality time with loved ones can enhance happiness and resilience. Strong, supportive relationships are critical for principals who often feel isolated due to their responsibilities. Building trusting connections with staff, students, parents, and other administrators reduces stress and promotes collaboration (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). For instance, regular check-ins and open communication channels can enhance these relationships.

Meaning: Having a sense of purpose and belonging to something larger than oneself provides direction and significance in life (Steger, 2009). This can come from

religion, community service, career goals, or family roles. Finding meaning helps individuals navigate challenges and sustain motivation. Principals who connect their work to a larger purpose, such as empowering students, promoting equity, or community development, create greater meaning and motivation. This sense of purpose sustains them through challenges and reinforces their commitment to education (Steger, 2009).

Accomplishment: This element highlights pursuing and achieving goals, fostering a sense of competence, mastery, and pride. Setting realistic, attainable goals and experiencing progress promotes self-esteem and motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002). Examples include completing a project, earning a degree, or improving a skill. Setting clear, achievable goals related to school improvement, leadership development, or personal growth helps principals experience accomplishment. Tracking progress and celebrating milestones boosts confidence and motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002). Examples include successfully implementing a new program or improving student outcomes.

Seligman (2011) argued that cultivating these five elements leads to sustained well-being and a flourishing life beyond transient happiness. The PERMA model has influenced interventions in education, therapy, and workplace well-being programs, underscoring its practical relevance. Training programs for principals can incorporate the PERMA model to promote well-being and leadership skills. Encouraging principals to integrate PERMA-focused habits such as gratitude, goal setting, and relationship building into daily life as a daily routine is a practical way to focus on self-care and improve well-being. Another way to embody elements of the PERMA model would be

for principals to set a standard for positive behaviors and attitudes to exist and celebrate these actions.

By exemplifying positivity, creating and supporting space for thriving environments, principals create a culture of care that enhances well-being. Educational leaders are aware that the well-being of school principals' influences school climate. When principals engage in self-care routines to improve well-being, their actions result in an atmosphere that the community benefits from. To nurture this state of healthy well-being, principals should be provided with professional development training fostering positive emotions, self-care, and personal reflection. By regularly structuring trainings along with activities to teach principals how to take extremely good care of themselves to improve their well-being, we can improve experiences for principals to flourish (Mahfouz & Schussler, 2021).

Integrating Activities to Foster Principal Well-Being Using the PERMA Model

The PERMA model, developed by Seligman (2011), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and fostering well-being. It comprises five core elements: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Applying the PERMA model to school leadership offers a structured, research-informed approach to support principals' emotional and psychological resilience in demanding educational environments.

Positive Emotions

Positive emotions broaden thought-action repertoires and build personal resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Mindfulness-based activities, such as self-compassion exercises and gratitude journaling, elevate positive affect and reduce stress in school

leaders (Neff & Germer, 2013). For example, principals who engaged in daily gratitude journaling reported increased emotional clarity and optimism (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Just fifteen minutes of gratitude-focused journaling daily has significantly boosted optimism and reduced stress (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). The experience of positive emotion promotes upward spirals of well-being by encouraging prosocial behavior, strengthening relationships, and fostering a sense of purpose. Interventions that aim to increase positive emotional experiences, such as practicing gratitude, savoring, or acts of kindness, can become essential to flourishing. Positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, hope, awe, serenity, amusement, and love are not only pleasurable experiences within the mind. These positive emotions also play a critical role in promoting psychological resilience and long-term well-being (Seligman, 2011).

Through an 8-week music therapy intervention involving 256 participants, the results demonstrated that music therapy significantly enhanced participants' emotional resilience, improving their well-being and employability. A significant positive correlation was found between emotional resilience, well-being, and employability, with well-being mediating the relationship between emotional resilience and employability. (Feng & Wang, 2025)

Based on this study, music can create positive emotions. Furthermore, listening to music can also provide a way to enhance emotional resilience along with enhanced well-being.

Engagement

Engagement refers to being fully absorbed in activities that match one's strengths and interests. Principals who practice strengths-based reflection and curiosity

journaling demonstrate higher job involvement and emotional resilience (Hodge, 2014). Research supports that strengths-focused leadership leads to greater vitality and persistence in school leaders (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Engagement through shared, meaningful experiences contributes significantly to leaders' well-being and sense of connection. Surrounding oneself with positive, engaged activities such as yoga, meditation, or communal meals helps build relational bonds and a sense of belonging. These engagement opportunities are essential in high-stress roles like school leadership. Research uncovered that group meditation fosters social connection and reduces isolation. This creates a sense of emotional support (Couple Therapy, 2024). Similarly, yoga practiced in community settings offers a space for collective growth and shared reflection, enhancing physical well-being and social cohesion (Nuvo Well-being, 2024). Beyond mindfulness practices, shared meals such as supper clubs or communal lunches have been linked to increased happiness, reduced depression, and improved mental health outcomes. These activities with others encourage conversation, trust, and a relaxed sense of intimacy (Food & Wine, 2025). For principals, regularly engaging in such activities can serve as both self-care and community care, reinforcing the “engagement” pillar of the PERMA model through positive interaction, presence, and shared experience.

Relationships

Relational well-being is foundational to sustainable leadership. Strong mentoring relationships, peer support networks, and emotional intelligence training improve relational trust and reduce principal isolation (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018). Emotional intelligence is particularly critical. Principals with high emotional intelligence foster

healthier staff climates and are better equipped to manage emotional demands (Boyatzis et al., 2013). Cultivating strong relationships anchored in emotional intelligence and supported by mentoring is essential for principal well-being and school efficacy. Research reveals that principals who regulate their emotions and support staff emotionally report higher well-being and lower burnout and turnover rates (Floman & Brackett, 2025). In addition, emotional intelligence skills develop through mentoring relationships and building trust. Trust is a key element of relational leadership (Frontiers, 2024). Finally, compassionate, caring leadership practices foster school cultures marked by collective efficacy, belonging, and sustained morale (LaVenía, 2024). Through emotionally intelligent, trusting, and compassionate relationships, principals anchor their leadership in authentic connection, resilience, and community.

Meaning

Finding purpose in leadership work sustains principals through challenges. Values-aligned reflection, journaling, and mindfulness practices have been shown to increase meaning and reduce burnout (Lomas et al., 2017). Principals who regularly reconnect with their educational purpose report stronger job satisfaction and commitment (Day, 2007). When people find meaning within their work, they are more likely to be resilient, motivated, and committed. Meaningful work aligns with an individual's values, contributes to a greater cause, and provides a sense of accomplishment. Cultivating a strong sense of meaning is vital to anchoring principals in their roles and promoting long-term resilience. Research emphasizes that when school leaders engage in purpose-driven work that aligns with their values, they exhibit greater commitment, motivation, and psychological resilience. Long-term studies of principals in

Australia and Ireland demonstrate that higher levels of social capital, such as connection to colleagues, predict sustained well-being over time, suggesting that relational networks reinforce relational meaning (Beausaert et al., 2023). Another study found that structured writing exercises focused on meaning reliably increase well-being in controlled studies, providing empirical support for purpose-based interventions (Giannopoulos & Vella-Brodrick, 2011). Integrating meaning-enhancing practices (e.g., values journaling, mission reflection, collaborative sense-making) into principal development supports the “M” pillar of PERMA and fosters leadership that is resilient, sustainable, and deeply connected to educational purpose.

Accomplishment

Within Seligman's PERMA framework, accomplishment refers to pursuing and achieving goals that provide a sense of competence, mastery, and fulfillment (Seligman, 2011). For school principals, who juggle multiple responsibilities in high-stress environments, intentional goal setting is not only a tool for task management, it is a powerful method for enhancing professional efficacy, psychological resilience, and overall well-being. Activities are available for principals to engage with and experience the emotions accomplishment brings.

One of the ways principals can experience accomplishment is through developing SMART goals. SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (Doran, 1981). The SMART model, Figure 2, was originally designed for management contexts. It has since been widely adopted in education and leadership development for its clarity, structure, and motivational benefits. Setting and achieving SMART goals allows school leaders to experience a sense of progress and

mastery, which is essential for combating feelings of burnout or helplessness (Locke & Latham, 2002). When principals see clear results from intentional efforts, they are more likely to feel effective, valued, and encouraged to continue accomplishing. In addition to driving performance, SMART goals contribute to psychological well-being by creating a sense of control, competence, and direction. These elements are closely tied to the accomplishment domain in the PERMA framework. According to Sheldon and Elliot (1999), pursuing self-concordant goals (goals that align with personal values) leads to greater motivation, persistence, and well-being. This is especially relevant for principals, who often feel overwhelmed and disconnected from their initial sense of purpose (Mahfouz & Schussler, 2021). SMART goals help reconnect leaders to their core motivations and provide tangible progress indicators.



Figure 2. SMART goals

The figure above is based on the SMART model of setting goals. SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. The SMART model was originally designed for management contexts. It has since been widely adopted in education and leadership development for its clarity, structure, and motivational benefits. Setting and achieving SMART goals allows school leaders to experience a sense of progress and mastery, which is essential for combating feelings of burnout or helplessness.

A sense of achievement enhances self-efficacy and perseverance. Through goal setting, strengths coaching, and psychological capital (PsyCap) development, principals can build the optimism and resilience needed for long-term leadership (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Research reveals that PsyCap interventions significantly improve well-being and reduce burnout among educational leaders (Dollard & Neser, 2013). Promoting accomplishment through goal attainment and PsyCap development is pivotal for enhancing principals' well-being and leadership capacity. Psychological capital interventions significantly enhance principals' sense of accomplishment. A pre-registered meta-analysis of 41 controlled intervention studies ($N = 3,911$) found small but meaningful gains in overall PsyCap ($d = 0.34$), self-efficacy ($d = 0.37$), and resilience ($d = 0.49$) among participants (Lupşa, 2019). These outcomes highlight the impact of structured goal-oriented coaching and strengths interventions in bolstering hope, optimism, and resilience. These elements are key drivers of principal well-being and leadership efficacy. Additionally, coaching that centers on goal attainment enhances motivation, positive affect, and self-belief. Psychological Capital, which

encompasses hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, is robustly associated with job performance, satisfaction, and resilience, as shown in Figure 3.

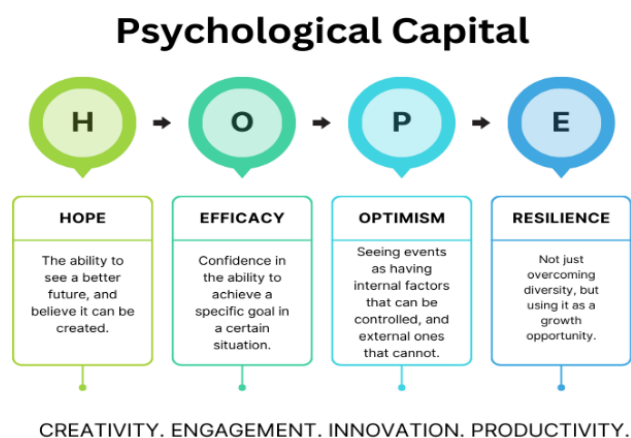


Figure 3. Psychological Capital

For school principals, integrating SMART goal setting and PsyCap-focused coaching into professional development reinforces their leadership effectiveness and sustained emotional well-being through the accomplishment pillar of PERMA.

Principal Development and Sustainability Through the Lens of Well-Being

The development and sustainability of effective school principals are increasingly recognized as critical to educational reform and long-term school success. However, discussions of principal development have historically focused on technical competencies and instructional leadership, often overlooking the central role of leader well-being in sustaining effective practice (Leithwood et al., 2020). Recent research emphasizes that sustainable leadership cannot be achieved without attending to school leaders' emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018). Sustainable principalship requires more than acquiring leadership skills. Being able to

sustain as a school principal also involves cultivating personal resources such as resilience, purpose, emotional intelligence, and the capacity to flourish amid complexity (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). The chronic demands placed on school principals, including high accountability, staff management, community expectations, and crisis response, contribute to high stress and attrition rates (School Leaders Network, 2014). When well-being is neglected, principals may experience burnout, decision fatigue, and reduced relational capacity. These conditions undermine both their effectiveness and the stability of the school environment (Grissom et al., 2015).

Viewing principal development through the well-being lens allows us to reframe leadership growth as a holistic process. This approach values not only professional competencies but also personal flourishing. This state can be defined as positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). Leaders who flourish are more likely to sustain their roles, foster positive school climates, and build strong, trusting relationships with staff and students (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). To support sustainable leadership, professional development programs must include structures that promote principal well-being. This includes access to mentorship, peer learning communities, reflective practice, and well-being-centered leadership frameworks. For example, Cherkowski and Walker (2018) advocate for “well-being leadership” models, where personal wellness and relational leadership are integrated into school improvement efforts. Such models emphasize care, connection, and the moral purpose of education, creating conditions for both leader and school community flourishing. Ultimately, sustainable principal development is inseparable from the leader's well-being. Supporting principals' emotional and

psychological needs is foundational to educational leadership's longevity, effectiveness, and ethical responsibility to take these needs seriously.

Flourishing

Flourishing is a multidimensional state of optimal human functioning that encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It reflects the presence of positive emotions and life satisfaction and a sense of meaning, engagement, positive relationships, personal growth, and contribution to the greater good (Keyes, 2002). The concept of flourishing, rooted in positive psychology, extends beyond the absence of illness or dysfunction to encompass a holistic state of well-being characterized by meaning, engagement, accomplishment, and positive relationships (Seligman, 2011).

For school principals, flourishing is particularly vital, as their well-being directly influences school culture, staff morale, and student achievement (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). However, the high-stakes nature of educational leadership, characterized by increasing accountability, workload intensification, and emotional labor, often places principals at risk of burnout and professional isolation (Grissom et al., 2015).

Flourishing among school principals can be seen as both a personal state and a professional imperative. According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006), sustainable leadership ensures long-term success for schools and promotes the health and well-being of those in leadership roles. When principals flourish, they are more likely to demonstrate adaptive leadership, support teacher development, and foster resilient school communities (Day, 2007).

Key dimensions of flourishing in school leadership include emotional vitality, sense of purpose, and connectedness. Positive organizational research emphasizes

that leaders who cultivate positive emotions, align their work with core values, and foster strong relational networks are more resilient and effective in complex environments (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Furthermore, flourishing is associated with enhanced decision-making, job satisfaction, and retention. All of which are essential given the growing concern over principal turnover (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012). Intentional strategies to promote flourishing among school principals include professional coaching, mindfulness training, peer support networks, and reflective practices (Cherkowski & Walker, 2018). These approaches mitigate stress and enhance principals' sense of efficacy and fulfillment. Policies and professional development models prioritizing school leaders' well-being are critical to cultivating educational environments where both adults and students thrive. In summary, "flourishing is the product of living a rich life in meaning, engagement, positive relationships, accomplishment, and positive emotion. All of these are the five well-being pillars that constitute the PERMA model" (Seligman, 2011).

Chapter 3: Methodology

The preceding chapters have highlighted the key elements affecting the school principals, including stress and burnout, which have negatively impacted their well-being and ability to lead effectively. Following the research by numerous studies like Australian Catholic University and Deakin University (2024), Gorrell and Nobile (2023), and Steiner et al. (2022), Chapter 2 was a comprehensive literature review, highlighting that school principals have minimal exposure to well-being practices. A few essential interventions developed to combat these challenges, however, have not yet been implemented to enhance well-being practices in leadership development. Research by

Pijanowski & Lasater (2020) and Hayes et al. (2022) suggest that the prevailing leadership preparation and training program clearly neglects the emotional and psychological health of the school principals.

There is a gap in the literature of actions embedded within professional development to encourage principal well-being practices to sustain the demands of principals' workloads. Regarding professional development, educational leaders need to explore the steps they can take to encourage professional development and well-being. In examining effective principal professional development, Boren et al. (2017) concluded that for principals to be effective, they must be lifelong learners. Obtaining, developing, and securing leadership skills should be a deliberate process embedded into the job demands. Professional development should not be incidental or casual. Instead, effective professional development for principals is a career-long progression of growth. Often, well-being has not been an area of emphasis, and literature now suggests that the flourishing of school principals must be a focus. Well-being is now seen as an urgent priority for school principals.

Active school principals at elementary, primary, and secondary school levels are the most significant target population directly affected by this problem. Principals often prioritize the needs of others, such as the needs of students and teachers, forgetting to take care of themselves. This issue affects their health and negatively impacts the school operation and the education system. Empirical evidence by Leithwood (2021) suggests that the school principal's well-being is directly interrelated to student performance, the morale of the teachers, and the overall learning atmosphere.

The school principal plays a significant role in shaping the school culture and how teachers teach and students learn and perform. Despite their vital role, research indicates that the school principals have a higher level of emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout than other people in different fields of careers (Steiner et al., 2022). The current administrative oversight, community, and the accountability standard that stress constant demands on principals' deliverables leave minimal space for them to take care of themselves. According to Boyatzis et al. (2006) and Hayes et al. (2022), school principals prioritize their work to meet their professional demands, thus neglecting their personal self-care routines, including rest and exercise. This imbalance has created an adverse problem that is continuously affecting the school principals' professional development.

The prevailing leadership preparation and training programs rarely address the well-being of school principals, especially in their emotional and personal health dimensions (Wang, 2024). They only pay attention to how the school principal delivers their duties and responsibilities, neglecting important areas of principal well-being such as their psychological and mental states. The school principal's well-being will remain at risk if an effective structure is not implemented to consider their self-care activities. This identified gap in the school principals has a direct impact not only on the leaders but also on the students' outcome, teacher morale, and the educational system at large.

Research by Williams & Carlson (2024) claims that hygiene, sleep, and exercise are the only strategies that exist to deal with stress and fatigue, but these are traditional techniques that cannot fully support and build effective leadership. Strategies such as mindful practices, activities to promote the domains of the PERMA model, and

mentoring are promising mechanisms to bridge this gap and increase principals' personal and professional well-being.

Research questions

This study aims to explore the nature of the school principal's well-being, particularly how they consider their well-being practices in relation to their career growth and mentoring. To achieve this, this qualitative study seeks to answer the following research questions:

Cycle 1 Baseline

1. What mentoring for well-being activities do school principals have in place presently?

Cycle 2 PERMA Mentoring Activities

2. How do school principals describe the influence of mentoring activities on their personal and professional well-being?
3. In what ways does engaging in PERMA-aligned mentoring activities enhance principals' perceptions of their well-being?

The above research questions are directly connected with the problem statement of the study, which is that there is a lack of a well-structured programs that consider the school principal's personal well-being.

Research Methodology

A qualitative action research methodology guided this study. Action research is a participatory approach that engages stakeholders in systematically investigating a problem of practice and then implementing actions for improvement. Once this is accomplished, stakeholders reflect on the outcomes before they begin the next cycle of

improvement. The most significant problem under study is the school principal's well-being and how a systematic mentoring framework can influence their professional and personal well-being with the cohesive guidance of the PERMA model to establish healthy well-being activities. This qualitative action research method is the most suitable design for this study because it will help us understand the lived experiences of school principals comprehensively without generalization and help to record the school principals' leadership perceptions in detail based on their capacity for stress, resilience, and development.

Another reason this study is well-suited to qualitative methodology is that it attempts to understand if mentoring techniques will help in fostering the school principals' resilience in conjunction with well-being practices, rather than to measure variables with quantitative methodology. Cherkowski and Walker (2018) note that when educational leaders share their life experiences, qualitative studies will allow the research to capture more comprehensive details than survey-based studies. For example, if a researcher uses qualitative research to examine principal well-being, they can reveal some dimension of leadership that a survey may be unable to capture. During COVID-19, Hayes et al. (2022) used qualitative research methodology to investigate the same objective as this study, and their findings capture an in-depth look at the principals' voices and perspectives, something that quantitative research cannot do.

Research Design

This study aims to leverage an action research design lying within a qualitative methodology. This research design is the most appropriate for this investigation, as it

seeks to understand the overall well-being of the participants and also build a structured practice-based development for the school principals. Manuel et al. (2023) argue that the most suitable research design in an educational setting is action research because its main objective is to inquire and provide immediate transformation.

This design involves two cycles of research regarding well-being activities that promote principal well-being guided by the Mentoring for Well-Being Framework (Reames, 2025) through the lens of the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). Cycle 1 determines baseline data to determine what activities the participants currently use to address their well-being. In Cycle 2, they join a systematically planned class to learn about fun activities that could support their well-being that are aligned with the PERMA model, such as journaling, running, and other physical exercise activities. This cycle also includes weekly reflective writing and discussion so that the participants can monitor their progress. Cycle 2 also integrates mentoring, peer discussion, and group feedback to allow the educational leaders to improve their well-being activities.

The data collection method of this study will involve semi-structured interviews, discussion/feedback sessions, and weekly reflections. Involving all these instruments in data collection played a significant role in gathering cohesive qualitative information. Interviews, check-ins, journal notes, and feedback sessions provided the school principals' beliefs, while observation will measure their personal behaviors during mentoring sessions.

This study aims to use thematic coding as its primary data analysis with the help of a Mentoring for Well-Being Framework (Reames, 2025) and the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). The study will seek to identify patterns across the information

gathered to develop a detailed understanding of how PERMA and mentoring-based practices impact the school principals' well-being. Triangulation across all the data collection methods will ensure this study achieves credibility and accuracy in interpreting the findings through participants' collaboration (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). Therefore, this research design will ensure that the findings directly address the research questions and provide positive recommendations on implementing sustainable well-being structures in leadership development.

Population and Sample

The population for this qualitative action research study were school principals in the United States who work in highly stressful leadership positions in Alabama and have limited access to activities that promote well-being. The participants represented high school, middle school, and elementary school levels. This group was selected due to the availability of a microcosm of leadership situations within a single district, enabling the review of well-being practice across different school environments. The study sample consisted of five principals, including two high school principals, one elementary school principal, one middle school principal and one principal of a K–12 school who voluntarily agreed to participate. This is a suitable sample size for a qualitative action research design as it offers enough variety of perspectives and is small enough to collect in-depth data through iterative analysis. Other empirical research on principal well-being and mentoring has used similar or smaller samples to produce deep, context-specific results, which justifies the current size (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016; Hayes et al., 2022).

The participants were recruited following the purposive sampling procedure, which involved selecting individuals with firsthand experience of the stressors of school leadership. Once the school district's administration had authorized the study, participation information was sent to the eligible principals, and they signed the informed consent forms. Inclusion criteria included participants who were current principals within the district and interested in participating in professional development activities and other well-being activities. Transcripts contained pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, separating consent forms and data, and keeping password-protected digital files. Only aggregate results were shared with the stakeholders, reducing individual identification opportunities. Such precautions follow the ethical standards of qualitative research, protect the participants' privacy, and promote authentic involvement.

Instrumentation or Sources of Data

The first set of semi-structured interviews were to establish a base line of what the participants were doing to address their well-being before any interventions, professional development, or activities occurred. The principles participated in professional development and chose the activities that they wanted to try from the PERMA chart of activities (See at the end of Appendix A). They attended weekly discussion/feedback sessions and kept journals as they reflected on ways they perceived the activities to be helpful. As the researcher, I kept a journal of the

discussions and feedback in our sessions, as well. Frequent check-ins and observation notes became a reliable source of qualitative data to gain triangulation of the data.

Validity, Credibility, and Trustworthiness

In an effort to create validity, credibility and trustworthiness, I used multiple data sources to establish triangulation and to provide accurate interpretation of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019), a rigorous literature review, collaboration with participants, member checking, and reflexivity. My objective was to use analysis and checking for clarification, when necessary, to convey the true experiences of the participants. I used purposive sampling because the participants had similar working experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Schwandt, 2015). I also made sure to accurately record and transcribe the content of the interviews to increase the accuracy of the interpretation when analyzing the data (Tracy, 2010) and used rich description of the analysis to report the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

A triangulation of data sources strengthened construct validity as data were obtained via semi-structured interviews, group discussions/feedback, and researcher observation notes/journals. A comparison of results from such sources would assist in the identification and explanation of differences and in reducing bias. Member checking was also conducted by summarizing important themes during group sessions and requesting members to confirm or disapprove the interpretations. The step enhanced the trust that the information represented real experiences of principals.

Finally, validity was strengthened by the cyclic nature of action research. Cycle 1 data were used directly to inform the refinements of Cycle 2, to match the intervention to the participants' actual needs. An iterative process reduced the discrepancy between

the aim of the study and the realities of principal well-being, strengthening the trustworthiness of conclusions drawn.

Ethical Considerations

Before participants were contacted, the Auburn University Institutional Review Board approved the study. In alignment with ethical research protocols for research with human subjects, I gave participants informed consent forms, ensured participants that I would take all precautions to ensure that their identities would be kept confidential, and told them they could withdraw from the study at any time. I also told participants of the objectives, processes, purpose, and time commitment of the study.

Ethical concerns were focused on protecting participants' autonomy, confidentiality, and well-being. Since the study concentrated on personal well-being, attention was paid to how the discussions were framed so as not to be evaluative but supportive and to avoid potential discomfort or perceptions of being judged. Data management practices, such as encryption, password management, and the secure deletion of audio files, provided additional security to sensitive information. These steps guaranteed adherence to institutional ethical guidelines and the development of trust in the relationship between myself and the participants, enabling authentic sharing of experiences.

Reliability

Reliability is maintaining the consistency and dependability of research results over time and in different situations (Ahmed & Ishtiaq, 2021). In this study, standardized processes of conducting check-ins and discussion/feedback sessions, interviews, and observations were encouraged to promote reliability. Each participant was given the

same materials and instructions, and data were collected within a similar period of time across cycles.

I maintained a comprehensive audit trail where all the research procedures were recorded, such as recruitment emails, consent forms, training materials, interview guides, and code decisions. Such a record promotes reliability, enabling other researchers to follow the results generated. In the qualitative coding, a second reviewer, who had been trained to do the coding, coded a subset of transcripts to verify that we agreed on themes, which increased interrater reliability, ensuring there was no bias in coding.

Group feedback and weekly check-in correspondence provided in-depth insight into the experiences and perceptions of the participants. I was able to search for common patterns and themes by comparing and cross-referencing the data collected during the check-ins, discussion/feedback sessions, participant journals, transcribed interviews, and my own journals/notes. This can be seen as authenticating the findings and ensuring that the findings are not merely the product of social desirability bias or misinterpretation of the questions, which are recognized as weaknesses of the research.

Data Collection and Management

Data collection was conducted with a strict sequence that was orderly, at least reproducible, as action research is of a collaborative nature. Invitations and consent forms were sent to the qualified principals after the school district provided authorization for the study.

After the initial interview for baseline data, the participants were presented with Professional Development Training #1 at the district office. In this session, they received a list of self-care activities that can be integrated with PERMA (such as mindfulness, journaling, yoga), and they were requested to select the most effective to address their personal and professional needs. During the following weeks, I conducted check-ins weekly through email or phone, discussed the activity's involvement, and received qualitative feedback. Through these interactions, observations were made to capture new patterns.

The participants were asked to provide data during Cycle 2 through weekly check-ins, reflections, and journaling notes. They also had group feedback sessions where they provided feedback about the activities they had implemented and the impact those activities had on them. With their consent, these conversations were recorded and later transcribed for further analysis.

The informed consent procedures emphasized voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any moment, and the confidentiality of responses. Consent forms were kept independently of data to avoid the possibility of identity and responses being linked.

Protection of participants was of importance during the study. All data files, including transcripts, journals, and field notes, were saved on an encrypted password-protected device that could be accessed only by the researcher and faculty advisor. All data sets and reports used pseudonyms instead of real names. After transcription and verification, the audio recordings were deleted. The results were summarized and shown to the district stakeholders to exclude the naming of particular principals.

The researcher created a secure folder to handle the data systematically, which divided the raw data, coded data, and analytic memos. The transcripts were imported into qualitative analysis packages to be coded. The data was stored on an encrypted drive as a backup in case data had to be lost or destroyed. This guaranteed the safety of confidential material, and the repeatability of subsequent researchers' procedures used in the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

This study seeks to answer the following question in Cycle 1: What mentoring for well-being activities do school principals have in place presently? Cycle 2 was used to answer the following questions: (1) How do school principals describe the influence of mentoring activities on their personal and professional well-being? (2) In what ways does engaging in PERMA-aligned mentoring activities enhance principals' perceptions of their well-being?

The data related to these questions were the baseline and follow-up responses, the weekly check-in notes, the group feedback session transcripts, participant journals, and my journals. Analysis of interview data was written descriptively to determine how well-being practices and perceived well-being differed between Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Thematic coding of the data and qualitative transcripts were performed with an inductive strategy based on PERMA constructs.

Data management was organized through a structured pipeline. Raw data were cleaned and sorted in spreadsheets and uploaded into qualitative analysis programs to be coded. Codes were classified into themes concerning the research questions, which included stress reduction activities, relationship building, meaning, and purpose.

Analysis procedures were consistent with the study's cyclical action research design. The findings of Cycle 1 informed the refinements of the professional development activities of Cycle 2 so that analysis could be directly translated into practice. Quality of data and analysis was ensured through triangulation (interview, observation, member checking, and peer debriefing with the faculty advisor). These steps increased the reliability and validity of the results and kept them closely consistent with the research questions stated.

As the researcher, I served as both the facilitator and mentor throughout the participatory action research process. To prepare for this role, I successfully completed a six-week Mentor Training Program with Dr. Linda Searby, an International Mentoring Association Endorsed Consultant and internationally recognized mentoring scholar. The training provided foundational knowledge and evidence-based mentoring practices that prepared me to facilitate well-being-focused mentoring with participants. Upon successful completion of the program, I earned a certificate in mentor training. Throughout the implementation of the study, I also consulted with Dr. Searby for guidance and feedback on the mentoring process to support the fidelity of the intervention. This preparation established my qualifications to facilitate the professional development sessions, mentor participants, and support the collaborative reflection and action central to the participatory action research design.

Limitations and Delimitations

The study faced several limitations inherent in qualitative action research. Social desirability bias may have influenced principals to overreport well-being practices. Recall errors could have influenced the accuracy of self-reported activities. The

selected instruments also might not have represented all dimensions of well-being. These limitations are inevitable because the self-report method and the sample are small and context specific.

Delimitations included restricting participation to a single school district, and the sample size was limited to principals and no other administrators. This narrower scale enabled in-depth exploration but limits generalizability. Efforts to reduce such problems involved data triangulation using several sources, member checking, and transparent reporting of procedures. These measures improve the validity of results without disregarding the contextual limitations of the study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology of the study. It began with the introduction to the literature that framed the research within the current body of research on the topic of principal well-being, positive psychology, and mentoring models. The chapter provided evidence of the gap in the existing leadership preparation programs by illustrating the absence of systematic efforts to address the well-being of principals, including the focus on such themes as stress and burnout, resilience, and professional development.

The research questions discussed in this chapter are directly aligned with the problem statement and the theoretical framework. The focus is to explore principals' well-being activities, what they do in the sessions of guided professional development, and the influence of such activities on their well-being and professional relationships. This chapter further details the research methodology and design, which was the qualitative action research. This approach is participatory and cyclical in nature, which

is advantageous for exploring interventions in the field of education. Two research cycles enable the iterative refinement of the study concerning professional development activities and articulate its changes over time, further enhancing its practical and applied focus.

The study participants were five school principals representing high school, middle school, and elementary school leadership. This purposive sampling strategy is designed so that the participants have firsthand experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The approach to obtaining site authorization, allocating consent forms, and maintaining confidentiality of records is also described, showing how the study satisfied the ethical requirements of research.

Instrumentation and data sources are described as multi-layered, including semi-structured interviews, group feedback, journals, and weekly check-ins. The instruments are based on existing positive psychology and mentoring-for-well-being frameworks, increasing the construct validity. The chapter explicitly explains how validity and reliability are ensured through peer reviewing the instruments, triangulation across different data sources, administering the instrument, and member checking. The combination of these factors improves the findings' credibility and reliability.

The data collection and management section outline methods to collect, store, and safeguard data. The respondents' privacy is protected through informed consent, encryption, and the use of pseudonyms. Reproducibility is enhanced through a systematic folder structure and an audit trail. The data analysis procedures are also straightforward and describe how the participants' responses, qualitative transcripts,

and other data (such as participant journals and my field notes) are thematically coded, cross-cycle compared, and then aligned to the research questions.

Lastly, the chapter covers ethical aspects and limitations and delimitations of the study. It highlights how the autonomy and confidentiality of the participants are safeguarded during the research and directly addresses the possibilities of bias, including social desirability or error of recall. These discussions support the integrity of the research process.

Generally, the chapter presents a coherent and interconnected methodology. The sections, from the literature review to ethical considerations, are correlated with the others, showing clear consistency between the research problem, questions, and the design and data analysis processes. This structure provides solid ground for the findings and precisely supports conclusions.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative action research study examining mentoring, and principal well-being activities through the lens of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model. It details participants' experiences, the themes that emerged from the interviews, and the ways in which these themes address research questions concerning principal well-being, mentoring support and engagement in PERMA-aligned activities. The findings illuminate the relationship between intentional mentoring and purposeful well-being activities and their influence on principals' emotional resilience, leadership effectiveness, and professional sustainability.

The chapter is structured in the order of the research questions and the two cycles of action research. The supports and strategies that principals are already using to promote mentoring and well-being, and the significance to their personal and professional lives were noted during Cycle 1. During Cycle 2, principals' participated in engaging PERMA-aligned mentoring activities, and the ways the principals' well-being and resilience were affected by this engagement were explored.

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, reflective discussion, participant feedback and mentoring discussions were used to produce the findings. Some themes were found throughout the data that included relational support systems, intentional wellness practices, accountability through mentoring, emotional regulation, resilience development and sustainable leadership practices. The themes are introduced for each research question and then illustrated by the experiences of the participants and from the actual examples given in the interviews.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to investigate the effects of mentoring or participation in PERMA-based activities designed to promote well-being. This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the well-being supports that principals used before the PERMA activities began and after the PERMA activities were used in a series of mentoring interventions.

The purpose of this study lies in building and developing healthy and happy school principals who can flourish in their roles as leaders. This action research was designed to provide professional development activities to create systematic change for career sustainability, prioritizing well-being by embedding self-care activities for

success. By helping school principals stay attuned to their own well-being routines, the hope was that the participants could flourish and be sustained in their positions

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Cycle 1: Baseline

1. What mentoring for well-being activities do school principals have in place presently?

Cycle 2: PERMA Mentoring Activities

2. How do school principals describe the influence of mentoring activities on their personal and professional well-being?
3. In what ways does engaging in PERMA-aligned mentoring activities enhance principals' perceptions of their well-being?

Findings Overview

The findings were obtained from interviews of five principals from a variety of school types, including two high school principals, one elementary principal, one middle school principal and one principal of a K–12 school (as shown in Table 1). The participants were given a menu of activities they could choose to engage with based on the PERMA model. The participants were asked to engage with their activity for six weeks. Each week a professional development video was released on Sunday. The professional development was tailored to taking care of yourself and becoming a principal with the ability to flourish in any environment. The principals received daily inspirational and encouraging quotes five days each week (Monday-Friday) for all six weeks. Every Friday, I called the five principals to check in to see how the activity

selected was going. Before the study, the principals were not on a set routine of self-care activities. All participants were doing activities, however, no one in the study had a regular routine. Throughout the study, I sent themed self-care packages in the mail to each participant. The packages were meant to enhance the importance of developing a well-being routine in the hope the principals would take better care of themselves. The activities chosen by principals were golf, exercise, prayer/ walking, journaling and meditation-based reflection. These individual activities were analytically meaningful as they represented differential approaches to the domains of PERMA, including relationships, engagement, meaning, accomplishment and positive emotion.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants and Schools

Pseudo-nym	Position	Gender	Race	Total Years in Educ.	Years as Principal	School Setting	School Size	Activity Selected from menu
Mr. Green	High School Principal	Male	Black	27	11	High School	Large	Exercise
Mrs. Evans	Elementary School Principal	Female	White	25	3	Elementary School	Medium	Prayer and Walking
Dr. Jones	K–12 Principal	Female	Black	28	16	K–12 School	Small	Journaling, Prayer and Walking
Mr. Flowers	High School Principal	Male	White	23	8	High School	Medium	Golf
Mrs. Rickaby	Middle School Principal	Female	White	31	10	Middle School	Medium	Exercise

Participants agreed well-being was important, however, they admitted they were not always able to make time for self-care. The findings revealed that supportive relationship networks were foundational to the participant's ability to navigate the demands of the principalship. Support did not come from a clearly defined or structured

district mentoring program. The participants described individuals who collectively supported their leadership practice, but they did not have formal mentors. The participants included school personnel, district leaders, family members, church affiliations, peers and friends. These were informal supports for the participants personal and professional development.

The researcher asked participants a set of questions and the following themes were identified from the questions. Theme 1: Knowledge and Understanding of Mentoring for Well-Being. Theme 2: Mentoring Activities for Well-Being Personal and Professional Supports. Theme 3: Mentoring Awareness regarding Activities for Personal and Professional Development. Theme 4: Intentional Wellness and Mentoring Supports. Theme 5: Stress Isolation and Burnout. Theme 6: Leadership Identity and Growth.

Findings Organized by Research Questions

Cycle 1: Baseline Research Question 1

1. What mentoring for well-being activities do school principals have in place presently?

The following four themes emerged from the participant interviews during Cycle 1:

Theme 1: Knowledge and Understanding of Mentoring for Well-Being

Mr. Flowers did not really have a foundational knowledge of mentoring for well-being. Throughout Mr. Flowers' interview, it was evident he did not have a depth of knowledge towards mentoring for well-being. Mr. Flowers described some key players that assisted him personally as well as professionally to sustain his role as a school principal. Yet, he appeared to view golf as a sport he played leisurely with his best friend as a form of well-being.

Mr. Flowers established multiple relationships that helped him both professionally and personally. Mr. Flowers maintained significant relationships with people at his school, within his district, among his family members, at his church, among peers, and among friends. In addition, Mr. Flowers found numerous support systems when moving from a regular teacher to a principal although none of those systems were linked to any form of mentoring progression regarding well-being. According to the participant,

My AP helped me out a lot. There was my instructional coach Mrs. Bland. She is wonderful; she was a great cheerleader for me my first year. There were some folks from the district too who would come over and check on me. They would come over and ask me how I was doing.

Mr. Flowers mentioned numerous informal support networks that were helpful in terms of carrying out his duties. As stated, "I've got my church at Wiregrass and I've got Jason, my golf friend. I've got the principal over at the elementary school that helps me. I also have my family. Kristen supports me a lot." Clearly, these relationships were instrumental for Mr. Flowers because they provided him with additional resources to work on. It seemed as if trust was one of the main qualities that characterized Mr. Flowers' support network. To be more specific, he emphasized the value of communication and discussion when addressing problems. Mr. Flowers says, "Sometimes I just need someone to talk it out with. I like to get feedback. So, I like to bounce ideas off my team." In addition, Mr. Flowers understands that it is always necessary to discuss things collectively. He adds, "I've got some blind spots so I'm not able to see everything and it takes a team of people to help make decisions."

Mr. Flowers seemed to value his support network because it helped him with many tasks and made him happier. He added that “Kristen will tell me ‘you need to go play golf.’ I think she knows it helps me relieve stress.” In addition, his children and office staff were his sources of daily motivation because “my kids encourage me” and “the front office staff pretty much keep me going.” Clearly, Mr. Flowers seemed to rely on his family to gain some sort of help and did not mention having a mentor who would care about his well-being and professional development.

Mr. Flowers established a support system that was very valuable to him. In particular, he says, “I value the friendships and really the conversations we have throughout the day.” He explained why he valued these interactions by emphasizing the need for constant contact with his friends. Mr. Flowers said,

It's important to me that they check in regularly and well I don't feel so alone or like I'm off by myself. My support system is probably the thing that keeps me running. I don't know what I would do without them to be honest.

He connected supportive relationships to stress reduction, which meant that these relationships not only assisted with some practical tasks but also enhanced resilience and emotional well-being. He stated that “I would not make it without my supports,” adding that “we joke around and laugh a lot. For some reason, I think the laughter and the jokes we play kind of help us all get through the day. This certainly makes the stress lighter.” Therefore, Mr. Flowers understands the value of social contacts and finds them essential in dealing with stressful situations.

In summary, Mr. Flowers' interview revealed that supportive relationship networks were crucial for principals who want to be successful in their roles. Overall, it

was clear that Mr. Flowers viewed these relationships as invaluable and instrumental. However, there seemed to be a lack of awareness in relationship to a formal mentor to actively provide support for him. He did not appear to have a knowledge of a systematic mentor provided by the district to expand his leadership role as a school principal through mentoring. Flowers leisurely played golf with his best friend to attend to his well-being needs. It appeared he did not have a foundation professionally to view mentoring for well-being as something he could achieve professionally. The lack of awareness to embed a well-being activity at work seemed foreign to him. It appeared that Mr. Flowers only framed well-being from the lens of leisurely playing golf as a source of meeting his well-being needs.

In Mrs. Rickaby's interview, she revealed relationships between professionals became the main type of mentoring for well-being support for her. Throughout various stages of her career development and progression to being an effective school principal, the reliance on relationships was evident. Even though Mrs. Rickaby mentioned the limited possibility of using mentoring mechanisms, she emphasized several times the necessity to establish strong relations with other school leaders, district leaders and experienced colleagues. This suggested that the scope of mentorship in sustaining principal well-being was not sufficiently considered, especially mentoring for well-being. The depth and scope of practice for mentoring school principals for well-being have not yet been established as a priority.

When reflecting on her entry into the role of the school leader, Mrs. Rickaby stressed that her professional growth happened with the help of informal mentoring relationships with other school principals and other experienced professionals in the

field. She said, "I was able to work with principals who had been principals for a long time" and was grateful for the opportunity to model under great school principals and administrators who have many years of experience. However, the lack of formal mentoring relationships was overshadowed by informal relationships: Mrs. Rickaby stated that she was "able to lean on people that I could trust to help me and support me."

Mrs. Rickaby noted how she shifted from focusing on learning about how to perform her responsibilities properly to the development of her skills and competencies. Mrs. Rickaby highlighted that with increasing experience, the need for emotional well-being and connection started to be dominant. The participant said that "as I gained experience, I think my needs shifted from doing the job towards more emotional support and really trying to maintain balance." At this stage, Mrs. Rickaby needed to establish a connection with other professionals and be able to contact trusted colleagues. However, she did not have a mentor who could provide her with the depth of understanding and knowledge. Mrs. Rickaby's interview revealed mentoring for well-being and leadership sustainability seems to happen informally.

Mrs. Rickaby's key sources of well-being and professional development included fellow principals and trusted colleagues. Specifically, she said, "Some of my strongest support comes from other principals and long-time trusted colleagues where we regularly communicate through phone, text and then during district meetings." Among the key aspects that contributed to establishing positive relationships with other school principals was trust. In particular, Mrs. Rickaby mentioned that she appreciated these relationships because "I trust the feedback and we're very honest with one another,"

which means that they established close ties based on the experience of the same challenging role. Moreover, she added, "We all truly understand the role because we're doing the role." Even though Mrs. Rickaby had support from other principals, she did not undergo a structured and continuous mentoring process.

Professional development was achieved by gaining different perspectives and solving different problems that emerged while working as a principal. In particular, Mrs. Rickaby said that she received support from her colleagues by receiving help "with problem solving," "making leadership decisions" and having an opportunity to discuss issues and "bounce ideas off one another." These relationships with other principals allowed her to solve complicated issues related to interactions with staff, students, and parents. Instead of participating in a formal mentorship relationship, she used the existing relationships in her professional and private life to get advice on making various decisions.

Mrs. Rickaby mentioned that colleagues help her relieve stress during challenging periods by reminding "me to maintain perspective and help reduce feeling so alone" because, as she claims, "leadership can be very lonely." It can be concluded that these relationships provide an additional psychological benefit since sometimes "just having someone to listen to and understand really makes a big difference."

It should be noted that despite having various support resources, Mrs. Rickaby never experienced being in a structured mentoring relationship. As a result, she had to use informal relationships with other principals as the main type of support.

Her supportive networks include fellow principals and long-term colleagues who provided professional and psychosocial benefits. These connections imply regular

communication and the opportunity to share experiences. For example, Mrs. Rickaby mentioned, "We communicate regularly and frequently – almost every day by calling or texting my fellow principals. We're all there for one another." The sense of community appeared to be an essential protective factor preventing her from isolating herself as a school principal. This pattern suggested a structural problem connected to the absence of formal mentoring support which is supposed to facilitate career development and well-being of the principal. Instead of having a mentor, Mrs. Rickaby used informal contacts with other school leaders who were able to help her solve various problems.

Among the most valuable features of these mentoring relationships, Mrs. Rickaby noted honesty, trust, and the shared experience of fellow principals. In particular, she said that "the shared experience is the most valuable to me" and that "we're in this together" since other principals had the same difficulties as she had. She emphasized that psychological safety became especially important since being "able to speak openly without judgment" made these relations better and more beneficial.

Mrs. Rickaby mentioned her mentoring relationships and supportive network several times when explaining why those relationships were helpful for her. Specifically, she said that "my support systems help me significantly" as talking through different problems with trustworthy colleagues reduced stress and helped her stay balanced. Mrs. Rickaby explained that mentoring relationships increased her confidence by telling her that "challenges are normal, and challenges are also manageable." Her colleagues helped her to build healthy boundaries between work and family life.

Mrs. Rickaby's network became an additional motivation for her to continue working in the position of a school principal and not leave the profession because she

felt "connected, valued and supported." When explaining why mentoring was so important to her, Mrs. Rickaby admitted, "Mentoring supports are extremely important because no principal can effectively manage the demands of the role alone." In addition, well-being support was recognized as a necessity by the participant saying, "Well-being supports are essential for longevity in this job." She identified the lack of formalized and structured mentorship; however, she did express the need for mentors.

Similarly, another principal in the study, Mr. Green, revealed a limited understanding of mentoring as formal process designed to promote well-being. Mr. Green stated, "right now there is not a ton of formal structure for me around mentoring...there is no one specifically assigned to me." Even though Mr. Green named individuals he could contact, these contacts appeared to be easily reachable colleagues rather than planned mentoring processes designed to enhance well-being. Mr. Green saw the responsibility of promoting well-being in terms of personal care. He confessed that, "I have been taking terrible care of myself. I almost feel guilty if I do anything for myself," which means that, unlike other participants, he views attending to his own well-being as a personal matter unrelated to mentoring and organizational structures. Even though he was aware of the importance of well-being by stating, "I know they are important. I don't know why I don't take better care of myself." Mr. Green did not consider mentoring to achieve this goal. Mr. Green referred to some of the members of his gym offering him "encouraging words" and served as a sounding board and "safe space for me to vent." This suggests the lack of awareness around mentoring principals for well-being offered by districts. Mr. Green stated, "There is certainly not enough focus on well-being." Therefore, it can be concluded that despite Mr. Green's awareness of

this need, he did not regard mentoring as a well-thought-out professional system designed to help principals.

Mrs. Evans greatly appreciated receiving any form of support, including mentoring. When discussing mentoring for well-being, however, Mrs. Evans framed mentoring as a personal and informal process. Mrs. Evans stated, "I haven't really had any formal mentoring, and I would like to have some if it was available. I just haven't gotten involved in any formal mentoring. It doesn't seem to be the top priority, however it should be."

Mrs. Evans mentioned people from a local church in the community bringing breakfast for the staff as an informal act of kindness rather than mentoring programs within the district. She regarded the process of participating in this research study as the most valuable form of mentoring. She stated that "I haven't really done anything other than I guess going through what you're going through with me... That's honestly what I've had as far as mentoring." Instead of referring to mentoring as something connected to district programs, coaching or leadership networks, she referred to weekly interviews, care packages, inspiring quotes, and the weekly videos within this research study as the most mentoring she has received. This highlights the limited availability and lack of awareness around district structured mentoring for well-being.

Mrs. Evans' response to some of the wellness items delivered to her highlights the need for wellness among principals. Mrs. Evans said, "I got in a hot bath after a long week and I soaked there... and I sat in the bathtub, and I cried because you sent me that lavender salt." In addition, she said "The blanket that you sent about wrapping up in well-being, all of the things that you sent me really honestly were great examples of

mentoring for well-being, truly caring about me and the support was truly amazing." For Mrs. Evans, mentoring was connected to personal care, encouragement and prompts "to remember to care of yourself."

It is evident Mrs. Evans recognized the importance of having supportive structures, stating "If I had no supports, I would walk out the door." However, the way she framed mentoring was connected with calling trusted people, praying, and receiving encouragement. When asked how she saw the ideal structure of support, she said "a mentor, someone who you can trust to call, check-ins, treats, quotes and intentional time that we met would be a mentor to me." This is a description that resembles the current study more than professional mentoring offered through her district.

Mrs. Evans stated, "after going through this study with you, I think there is a need for well-being and support embedded in my daily career life and I see that now." In summary, Mrs. Evans is a person who appreciated encouragement, accountability, prayer and personal relationships. Mentoring in this case was viewed not as a formal and systemic structure related to principal's leadership but as an act of caring for the person and encouraging her. There seemed to be a lack of knowledge of what a formal mentoring relationship should be as well as a lack of understanding around mentoring for well-being.

In contrast to other participants, Dr. Jones articulated a sophisticated and systems-oriented understanding of mentoring and well-being support. Rather than describing mentoring as informal encouragement or isolated relational gestures, she framed it as a multi-layered professional structure embedded across career stages.

When talking about mentoring systems, Dr. Jones stated throughout her career, she has participated in different kinds of leadership development initiatives conducted at the district level. Among those initiatives, she singled out the Superintendent's Academy. According to Dr. Jones, "I really benefited from it and will always benefit from the mentoring that I went through in the Superintendent's Academy." Therefore, she viewed mentoring as a formalized development that positively affected her leadership.

Although she did not "have an assigned mentor in the traditional sense," Dr. Jones emphasized that she maintained professional networking based on collaboration, honesty, and problem-solving. In such a case, colleagues serve as sounding boards for one another, particularly when problems arise. Unlike the other participants who emphasized an emotional aspect of mentoring, Dr. Jones viewed mentoring with both strategic and relational components. According to Dr. Jones, her mentors helped her avoid being overly emotional and act strategically instead. Dr. Jones viewed mentoring as both emotional regulation and decision-making skills that are supported through mentoring.

Additionally, she discussed the emotional isolation associated with leadership positions, stating, "Leadership can be isolating it's lonely at the top. Well, it really is." At the same time, she viewed mentoring as necessary for longevity in leadership roles. To be more precise, Dr. Jones highlighted the importance of well-being support for leaders' ability to function effectively for a long period of time. Specifically, she stated, "Well-being supports are essential for longevity in leadership. Without them, burnout becomes a problem."

Dr. Jones also displayed a high level of awareness related to gaps in principal development within systems. In particular, she mentioned that individual mentoring beyond initial mentoring is necessary for many new principals. Furthermore, according to Dr. Jones, mentoring could be useful not only for the inexperienced but also for veteran principals. To illustrate the point made, she proposed mentoring where two principals act as mentors and coach respectively and belong to different generations providing a rich experience for both mentee and mentor.

In contrast to the other participants who considered mentoring for well-being primarily as motivational practice, Dr. Jones gave the following description of the ideal mentoring structure: "Ongoing mentoring across all career stages, leadership coaching availability, robust peer networking, wellness opportunities, developing leaders and making well-being a priority." Dr. Jones differed significantly from the rest of the participants. Although other interviewees tended to refer to mentoring for well-being as a fragmented process, Dr. Jones emphasized all important aspects of mentoring including formalization, professional networking, emotional regulation, and coaching.

In summary, Dr. Jones appeared to have a more comprehensive perspective of mentoring, while the other participants in the study perceived mentoring for well-being in terms of informal relationships. Dr. Jones emphasized the need to develop a mentoring system that would include formal structures and informal networking along with emotional regulation, coaching, and sustainability.

The interviews from the participants revealed that mentoring for well-being among principals was primarily characterized by informal relational supports. Mentors, spouses, friends, colleagues, and wellness activities were referred to as the major

sources of both emotional and professional support without fail. The participants realized the importance of wellness and principal well-being but do not perceive mentoring structures as an effective tool to promote well-being.

Even though the participants understood the significance of well-being, they generally agree that well-being structures in the district are either insufficient or even non-existent. Consequently, the principals created their own relational networks outside the system. These networks served as adaptive means to bridge the gap and ensure the personal and professional well-being of the participants. Instead of receiving systematic mentoring within the district, principals were supported by informal networks.

As seen from the participants interviews, mentoring for well-being among principals does not imply any particular organization and structure but consists of personal and professional relationships. It is an informal process based on mutual trust. Wellness in this case appears to be mostly achieved informally and privately rather than through district-sponsored programs and structures. Even though well-being is considered a critical issue, there are no examples of structured mentoring programs aimed at promoting principal well-being and maintaining principal leadership sustainability.

Table 2. Analysis of Principals' Mentoring for Well-being

Principal	Understanding of Mentoring for Well-being	Formal Mentoring Structures	Informal Mentoring Reliance	Well-being Supports Used	Summary Characterization
Mr. Flowers	Low	Low	High	Low	Highly relational understanding of mentoring; emphasizes friendships, daily encouragement, and informal peer support rather than structured systems.
Mrs. Rickaby	Moderate–Low	Low	High	Moderate	Relies heavily on peer principals and trusted colleagues; mentoring is present but not strongly conceptualized within a formal system.
Mr. Green	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low–Moderate	Mentoring primarily occurs through informal social and professional networks (church, peers, leisure relationships); framed as practical problem-solving support.
Mrs. Evans	Low–Moderate	Very Low	Moderate	Low–Moderate	Mentoring for well-being is largely absent as a formal construct; support is rooted in personal/spiritual coping strategies rather than organizational systems.
Dr. Jones	High	Moderate–High	High	Moderate–High	Demonstrates a clear systems-based understanding of mentoring, including coaching, reflection, leadership development, and structured professional support.

Theme 2: Mentoring Activities for Well-Being Personal & Professional Supports

According to the participants interviews, well-being was a personal and organized practice for improving the well-being and leadership of the participant. As the participant shared, they engaged in activities such as golfing, exercising, praying, walking, meditation, grounding spirituality, and reflecting on one's purpose. The initial activities practiced by the participants have served them well in terms of emotional stability, reduction in stress, and professional resilience. However, despite frequently participating in previous restorative practices, the participants did not associate such activities with deliberate practices aimed at one's well-being. The primary conclusion drawn based on the findings was that well-being was not achieved through intentional practices. There was a lack of specific structured practices.

Based on Mr. Flowers' interview, it became evident that the well-being activities related to mentoring occurred spontaneously through typical social interactions. The well-being support was not consciously recognized as a part of well-being and mentoring practices. Rather, he referred to such activities as normal elements of life, professional activities and maintaining social contacts. For instance, before conducting the research, playing golf helped in relieving stress, although it was not identified as a conscious effort to develop well-being practices. As Mr. Flowers notes, "Sometimes Kristen will tell me 'You need to go play golf.' I think she knows it helps me relieve stress." This quote suggested that he was aware of the possibility to use golf to relieve the pressure, although he did not identify it as a well-being practice.

At the same time, the golf practice could serve as an important tool to develop social connections, but it was never thought of as well-being support. Mr. Flowers explains, "I met my best friend Jason through golf and that friendship sustains me." Mr. Flowers had golf in place meeting with Jason around once a month, however, he considered it a social activity more than a well-being practice. In addition, "I have also met some other people through golf that we meet up and play with that I can say have become a support system for me."

Mr. Flowers emphasized the support he receives at school as a relational aspect, without mentioning the notion of well-being support at all. For example, he explained, "I would have to say I value the friendships and really the conversations we have throughout the day," and "My support system is probably the thing that keeps me running." Mr. Flowers had a strong support system in place at school through relationships with others he counted on. He did not frame these towards mentors and never related them to a part of well-being even though those supports were in place.

The absence of a formal approach to well-being support was observed not only in the social life sphere but also in the field of professional relations. According to Mr. Flowers, "We get to hang out and talk about principal stuff, and it helps a lot." In this case, it referred to the weekly meetings among the principals, which contributed to his well-being. At the same time, Mr. Flowers stated, "I don't really know of any wellness programs at the moment."

There was, however, an obvious tendency to provide well-being activities through leisure and routine activities. Mr. Flowers mentioned that "I routinely start my day with a shower, then I listen to my podcast, and then when I need to, I take a drive

around on the school golf cart when I need to just clear my head." All these activities could facilitate regulation and reflection; however, they were not recognized by the participant as well-being activities or mentoring practices.

In summary, Mr. Flowers revealed the initial existence of the following well-being sources (golf, relationships, and routine activities) which cannot be perceived as elements of formalized well-being or professional mentoring practice. In Mr. Flowers initial interview he did observe the importance of golfing about once a month as an important source of emotional support and regulation.

Mrs. Rickaby revealed her initial well-being activities were included in an informal environment of professional relationships and activities rather than any formal structures. Mrs. Rickaby explained that during the initial period of being a school principal, she found a great deal of support from the meetings held in the district and from experienced principals. Her mentorship was not part of any formal system of mentoring, but rather it was learning by observing the behavior and actions of experienced professionals. According to her, her professional mentorship occurred because she happened to be around experienced school leaders that took the time out to help her. "When I first became principal, most of my mentorship occurred through district leadership meetings... I worked with principals who had been principals for a long time... I was kind of their shadow coming in."

In addition to these relationships, Mrs. Rickaby noted physical activities among her initial practices for coping with stressful experiences of working as a principal. Prior to participating in the current research study, she was going to the gym once or twice per month. She participated in circuit training that was very helpful in relieving stress.

Even though Mrs. Rickaby went to the gym to relieve stress, she did not consider this activity to be a part of a well-being practice, but she did discuss in the interview how much the circuit training helped her feel as though she had accomplished a goal.

Mrs. Rickaby described her physical activities in terms of general self-management techniques: "I do walk. I'm exercising. I do try to disconnect when I can." Here, both "exercise" and "walking" refer to personal practices for coping with stressful experiences that were not directly related to well-being strategies designed specifically for keeping sustainability in her role as a school principal.

For Mrs. Rickaby, the most reliable means of stress relief and professional grounding were conversations with other administrators who were her close friends and trusted colleagues. She emphasized the importance of talking out various issues in her leadership experience: "Talking it out through challenges with trusted colleagues helps me reduce stress; it keeps situations in perspective." In addition to that, she frequently communicated with other administrators, who constituted her professional network: "a lot of times daily I'm on the phone, I'm pretty much in our little principal network talking and communicating quite a bit."

Overall, prior to participating in this research study, Mrs. Rickaby had some supports in place to help cope with stress: professional mentorship based on informal networks of communication and informal learning opportunities, and physical exercises. Prior to taking part in this study, Mrs. Rickaby was going to the circuit training sessions about once or twice per month. This was initially how she framed mentoring for well-being.

In Mr. Green's Cycle 1 interview, he described his initial support for well-being as engaging in physical activity by visiting the gym at Crunch fitness once or twice a week. Mr. Green framed going to the gym as his organized approach to dealing with stress, regulating emotions, and building resilience. According to Mr. Green, prior to beginning the intervention, he exercised occasionally, "I was going about once a month on a Saturday or a Sunday." In contrast, after engaging in the study, the frequency of exercise greatly increased. Specifically, he claimed, "Once we started the study, I went three times a week and I have now made this my routine, and I am still hitting the gym."

For Mr. Green, engaging in physical exercise served as a primary method of reducing stress and regulating emotions. In particular, he said, "Going to the gym is a big stress release for me" and also emphasized that regular visits to the gym helped him "not be as stressed out at work and home." Mr. Green reported that physical well-being allowed him to remain consistent across personal and professional domains. Engaging in physical activity was associated with the improvement in cognitive functioning and emotion regulation within the context of school principalship. Mr. Green stated that he felt more alert when working and could better regulate his emotions and stress when engaging in physical exercise. He also mentioned that exercise improved his endurance during particularly challenging weeks in his career.

A significant component of Mr. Green's well-being strategy of going to the gym was the involvement of social relationships that could provide emotional and professional support. Mr. Green referred to friendships established within the gym. Specifically, he stated that gym friends offered him guidance, providing a "safe space for me to vent." Also, Mr. Green considered his peers "kind of like my cheerleaders," as

they provided him with emotional support. Additionally, these relationships served as accountability mechanisms, as the participant mentioned that gym peers helped him "have someone to be accountable to check in."

Importantly, Mr. Green noted that these relationships allowed him to receive both emotional and professional support. As mentioned above, they offered encouraging words and acted as a sounding board, helping him "make good decisions" and providing a venue to "express frustrations with each other and be there for each other." Therefore, Mr. Green's well-being practice was strengthened by the participation within the social networks he found at the gym.

Mr. Green highlighted the importance of having these relationships for building resilience and sustaining the principalship. Specifically, he claimed, "having these supports in place is going to help me continue to retirement in three more years." Mr. Green indicated that physical exercise and social relationships contributed to his ability to become resilient and sustain the job.

Mr. Green emphasized the need "to make time for myself and definitely making time for my family." Mr. Green admitted difficulties related to managing self-care as he stated that he "had been taking terrible care of myself. I almost feel guilty if I do anything for myself." It appears Mr. Green was concerned about the growing tension between personal and professional well-being needs.

In summary, Mr. Green initially engaged primarily in physical activities by attending the gym once or twice a week. It should be noted that Mr. Green did not consider visits to the gym as organized practices in relation to well-being. He primarily mentioned them as a physical activity or exercise, not as a well-being strategy or self-

care. In turn, even though exercise was the main strategy used to alleviate the impact of stress, its benefits derived more from the formation of habitual behavior rather than from the purposeful application of well-being practices. Mr. Green also found an aspect of social support and accountability through attending the gym.

The well-being activities Mrs. Evans engaged in initially prior to the study consisted of prayer on the drive to work and occasional walking. In her explanation, Mrs. Evans indicated that although she was conducting prayer and spiritual grounding, she was not considering them as well-being activities. Walking and spiritual grounding enabled her to manage her stress; however, they were neither considered an informal well-being strategy nor a formal one.

Mrs. Evans said she was engaging in "prayer and walking and the spiritual grounding." These activities involved going outside for the purpose of "just praying to get back to my center point." This is where spiritual grounding would take place. In answering whether she was using any formal well-being activities earlier, Mrs. Evans revealed that she was not engaged in any such activities. She said, "I really wasn't doing all of that" and that "I was just praying on the way to work."

In summary, Mrs. Evans seems to have engaged in well-being activities prior to the study minimally and informally. She was simply walking, praying, and engaging in spiritual grounding without a routine.

Dr. Jones reveals in her interview she was already engaged in several practices related to personal well-being before we started our study. However, these practices were not structured and supported by mentoring-style well-being programs. According to the participant, her activities prior to the study were not linked to any specific

techniques or tools that would help her reflect on her leadership and maintain balance. The practices consisted of walking, journaling, and praying at least one or two times per week. These practices were used by the participant to address various leadership issues without referring to mentoring for well-being activities.

Dr. Jones clearly grasped the benefits of having practices in place to support well-being. Her initial practices involved journaling and praying along with occasional walking. However, no systematic effort and structure aimed at mentoring and leadership development could be revealed in her interview. In addition, Dr. Jones noted that she usually turned to experienced colleagues and team members for practical and emotional assistance during challenging leadership situations. In summary, Dr. Jones was initially journaling, walking and praying as her pre-study activities related to well-being without involving mentoring frameworks for reflection and development.

The five participants indicated that mentoring for well-being was not necessarily planned but was rather a product of personal interaction with no actual formal well-being mentoring. The participants revealed that they performed activities such as walking, praying, journaling, playing golf, and exercising as a means of taking care of their well-being, but again this was done spontaneously without any pre-planned and deliberate attempt to mentor one another about their well-being.

Table 3. Initial Mentoring Activities for Well-being: Personal and Professional Supports

Principal	Formal Mentoring Structures (Pre-Study)	Informal Professional Supports	Personal Well-Being Activities (Pre-Study)	Framing of Well-Being Prior to Study
Mr. Flowers	Limited structured mentoring specific to well-being; primarily district meetings	Peer principals and colleagues for professional problem-solving	Golf once a month Minimal structured self-care practices reported	Did not explicitly frame activities as well-being; mentoring viewed primarily as professional support
Mrs. Rickaby	No formalized well-being mentoring structure	Collegial networks and professional conversations	Circuit gym participation; structured exercise routine	Viewed gym participation primarily as physical activity rather than intentional well-being practice
Mr. Green	Limited formal mentoring beyond district meetings	Trusted colleagues; informal sounding boards	Exercise-based stress relief on the weekends	Exercise framed as activity rather than integrated leadership wellness
Mrs. Evans	Minimal structured mentoring for personal wellness	Peer relationships and collaborative dialogue	Walking routines; occasional reflective time	Did not initially conceptualize walking as structured well-being activity
Dr. Jones (Outlier)	Transitional mentoring from predecessor; leadership academies; access to counseling (unused)	Veteran principals; long-term professional networks; peer consultation	Journaling and prayer (1–2 times per week); occasional walking; boundary setting	Recognized importance of well-being conceptually; practices limited and not systemically embedded

Theme 3: Mentoring Awareness regarding Well-Being Activities for Personal and Professional Development

Theme three reflects the participant's limited awareness of structured activities designed to support personal and professional development. While the participants described having strong interpersonal support systems, their responses revealed minimal access to formal mentoring structures, limited knowledge of well-being initiatives and a perception that professional development was primarily compliance-driven rather than growth-oriented. Development appeared largely informal and self-initiated rather than embedded within a clearly articulated district framework. There is one outlier within the participants, Dr. Jones, that has an awareness of mentoring for well-being. In her findings, she articulates mentoring for well-being and recognizes the need for principals to have well-being activities provided through formal systematic mentoring offered through school districts.

Mr. Flowers said, "Well at the present time I would not say I have any formal structures in place. I would not consider it mentoring, but we go to our principal meeting once a week." There were some weekly meetings, but the interviewee did not consider it to be mentoring. Then talking about his mentor and his experience of having one, Mr. Flowers continued, "My first year a retired principal I knew at my church came and met with me and he prayed for me. I called him a lot and I would say he was my mentor. He kind of just took it upon himself to help me." Using the expression "kind of just took it upon himself" to explain who Mr. Flowers's mentor was and how it happened can indicate that the mentoring program is not formally implemented in this school district. It also proves that such activities are not mandatory but happen by themselves, so Mr.

Flowers continued, "Sure so, we definitely need some supports. You know there is not a lot out there. Especially for us that have been doing this a while. It would be nice for everyone to have a mentor." Thus, the opportunity for mentoring is not sufficient and is not provided throughout people's entire careers.

Professional development in general was discussed as something obligatory and imposed on teachers rather than beneficial. Explaining how he receives information concerning professional development programs, the interviewee added, "They harp and harp on professional development. You know you have to get 30 hours in to get the stipend so I go to a lot of training to make sure I get that." Thus, professional development in this context means earning certain hours and obtaining some benefits. Talking about the resources and activities used for personal growth, Mr. Flowers said, "I am a keep to myself kind ah guy. I don't really like going to all this stuff. I like the few people around me and that's pretty much it. I know we have to get our hours in and I do that but as far as me going to just hang out when I go to conferences and all I really don't do all that."

There was no mention of networking and conferences being beneficial to his professional development. They were presented as something that should be done, but Mr. Flowers does not feel obligated to participate. Talking about well-being, the participant added, "I don't really know of any wellness programs at the moment." Mr. Flowers is not informed regarding wellness activities implemented in his school district. Wellness in Mr. Flowers' opinion appeared to be a result of social interaction and spontaneous relaxation. The interviewee stated that, "We joke around and laugh a lot. For some reason, I think the laughter and the jokes we play kind of like help us all get

through the day. This certainly makes the stress lighter." Thus, wellness programs are also informal and socialized, not organized and district supervised.

When asked what types of supports he would appreciate, the participant mentioned, "Well, it would be nice to see some time out during the day to take care of myself even like some regular breaks or even a walk outside. It would even be nice to have some dedicated wellness rooms to take a break in." This proves that there are currently no such activities and facilities provided.

Mrs. Rickaby demonstrates considerable peer relationships that she values and supports actively. However, it becomes clear from her statements that the mentoring activities that would focus on the well-being of principals are rarely used by her, as the support is either absent or limited by the specific goals that the principal has at the moment. For example, such opportunities seem to be unavailable or at least inconsistent and applied exclusively to new principals who require more help than experienced leaders. While some well-being programs are provided by her employer, including counseling for employees, these opportunities are not used by the principal daily.

When discussing possible mentoring opportunities, Mrs. Rickaby claims, "I don't really have access to a coach or anything like that, which I wish I did. I know that now our new principals are assigned mentors and I'm not formally assigned a mentor." This means that she recognizes a difference between mentoring options for new and experienced principals and mentions the need to continue mentoring programs that are helpful for leadership sustainability in the long term.

At the same time, she refers to the weekly leadership meetings as examples of collaboration within the peer group that do not necessarily represent well-being-oriented mentoring: "We do have leadership meetings. We have principal leadership meetings once a week. I do go to the meet and greet that I like to go to a little bit before and get coffee and just talk." These meetings may be regarded as collaborative activities but are not organized intentionally as mentoring sessions.

Later, the participant notes explicitly: "I really believe that districts could provide more ongoing mentoring for experienced principals, not just those that are new to the role, but us veteran leaders also face evolving challenges and benefit from continued support and collaboration." Throughout the interview, Mrs. Rickaby relies heavily on informal peer mentoring activities that take place outside the workplace: "Some of my strongest support comes from fellow principals and long-time trusted colleagues where we regularly communicate through phone, text and then during district meetings." She refers to daily contacts she has with her informal mentoring group and admits that "I might call Vanessa Gunn... or I might call Sue Clark... I call Sue Clark a lot... sometimes I just check in and sometimes I'm asking questions, but I'm pretty much in our little principal network talking and communicating quite a bit." Such networking can be viewed as collaboration rather than well-being-related mentoring activity.

At the same time, she explains that when she began to work as a principal, she did not think about the importance of collaboration and preferred to perform her duties alone: "In the beginning I was more trying to do it by myself, and now I realize that it's much better to operate with a team." Thus, it can be concluded that while Mrs. Rickaby demonstrates effective communication with her peers, there is a lack of organized

mentoring that focuses on well-being among veteran leaders and is provided only to new principals.

Mr. Green expressed how critical well-being is and the ways through which mentoring can assist with that. However, it became evident that there are not many mentoring activities conducted in the district explicitly targeted at supporting the principal's well-being.

Responding to the question of formal structures for mentoring that he has access to, Mr. Green said that there "isn't really a lot of formalized structures in place for me when it comes to mentoring. I do have some people to call on but there is nobody assigned to me." Although he was able to "call" on some people, there was no formally assigned mentor. The support he receives is more of an informal kind, coming from people working at the same school: "I just go to my assistant principal, my instructional coach, my counselor and I have a team of people I know I can count on." They can be relied upon, although such relationships cannot be called formally organized mentoring.

Overall, Mr. Green understands the importance of mentoring and well-being and mentions their positive outcomes, particularly when they take account of reliable structures. There are still very few formal mentoring activities aimed at promoting the well-being of the principal, which tends to be self-initiated. Districts scarcely mentioning well-being, and the only way through which people get the necessary support is from peers within informal networks.

Mrs. Evans reveals through her interviews there was little structured mentoring intended for supporting principals' well-being. According to the participant, the research study was "transformative." Before joining it, Mrs. Evans was offered few structured

mentoring options to promote well-being. Those options that existed were either informal or provided by means of the research study itself. In terms of support provided by the superintendent, Mrs. Evans mentioned that Becky Birdsong was supportive and helpful to some degree. "Our superintendent, Becky Birdsong, is a person who has helped me a lot with her leadership and supervisory skills." However, this support could not be regarded as the structure for promoting the well-being of principal because it was not an official mentorship program.

Talking about current well-being practices in the district, Mrs. Evans replied: "Well, to be honest with you, I really don't have a lot of well-being supports going on. I haven't really had any." There is practically no mentoring activities aimed at promoting well-being among principals within this particular district. The only examples provided included volunteers providing breakfasts and lunches: "There's a church that is a host church that comes in and they do bring breakfast and things like that, and they do support us, and they do check on me."

Mrs. Evans does not have many formal mentoring structures, nor does the district offer any well-being support programs. Mrs. Evans mentions some informal support provided by the assistant principal, church community, as well as superintendent; however, formal mentoring and well-being programs were not developed. Mrs. Evan's participation in the research study itself served as her major formal well-being practice.

Dr. Jones was the clearest of mentoring and well-being supports as essential elements of effective, sustainable leadership development. With her extensive experience as an educator, school principal, assistant superintendent, and assistant

principal, Dr. Jones explained the importance of mentoring and well-being supports for sustaining leadership. In particular, her responses were indicative of critical thinking, advocacy for systemic changes, and the recognition of mentoring and well-being as necessary components for successful leadership.

Dr. Jones openly acknowledged her feeling of being isolated in her position. She stated that "Mentoring supports are extremely important to me because leadership can be isolating," adding, "It really is. That saying that it's lonely at the top. Well, it really is." Unlike the majority of respondents, Dr. Jones did not present mentoring as one of several possible sources of professional support; rather, she perceived it as an instrument protecting her from the feeling of being isolated. In particular, she stressed the importance of "trusted individuals who can provide perspective, accountability and certainly encouragement," which can be seen as relational supports ensuring the well-being of principals.

Dr. Jones made the connection between well-being and the longevity of her leadership very clear. Indeed, she explicitly states that "Well-being supports are essential for the longevity in leadership. Without 'em...burnout becomes a problem" and adds, "You will burn out if you do not have supports in place." Therefore, one may see that well-being is for her a necessary professional component rather than a personal luxury. The relationship between well-being and mentoring supports, on one hand, and the longevity of her leadership is apparent: "Feeling supported professionally and personally has absolutely influenced my longevity in education."

While Dr. Jones valued the structured mentoring programs such as Superintendent's Academy in her earlier years of service, she recognizes the lack of

structured mentoring support for veteran principals now. "Earlier in my career, formal mentoring was more structured, but at this stage, support tends to come through professional networks." Furthermore, she notes the following system need: "I believe many principals need more individualized mentoring beyond the first few years in leadership. Veteran principals also can benefit from opportunities for reflection and coaching and professional dialogue." In particular, she suggests an interesting concept of cross-generational mentoring: "I would love to see some supports for veteran principals... where you could have a new and a younger principal working together as a mentor or coach."

In describing the practices, she follows to protect her well-being, Dr. Jones explains their evolution and emphasizes the importance of taking certain steps to take care of herself. "I have learned the importance of setting boundaries and that it's okay to say no." Dr. Jones also stresses the importance of having time for her family, exercising, and disconnecting from work-related activities when it is possible. "Intentional self-care and reflection by asking myself did I balance myself between work and home is something that I do." It is worth noting that the use of self-reflection as an important tool for taking care of oneself indicates very high self-awareness.

Dr. Jones appeals to the district administration in terms of the need for systemic changes. Thus, she suggests that districts should "Recognize that there are increasing demands placed on principals and create structures that support balance and have some realistic expectations." She emphasizes the importance of addressing well-being needs: "You can't get the job done if your people are not well." Thus, she perceives

well-being not only as an issue of each individual principal but as a matter for the entire educational organization to solve.

When asked to describe her vision of the system in which mentoring and well-being are supported, Dr. Jones described a comprehensive approach involving ongoing mentoring during all career stages, availability of leadership coaching, effective peer relationships, accessibility of various wellness resources, and a focus on both performance and well-being as key components of leadership.

In summary, it seems that Dr. Jones represents the third theme the best among all the respondents interviewed. While other participants acknowledge gaps in mentoring supports as well-being-related or normalize such experiences, she presents a vivid description of the importance of mentoring for well-being as a key element of sustainable leadership.

Table 4. Analysis of Principals' Awareness of Mentoring Activities for Well-being

Participant	Awareness of Mentoring for Well-Being	Mentoring Structures Experienced	Well-Being Understanding / Use	Key Finding
Mr. Flowers	Limited awareness of mentoring as structured well-being support; mentoring primarily viewed as collegial assistance	Informal peer collaboration with other principals; district meetings; no formal mentoring emphasis	Well-being primarily addressed through emotional relief via peer discussion; no structured wellness system identified	Mentoring functions as informal problem-solving support; well-being is incidental rather than intentionally supported through mentoring systems
Mrs. Rickaby	Limited awareness of mentoring as formal well-being support; mentoring linked to trust-based peer relationships	Informal principal network; trusted colleagues; superintendent access; no assigned mentor	Well-being primarily supported through emotional encouragement and relational trust	Mentoring is experienced as relational and supportive but not explicitly structured as a well-being framework
Mr. Green	Moderate awareness of personal well-being strategies, but weak connection between mentoring systems and well-being	Informal peer network; gym-based social accountability; minimal formal mentoring structures	Well-being primarily self-managed through exercise and personal accountability routines	Mentoring is not conceptualized as a well-being mechanism; wellness is individually driven rather than system-supported
Mrs. Evans	Low awareness of formal mentoring systems; strong reliance on personal spiritual coping strategies rather than mentoring frameworks	No formal mentoring assigned; limited district support; assistant principal support; informal relationships	Well-being grounded in prayer, meditation and personal grounding practices rather than mentoring systems	Well-being is highly individualized and spiritual; mentoring structures are minimally present or not perceived as well-being supports
Dr. Jones (Outlier)	High awareness explicitly connects mentoring to burnout prevention, reflection and leadership sustainability	Former structured mentoring through Superintendent's Academy; current professional networks; district leadership collaboration	Strong integration of mentoring and well-being; uses reflection, boundary setting and peer consultation	Demonstrates advanced systemic understanding of mentoring as essential to well-being, leadership longevity and organizational sustainability

Theme 4: Intentional Wellness and Mentoring Supports

Across the five participants, findings indicate a consistent perception that well-being is important to leadership effectiveness. However, intentional mentoring structures that explicitly integrate well-being practices are limited or inconsistently applied. All of the participants described some form of supports. This ranged from informal peer relationships to district meetings and leadership collaboration sessions. These supports were largely framed around operational leadership demands rather than structured mentoring for well-being. As a result, principals often relied on personal initiative, informal networks or self-developed routines to sustain their well-being.

The interview from Mr. Flowers indicates a good understanding of the importance of incorporating well-being practices into one's routine in order to sustain their capacity to lead. At the same time, it is obvious that Mr. Flowers sees a lack of structural mechanisms which would provide for these types of activities. Even though the participant provided some examples of self-care practices he had at his disposal, he insisted upon the necessity of having a chance to take care of himself through dedicated breaks and walks.

According to Mr. Flowers', one of the practical barriers to practicing self-care at work includes the lack of designated time which can be spent this way. In particular, Mr. Flowers stated that "it would be nice to see some time out during the day to take care of myself, even like some regular breaks or even a walk outside." Moreover, Mr. Flowers stressed the need to create the necessary environment to encourage teachers to take breaks and walks: "It would even be nice to have some dedicated wellness rooms to take a break in. I even think some intentional walks outside would help."

Apart from mentioning some structural and environmental opportunities for self-care, Mr. Flowers also indicated his own routines that assist in coping with the pressures related to leading. According to him, "I routinely start my day with a shower. I get up shower and make my coffee... I listen to my podcast," and also, "I also take a drive around on the school golf cart when I need to just clear my head." These practices demonstrate that self-regulation takes place via informal channels of personal support rather than through mentorship or structured systems.

When asked about possible gaps in current mentoring support for Mr. Flowers, he mentioned that one of the most important is the lack of intentionally created mentoring structures which provide opportunities for maintaining a balanced well-being state. Thus, Mr. Flowers said that "there is not a lot out there. Especially for us that have been doing this a while. It would be nice for everyone to have a mentor." Furthermore, he expressed satisfaction with the encouragement provided within the current study and added, "I think regular sessions would be nice and the encouragement like you sent to keep going... it was great encouragement."

To explain what Mr. Flowers sees as an ideal support system, the interviewee provided quite a detailed answer saying, "this was amazing what you did sending weekly treats in the mail... the music you sent was so encouraging and the quote of the day... our weekly check ins were so uplifting. I would include all of that in a system for principals and I would assign a mentor for sure." Mr. Flowers interview reveals the need for intentional wellness supports to be embedded through intentional mentoring for school principals.

Mrs. Rickaby's interview reveals that the mentoring experience of the school principal does not have structural elements promoting well-being. In particular, she noted, "I would for sure like to see more proactive wellness support, specifically designed for school leaders, including maybe some leadership coaching, maybe some mental health resources, and some protected time for professional reflection." This comment reveals a need for the development of mentoring experiences for principals beyond just task-based leadership mentoring.

It is also important to note that Mrs. Rickaby emphasized the importance of having more time to focus on herself when at work. For example, she pointed out her inability to go outside, pray, walk or meditate, "because I have to wait until I get home to do those things." Therefore, it could be said that there exists a disconnect between recognizing the value of certain wellness practices and the presence of conditions to facilitate these practices.

While Mrs. Rickaby admitted that some wellness practices already exist on the district level, she did not seem to think that these practices align properly with well-being-oriented mentoring, "Take well-being seriously and put well-being at the top because it matters whether or not we are taking care of ourselves." The language she uses shows that the current mentoring experience is focused on something else besides wellness.

Furthermore, Mrs. Rickaby highlighted that well-being is associated with better overall leadership performance and sustainability, "many principals need more individualized mentoring beyond the first few years in leadership. Veteran principals also can benefit from opportunities for reflection and coaching and professional

dialogue." Thus, it could be inferred that a gap in mentoring persists among veteran leaders, since many districts do not provide mentorship programs for principals past a certain point of their leadership careers.

Another issue that Mrs. Rickaby identified relates to her opinion about the necessity to develop a new model for mentoring based on several different components, "an ideal system would include ongoing mentoring at all career stages, access to leadership coaching, strong peer networks, wellness resources and certainly a culture that values performance and well-being." Therefore, it could be concluded that well-being needs to become a fundamental component of mentoring.

In general, one might say that Mrs. Rickaby revealed herself as a principal who cares about her well-being. However, she does not think that current district-level mentoring practices help promote well-being of principals, which could be considered as another problem. It seems that Mrs. Rickaby expects more cultural elements and structures related to mentoring to appear, and she expects that these structures will facilitate well-being and leadership sustainability.

Mr. Green, an experienced principal who participated in this study, was very specific about his experience. It featured high levels of demand, lack of organized well-being activities, and increasing awareness of the importance of integrating wellness within the profession. Despite understanding the importance of self-care and engaging in it regularly, Mr. Green viewed well-being as something lacking organized support within the profession, claiming "I have been taking terrible care of myself. I almost feel guilty if I do anything for myself." It is obvious that not only did he not participate in

organized wellness activities as a principal, but there was also an established professional culture where self-care was neglected.

Another characteristic of Mr. Green's interview was the claim that although wellness is being recognized as important in general, it is not integrated into working routines of principals. He said: "There is certainly not enough focus on well-being. Principals are not making time out for it." This statement indicates that Mr. Green's awareness of wellness and its value does not extend to its implementation in the daily life of a principal.

According to Mr. Green, exercise has been the main method of improving wellness. The only thing he stressed in the discussion about his wellness experience was the fact that such a method was adopted spontaneously, and not through mentoring systems: "Once we started the study, I went three times a week and I have now made this my routine." In spite of receiving a number of benefits from regular workouts (such as stress relief and developing patience), Mr. Green considered them a part of personal efforts, rather than an organized system.

Due to a lack of organized mentoring systems supporting wellness of school principals, Mr. Green had to rely on peers in order to sustain well-being. For example, he mentioned that making friends at the gym was crucial for his well-being because those people acted as a support group. According to Mr. Green, relationships at the gym were helpful in the following aspects: emotional support, decision-making, and holding the participant accountable. In particular, he claimed: "Talking to them helps me make good decisions. It's kind of like a sounding board when I get stuck... Having

someone to be accountable to check in... and they call me." Therefore, relationships at the gym served as compensatory means for the lack of organized mentoring systems.

The issue of incorporating wellness into leadership systems is an essential topic addressed in this interview. Mr. Green expressed his opinion about how well-being can become part of school principals' everyday activity: "There should be times out to walk and exercise at work throughout the day." Moreover, he emphasized the need for wellness to be validated and incorporated in leadership systems, such as observations and mentorships, saying "I would like to see someone put wellness on observation and observe wellness on the job." Another idea worth mentioning here is Mr. Green's sense of guilt when exercising because it was not accepted in a professional environment.

The interview from Mrs. Evans interview reveals the value of deliberately structured well-being support for principals. This third-year principal had an overwhelming due process case and described the study intervention as arriving at "just the right time in my life." Mrs. Evans added: "This was a much needed welcome surprise for me in my life... The daily inspiration for the six weeks... and our weekly Friday interviews honestly helped me make it through this school year." She highlighted the timing of the intervention: "I truly think that if I had not been doing these things, I would not have made it through the due process."

While Mrs. Evans had an existing practice of prayer, she indicated that she also felt a sense of needing to practice well-being activities much more deliberately after beginning the study. She indicated that "When I began the study, I really wanted to do an extra practice, and so I started doing the walking, and then started praying and when I was outside, I would actually stand and would connect with the ground spiritually

connecting my prayer." She also found she began meditating each night, "before I would sleep, I would get out my calm app, and then I would meditate." Mrs. Evans said, "I got to tell you this was a game changer because I woke up clearer and I had clarity on the days that I did these practices. I didn't seem to feel as stuck at work." Here, her statement suggests a direct correlation between intentional practices.

It is important to note that this was not simply adding activities to a routine, but an intervention with built-in accountability. Mrs. Evans said she felt it was significant to have an intentional time: "I also liked that we had an intentional time that we met and went over the questions of the week that really helped me."

Although the intervention appeared to be helpful, Mrs. Evans reported a lack of a structure of well-being supports in her district. In responding to the question of what well-being supports she had at work she stated, "To be honest with you I really don't have a lot of well-being supports going on." Although she had mentoring opportunities and a supportive superintendent, she expressed that it wasn't structured, saying "I've not really had any formal mentoring...and I would like to have some if it was available." These comments reveal a gap at the organizational level in terms of intentional principal well-being support.

Mrs. Evans' comments most concretely articulated an intentional support need related to well-being around the issue of sustainability. She connected well-being supports with retention by declaring, "If I had no support, I would walk out the door." In doing so she asserted that well-being supports are indispensable to the continuation in the principalship role. In addressing intentional time in the workday, Mrs. Evans stated, "I would like to see dedicated, intentional time to be able to go outside and pray or walk

or meditate while at work instead of having to wait until I get home." She implies that without protected intentional time in the workday well-being practices may take a back seat to multiple tasks. When asked the question of how districts could better support principal well-being, Mrs. Evans said, "I believe that they could take well-being seriously and put well-being at the top because it matters whether or not we are taking care of ourselves."

In conclusion Mrs. Evans outlined an ideal intentional support system for principals that involved mentoring, a caring relationship and formal reflection. She stated ideal system should include: "...for sure a mentor, someone you can rely on to call, check-ins, daily inspiration, the quotes and things like you sent and a defined time that we met." Mrs. Evans focus on reliability, frequency and definition support her overall concern for structured well-being supports.

Dr. Jones interview, she reveals an ongoing need for mentorship and well-being support for school principals. While the participant acknowledged a formal system in place for beginning school principals, concerns arose with regards to the lack of similar support provided to veteran principals. Dr. Jones expresses most mentorships are tailored to novice administrators and said, "I think many principals would benefit from individualized mentorship even after their initial few years of leadership." Dr. Jones further noted "there are things that veteran principals can gain from reflective conversations."

One particularly interesting suggestion was a mentoring system involving a reciprocal relationship between the novice and veteran school principals. The participant stated, "I would love to see some support for veteran principals that is maybe

done by the younger principals where you could have a new and younger principal work together as a mentor or coach." The suggestion clearly demonstrates the need to embrace mentorship as a two-way process rather than one-sided.

Further suggestions made by Dr. Jones centered on the need for well-being measures for school leaders. Some of the necessary well-being services suggested were "proactive wellness supports," "leadership coaching," "access to mental healthcare professionals," and "protected time for professional reflection." It appears Dr. Jones believes the well-being of school principals is an important matter that needs the attention of formalized systematic structure offered through school districts.

Another interesting suggestion that was made by the participant involves the need to understand the current realities of the leadership of schools. According to Dr. Jones, school districts should take into account the challenges the a school principal faces. Dr. Jones clearly emphasis the need for districts to, "Recognize that there are increasing demands on principals and create structures that support balance." Furthermore, Dr. Jones stated there should be reasonable expectations as leadership is not "about getting the job done; it's about taking care of your people." The participant made an important point when he or she added that "you cannot get the job done if your people are not well." Dr. Jones also offered a brief description of what an ideal support system looks like, according to her, "Important aspects of an effective support system include ongoing mentoring throughout your career, leadership coaching, peer networking, wellness supports and of course a performance and well-being-focused culture."

Collectively, it becomes apparent that principals lack systematic mentoring, incorporating the idea of well-being as regular practice in their leadership role. For all the participants, well-being was presented as a vital element ensuring the effectiveness of leadership, preventing burnout, and supporting decision-making. There is a definite gap for districts to prioritize mentoring for well-being among school principals.

Table 5. Analysis of Intentional Wellness and Mentoring Supports Among School Principals

Participant	Existing Supports	Identified Gaps	Representative Quote	Suggested Supports
Mr. Flowers	Relied on personal wellness practices, including podcasts, morning routines, and brief periods of reflection.	Lack of formal mentoring and limited opportunities for wellness during the workday, particularly for veteran principals.	"There is not a lot out there. Especially for us that have been doing this a while. It would be nice for everyone to have a mentor."	Formal mentoring, wellness-focused check-ins, dedicated wellness spaces, and protected time for self-care.
Mrs. Rickaby	Engaged in personal wellness practices such as prayer, walking, and meditation outside of work. Participated in district leadership supports.	Limited proactive wellness resources, coaching opportunities, and protected time for reflection.	"Take well-being seriously and put well-being at the top because it matters whether or not we are taking care of ourselves."	Ongoing mentoring, leadership coaching, peer support networks, and a culture that prioritizes well-being.
Mr. Green	Utilized exercise and peer relationships for accountability and emotional support.	Absence of organized wellness initiatives and mentoring structures. Perceived stigma surrounding self-care.	"There is certainly not enough focus on well-being. Principals are not making time out for it."	Scheduled wellness opportunities, wellness-centered mentoring, and organizational support for self-care.
Mrs. Evans	Benefited from structured wellness activities, reflection, and accountability provided during the study. Maintained prayer and meditation practices.	Limited district-sponsored wellness supports and lack of formal mentoring.	"If I had no supports I would walk out the door."	Formal mentoring relationships, structured check-ins, protected wellness time, and opportunities for reflection.
Dr. Jones	Acknowledged mentoring opportunities for novice principals and valued reflective conversations with colleagues.	Limited mentoring and wellness supports for veteran principals.	"I think many principals would benefit from individualized mentorship even after their initial few years of leadership."	Career-long mentoring, reciprocal mentoring partnerships, leadership coaching, wellness resources, and peer networking opportunities.

Theme 5: Stress Isolation and Burnout

Mr. Flowers may not put the label of “burnout” on his own situation, but an analysis of our interview shows he is well aware of the stressors that come with being a principal. What came through clearly was his view on how vital support systems are to his well-being. He made no secret of the fact that personal and professional ties are what allow him to handle the rigors of school leadership. The educational landscape has been a particular source of stress for him. “The need for certified teachers has been a really big shift for me,” he said. “I used to have several interviews with certified teachers for one position. Now, I’m lucky if anyone applies that is even non-certified.” He attributed much of this to the post-pandemic climate. “When we came back from COVID it was like everything changed,” he told me. “Behaviors have certainly changed, and I can tell a difference even in the parents.” Such external pressures as staffing shortages make the job more complex and stressful.

Mr. Flowers relies heavily on social support. He sees it as a protective measure and will turn to his team for a sounding board. “Sometimes I just need someone to talk it out with. I like to get feedback. So, I like to bounce ideas off my team,” he explained. The collaboration with others helped take some of the feeling of isolation away within the role.

There seems to be an emotional weight to these connections for him. “My support system is probably the thing that keeps me running. I don’t know what I would do without them to be honest,” he admitted. He values the friendships and the conversations they have in the course of the day; when they check in, he doesn’t feel so alone or off by himself.

Mr. Flowers has his own ways of managing the stress and keeping his balance. Mr. Flowers might listen to a podcast on the way in to work, take a short break, or spend time with family. His wife Kristen is good at prompting him to let off steam. “Sometimes she will say you need to go play golf. I think she knows it helps,” he said. Then there is the humor. “We joke around and laugh a lot. For some reason, I think the laughter and the jokes we play kind of help us all get through the day. This certainly makes the stress lighter.”

For all his informal support, however, Mr. Flowers feels there are gaps in the formal side of things for principals. “I think going to work and getting the job done is the priority. I don’t think us principals taking care of ourselves is a focus,” he observed. He would like to see more built-in time for self-care, “even like some regular breaks or a walk outside.”

In the end, Mr. Flowers’ answers paint a picture of a job where stress is to be expected given the demands on a leader and the changing needs of students and staff. But his experience also shows that with the right mix of mentoring, coping strategies and supportive relationships, burnout can be kept at bay. It is a reminder that districts should be putting more structure behind the well-being of their principals.

One could say that stress and burnout are the defining challenges of the principalship, a fact brought to light in my analysis of the interview with Mrs. Rickaby. It is clear from her account that having support systems in place is what keeps a principal’s well-being intact.

Mrs. Rickaby spoke at length about the emotional toll of school leadership and the sense of isolation that comes with it. She was candid about how mentoring and the

backing of one's colleagues are vital in staving off burnout. With over twenty years in the game as a school leader, she has seen her own needs change. In the early days of her administration, she needed the technical and operational kind of guidance; now it is more about self-care and emotional health. "As I gained experience, I think my needs shifted from doing the job towards more emotional support and really trying to maintain balance," she said. Having the job down pat means she can no longer just rely on her own resources. "Now I need help in taking time outs and caring for myself as a principal."

There is an element of loneliness to the role, something Mrs. Rickaby did not shy away from. "A lot of times you can feel very alone in this role. It can be very isolating," she noted, adding that good relationships with other principals who know the unique difficulties of the position are what keep you from feeling so cut off. She made it plain that mentoring and peer support are her go-to for managing stress. "Talking it out through challenges with trusted colleagues helps me reduce stress," she explained. It gives her the chance to see things from another angle and not get overwhelmed. The validation and practical advice she gets from fellow administrators is invaluable.

The demands on a principal's mind and emotions are considerable. Mrs. Rickaby was quick to point out that without a support system to lean on, "it really becomes difficult to manage the stress and the energy and focus that's really needed to do this job and lead." Left to their own devices under such pressure, she implied, a leader will not last long. In fact, when we discussed mentoring, she offered a straightforward assessment: "I know that it has helped me prevent burnout."

This year has been no exception. Between staff not showing up for work and a spike in student behavior, it has been a hard run. Yet she credits the advice and encouragement from district leaders and her peers for keeping her calm and able to make the calls that had to be made. Then there is the matter of work-life balance. Mrs. Rickaby is intentional about it – whether it is exercise, church or time with family. “Without those reminders [from support systems] to prioritize self-care and family time, it’s easy to become consumed by responsibilities of the job,” she admitted.

Still, for all the strong networks she has, Mrs. Rickaby sees where the system falls short. She would like to see districts put in place more purposeful wellness initiatives for administrators: mental health days, some protected time to reflect or go on a retreat, even some renewal. She also called for less of the unnecessary administrative burden and more structures that foster collaboration. Her views make it evident that while stress is part and parcel of being a principal, districts have an obligation to put in place the kind of structures that ensure a leader can be effective for the long term.

The interview with Mr. Green brought to light a number of indicators of occupational stress and the risk of burnout, not to mention the hurdles principals put up when they try to put their own well-being first. In the course of our conversation, Mr. Green was open about the strain of juggling his job with self-care, how exercise can be a release, and what educational organizations should be doing to support their principals.

One thing that stood out was Mr. Green’s frank admission that he has been hard on himself in this regard. “I have been taking terrible care of myself,” he said. “I almost

feel guilty if I do anything for myself.” It is a familiar problem for school leaders; you see them putting the physical and emotional needs of the staff and student body ahead of their own, and as Mr. Green’s words imply, that sense of guilt can be a recipe for more stress and eventual burnout.

Then there is the sheer volume of work. Between an hour-plus drive to get to the office and the demands of being a high school presence at all the sports events, Mr. Green has little room left in the day for wellness. “I am driving over an hour away to get to work, and I go to a lot of sports events,” he told me. The principalship has a way of spilling over traditional hours and eating into the time you need to recover. But we also saw how exercise can be an effective antidote to that kind of pressure. Since starting the well-being intervention, Mr. Green has made a habit of it and reaped the rewards. “Going to the gym is a big stress release for me,” he put it. He even noticed it carried over to his work, saying his patience with people in general has improved. He feels more alert and better able to handle the week’s demands, which speaks to the value of such practices in building resilience.

He is not alone in this either. Mr. Green pointed to the friendships he has made in athletics and at the gym as a source of protection. “Some of my buddies have offered me guidance and provided a safe space for me to vent. They are kind of like my cheerleaders.” A coffee to talk shop and air your frustrations with someone who will be there for you is often all it takes. He sees these supports as key to his longevity in the job. “Having these in place is going to help me continue to retirement in three more years,” he noted.

At the same time, Mr. Green was critical of where things stand with support for principals. “There is certainly not enough focus on well-being. Principals are not making time out for it,” he observed. He would like to see the organization make it easier to step out for a walk and some fresh air during the day. Ultimately, he thinks the culture needs to change so that leaders don’t have to feel guilty for tending to themselves. “If they allowed well-being then I could own my time to take better care of myself,” he said. His experience makes clear that while the demands of the role are chronic, a combination of social support, accountability and intentional self-care can keep a principal from burning out.

The interview with Mrs. Evans put a fine point on the occupational stress and emotional toll exacted on school leaders, as well as how vital well-being supports are for seeing them through trying times. In describing her role as principal, she spoke of a particularly difficult stretch but made it clear that her resilience was in no small part due to the support she had around her and the well-being practices she put in place.

“I was having such a horrible time with the due process I told you about,” she said of the period when parents sued the school system. It was one of the more taxing situations a principal can face when dealing with families and the system at large. Yet she credited the backing she got within this study getting her through the year. “It honestly helped me make it through this school year.”

Mrs. Evans turned to spiritual well-being. During the course of the study, she would go outside to pray and meditate or engage in other forms of spiritual grounding. “This anchors me,” she said. On some of the rougher days, she found these were essential. “It’s honestly helped me make it through.” In her view, spirituality is as much a

way to build resilience as it is emotional support. She was equally forthright about how intentional routines have affected her mental clarity. A day of prayer, a walk or some meditation was, in her words, “a game changer” that left her waking up with a clearer head and not feeling as stuck at work. Without such supports, she was blunt about what would happen: “If I had no supports, I would walk out the door.” She has to do things to look after herself “in order to keep going and keep coming back every day.”

Formal structures for well-being are something of a rarity in her environment; “I really don’t have a lot of well-being supports going on,” she admitted. So, she has been proactive, setting up a “Zen room” at the school for staff to put on some calming music and recharge. She uses it herself to reboot from time to time. Then there are the people she can count on her assistant principal, the superintendent, friends and her church community who offer the kind of guidance and problem-solving that guards against burnout.

Looking ahead, she sees a need for this kind of thing to be part of the job. “I think there is a need for well-being and support embedded in my daily career life,” she said, adding that she would like to have “dedicated, intentional time to be able to go outside and pray or walk or meditate while at work.” In the end, her story is a testament to the heavy emotional demands of leading a school. It shows how practices like prayer, good relationships and self-care can be powerful shields against stress, and why embedding such supports into a principal’s day-to-day is key to any lasting effectiveness in the role.

The interview with Dr. Jones made it clear that stress and burnout are at the heart of the matter, especially when you consider the mounting demands of school leadership and the emotional toll it takes. In her 27 years in education, she has seen the

principalship become a more complex affair, one that heightens stressors given the needs of both staff and students. “We are trying to meet the needs of students who have a lot of needs,” she said, “and so that...causes us to have more need as principals for people to come along beside us and help us.” It is an organizational demand that translates directly into the stress of the role.

Then there is the issue of isolation. Dr. Jones pointed to this as a key source of stress. “Leadership can be isolating,” she observed, echoing the old adage that “it’s lonely at the top.” She added that having a colleague you can trust to understand the pressures of the job “really helps reduce isolation” because the emotional side of leading is so significant. Such isolation can lead to a good deal of fatigue and chronic stress.

To cope, Dr. Jones said one has to be active in managing stress through support and reflection. “Support systems help me process stress constructively rather than just carrying it alone,” she explained. With the backing of colleagues she can “avoid reacting emotionally and instead approach situations strategically,” which is vital in high-pressure moments. She was also blunt about the risk of burnout. “Without them, I mean, burnout becomes a problem.” It is a systemic issue tied to what support is available; after all, “Principals cannot support others if they are not maintaining their own well-being.” Work-life balance is the safeguard against this. “I have to protect my personal time if I’m going to survive and not burn out,” she told me citing everything from exercise to time with family and simply disconnecting from work as non-negotiable for her stability.

Even for veteran principals, the stress does not disappear. “Veteran principals also can benefit from opportunities for reflection and coaching and professional dialogue,” she noted indicating that burnout is a concern at every stage of the career. Dr. Jones account reveals the stress and burnout we see in school leadership stem from job demands and emotional isolation. Her words make a case for the value of good mentoring and wellness routines if one is to be an effective leader over the long term.

Table 6. Burnout and Isolation Among School Principals

Principal	Theme	Category	Verbatim Evidence
Flowers	Burnout	Work overload and emotional strain	“I have just been so busy right here at the end of May trying to get some things done.”
Flowers	Isolation	Leadership loneliness	“Leadership can be isolating... it really is lonely at the top.”
Rickaby	Burnout	High job demands and limited recovery time	“We are trying to meet the needs of students who have a lot of needs.”
Rickaby	Isolation	Need for structured professional support	“Earlier in my career, formal mentoring was more structured”
Green	Burnout	Self-neglect and chronic stress	“I have been taking terrible care of myself. I almost feel guilty if I do anything for myself.”
Green	Isolation	Lack of formal mentoring structures	“Right now there is not a ton of formal structure for me around mentoring.”
Evans	Burnout	Emotional exhaustion during crisis conditions	“I truly think that if I had not been doing these things, I would not have made it...”
Evans	Isolation	Need for emotional connection and support	“It helps to have people in your life that care and who make you feel like you matter.”
Dr. Jones	Burnout	Sustained workload pressure and fatigue	“I’ve just been so busy right here at the end of May trying to get some things done.”
Dr. Jones	Isolation	Leadership loneliness and emotional isolation	“Leadership can be isolating... it really is lonely at the top.”

Theme 6: Leadership Identity and Growth

According to Mr. Flowers, his leadership identity is something you build over time through your relationships, not through a prescribed system. When asked about his current position, Mr. Flowers was clear that he does not have much within formalized support. "At the present time I would not say I have any formal structures in place," he said. The support he gets is mostly what comes with the territory of regular principal meetings; while there may be an occasional coaching moment, it is no substitute for a real mentoring framework. There is a gap in the formal systems for developing leaders, he suggested.

Early on in Mr. Flowers' career, he had the benefit of some very good informal guidance. He pointed to his first year as principal when a retired principal from his church would come and see him. "I would say he was my mentor. He kind of just took it upon himself to help me." That sort of relational support was foundational to his development in those early days, filling in where structured programs were lacking.

As he has matured in the role, Mr. Flowers has become more independent yet still values the input of others. "I like to bounce ideas off my team... it takes a team of people to help make decisions," he observed. It is a form of distributed leadership built on shared problem solving with peers you can trust, as opposed to top-down direction. He put it plainly: "My support system is probably the thing that keeps me running. I don't feel so alone or like I'm off by myself."

Still, he sees a void in the way leadership is developed once you are past the novice stage. For an experienced principal like himself, there is little in the way of ongoing, structured mentoring. In the end, Mr. Flowers' experience is a case for the

value of your network. His identity as a leader has been defined by peer collaboration and the lessons learned in the field, rather than any formal program designed to do the same.

One could trace the contours of Mrs. Rickaby's leadership identity to a combination of experiential learning, informal mentoring and the changing demands of her career. What comes through in her interview is an evolution from depending on peers and informal models in the beginning to a more self-sufficient kind of leadership, one that has been tempered by collaboration and reflection in the face of systemic shortcomings in formal mentoring. Looking back over her tenure as a principal, Mrs. Rickaby says she has not had much in the way of structured mentoring. "I wouldn't say that I've had a lot of it," she put it, "but I will say that I've had a lot of trusted colleagues and I've done a lot of leaning on people that I could trust to help me and support me." In lieu of formal programs, early on she found what she needed in these informal systems. Her knowledge of leadership was shaped by watching those with more experience. "I was able to work with principals who had been principals for a long time... and I kind of was their shadow," she recalled. That sort of apprenticeship, rather than any formal induction process, gave her an appreciation for how school culture and leadership practice are built. With time, however, her approach has become more independent even as she has kept her collaborative ties strong. "I think that now I realize that it's much better to operate with a team," she said, moving away from trying to solve everything on her own to a more distributed style of leadership.

Those informal relationships have been key to her growth and emotional well-being. Beyond the professional side of things, they offer a necessary release valve.

“They help me make leadership decisions... and it helps to get a different perspective,” she explained. “It helps to reduce feeling so alone, and that can come with leadership.” Her network of fellow principals has been a steady source of this kind of support and shared problem-solving, reinforcing an identity that is adaptive and reflective, not hierarchical or isolated. Yet Mrs. Rickaby is quick to point out where the system falls short, especially for seasoned administrators. She would like to see districts step up and provide “a more ongoing mentoring for experienced principals, not just those that are new to the role.” It is a gap she sees in the formal structures meant to sustain a principal’s development.

In the end, Mrs. Rickaby’s narrative is of a leader whose identity has been forged through connection and experience rather than by the book. Where there was no formalized structure, she has built a self-directed path supported by the resilience and collaborative decision-making that only good peer networks can provide.

According to Mr. Green, the making of his leadership identity was not something you put in a formal preparation course; it was a slow process built on experience, self-reflection and the kind of informal mentoring one picks up along the way. In time, he stopped seeing leadership as an individual’s burden and began to regard it as a collective exercise in accountability and shared growth. You could see this in how he moved away from an isolated approach to one that is more team oriented. Early on, he would have put in the personal effort to meet the demands of the job, but he has since come to appreciate the value of collaboration. “I have some really good relationships and friendships, networks I stay engaged with,” he said. “They help me be positive, handle the stress of the workload and make me feel like what I am doing is purposeful.”

For him, these professional and social ties are what sustain you, offering a measure of emotional and cognitive support.

Informal mentoring has been just as important to who he is as a leader. He does not rely on any district-assigned program for that; instead he turns to his peers and colleagues for perspective and encouragement. “They are kind of like my cheerleaders,” he put it, adding that they serve as both a place to reflect on decisions and a form of accountability. Such supports give him the stability to deal with the emotional side of being a principal. Accountability and shared growth run through much of what Mr. Green has to say. He will point to the routines he keeps with his peers as a way to build resilience. “When we were meeting and checking in I had some accountability to do the exercise that helped me be accountable to continue with my activity,” he explained. While he was talking about wellness, it is indicative of a broader identity based on discipline and having external systems to back you up. His philosophy is also informed by his past, particularly his time in athletics. He still carries with him the mindset of his college football coach: “My coach said ask yourself every day, what did I do today with that dash?” It is a way of evaluating your impact and purpose. Those days also taught him “how to show up for people,” which is at the heart of his service-oriented approach.

Yet for all that support, Mr. Green sees a void in the formal structures around him. He worries that the profession does not do enough to ensure sustainability. “There is certainly not enough focus on well-being. Principals are not making time out for it,” he observed. He would like to see development systems that don’t treat well-being as optional, perhaps with weekly check-ins like the ones he has found useful. To him,

being an effective leader is as much about maintaining your own health and balance as it is about the results you put on the table.

In the end, Mr. Green's story is of a leader whose identity has been forged by experience and peer networks rather than by design. There is a clear increase in his self-awareness and a recognition that resilience is a group as well as an individual affair. But his account makes plain that there is still a need for more structured mentoring and well-being if one is to grow as a leader over the long term.

In her Cycle One narrative, Mrs. Evans, paints a picture of a leadership identity that is yet to be fully formed. Her account of the early days at the helm is one of uncertainty and a tendency to react rather than plan, with little in the way of structured mentoring or formal development frameworks to fall back on. When we did our interview, Mrs. Evans was candid about not being entirely confident in her capacity as a leader. She said she was still in the process of adjusting to the principalship. The move into administration had been something of an abrupt affair, and she would often find herself wondering if she was making the right calls on a day-to-day basis. "I didn't have a clue what I was doing in my first year," as she put it, a telling admission of an identity built more on getting by than on any deliberate development. You could sense from her responses that her grasp of the role was still somewhat externally dependent. Whether it was a matter of staffing, quelling a dispute with a parent or some operational hiccup, she leaned on others to make sense of the situation and point the way. There was not yet the internalized confidence of an autonomous decision-maker.

Mrs. Evans did not have the benefit of a consistent formal mentoring structure in her first years as principal. What she had were informal arrangements – her assistant

principal, a former head of school, the odd conversation with the superintendent. They were helpful, but sporadic. Support was usually something you went after when trouble presented itself, not part of a proactive process. She has “people to call on,” she noted, but no defined system to guide her over time.

There are signs that her needs are moving past mere survival to the planned system of operations, but she is not yet sure of herself when it comes to the more complex tasks. Things like strategic planning or navigating staffing transitions have been trying because they were never properly modeled for her when she started. “How do you effectively do this job?” is a question that lingers for her; her competence is developing in fits and starts rather than in a cohesive manner. It is hard to miss the lack of any formal coaching or sustained mentoring in her story. She has been to conferences and the occasional professional development session, but nothing that has intentionally fostered her growth. She knows there is a gap between what she has and what is needed for good leadership, and it leaves the impression that she is having to forge her own path in isolation.

At the time of the Cycle 1 interview, Mrs. Evans was not much engaged in reflective practices or anything resembling a well-being strategy. Prayer and faith are part of her life, but she had not made them a part of how she copes professionally. The workload can be overwhelming and well-being is hard to prioritize; she tends to be reactive when the stress gets to be too much. She is aware, however, that you cannot sustain this job without support. “I would walk out the door” if I didn’t have it, she said. It is a frank assessment of how fragile the experience has been so far. Mrs. Evans’ Cycle One profile is that of an early-stage principal whose identity is unsteady and who is in

need of the kind of structured coaching and intentional support that would help her to be sustained in the profession.

My interview with Dr. Jones in Cycle One was meant to establish a baseline on her leadership identity and how she views her professional growth as principal of the Laurel Oaks Behavioral Center. The results paint a picture of an experienced educational leader whose current identity is one of adaptation and transition, more so than one that has been deliberately and systematically developed.

With twenty-seven years of experience in public education— having served as a teacher, assistant and full principal, and even an assistant superintendent – Dr. Jones has no shortage of background. Yet she considers her present position at Laurel Oaks a relatively new chapter, having only been in the role some 10 months. That kind of shift into a different context seems to have made her leadership style more situationally responsive than it might be if she were fully settled in.

What stands out in Dr. Jones’s account is how much she has learned from past experiences and outside support in her early months. She credited a former principal who was on contract for six months to help her with onboarding as being essential for “getting started” in such a complex behavioral school. Once that formal support ended, however, her development has been largely a matter of self-direction and informal networks.

Dr. Jones sees leadership as a relational affair. For her, collaboration and trust are paramount; she will turn to veteran principals and colleagues as “sounding boards” to work through decisions and keep from becoming emotionally reactive. It is a mature way of operating, but it also means her identity as a leader is built up through this kind

of interpersonal validation and dialogue rather than any formalized framework for reflective practice.

There is an awareness on her part of the need for boundaries and emotional regulation, but she manages those things on her own. When we spoke about growth, it was in terms of using good judgment born of experience and knowing when to slow down and get another perspective from someone you can trust. She has the option to attend district conferences or leadership academies, but you won't find her in a formal mentoring arrangement. Her support comes from the long-standing professional relationships she has put in place over the years. They are there to guide her, but they are not set up with the express purpose of structured identity formation.

Table 7. Leadership Identity and Growth

Participant	Leadership Identity (Who I Am as a Leader)	Leadership Growth (Development Over Time)
Mr. Flowers	"I want to be an encourager because others encourage me. I have to stay the course and maintain professionalism while having a place to be me at the same time."	"Going to the gym is a big stress release for me... it helped me not be as stressed at work and at home."
Mrs. Rickaby	"I pray throughout the day for our teachers, for our kids, for our lunchroom bus drivers... I would not make it as a principal without my prayer life."	"Once I started the study, I really wanted to do something extra... I started walking in the afternoon and meditating... I woke up clearer and had clarity."
Mr. Green	"Strong relationships are the foundation of effective leadership... they provide trust, collaboration, and a positive school culture."	"Support systems helped me slow down and reflect and consider multiple perspectives before making any decisions."
Mrs. Evans	"I believe in prayer and that it grounds me... my faith and leadership run simultaneously for me and I could not separate them."	"This was a game changer... I woke up clearer and had clarity... I am now still doing them and doing way more than before the study."
Dr. Jones	"Leadership can be isolating... it really is lonely at the top, and trusted relationships help me get through it."	"Earlier in my career, formal mentoring was more structured but now support comes through professional networks and peer consultation."

Cycle 2 PERMA Mentoring Activities, Research Question 2

2. How do school principals describe the influence of mentoring activities on their personal and professional well-being?

Intervention included a weekly professional development session via video, daily quotes, motivational songs and a themed care package that arrived at the principal's door each Wednesday.

Theme 1: Knowledge and Understanding of Mentoring for Well-Being

Where in Cycle 1 Mr. Flowers' view of mentoring for well-being was rather informal and tied to leisure, the data from Cycle 2 shows a marked change. He has come to see structured mentoring not just as support but as an intentional and reflective means of managing stress, growing professionally and sustaining his leadership. The earlier findings left little room for awareness of mentoring beyond the social side of things, like a round of golf; now there is an emerging sense of how consistent relational work feeds into one's effectiveness as a leader. Take his attitude toward golf, for instance. In the first cycle he would have called it stress relief, period. Now he sees it as an intentional venue for dialogue and what he puts down as "kind of informal mentoring." "Going out and playing with Jason really helps me," he said. That is a more nuanced take than before.

We also see him putting more stock in routine and intentionality when it comes to keeping his leadership in balance. Before the study, he might play once a month at best. But with the weekly engagement we put in place, "we started going every Sunday... once a week... and sometimes twice a week," he reported. And even after the study, "we've continued going and playing," which speaks to a lasting change in his habits. For Mr. Flowers, the golf course has become a place to "slow down and decompress" from running the school. "It helps me manage stress... I don't feel so isolated having somebody to talk to," he explained. This is a step up from Cycle 1 where he would acknowledge his support system without making the link to any kind of well-being framework. It is about emotional regulation and resilience.

He has also begun to appreciate the restorative side of these interactions. The relaxed setting lets him “toss ideas around” and work through challenges. “It kind of gives me a recharge,” he noted, showing he understands this as part of his professional sustainability. Above all, he pointed to the relationship with Jason as “probably the most impactful thing for me,” and admitted to some new self-awareness in that he “needed to take better care of myself.”

Mr. Flowers has moved on from the limited perspective of Cycle 1. There is clear evidence of a principal who is forming routines and recognizing the professional and emotional upside of his relationships. It is a progression that underlines an emerging leadership identity in how he ties reflection and stress management to the job of being an effective principal.

When you look at the analysis of Mrs. Rickaby’s Cycle 2 interview, a distinct change in how she views mentoring for well-being is apparent. Where her Cycle 1 perspective was informal and rooted in relationships, this cycle shows a more deliberate and structured approach to the self-directed kind of mentoring that underpins sustainable leadership. There is an explicit recognition in her leadership identity now that one must put as much – if not more – intention into self-care as into looking after others. “Effective leadership requires you to take care of yourself as much or even maybe more as taking care of other people,” she put it. That is a far cry from Cycle 1, when support for well-being was something external and relational; here we see an internalized framework where Mrs. Rickaby ties her own health directly to her effectiveness as a leader.

For instance, she has come to see structured physical activity as integral to her experience of mentoring for well-being. She will do circuit training three or four times a week, noting it is good for “energy management” and leaves her feeling “stronger” with “more energy.” It is a move away from the passive support systems of the past to active, self-regulated behavior. The same holds true for her routine-building. Mrs. Rickaby sees consistency as a way to stabilize her leadership. “It helps reduce stress and kind of gives me some structure,” she said, adding that when she puts in the work on her wellness, “my day runs smoother.” She links these habits to better focus and patience, viewing them as functional parts of her capacity rather than just emotional support.

She has also developed a sense of boundaries around self-care and the need to recover. At times, she will “just lay in the bed and watch Netflix” to recharge, acknowledging that well-being is cyclical, not a matter of constant output. Part of this evolution can be traced back to the loss of her mother; the experience “made me aware” of what matters and forced her to re-evaluate how she expends her time and energy.

Mrs. Rickaby has broadened her conceptualization of mentoring. No longer does she see it as merely an informal peer relationship. Today she would describe her circuit training and the like as essential for staving off burnout and keeping up her stamina. And she knows it has a bearing on her professional life: “When I am physically and mentally well, I am more patient, more present,” she said, which makes for better support of her staff and students. The findings from this cycle make it clear that for Mrs. Rickaby, “well-being is not something that happens by accident. It requires an

intentional effort.” Compared to the implicit nature of things in Cycle 1, there has been real growth in her understanding of how personal wellness strategies are inextricably linked to resilience and professional effectiveness.

There was a marked change in Mr. Green’s approach to mentoring for well-being in Cycle 2. Where in the first cycle he saw it as little more than unstructured, informal support, he has since come to appreciate the value of self-care practices that are put in place with some intention to preserve his capacity as a leader. He may not have put a formal label on these as mentoring, but you could tell from his answers that he is more attuned to how physical wellness and sustained routines underpin his effectiveness at school.

“Leadership is really about managing yourself,” Mr. Green said, linking what he does to his performance as a leader. In his view, the kind of structured wellness he now partakes in makes him “a better leader.” It is a far cry from his Cycle 1 stance, in which he did not see mentoring as a defined system for well-being; now he has a firmer grasp on how personal habits feed into professional sustainability.

One of the things that stood out in this second cycle was how he talked about consistency. He made it clear that his gym visits, some four or five times a week, are non-negotiable for keeping his energy and emotional regulation in check. “It reduces stress and my mood is better, I feel more balanced,” he explained, showing an awareness that well-being is something you have to work at in a structured way, not just something that happens through casual networks.

His attitude toward self-care has also undergone a reversal. Back in Cycle 1 he would confess to feeling “almost guilty if I do anything for myself.” These days he has

no such qualms, seeing it as a necessity. “I am more focused, more patient and productive” when he puts in the time for exercise and recovery, Professionally, he can draw a line between those habits and being a better leader. By looking after himself he avoids burnout and is “able to be more present in the conversation” with staff and students. That said, he still does not think of mentoring as a formal construct put in place by the district. For him it is self-directed and part of his lifestyle. Yet compared to the absence of such thinking in Cycle 1, there is no doubt that in Cycle 2 he understands that accountability and intentional self-care are what allow a leader to endure.

The evidence from Cycle 2 is that Mr. Green has moved on from the rather underdeveloped views of the first cycle. He has not yet embraced the idea of formal mentoring structures, but he is clearly of the mind that without a disciplined approach to wellness, one cannot expect the kind of resilience and longevity required of a school leader.

There is a marked difference in Mrs. Evans’ grasp of mentoring for well-being in Cycle 2 as opposed to Cycle 1. In the first cycle, her answers pointed to a reliance on informal or study-based support and little familiarity with formal mentoring; by the time of her Cycle 2 interview, she had put forward a much more intentional and well-developed view of mentoring as a structured process conducive to personal grounding and leadership sustainability.

Mrs. Evans now speaks of mentoring as an intentional practice that keeps her “calm,” “centered” and “grounded.” “It gives you the chance to pause and reflect and focus on me staying grounded in my center,” she said. That is quite a change from

Cycle 1 when mentoring was seen as something more external and informal. Here we see a clearer sense of it as a deliberate means of supporting one's internal regulation and effectiveness as a leader. One can see this in how she has come to articulate well-being practices like walking, prayer and what she calls "spiritual grounding" as tools for mentoring. Walking lets her "step away from the daily pressures and clear my mind," she explained, while prayer is a source of "peace and comfort" in trying leadership moments. She talks about these as ways to "go into my center and my core," showing a more nuanced approach to self-regulation.

What stands out in Cycle 2 is her awareness that mentoring is a repeated, purposeful process and not just an isolated event. She has made these activities part of a "daily routine," doing them three or five times a week to function properly as a leader. This is a move away from the external encouragement of church or research she described in the earlier cycle; now it is an internalized habit. She also has a firmer hold on the link between her well-being and her capacity to lead. These practices make her "more patient" and in a better position to back up her staff and students, she noted, recognizing that professional effectiveness is tied to personal well-being. In this way, mentoring is no longer optional but essential. Also, Mrs. Evans definition of mentoring has been broadened to encompass gratitude, reflection and a sense of purpose. She uses them to reconnect with her "source" and stay aligned, which points to a more holistic way of thinking about the emotional and professional stability that mentoring provides. Mrs. Evans did not point to any district-level or formal structures as her main support. But where in Cycle 1 she had scant awareness of such systems, there is now a definite understanding in Cycle 2 that you can have structured, intentional practices that

serve as mentoring and build resilience. All in all, the findings from this cycle show a meaningful evolution: from the inconsistent, informal view of mentoring in Cycle 1 to the recognition of it as a routine and necessary component of good leadership in Cycle 2.

In Cycle 2, Dr. Jones appeared to have a more applied and consolidated grasp of mentoring for well-being, making plain how structured reflective work can be an intentional support for the sustainability of leadership. One could see an evolution from her strong showing in Cycle 1; where she had the foundational knowledge then, her answers here were marked by a greater clarity as to how mentoring activities become part of one's day-to-day professional routine and build resilience.

For Dr. Jones, mentoring is purpose-driven and relational. She sees it as a way to ground a leader and stave off the "very lonely and isolating" nature of the job which she admitted can be overwhelming. "I've had a lot of guidance from some really great people who have been there to support me," she said, speaking of the encouragement she has received. In doing so she underlined the emotional and professional stability that mentoring affords, going beyond the systems-oriented view she held before.

What was notable in this cycle was her more structured take on well-being practices. She pointed to journaling, prayer and walking as interlinked ways to regulate emotion and reflect. "Journaling allowed me to really reflect... I kind of write my feelings down in my journal," she told us. And when she walks, it is to "pray and really get my prayers out and walk" for the sake of clarity. She was unequivocal about the importance of these things: "prayer is the foundation of my well-being... I don't think that I would ever make it without prayer and walking and journaling in my life." Dr. Jones was able to link these to stress management and professional functioning in a way she did not in

Cycle 1. They are what let her “lead with a lot of patience and grace and understanding even during stressful situations” and “stay calm and focused and really grounded in my values.” There is a refined sense here of mentoring as a tool for longevity. She noted that such practices have enabled her to “remain in the field and... manage it so that I wouldn't burn out and just quit,” which is a far more practical application than simply viewing it as a form of support.

In the end, Dr. Jones offered a more comprehensive view of what mentoring structures should be. Principals are “human beings with emotional and spiritual needs,” she argued, and programs ought to provide them with “opportunities for reflection” and wellness. It is a more actionable stance than the conceptual and systemic definitions she put forward in the first cycle. To sum up, Dr. Jones came into Cycle 2 with an advanced understanding of mentoring, but you can see in her responses a shift toward a framework that is explicitly applied, one where daily reflective practice is used to sustain the balance and resilience required of a leader. Table 8 shows an increase from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 in how the participants increased their knowledge and understanding of mentoring for well-being and Table 9 shows cycle 1 and cycle 2 side by side comparison of how the participants knowledge and understanding of mentoring for well-being shifted.

Table 8. Cycle 2 Findings: Knowledge and Understanding of Mentoring for Well-being

Principal	Understanding of Mentoring for Well-Being	Formal Mentoring Structures	Informal Mentoring Reliance	Well-Being Supports Used	Summary Characterization
Mr. Flowers	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	Shows increased awareness of mentoring as both relational and intentional. Begins to recognize structured supports but still relies heavily on peer relationships and informal encouragement.
Mrs. Rickaby	Moderate	Moderate–Low	High	Moderate–High	Demonstrates clearer understanding of mentoring as including reflective and supportive structures while continuing to rely on trusted peers.
Mr. Green	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Maintains informal/self-directed mentoring orientation with slight increase in intentional wellness routines, but limited systems-level understanding.
Mrs. Evans	Moderate	Low–Moderate	Moderate	Moderate–High	Shows strongest developmental shift, moving toward recognition of mentoring as structured, embedded, and intentionally supportive.
Dr. Jones	High	High	High	High	Maintains advanced systems-level understanding with deeper application of mentoring practices in daily leadership routines.

Table 9. Cross-Cycle Comparison of Knowledge and Understanding of Mentoring for Well-being

Principal	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Change Across Cycles
Mr. Flowers	Low understanding; mentoring viewed as informal peer support and relational encouragement.	Moderate understanding; increased recognition of mentoring as intentional but still primarily relational.	Moderate increase in awareness of structured mentoring, though informal reliance remains dominant.
Mrs. Rickaby	Moderate–low understanding; mentoring framed as informal peer-based support with limited systems awareness.	Moderate understanding; clearer recognition of structured reflective and supportive mentoring practices.	Moderate improvement in conceptual clarity of mentoring for well-being.
Mr. Green	Moderate understanding; mentoring primarily informal and self-directed through peer networks and personal coping strategies.	Moderate understanding; continued informal/self-directed approach with slight increase in intentional wellness practices.	Minimal conceptual change; increased intentional self-care without systems-level shift.
Mrs. Evans	Low–moderate understanding; mentoring largely informal or absent, grounded in personal and community support.	Moderate understanding; recognition of mentoring as structured and intentionally embedded support for well-being.	Significant developmental shift toward awareness of structured mentoring systems.
Dr. Jones	High understanding; mentoring conceptualized as a multi-layered system including formal programs, coaching, and networking.	High understanding; strengthened application of mentoring through daily reflective practices and leadership integration.	Refinement from systems understanding to applied practice integration.

Theme 2: Mentoring Activities for Well-Being Personal and Professional Supports

In his Cycle 2 interview, Mr. Flowers put a different spin on how he views and makes use of mentoring as a way to support the well-being of a principal. You could see a marked change from Cycle 1. Before we began our study, he viewed golf or a good talk with a colleague as just the ordinary course of life, not a form of well-being practice. Now he has come to appreciate them as genuine mentoring opportunities that enhance his work and his personal life.

The PERMA-aligned activities in particular have made him more conscious of the need to put his own well-being first and build the kind of relationships that will sustain him as a school leader. He was very positive about the whole mentoring process and how it has allowed him to see mentoring and leadership in a new light. “Mentoring has given me some opportunities,” he said, “to really connect with other principals and get a different take on the challenges of being a principal. I’ve been able to reflect on my leadership through it.”

Take his time with Jason for instance. Where he might have once seen golf as nothing more than a pastime, he now sees it as an informal sort of mentoring built on trust and authenticity. “When me and Jason go play golf it is kind of informal,” he explained. “I have an honest relationship with him that I can trust and it creates a supportive environment.” What stands out most compared to the first cycle is the intentionality of it all. Before we started the study he would be playing golf with Jason maybe once a month. In Cycle 2 he made a point of it. “After we started the study we made it a habit to go every Sunday afternoon. We are still at it, sometimes even twice a

week,” he noted. It has become less of an occasional recreation and more of a structured practice for renewal.

Mr. Flowers credits these sessions with keeping his stress in check and giving him a better outlook for the week ahead. “You can slow down and decompress out there on the course, away from the daily demands of running the school,” he said of the calming effect of the outdoors and talking things over with Jason. In Cycle 1 he would admit to the stress relief but not think of it as a strategy for his emotional health; this time around he was quite explicit about the connection.

On the professional side, he feels the mentoring is what keeps him from burning out. “It’s like I get a recharge when I’m out there,” he said. “Having someone to confide in and discuss some of the challenges with means I don’t feel so isolated.” The findings show mentoring can be much more than an emotional crutch; it is a professional resource in its own right, one that builds resilience and the longevity of one’s leadership.

Mr. Flowers was able to point to tangible gains in his stress management, confidence and resilience. He said that talking with Jason put the demands of school leadership in perspective by making clear that he was not alone in his struggles. “It helps me manage the stress to remember that my challenges are shared experiences among principals, that it is not just me going through these things,” he said. Then there is golf, which he sees as a way to build confidence. The prospect of heading back to the course and the fun of the competition give him the optimism he needs when times are hard.

The value of this mentoring has had a ripple effect on how he deals with people at the school. “I have better patience, I feel better overall. I find myself listening and

communicating better,” Mr. Flowers observed. He put the improved relations with his staff and administrators down to having less burnout and more of a balance, crediting the mentoring for allowing him to “stay balanced so that I can be a better leader.” In short, it is a case of how setting intentional time aside for well-being can change your relational capacity.

Also, being part of the study made him more conscious of the need for such care. Before the intervention, he would let well-being slide for what he thought were more pressing matters. Now he has put in place routines to put his own needs first. “Once I made the time and got into a routine I saw I needed to be doing that for myself,” he reflected. “When I do the things that make me feel better, I am a better husband, a better dad and an overall better principal.”

He also spoke highly of the structured side of the study. The weekly interviews, the videos, the songs and inspirational quotes you sent were all very helpful. “I had never had anybody do that for me,” he admitted. That kind of encouragement and accountability kept him on track with the mentoring even when other demands came along. “I couldn’t wait to get home every Wednesday to get my Wednesday Wellness box.” It made me want to do that for other people.

Taken together, the Cycle 2 results for Mr. Flowers tell a story of real growth. You could say he has moved on from the incidental enjoyment of activities in Cycle 1 to a more deliberate use of well-being support and mentoring. Whether it is a round of golf with a colleague, or the support built into the intervention, he has come to appreciate how these things cut down on stress and burnout while keeping him effective. His

experience is evidence that a mix of informal and formal supports can be powerful in ensuring a principal's long-term flourishing.

The interview for Mrs. Rickaby's second cycle showed a distinct change in how she views mentoring activities, seeing them now as the kind of intentional support necessary for professional sustainability and personal well-being. In Cycle 1, her take on mentorship was more along the lines of informal ties with seasoned principals in the district. And while she would put in some walking to blow off steam or make it to a circuit training session once in a while, she didn't put a label on those as purposeful practices that made her a better school leader. By Cycle 2, there is a much clearer sense of the link between self-care, mentoring and what it means for a principal to flourish.

Looking back over the 6 weeks of the study, Mrs. Rickaby is quick to point out that you have to put your own well-being first to be an effective leader. "I really learned that effective leadership requires you to take care of yourself as much or even maybe more as taking care of other people," she said. It is quite different from her stance in the first cycle when such things were secondary to work. The PERMA-aligned mentoring has made her see that looking after herself is in no way selfish; it is what allows her to sustain her capacity as a leader.

You can see this in the way she has become more consistent with her physical health. Where in Cycle 1 she might go to the gym for circuit training once or twice a month, in this cycle she is at the circuit gym three or four times a week for 45 minutes or so. "I'm trying to manage my energy in order to sustain," she told me. That move from

the occasional workout to an intentional routine is telling of her commitment to her well-being on all fronts.

Mrs. Rickaby credits the mentoring for a lot of that. The regular exercise gives her structure and makes her feel stronger, she says. “Building consistent routines helps me reduce stress and kind of gives me some structure.” She has also come to understand her “energy management” better, knowing when it is time to recharge. The passing of her mother was part of that awakening. “It really was a reminder to me that I needed to take better care of myself,” she admitted, which led her to re-prioritize and find more balance.

Taking better care of herself emerged in her work, too. “When I exercise regularly and I sustain my schedule and follow my routines, I’m a lot more focused. I’m a lot more patient and I’m a lot more productive.” She moved past the idea of resilience as simply grinding through the work. “Resilience isn’t just about pushing through and working harder,” she put it. “Knowing when to put things down and have a rest, to recharge and keep my balance in check, is what it comes down to.” For Mrs. Rickaby, this kind of self-awareness has become an integral part of her leadership.

Due to the intervention in this study, she has seen a difference at work in how she relates to other people. She has noticed better interactions with her colleagues, staff, teachers and students. “When I am in good shape physically and mentally, I find I have more patience,” she says. “I have the energy to put into relationships.” By sticking to her well-being routine, she is more available to the students, better equipped for staff and simply more present in any given conversation. In this way, a principal’s well-being can be a positive force in the relational side of school leadership.

Then there is the matter of work-life balance. Looking back at how she used to operate early in her career, Mrs. Rickaby will admit to putting work first and letting her own needs slide. Not anymore. “These experiences have driven home the point that you have to look after yourself,” she explained. “It is not selfish, it is necessary.” The structure of the intervention has given her the accountability to set boundaries and make time for both her job and her life.

Such practices have been a lifeline during some of the tougher stretches of leadership. Lately, with the pressure to turn around school performance, staffing issues and the like, she has had to rely on her routines to keep from being overwhelmed. A regular workout, for instance, allows her to put stress in its place and remember to focus on the people, not the test scores. It is a sign of the resilience and sustainability she has built up. She also appreciates the structured support the study has offered. “Your videos, our weekly check-in, those kinds of things have really helped me,” she noted of the encouragement she has received. “The wrap up in well-being UGG blanket you sent was over the top. It reminds me to take care of myself every time I look at it.”

All in all, the results from Cycle 2 show real progress. You could say it is more than just exercising a little more often than in Cycle 1; Mrs. Rickaby has come to see these as deliberate strategies for a principal to flourish, rather than just an occasional way to cope. “Well-being doesn’t happen by accident,” she observes, noting the need for consistent practice. “I have put in place habits to improve my personal and professional life so I can sustain it.” Her results make a strong argument for building in this sort of practical wellness and mentoring to principal development if you want to see long-term effectiveness and balance.

There was a significant change in Mr. Green's perspective on what constitutes good school leadership when it came to well-being and mentoring, as his Cycle 2 interview made clear. In the first cycle he would talk of going to the gym for the exercise and "to blow off some steam," and while he put in that he got some accountability and support from the people there, he did not see those as deliberate acts of well-being or mentoring. By the time of Cycle 2 interview he had come to a more profound understanding of how well-being and mentoring are tied to the demands of being a principal.

For Mr. Green, leadership is first and foremost about managing oneself. "Leadership is really about managing yourself," he said. "I think I have learned that it is just as much about that as it is in running a school." He sees now that the kind of self-improvement one gets from mentoring and this has enhanced his capacity as a leader. "When I take care of myself, I can take care of my school and my family," he said. It was a far cry from Cycle 1, where he viewed exercise as simply physical exertion. He has since come to regard well-being practices as something a leader must do.

Mr. Green's fitness routine has become much more consistent and intentional. Before the study, he was at the gym maybe once a month on a weekend, but through this process he has put in place a regular schedule. "I went to Crunch about four to five times a week," he reported, for an hour or so at a pop. He feels it has done him good for his "energy and mindset" in helping him "get my mind right."

The benefits of these activities are plain to him. "Being a principal is mentally draining," Mr. Green admitted, "and I think my regular workouts give me an outlet to release stress and clear my head. I always feel more balanced once I leave." The

exercise lifts his mood and gives him an emotional release, which is key for psychological renewal.

On the professional side, he says it has made him a better leader. “I’m able to stay focused and I think I’m more positive. I know I’m in a better mood all day.” He has found it keeps him from becoming so burned out in the busy seasons and makes him more patient with staff. That sort of awareness of how well-being feeds into your work is a big step forward from where he was in Cycle 1. He also has a greater respect for the informal mentoring and accountability he gets from his friends at the gym, which has made him more resilient. “I have my buddies at the gym that I like to put in some time with,” he said, and he was quick to point out how much of an encouragement and a source of motivation they are for him. He has come to see that even on his own, the gym is where you find the kind of support and accountability you need to keep up your healthy habits.

Then there are the mentoring activities, which have done a lot for Mr. Green’s confidence and his ability to cope with stress. “Exercise improves my resilience,” he told us. In his view, doing the work at the gym makes you more confident when it comes to the demands of your job.

My confidence is a little bit stronger because I have been able to hit the gym and kind of work my way up. There is an accomplishment in meeting your fitness goals that doesn’t stay in the gym. It has given me a real sense of accomplishment, which has carried me throughout my professional life.

He can also point to times when the mentoring has backed up his decision making as a leader. Take the case of having to let go of a staff member who happened

to be a friend. “I think going to the gym helped me make a better decision because I was able to kind of think through it there and be clear about it,” he explained. It is one way he processes things before acting.

Also, there is a professional benefit in how he relates to people, too. “Because I have felt healthier and in a better mood, I am able to bring more to the table, and my interactions are better with others.” With less stress on his mind he is more approachable, and he feels that by taking care of himself he is showing others they should do the same. Mr. Green has found value in the structure of the intervention as well. The PERMA-aligned mentoring has been “very positive” and made him realize “I’m not alone.”

The Cycle 2 findings for Mr. Green show significant improvement in how he approaches well-being. He has moved past seeing exercise as just something you do to physical activity and now views it as an intentional way to build resilience and lead more effectively. With the right mix of consistency and support, he has gained a better appreciation for the fact that you have to invest in yourself to be an effective principal. “Leadership is just as much about managing yourself as it is in managing a school,” he says. His story is proof that these kinds of practical wellness and mentoring opportunities can be a powerful way for a principal to flourish and sustain himself over the long term.

In Cycle 1, Mrs. Evans spoke of the limited and informal way she went about her well-being. Her support came in the form of an occasional walk or prayer on the way to work. While it was a comfort and a way to deal with stress, she did not at first see these as any kind of intentional practice or mentoring that made for a better school leader. “I

was just praying on the way to work,” she put it, and admitted she “really wasn’t doing all of that” when it came to formal self-care. Prayer and walking were there, but they were more of a reaction to what life threw at her than a deliberate strategy.

That changed for Mrs. Evans after she took part in the PERMA-aligned mentoring activities she selected. There was a marked difference in how consistently and purposefully she applied herself to these things. What had been an informal coping mechanism became a structured source of support for her personal and professional life. She still prays, of course, but now she makes a point of it every day and pairs it with walking and spiritual grounding three to five times a week. “Walking always gives me a chance to step away from the daily pressures and kind of clear my mind, and as I walk, I pray,” she said. It is her way of getting some reflection in, of letting go of stress and recharging.

Mrs. Evans also wove in spiritual grounding, which she saw as a means of centering herself and making contact with what she referred to as her “source.” The result is a calmer, more balanced disposition and the ability to keep perspective when things get difficult. Mrs. Evans found that this translated directly to her job; she met challenges with “a calmer mindset” and has more patience. Because she is less overwhelmed and more focused, she is in a better position to be of service to her students, staff and families.

Also, the impact on her relationships was noticeable. She described herself as being “more present,” “more compassionate” and “more patient” with those around her, able to listen and respond with more thought. In fact, she made a habit of including her school community in her prayers for certain individuals and relationships. In that way,

the personal support she got from prayer became a professional asset in her interactions.

Mrs. Evans was clear that she drove home the value of consistency. Where before there was little structure, she felt it is a necessity to put aside time for these practices. “I know that I have to walk and I have to ground in order for me to be effective at all,” she said, adding, “I do not think that I would be able to remain without these practices in my life.” They are no longer optional habits but critical to her resilience as a principal.

Then there was the matter of asking for help. When faced with legal issues or trouble with student discipline and staff, she came to see the value in remaining open to assistance. “To ask for help when needed” was one of the most important things she took from the experience. All in all, the Cycle 2 results show a real evolution for Mrs. Evans. Prayer and walking were no longer infrequent diversions but are woven into her routine. She understood that tending to her own well-being was not something apart from being an effective leader; it was what allowed her to sustain herself and do well in the principalship.

When you compare Dr. Jones’s Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, a pattern of continuity in her well-being as a school principal was evident, yet there was a significant increase in the intentionality with which she approached the activities and an awareness of what they do for her leadership. In the first cycle, Dr. Jones engaged in prayer, journaling and a walk as a way of coping. She knew they were good for processing hard experiences and keeping stress at bay, but she did not see them as part of any formal mentoring

framework for a principal's professional growth. They were simply independent self-care measures to be called upon when things got tough.

By Cycle 2, however, she spoke of those very same things as integral to her effectiveness, both personally and professionally. What had been informal mechanisms became part of her day-to-day routine with purpose. She made a point to pray throughout the day, was out walking in the evenings and put pen to paper six mornings a week. "Being able to be more intentional about them really helped me see how much I needed this," she said of the change. The study, she noted, had made her more deliberate in it all.

Dr. Jones was something of an outlier among the participants. Where some took up new habits during the research, she came to it with a solid foundation of practices for her emotional and spiritual health already in place. The mentoring didn't so much introduce unfamiliar strategies as it did reinforce and validate the ones she found meaningful. It seemed to clarify that looking after herself was no small matter if she wanted to lead others well.

Prayer was always at the center of her well-being but, in Cycle 2, she put a finer point on its role in her leadership. She called it the "foundation" that kept her calm and resilient. Journaling, too, was no longer just a reflective outlet; it was a tool for clarity before she had to deal with a leadership issue or to record an answered prayer. And walking offered more than relief from stress, giving her time for mental and spiritual renewal.

There was a clearer sense in Cycle 2 of how personal wellness and professional practice are linked. In Cycle 1 she used these things to get by with the demands of the

job. Later on, she could articulate how they made her a better principal in terms of patience, communication and decision-making. She felt more balanced and better able to stand by her teachers and students without being overwhelmed. She suggested that without the discipline of prayer and such routines, she might not have stayed in school leadership at all.

All in all, the comparison shows that for Dr. Jones the mentoring was as much a professional support as a personal one. The activities themselves did not change, but their purpose did. Dr. Jones' results reveal that mentoring can work at different levels: for some it is about new strategies, for others like Dr. Jones it is about affirming and deepening what is already there to ensure sustained effectiveness. As shown in Table 10, Cycle 2 results revealed a shift away from informal practices towards intentional mentoring activities. Dr. Jones presents as an outlier within the sample. She entered the study with a more established set of well-being practices. Her routines were reinforced and strengthened through intentional engagement in the mentoring activities. Table 11 describes how Cycle 2 findings demonstrated an increased recognition that mentoring activities served not only as personal wellness practices but also as professional supports that enhanced resilience, stress management, relationship-building, and leadership effectiveness, across all participants.

Table 10. Cycle 2 Mentoring Activities for Well-being: Personal and Professional Supports

Principal	Mentoring Activities and Supports (Cycle 2)	Personal Well-Being Supports	Professional Well-Being Supports	Framing of Well-Being Following Participation
Mr. Flowers	Intentional participation in mentoring activities that promoted reflection and self-awareness	Increased attention to self-care and stress management practices; greater awareness of personal needs	Improved ability to manage leadership demands, regulate emotions, and support others	Reframed well-being as essential to sustaining leadership effectiveness rather than optional self-care
Mrs. Rickaby	Continued engagement in mentoring activities that encouraged intentional wellness practices	Structured exercise and reflective practices became recognized as necessary for maintaining balance and energy	Reported greater resilience, patience, and capacity to respond thoughtfully to leadership challenges	Shifted from viewing wellness activities as physical exercise alone to recognizing their influence on leadership well-being
Mr. Green	Mentoring activities reinforced purposeful engagement in wellness behaviors and reflection	Exercise and stress-management practices became more deliberate and integrated into routine self-care	Enhanced focus, emotional regulation, and persistence in navigating school responsibilities	Reframed wellness activities as supports that strengthened both personal health and professional effectiveness
Mrs. Evans	Walking, prayer, and spiritual grounding became intentional mentoring supports that reinforced reflection and purpose	Daily prayer and spiritual grounding fostered peace, gratitude, balance, and emotional renewal; walking supported stress reduction	Improved resilience, patience, compassion, decision-making, and relationships with staff, students, and families	Well-being evolved from informal practices to intentional supports essential to flourishing personally and professionally
Dr. Jones (Outlier)	Existing mentoring experiences and faith-based practices were strengthened through intentional participation and reflection	Prayer, journaling, and walking became increasingly deliberate routines that sustained emotional and spiritual well-being	Enhanced leadership confidence, resilience, communication, and ability to navigate challenges without burnout	Entered the study with established well-being routines; participation affirmed and formalized these practices as indispensable personal and professional supports

Table 11. Comparison of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 Findings: Mentoring Activities for Well-being as Personal and Professional Supports

Principal	Cycle 1: Initial Well-Being Supports	Cycle 2: Mentoring Activities for Well-Being	Comparison Across Cycles
Mr. Flowers	Limited formal mentoring. Relied on district meetings, peer principals, and occasional golf. Few intentional well-being practices	Mentoring promoted reflection, connection, and perspective-taking. Prioritized well-being to manage stress, improve patience, and sustain leadership	Shifted from viewing mentoring primarily as professional support to recognizing well-being activities as essential for resilience, and leadership sustainability.
Mrs. Rickaby	No formal mentoring. Relied on collegial conversations and participated regular exercise primarily for fitness.	Used exercise, reflection, and mentoring conversations to improve emotional balance, confidence, and stress management	Shifted from isolated wellness activities to intentional well-being practices supporting personal and professional flourishing.
Mr. Green	Limited mentoring. Relied on trusted colleagues and weekend exercise for stress relief.	Mentoring strengthened resilience, coping, and awareness of the connection between self-care and leadership.	Progressed from viewing exercise as a stress relief to integrating well-being into leadership practice.
Mrs. Evans	Minimal structured mentoring. Practiced prayer, walking, and spiritual grounding but did not intentionally view them as well-being strategies.	Regular prayer, walking, and spiritual grounding became essential for remaining calm, purpose driven and effective during challenges.	Evolved from informal practices to intentional well-being strategies that sustained leadership effectiveness.
Dr. Jones (Outlier)	Entered with established well-being practices including leadership academies, journaling, prayer, and consultation with veteran principals.	Increased the frequency and intentionality of prayer, journaling, and walking, resulting in greater resilience, emotional regulation, and stronger relationships.	Rather than adopting new practices, refined and strengthened an established well-being framework, distinguishing her as the study outlier.

Although participants entered the study with varying levels of engagement in well-being activities, the mentoring activities promoted greater intentionality and integration of practices that supported principal flourishing. Dr. Jones emerged as an outlier because she entered the study with more established well-being routines and mentoring experiences than her peers; however, she still demonstrated meaningful growth through deeper intentional application and integration of these supports.

Theme 3: Mentoring Awareness regarding Activities for Personal and Professional Development

In the first cycle, Mr. Flowers had a rather narrow view of mentoring as a tool for development. He would attend his weekly meetings with the principal but was quick to say he didn't see that as mentoring at all. For him, true mentoring was an informal affair; he pointed to a retired principal from his church who, back when he was starting out, "kind of just took it upon himself" to be there for him. His take was that the district's approach to mentoring was unstructured and left to the individual's own devices.

The same held true for his attitude toward professional development. He put it in terms of compliance: you go to the trainings to put in your hours and get the stipend the district requires. Conferences and networking were not so much opportunities to grow as they were obligations to check off a list. While he could see how good humor and collegiality helped take the edge off, he wasn't really aware of any organized efforts to promote well-being among principals.

There was a significant change by the time we reached Cycle 2. Mr. Flowers showed a much deeper appreciation for what mentoring can do for you, personally and professionally. The PERMA-aligned activities opened his eyes to the fact that something you might have put down as recreation can be an intentional form of development. Take his weekly golf game with Jason, for instance. Where before it was just a leisurely outing, he now sees it as a chance for leadership growth and peer consultation. "It is a relaxed and supportive environment," he said of his time on the course with the other educator and friend, where they have some authentic

conversation. He no longer considers these encounters merely social; they are informal mentoring in its best form.

Perhaps the biggest shift was in how he regarded a regular well-being routine. It is no longer an optional extra but a part of the job. “I realized that I needed to take better care of myself,” he admitted, noting that he used to let his own well-being slide in favor of other duties. Making a habit of his weekly golf has shown him that if he invests in his wellness, it makes him a better principal, husband and father. “If I take better care of myself, I think that I’m going to be a better leader,” he put it, showing he understands the two are linked.

Mr. Flowers perspective on what makes a good program has broadened as well. In Cycle 1, mentoring was mostly talked about as something the district didn’t provide. Now he is thinking in terms of specific elements that make for growth, like mixing structure with the kind of relationship building that leads to real accountability. He gave credit to the study itself – the videos, the daily quotes, the encouragement – for instilling a sense of intentionality. “I didn’t really realize that playing golf was helping me as much as it was until I started doing it routinely in the study,” he observed.

Mr. Flowers has moved on from seeing professional development as a series of isolated chores to understanding it as a process that allows you to flourish. His experience with the intervention has given him a new respect for the value of reflective relationships and accountability. It would seem principals could do well with a model of mentoring that goes beyond the traditional and includes practices that build resilience and self-awareness.

There is a clear progression in Mrs. Rickaby's approach to the kind of mentoring activities that foster development, both personally and professionally. In Cycle 1, she was very much in favor of collaboration and the bonds with her peers, but she tended to see those as informal ways of getting support rather than anything more deliberate. She would have regular talks with other principals and colleagues she could trust, yet she made no mistake in drawing a line between that sort of consultation and true mentoring. "I don't really have access to a coach or anything like that, which I wish I did," she said. "I know our new principals are given mentors and I am not formally assigned one." It was her way of pointing out that even veteran leaders need backing, even if formal programs don't always make room for them.

While she valued the weekly principal meetings and the problem-solving that came with them, she didn't consider them purposeful exercises in leadership development. Over time she had come to depend on others more – "In the beginning I was more trying to do it by myself, and now I realize that it's much better to operate with a team" – but her view of mentoring was still rooted in interpersonal support.

Cycle 2 tells a different story. Her awareness of what can be done for one's own development has broadened considerably, in part thanks to the PERMA-aligned mentoring intervention. She has come to see that mentoring is not just a matter of having a formal coach; it involves intentional practices that put you in a good place physically, emotionally and professionally.

Where once wellness might have been seen as secondary to the job, she found that it was integral to being an effective leader. With her circuit training and work on energy management, she made the connection between how well she was and how

well she led. “These activities help me recognize that well-being is not something that happens by accident. It requires an intentional effort,” she explained. The findings from this cycle also show she had a firmer grasp on the necessity of boundaries. After the death of her mother and with the pressures of the principalship, she learned some hard lessons. “These experiences have reminded me to take care of myself, that it’s actually not selfish to take care of myself. It is necessary.” That was a shift for her from seeing self-care as an indulgence to treating it as a professional responsibility.

Mrs. Rickaby was also more attuned to the value of consistency. “Consistency is a very important factor,” she noted, adding that you are better off with sustained habits than “just a quick fix.” The structure of the study with its videos, weekly check-ins and daily encouragement helped her see the need for the daily awareness of integrating well-being into her life. Mrs. Rickaby learned a wider appreciation of what professional development entails. “Growth is possible at every stage in my career,” she observed, meaning it is as much about your health and stamina as it is about acquiring new knowledge. During Cycle 2 Mrs. Rickaby seemed to have matured into a deeper awareness that any worthwhile program for a veteran principal should go past technicalities and include the kind of practical strategies that build resilience and sustain a leader for longevity in the career.

In Cycle 1, Mr. Green was well aware of the value of mentoring and well-being in theory, but he told us he had little access to any formal structures for it. “There isn’t really a lot of formalized structures in place for me when it comes to mentoring,” he said. “I do have some people to call on but there is nobody assigned to me.” He did have trusted colleagues at school – his assistant principal, the instructional coach, the

counselor – and “a team of people I know I can count on,” but those were informal, problem-solving relationships rather than anything designed with the express purpose of fostering a principal’s growth or well-being. He was candid about the lack of formal opportunities for an experienced principal like himself.

By the time we reached Cycle 2, however, Mr. Green had come to see intentional developmental activities in a new light. He spoke of well-being as something integral to being a sustainable and effective leader. His grasp of the link between personal development and professional results was much deeper. “Leadership is really about managing yourself,” he reflected. “I think that I have learned that leadership is just as much about managing yourself as it is in managing a school.” It was a meaningful departure from his earlier views; self-management was now part of how he defined good leadership.

The PERMA-aligned mentoring activities seemed to put some intentionality into his approach. Take exercise for instance: what was once a habit was now seen as building his capacity to lead. “I’m trying to work on my fitness and that’s given me an opportunity to work on myself,” he explained. “And I know that going to the gym is a simple thing, but I will say that it does have an impact on me because when I take care of myself, I can take care of my school and my family.” He made a point of the need for consistency. “I think the consistency and being intentional about taking care of yourself and making the time to do it...really helps me prioritize my own self and my own health. This ultimately improves me as a leader.”

Mr. Green’s view of mentoring itself had broadened, as well. Where Cycle 1 was defined by what was missing in terms of formal structure, Cycle 2 saw him appreciate

the process of accountability and shared experience. “Participating in this with you has helped me see that I’m not alone and that it helped to have the other principals in the study with us,” he noted of the intervention. “Me being able to reflect and take time out and set intentional time for myself, that has been very positive for me as a leader.”

This progression was evident in the advice he would give for future development. Instead of pushing for the usual leadership development, he put an emphasis on wellness supports. He would have a program “include practical wellness activities” to get people to realize they must “exercise, hydrate and drink their water and develop a fitness routine.” In his view, these were no longer optional extras but part of the job.

Mr. Green moved from noting the void of formal mentoring to a deeper appreciation for the kind of structured habits and routines that make a leader effective. The findings here point to the fact that if mentoring can be done in a way that promotes self-awareness and well-being, it gives principals the chance to flourish on both a personal and professional level.

When looking at the findings from Mrs. Evans’s first and second cycles, a clear progression in her awareness of mentoring emerges. While she has always seen value in the support and connection that mentoring provides, Cycle 2 shows a deeper grasp of how purposeful engagement in such activities can build resilience and leadership effectiveness through intentional wellness.

In Cycle 1, Mrs. Evans was quick to point out the importance of mentoring as a source of encouragement in the trying environment of school leadership. She said that being able to reflect on experiences with others kept her focused on what mattered as a leader. Yet, for all that, her view of things like prayer and reflection was rather informal;

they were coping mechanisms she valued personally but did not necessarily see as structured strategies for a principal's professional growth. There was a surface level understanding leaders should practice well-being routines, but little evidence she tied it directly to mentoring.

By the cycle 2 interview, her perspective had broadened. Mrs. Evans spoke of mentoring in terms of creating the space to stay grounded under pressure. "Having intentional opportunities to be able to pause and reflect and focus on me staying grounded and in my center helps me stay encouraged," she explained. The PERMA-aligned mentoring activities in this cycle led her to identify walking and spiritual grounding as much more than habits – they were practices that made her a better school leader.

Mrs. Evans was specific about the benefits. "Walking always gives me a chance to step away from the daily pressures and kind of clear my mind, and as I walk, I pray. And so prayer brings me a lot of peace and comfort, especially going through challenging times." For her, spiritual grounding was a way to get back in touch with her core values and "create intentions" so she could remain aligned with them. In short, these were no longer just personal routines but deliberate developmental strategies.

Mrs. Evans also made a direct link between these activities and her ability to lead. When faced with staff concerns or student discipline, she would turn to them for composure. "This practice really helps me to just stay grounded," she said, allowing her to "approach difficult situations with a calmer mindset and have a greater patience." It was a matter of emotional regulation; as she put it, "These moments gave me clarity... it reminds me to approach every situation with a lot of patience and compassion."

There is also a heightened sense in Cycle 2 of how one's own well-being affects those around you. "When I feel more grounded and at peace, I'm so much better able to listen and support the people around me," she observed, noting she was "more present" with teachers and families as a result. She came to see well-being activities as non-negotiable for any leader hoping to be effective. "I do not think that I would be able to remain without these practices in my life," she said. "I know that I have to walk and I have to ground in order for me to be effective at all."

With this in mind, by the end of Cycle 2 Mrs. Evans was making the case for mentoring programs that take a holistic view of the principal. She suggested districts should offer some wellness coaching and training, and that principals be given "opportunities carved out for reflection" to attend to their own needs, which are too often put aside for others.

"The combination of walking, prayer, and then my spiritual grounding that I do is very powerful for me," she summed up. The contrast between the two cycles was noticeable: where there was once a general appreciation for support, there was now a sophisticated understanding of how structured well-being activities and reflection are integral to a principal's capacity to flourish.

The interview with Dr. Jones in Cycle 2 put further weight on the conclusions she had drawn in Cycle 1 about the value of mentoring for one's personal and professional growth. In the first cycle, she made a point of how valuable well-being and mentoring are to a leader who has to endure the isolation that is all too common in the principalship. "It can be isolating," she said, and for that reason principals need people

they can trust to offer some perspective, to hold them accountable and, without question, to encourage them.

By Cycle 2, Dr. Jones was still an advocate of formal arrangements like the Superintendent's Academy, which she called "one of the best overall experiences as a school principal." But her view of mentoring had broadened to encompass the kind of self-development that makes you a more effective leader. She pointed to prayer, journaling and reflective walking as key to her well-being and capacity to lead. "Prayer gives me a sense of strength and peace and mostly comfort during really challenging and rewarding seasons of being a leader," she told us. With her journal she could look back on hard times and see her own progress, even "see how God answered my prayers."

For Dr. Jones, there is no mistaking the link between such practices and the resilience required to stay in the field. "All of these activities help me remain in it and manage it so I wouldn't just burn out and quit," she put it. The PERMA-aligned activities in particular made her more intentional about what she was already doing; it let her reflect on the "little baby steps" of her development and realize "how much I needed this."

These activities also changed the way she related to others. "The time I'm spending in prayer and walking and journaling has made a big difference in how I communicate with people," she observed, allowing her to show more empathy and compassion in her role. In the end, Dr. Jones was an advocate for mentoring that does more than just drill down on technical skills but treats principals as a whole person. "We are human beings with emotional and spiritual needs," she insisted. What she saw now

was that mentoring was as much of an internal process of self-development as it was an outside support system. Where Cycle 1 was about the formal networks, Cycle 2 showed how reflective practice were what highlighted a leader's longevity and effectiveness in education.

**Table 12. Comparison of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 Findings: Mentoring Awareness
Regarding Activities for Personal and Professional Development**

Participant	Cycle 1 Findings	Cycle 2 Findings	Evidence of Change
Mr. Flowers	Viewed mentoring primarily as collegial assistance and informal problem-solving. Limited recognition of mentoring as a mechanism for intentional personal or professional development.	Described mentoring activities as opportunities for reflection, encouragement, and leadership growth. Recognized the value of peer discussions and intentional reflection for improving leadership practices.	Demonstrated increased awareness that mentoring activities can contribute to professional confidence and personal growth, although understanding remained grounded in informal relationships.
Mrs. Rickaby	Identified mentoring through trusted relationships and emotional support. Mentoring was viewed as relational rather than developmental.	Reported that mentoring experiences fostered confidence, reassurance, and reflective thinking. Recognized the importance of supportive relationships for navigating leadership challenges.	Shifted from viewing mentoring solely as emotional support to recognizing its contribution to professional development and leadership effectiveness.
Mr. Green	Acknowledged the importance of mentoring and well-being but noted the absence of formal structures. Relied primarily on assistant principals and colleagues for support.	Connected regular exercise and PERMA activities to increased confidence, resilience, patience, and leadership capacity. Recommended incorporating wellness practices into mentoring programs.	Demonstrated greater intentionality regarding self-development activities; however, mentoring remained secondary to self-directed wellness practices.
Mrs. Evans	Reported limited formal mentoring support and relied heavily on spiritual practices to sustain leadership. Mentoring structures were minimally present.	Identified prayer, reflective walking, spiritual grounding, and gratitude as essential developmental activities that enhanced resilience, patience, and purposeful leadership. Recommended wellness coaching and reflection opportunities for principals.	Expanded awareness of intentional practices that support both personal and professional growth. Continued to conceptualize development through spirituality rather than formal mentoring systems.
Dr. Jones	Demonstrated advanced awareness of mentoring as essential to leadership sustainability, burnout prevention, and organizational effectiveness. Advocated for systemic mentoring supports across career stages.	Reinforced the importance of structured and informal supports through journaling, prayer, reflective walking, and faith-based practices. Emphasized principals' emotional and spiritual needs and recommended mentoring models that address the whole person.	Maintained a sophisticated understanding of mentoring while broadening her perspective to include intentional reflective and spiritual practices that support sustained leadership development.

Although formal mentoring structures remained limited across participants, Cycle 2 findings demonstrated increased recognition of reflective practices, wellness activities, spirituality, peer relationships, and wellness routines as important contributors to leadership effectiveness and sustainability. Dr. Jones continued to exhibit the most comprehensive understanding of mentoring as a multidimensional process supporting both individual flourishing and organizational success, while the remaining participants increasingly acknowledged the developmental value of intentional well-being practices integrated into their leadership roles.

Theme 4: Intentional Wellness and Mentoring Supports

The progression of Mr. Flowers' experiences in Cycles 1 and 2 has been a journey in how one comes to appreciate the value of intentional wellness and mentoring as part of effective school leadership. In Cycle 1, he was quick to see the worth of wellness routines and the need for principals to have more structured ways to do so. He would engage with informal means of coping, like a podcast on his morning commute or a short ride in the golf cart to put things in perspective. But he made it clear these were solitary pursuits, not the result of any formalized mentoring. "There is not a lot out there," he said of the systems meant to support an administrator's well-being, "especially for us that have been at this a while. It would be nice for everyone to have a mentor." What he wanted were designated spaces for wellness, time for a break, and a mentoring system with some real accountability and encouragement.

By the time we got to Cycle 2, the PERMA-aligned mentoring activities equipped him of moving from simply seeing the need for such supports to making them part of his practice. He chose golf for his mentoring activity and in doing so turned what was once

a sporadic diversion into a staple of his routine. Before the study, he might have played with his friend and colleague Jason once a month; during the course of Cycle 2, they were out there weekly, sometimes twice. “Once I made the time and got into a routine, well, I saw that I needed to be doing that for myself,” he revealed.

For Mr. Flowers, those rounds of golf became something of an informal mentoring session built on trust and good conversation. “The informal conversations on the golf course have been the most meaningful to me,” he noted. They gave him an opening to talk through the rigors of being a principal with someone who gets it. “I don’t feel so isolated having somebody to talk to and just kind of discuss some challenges with.”

Mr. Flowers’ advocacy for mentoring has only grown, but where in Cycle 1 he was pointing out unmet needs, his reflections in Cycle 2 are more prescriptive. Drawing on what he has lived through, he puts forward the idea of programs that mix formal coaching with the kind of relationship building you get on a golf course. He has also found value in the study’s weekly check-ins, the videos and music, for the consistency and motivation they provide. “I didn’t really realize that playing golf was helping me as much as it was until I started doing it routinely in the study,” he admitted. Mr. Flowers has moved from awareness to action. His results reveal when you have mentoring that is intentional and provides peer connection and encouragement, it does more than just make a principal feel better; it builds the resilience and sustainability required for the job.

There is a significant difference in the way Mrs. Rickaby has come to understand and put into practice intentional wellness over the course of Cycles 1 and 2, particularly

as it relates to leadership sustainability. In Cycle 1, while she saw the value in a principal's well-being, she also saw where the current mentoring structures fell short. To her, district mentoring was too much about tasks and not enough about the needs of the individual. "We need more proactive wellness support for school leaders," she said, calling for "some leadership coaching, perhaps some mental health resources, and protected time for professional reflection." She did make time for prayer or a walk or meditation, but the demands of the job meant she had to "wait until I get home to do those things."

The findings from Cycle 1 showed Mrs. Rickaby viewing well-being as a prerequisite for leadership development yet finding the system inadequate to support principals in any holistic way. She could envision an ideal model with peer networks and a culture that put equal stock in performance and well-being, but for now, the idea of intentional wellness support was more of a concept than something woven into her day-to-day.

That changed after the PERMA-aligned mentoring of Cycle 2. Mrs. Rickaby moved from merely acknowledging the need for support to engaging with the selected mentoring activities. "These activities helped me recognize that well-being is not something that happens by accident. It requires intentional effort," she observed. She no longer saw it as some aspirational goal but as part of her responsibility as a leader. The 45 minutes of circuit training three or four times a week "helps me maintain my stamina and my focus," she says of the exercise, and to keep a positive attitude when things get difficult. Her definition of resilience has evolved; it is not just about powering

through stress but knowing “when I need to stop and rest and recharge and maintain my balance.”

Some of this change can be traced to the death of her mother, which made her reflect on what it means to let your own well-being slide. “Losing my mother was a reminder to me that I needed to take better care of myself,” she explained, and it has since led her to draw firmer lines between her work and her personal life.

Mrs. Rickaby also found value in accountability. The weekly check-ins and videos from the mentoring intervention provided a structured encouragement that Mrs. Rickaby found valuable. They kept her consistent and allowed her to form habits that serve her both personally and professionally. Mrs. Rickaby has gone from wanting a wellness-oriented mentoring structure to living out those practices with the help of that very accountability. Where Cycle 1 pointed to an organizational void, Cycle 2 shows how structured encouragement can make wellness part of the job. Her experience would suggest that if we want principals to flourish, our mentoring programs should be doing more than developing skills; they should be cultivating the habits and reflective space that make for a healthy, sustainable career.

Throughout Cycles 1 and 2, Mr. Green’s experiences charted a clear path from simply noting the lack of wellness supports in educational leadership to making them an intentional part of his routine via wellness practices. His findings revealed that one is not likely to be an effective principal without personal well-being. For leadership to be sustainable, wellness has to be deliberate.

In Cycle 1, Mr. Green put his finger on a professional culture where formal mentoring made no room for wellness routines. He was aware he should be looking

after himself but found it hard to make it a priority. “I have been taking terrible care of myself,” he conceded. “I almost feel guilty if I do anything for myself.” It was a sentiment that spoke to the unspoken norm among principals not to engage in such practices. He pointed out that while the value of well-being is often talked about, it is not often seen in the day-to-day work of school leaders. “There is certainly not enough focus on well-being. Principals are not making time out for it.”

Mr. Green went to the gym three times a week once the study began and had made it a habit, but he saw this as something he was doing on his own rather than as part of any organized framework. The study, in a way, gave him the accountability to be consistent. Lacking any formal system to back him up, Mr. Green turned to the informal relationships he had at the gym. They were his sounding board, a place to get some encouragement or to have “someone to be accountable to check in” with when things got tough. In short, the findings of Cycle 1 showed that while he valued the support of his peers, there were obvious voids in the institutional structures meant to sustain a principal.

By the time we reached Cycle 2 and the PERMA-aligned mentoring activities, there was a definite change in Mr. Green’s approach. He started to link self-care directly to how well he could lead. “Leadership is just as much about managing yourself as it is in managing a school,” he said, showing he understood the need to attend to his own physical and emotional state. He no longer put wellness on the back burner.

Mr. Green’s fitness routine became more regimented, with four or five trips to the gym a week for an hour or so. The benefits were plain to see: less stress, better mood and focus, and more energy. “It is an outlet to release stress and clear my mind,” he

explained, adding that it left him feeling more balanced. He even found it made him more patient with staff and staved off burnout in the harder months of the year. The discipline of it all built his resilience. “No pain, no gain kind of thing,” he would say, drawing a line between the perseverance needed for a workout and his job. Reaching those goals in the gym gave him a sense of accomplishment that carried over into his work. On one occasion, when he had to let go of a STEM teacher who was also a friend, he used his time at the gym to think the situation through. “Going to the gym helped me make a better decision,” he recalled.

There was also a new appreciation for what the mentoring provided in Cycle 2 compared to the independent peer connections of the first cycle. “Participating in this with you has helped me see that I’m not alone,” he reflected on the value of having other principals around and the time set aside for reflection. Looking ahead, Mr. Green would advise future programs to be practical about wellness. “Physical exercise might be overlooked, but I think it does have a really big impact on stress management,” he said, urging that habits like hydration and healthy routines be part of the mix. With so many leaders burning out and leaving, he thinks principals can learn a lot from how others in the profession sustain themselves.

By participating in this study, Mr. Green has moved from feeling some guilt over practicing wellness routines, to embedding wellness into his identity as a leader. Mr. Green’s experience in this study revealed that if a person wants to foster true flourishing in principals, mentoring has to include the accountability and structure to make wellness practices a normal part of the job.

By looking at the findings from Mrs. Evans' first two cycles, one can see a mix of continuity and growth in how she approached intentional wellness and mentoring. In both instances, she made it clear that a principal well-being is something they have to put deliberate effort into. They can't just leave it to chance when they are up against the rigors of school leadership.

During Cycle 1, Mrs. Evans said the intervention came at "just the right time" as she was going through a difficult due process case. She would point to the study's built-in supports – her weekly check-ins and daily inspiration – as what got her through a hard year. This type of accountability and set-aside time for reflection was what prompted her to make time for walking, prayer or meditation. A different picture emerged in Cycle 2. Those same things had become part of her day. In cycle 2, she considered her routines vital to being an effective, sustainable principal. Prayer was still at the center of it, but walking and spiritual grounding were now regular ways for her to stay true to her faith and purpose. "I don't think I could be a principal without them," she said, noting they gave her the emotional balance and clarity to deal with problems. They were no longer mere coping mechanisms but integral to who she was as a leader.

Mrs. Evans' view on mentoring matured, as well. In the first cycle, with no formal well-being support in the district, she spoke positively about the structure and accountability of the program. By the second, while she still valued that intentionality, she saw mentoring as a way to find meaning and ask for help in tough times instead of bearing the burden of leadership on her own. Mrs. Evans' experience revealed mentoring activities tailored to the principal to foster resilience not only to do the job but to lead others with greater capacity.

The interview with Dr. Jones in Cycle 2 served to put further emphasis on the intentional wellness and mentoring support we saw in Cycle 1, though her case was something of an outlier for the study. Where a few other participants took up new well-being habits as part of the intervention, Dr. Jones came to us with routines of prayer, walking and journaling that were already well ingrained; she sees them as indispensable to a career in leadership. The intervention did not so much add to her routine as it made her more conscious of why they matter. “Being able to be more intentional about them really helped me see how much I needed them,” she .

Dr. Jones has been consistent across both cycles in reporting it should be more than technical advice from a leader. It is also a form of emotional, spiritual and reflective care. During Cycle 2 she pointed out principals have “emotional and spiritual needs” and are in need of practices to reduce burnout. To her, a good mentoring program should look after the “whole person” by offering stress management and room for reflection, as well as fostering connections and meaningful dialogue with peers.

As an outlier, Dr. Jones shows that PERMA-aligned mentoring can play out in different ways depending on what a principal is already doing for his or her well-being. For those with set routines like hers, the intervention is less about starting something new and more about highlighting the value of wellness routines and reinforcing the coping mechanisms that work. The findings indicate that when you have structured mentoring to back it up, intentional wellness can do a great deal to build resilience and a lasting commitment to the role of principal, even if the practices themselves are new to the principal.

Table 13. Comparison of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 Findings Related to Intentional Wellness and Mentoring Supports

Participant	Cycle 1 Findings	Cycle 2 Findings	Cross-Cycle Interpretation
Mr. Flowers	Relied on personal wellness routines, podcasts, morning reflection, and self-directed practices. Reported limited formal mentoring and wellness supports	Continued intentional self-care and emphasized mentoring as a structured opportunity for reflection, connection, and organizational support	Reinforced the belief that principal well-being requires intentional mentoring and systemic support.
Mrs. Rickaby	Practiced prayer, walking, and meditation. Reported limited wellness resources and little protected time for reflection	Became more intentional with wellness practices and viewed mentoring as essential for resilience, calm, and clarity.	Existing practices became more purposeful through mentoring and structured reflection
Mr. Green	Relied on exercise and peer relationships for support. Reported limited wellness initiatives and stigma surrounding self-care.	Mentoring normalized wellness conversations, increased intentionality, and reinforced the need for formal supports.	Mentoring validated self-care and reduced perceived stigma surrounding principal well-being.
Mrs. Evans	Maintained prayer and meditation while participating in structured wellness activities. Reported limited district wellness supports and no formal mentoring.	Continued prayer, walking, and spiritual grounding. Used mentoring for reflection, renewed purpose, and resilience while advocating for wellness coaching and reflection time.	Mentoring strengthened and sustained well-being as an intentional leadership practice.
Dr. Jones	Entered with established practices of mentoring, reflection, prayer, journaling, and walking. Recommended mentoring throughout the leadership career span.	Increased intentionality of existing well-being routines and advocated mentoring that supports principals' emotional and spiritual well-being.	Outlier case whose mentoring experience deepened established habits rather than creating new ones.

Theme 5: Stress Isolation and Burnout

Mr. Flowers' findings reveal a difference in the Cycle 2 interview with Mr. Flowers from his earlier reflections. Mr. Flowers concludes the demands of the job are as relentless as ever. Throughout the cycle 2 interview he highlighted how one can head off burnout and isolation through some deliberate self-care and the kind of mentoring that is not bound by formality. In Cycle 1 he would speak of support systems as

necessary to “keep him running,” but here there is an intentionality to the way he prioritizes his own well-being.

Connection was a thread that ran through much of what he had to say. He pointed to his informal arrangement with Jason, a friend and fellow educator, as perhaps the most meaningful part of his experience. “I don’t feel so isolated having somebody to talk to and go over some of the challenges,” he said. The two of them would get on the golf course and toss ideas about. It is a far cry from a formal mentoring setup; it happens naturally while he is doing something he likes. In that relaxed atmosphere he can be open about the pressures of leadership and get some good encouragement from a man who knows what the profession entails. Mr. Flowers is quite clear that the golf outings are a check against burnout. “It’s like I get a recharge when I’m out there playing and come back and it helps me to sustain.” He has come to see that if you put in the work on wellness consistently you don’t have to wait until the stress is too much to handle.

That has led to a change in routine. Before we started the study, he might have been on the course with Jason once a month or so. “After we started the study we made it a point to go every Sunday,” he explained. “We’re still doing that.” Once he got into the habit of making time for it, he saw the value in it. “I realized I needed to take better care of myself,” he said.

Even just the prospect of getting to the golf course can put a difficult situation in perspective. “Eventually I am going to get back out where I am not under so much pressure,” he noted. That knowledge of an outlet allows him to regulate himself and be more patient and a better communicator in the moment. The effect of all this is felt in his

relationships at home and at school. “When I overall feel better, I act better,” he put it. Golf gives him a balance that makes him easier to deal with whether you are talking to him as a principal, a father or just a man. He doesn’t see self-care as apart from good leadership anymore; it is what enables him to lead well.

Mr. Flowers will admit he needed some structure to keep at it. The weekly videos, the interviews and the prompts from the study provided an accountability he hasn’t had before. “I had never had anybody do that for me,” he said. For future programs, he would suggest mixing in some of the informal things principals actually enjoy, like golf, to create room for stress relief.

Mr. Flowers’s story in Cycle 2 shows that although the principalship will always be stressful, one can insulate one’s self from the worst of it with the right kind of mentoring and by giving one’s self permission to recharge. It is something many principals know they should do but need a nudge to make a priority.

Within Cycle 2, Mrs. Rickaby stated that stress and burnout were still part of the principalship for her. Her perspective, however, became more of a proactive matter of self-preservation. In our Cycle 2 interview, she didn’t come across as being overwhelmed by the job; instead, she talked about the need to sustain herself physically and emotionally if she was to be an effective leader. It is clear from her comments that she came to view resilience as something you have to manage.

“Effective leadership requires you to take care of yourself as much or even maybe more as taking care of other people,” she told me. She did three or four circuit training sessions a week and said it gave her the structure to lower her stress levels. She no longer thought of it as optional but as a requirement for the kind of stamina the

role demands. In Cycle 1, we were looking at the emotional side of isolation, but she focused on knowing when to call it a day in Cycle 2. “Managing my energy has really taught me that resilience isn’t just about pushing through the work and working harder,” Mrs. Rickaby explained. “It’s about recognizing when I need to stop and rest and recharge and maintain my balance.” She said that may mean going home to her dog and putting on Netflix, something she learned to view as necessary restoration.

Mrs. Rickaby’s own experience with loss informed how she viewed burnout. When her mother passed away, it forced her to re-evaluate. “I realized that I didn’t spend enough time with her, that I was at the school when I should have been with her,” she said. It was a turning point that drove home the importance of work-life balance and showed her how professional demands could erode personal relationships. The job itself was no less demanding. She dealt with teacher shortages – “several of our teachers just quit” – and the district was holding her accountable to be a C school and not a D. “I needed an energy reserve for when I’m at work and they’re breathing down my neck,” she put it. The routines she put in place helped her keep her perspective and not get consumed by it all.

In cycle 2, she realized she received support from the mentoring and check-ins built into the intervention. “These activities encouraged me to focus on myself and make sure I keep going,” she reflected. She learned that tending to one’s own health is not a selfish act. “It is necessary,” she said. Mrs. Rickaby’s interview in Cycle 2 revealed that she was moving past the recognition of stress to actually managing the conditions of burnout. Her approach revealed that to flourish as a principal and serve others well over the long haul, principals must pay attention their own well-being.

Talking with Mr. Green in our Cycle 2 interview made it clear that stress and burnout were still part and parcel of the principalship, yet there was a difference in his outlook during Cycle 2. He made a more deliberate effort at wellness routines to assist him with sustaining the job. Where you might have heard guilt in Cycle 1, after learning to put his own well-being first, there became an acceptance that looking after his physical health was not something he could do without if he was going to be an effective leader. He came to understand he could not serve others as a leader if he did not take care of himself. "Leadership is really about managing yourself," said Mr. Green. "I think I've learned that is just as much a part of it as managing a school." It was an evolution in how he thought about avoiding burnout. What he once viewed as something that took time away from professional duties was now viewed as the foundation for his duties and responsibilities. "When I take care of myself, I can take care of my school and my family," is how he described taking care of himself.

The job is no less demanding for it. Mr. Green called the principalship "mentally draining" and physically exhausting. "This school year wrapping up was really busy," he noted of the end-of-year rush. Then there were the physical realities of being a high school principal. "During the football season I have to go to all the games and stay late," he explained. Those long hours and commutes add to the strain.

In contrast to Cycle 1, he was less inclined to talk about guilt and more about using exercise as a buffer. His routine at the gym was a form of protection. "My regular workouts kind of give me an outlet to release stress and clear my mind," he said. Four or five times a week, he hit the gym for the physical and emotional restorative effect. "I'm less stressed, better equipped to handle demands. I don't think I'm as burned out

when I go and take care of myself.” Mr. Green spoke about having to let go of a STEM teacher who was also a friend. “I had to make a very important decision,” he recalled. Instead of acting on impulse, he headed to the gym to think it through. “I think going to the gym helped me make a better decision.”

Mr. Green noted he did not feel so alone while participating in the study. The mentoring program has been a help in that regard. “Participating in this with you has helped me see that I’m not alone,” he said, also pointing to the value of having discussions with the other principals in the study.

Mr. Green saw a direct line between his fitness and how he shows up at work. “When I don’t feel as stressed and I don’t walk around in a bad mood, other people see that,” he observed. He becomes more patient, more approachable, and can “bring more to the table.” He is also aware that the system needs to support its principals. With so many retiring or leaving, “a principal job is not an easy job,” he pointed out. In his view, mentoring should be about giving leaders practical advice to develop a fitness routine because “it will help them on their journey.” Mr. Green’s story in Cycle 2 is one of moving from simply recognizing the danger of burnout to doing something about it. You need structure and the right habits to build the kind of resilience that allows you to keep leading effectively.

In the course of the Cycle 2 interview, Mrs. Evans shed light on the considerable stress that comes with being a principal and showed in equal measure how deliberate wellness routines can be a safeguard against burnout and isolation. There was a distinct change from the tone of Cycle 1 when she was in crisis mode after a due process and put it bluntly: “If I had no supports, I would walk out the door.” During Cycle

2, however, one could see her moving past a reactive decision to a more enduring form of resilience built on purposeful routines and faith.

Mrs. Evans called school leadership “very demanding work” and noted how easy it is to become overwhelmed. However, where once she might have simply endured the strain, she has since put in place some structure to handle it. “Having intentional opportunities to be able to pause and reflect and focus on me staying grounded and in my center helps me stay encouraged,” she said. It had become a necessity for her emotional health.

Prayer was at the heart of how she coped and was part of her identity as a leader. For Mrs. Evans, it is “the most meaningful activity,” offering an unbroken space to make sense of things and find peace. She made a ritual of walking while she prayed, a way to let go of what the job put on her and to help her seek direction. “It’s almost like I’m walking with God through a garden and this provides me with a friendship with God.” In doing so, she was not just putting stress aside but processing it.

Cycle 2 did not reveal the same degree of isolation as when we met in Cycle 1. Her bond with spiritual and interpersonal resources deepened. “I know that I have to ask for help from the Lord, and then He provides and He sustains me through the prayer.” While she still turned to people she trusted for assistance, that spiritual link meant she no longer felt like she was bearing the responsibility of leadership all by herself. “When I feel more grounded and at peace, I’m much better able to listen and support the people around me,” she observed. By being more present and compassionate, she could put in the work to build relationships with the staff and

students. In that sense, having a structured wellness routine was a leadership tool that affected the whole school climate.

Mrs. Evans was quick to point out that she has had to generate much of this support herself. “We spend a lot of time supporting other people, and a lot of times we don’t support ourselves, and we neglect our own needs,” she noted. She would like to see districts do more to incorporate coaching and wellness education for principals. Her story in Cycle 2 was one of making the move from merely surviving to actively building resilience. What her experience revealed was that principals cannot prevent burnout with crisis intervention alone; they must put restorative and reflective practices into the daily fabric of their lives if they are to remain effective and well for the longevity of their careers.

Dr. Jones was candid about the fact that being a principal was “very lonely” and an emotional undertaking. Even after many decades in a leadership position, the weight of making decisions for staff and students did not lessen. “Leadership can sometimes feel very lonely, and it can be isolating and overwhelming.” She did not mince words about the emotional toll, though she drew on the support of her faith community and the Superintendent’s Academy to see her through. When one might expect to hear the usual talk of exhaustion when describing burnout, Dr. Jones pointed to isolation as the real undercurrent of the role, something you have to make a conscious effort to avoid.

What came through most clearly in her interview was how much she relied on spirituality to manage the pressure. Prayer, walking, and journaling were not optional wellness exercises for her; they were what kept her going. “I don’t think that I would ever make it without prayer and walking and journaling in my life,” she said. For Dr.

Jones, these are necessities. “Prayer gives me a sense of strength and peace and mostly comfort during really challenging and rewarding seasons of being a leader.”

There is a cumulative quality to the stress of the job, and her story made it clear that these habits have been the difference between burning out and quitting or being sustained in the position. “I wouldn’t have made it as a principal without prayer in my life,” she reflected. “I’ve always cast the burdens on Him and He’s taken them for me.” Walking lets her get her head straight after a hard day and journaling is where she works through difficult feelings. This was revealed in how she dealt with people, too. “Nobody needs to talk to me or see me until I’ve had my time with the Lord,” she joked, though there was sincerity in it. She credited her patience and ability to show grace to others to those quiet moments of reflection. It allowed her to come to a conversation with staff or families from a place of regulation instead of depletion, making her “more approachable and understanding.”

Dr. Jones’ time at Fain Elementary revealed a strong commitment to prayer. When she took over a school with low morale and had to make some tough calls on personnel, she found herself in immediate crisis mode. “I remember really praying for wisdom,” she recalled. Journaling gave her the space to think things through before acting on impulse, so she could handle the situation with clarity.

Dr. Jones believed principals should be seen as whole human beings with spiritual and emotional needs, not just professionals who deliver results. She would like to see mentoring programs that encourage leaders to pray, walk, and reflect. Her experience was proof that principals cannot rely on sheer willpower to be sustainable

leaders; they need the kind of intentional practice that restores their sense of purpose and keeps them from being worn down by the realities of the position.

Table 14. Cross-cycle Comparison: Burnout and Isolation (Cycle 1) to Well-being and Flourishing (Cycle 2)

Principal	Cycle 1: Burnout & Isolation	Cycle 2: Well-being & Flourishing	Cross-Cycle Interpretation
Flowers	Burnout due to work overload and emotional strain; isolation from leadership responsibilities.	Golf with Jason fostered trusted peer connection, stress relief, confidence, and intentional self-care. Informal mentoring reduced burnout and renewed energy.	Flowers shifted from experiencing leadership isolation to cultivating belonging through peer mentoring. Golf evolved into a sustainable protective factor against burnout.
Rickaby	High job demands, staffing pressures, and limited opportunities for recovery. Need for structured support.	Circuit training, routines, and energy management increased stamina, focus, and resilience while improving work-life boundaries.	Rickaby moved from survival under chronic demands to intentional wellness practices that promoted sustainability and longevity in leadership.
Green	Self-neglect, guilt surrounding self-care, and lack of formal mentoring structures. "I almost feel guilty if I do anything for myself."	Walking, prayer, gratitude, and spiritual grounding strengthened purpose, compassion, and emotional regulation.	Green transitioned from guilt over self-care to viewing wellness as a sacred responsibility essential to effective leadership and flourishing.
Evans	Emotional exhaustion during crisis conditions and reliance on meaningful relationships for support. "I truly think that if I had not been doing these things, I would not have made it."	Continued emphasis on support networks, reflective practices, and intentional self-care as protective factors promoting resilience.	Evans reframed survival strategies into intentional flourishing practices, emphasizing the sustaining role of relationships and well-being routines.
Dr. Jones	Sustained workload pressure, fatigue, leadership loneliness, and emotional isolation.	Prayer, journaling, and walking deepened spiritual resilience, improved emotional regulation, and enhanced patience and empathy.	Dr. Jones moved from enduring leadership burdens in isolation to experiencing meaning, renewal, and support through faith-based reflection.

Across the two cycles, participants demonstrated a clear progression from burnout, isolation, and survival-oriented coping toward intentional well-being, resilience, and flourishing. Although each principal selected different PERMA-aligned mentoring activities, all participants reported that structured self-care, reflective practices, and

meaningful connections enhanced both their personal well-being and professional effectiveness. These findings suggest that principal flourishing is not the absence of stress but rather the development of intentional practices and relationships that enable leaders to sustain themselves while continuing to serve others effectively.

Theme 6: Leadership Identity and Growth

In Mr. Flowers' Cycle 2 interview, he revealed a leadership identity that is more integrated and purposeful. Cycle 1 revealed the value of peer networks and the kind of informal mentoring that structures his approach. In Cycle 2, he became a principal being intentional about wellness routines in order to sustain his leadership role. During our interview, he spoke of mentoring as a chance to step back and get in touch with himself when the job got demanding. He admitted that the principalship could be overwhelming, but there was a growing sense that his capacity to lead well was tied to his ability to keep his own balance. Well-being was no longer something he put in a separate box from his duties. In Cycle 2, he saw it as fundamental to serving others.

Throughout Cycle 2, there was more self-awareness at play in his answers, and a better handle on his emotions. The mentoring activities prompted him to think about how he met challenges and to accept that resilience is built on habit, not just on putting up with hard times. In some ways, he moved from simply surviving the role to making a point of sustaining himself by engaging with his selected activity, which was golf.

Mrs. Rickaby's interview for Cycle 2 revealed a leader who had made a conscious move toward integrating wellness routines into her daily life. In Cycle 1, she spoke of her development as a principal through informal mentoring. In Cycle 2, she

had become someone who had decided taking care of herself was a professional imperative, not a luxury.

Mrs. Rickaby had woven the mentoring activities into how she leads. By doing the circuit training and building her routine, which she calls “energy management,” she said that it had given her a way to implement a wellness routine that worked for her. Mrs. Rickaby said that to be effective leaders, principals have to “take care of themselves as much or even maybe more as taking care of other people.” That was quite a shift in how she had previously defined her role.

Regular exercise was what kept Mrs. Rickaby focused and productive. She had a new definition of resilience: “It isn’t just about pushing through the work and working harder,” she told me. “It’s about recognizing when I need to stop and rest and recharge.” The loss of her mother was something of a catalyst for this. She realized then what happens when people put work responsibilities before themselves and those they care for. It took nearly a year to put in place the boundaries and habits for a healthier balance, but she did it. This allowed her to shift how she dealt with her staff and students. Mrs. Rickaby became more patient and present when she was in better physical and emotional shape. By taking better care of herself, she found she was taking better care of the people in her school.

There was a sense of intentionality and purpose in Mr. Green’s Cycle 2 interview that was not as pronounced before. We may have focused on accountability and collective resilience in the first cycle, but during Cycle 2, he seemed more attuned to the values that support him both personally and professionally. Attending crunch fitness regularly was a way for him to put some distance between himself and the day-to-day

pressures and return to his duties with a clearer head. He thought of exercise as an outlet to “blow off some steam.”

He found that the workouts gave him a sense of clarity and allowed him to be fully present with others. Instead of an impulsive reaction to stress, he learned to take his time and process things. It gave him the confidence to handle difficult situations with more thoughtfulness. For Mr. Green, going to the gym was no longer something he could put on the back burner. He became aware that the routines he had in place were integral to being an effective leader. “If I didn’t do these things,” he said with a shrug, “nobody wants to be around me.” He was candid about the fact that without them he would have trouble keeping his balance and perspective.

The shift from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 in Mrs. Evans’ interviews was the most striking of any of the participants. She was once reactive and unsure of herself in Cycle 1, looking to others to make sense of the job. In Cycle 2, she spoke with more confidence and clarity of purpose. Mrs. Evans was able to incorporate walking, prayer, and gratitude into her day. These activities were no longer just ways to get through a crisis but deliberate habits that highlighted who she was as a leader. Mrs. Evans noted that these routines had made her calmer and better able to face hard situations with some patience and compassion. And while she might have seen it differently before, Mrs. Evans found that asking for help was a mark of wisdom.

Mrs. Evans’ focus shifted from merely surviving the principalship to flourishing. She saw her position as a chance to serve in a way that was true to her values and through reflection, she became more attuned to the effect she had on the people around her. It was a clear case of moving from uncertainty to assurance.

In Cycle 2, Dr. Jones came across as a veteran whose identity was now firmly rooted in faith and reflection. While in the first cycle we saw her leaning on experience and the professional relationships she trusted, in Cycle 2, there was an added layer of resilience provided by structured wellness activities. For Dr. Jones, prayer was at the core of it all. “I would not have made it” without prayer, she insisted, noting that it gave her the comfort to know she was not shouldering the weight of the job alone. Then there was her journaling; putting pen to paper to record her thoughts and prayers allowed her to put difficult moments in perspective and even spot the lessons in them. A walk also gave her room to restore herself.

Dr. Jones did not see these as anything apart from her work, but as prerequisites for it. Dr. Jones had a well-developed sense of what it means to flourish and would advise mentoring programs to treat principals as whole human beings with spiritual needs. Dr. Jones’ Cycle 2 interview revealed an experienced leader who kept growing by tending to both the person and the professional.

What emerged from Cycle 2 was that the participants allowed their leadership identities to evolve. Through the mentoring activities, they were able to find their own identities in the wellness routines, and they were able to grow because of finding what they needed in order to be sustainable in their jobs. The participants’ Cycle 2 interviews reveal them sustaining themselves so they can in turn sustain others. Through exercise, journaling, golf, prayer or simply building a routine, these wellness practices have given them increased emotional regulation and resilience.

In Cycle 1, a lack of formal structures was noted and the need to fall back on informal networks. Cycle 2 revealed an inward shift. The participants began to see

themselves as responsible for their own well-being and recognized their personal growth. It became less about keeping up with the demands of the role and more about developing the right routines to thrive within the profession.

Table 15. Leadership Identity and Growth: Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 Comparison

Principal	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Mr. Flowers	Collaborative identity shaped by informal mentoring and peer support.	Greater self-awareness and intentional self-care to sustain leadership.
Mrs. Rickaby	Growth through trusted colleagues and experiential learning.	Wellness became a professional responsibility and resilience involved restoration.
Mr. Green	Service-oriented leadership grounded in accountability and peer networks.	Developed a more explicit spiritual purpose and reflective approach to leadership.
Mrs. Evans	Uncertain and reactive, relying heavily on others for guidance.	Became more confident, reflective, and purpose-driven through intentional practices.
Dr. Jones (<i>Outlier</i>)	Experienced, faith-centered leader relying on reflection and trusted relationships.	Existing identity was reinforced rather than transformed; mentoring validated and strengthened practices already in place.

Cycle 2: PERMA Mentoring Activities and Research Question 3

3. In what ways does engaging in PERMA-aligned mentoring activities enhance principals' perceptions of their well-being?

Positive Emotion

There was a clear sense among the principals that these mentoring activities brought them more emotional balance, hope, peace and gratitude. They found in prayer, walking, journaling or exercising a chance to step back and focus on the positives in their lives and work.

Mrs. Evans said she would finish her grounding practice by giving thanks to God “for all the gifts in my life,” which left her feeling “a lot calmer.” Dr. Jones found that

prayer was a source of “strength and peace and mostly comfort” in the more demanding times of being a leader. Mr. Green felt encouraged by his reflection, and Mrs. Rickaby noticed her energy and outlook improved with exercise. All in all, the participants felt that these things helped them stay optimistic when they were overwhelmed by their jobs.

Engagement

The participants revealed a shift from operating on “autopilot” toward a more present and intentional manner in their professional and personal time. The mentoring prompted the participants to slow down and really engage with what was happening. Mr. Green said prayer and grounding allowed him to “really think through it before I just get up and move,” so he could go back to work with his head in the game. For Dr. Jones, journaling was how she processed things and noticed “the lessons that God has tried to teach me.” Mrs. Rickaby used her exercise to keep her concentration and energy up for the day. The participants were able to see that it was less about enduring the job and more about being fully immersed in it. By engaging with the activities, participants were able to establish well-being routines to enhance their ability to flourish.

Relationships

The data revealed the mentoring activities have made for better relationships, bringing more patience and empathy to enhance the relationship. Mrs. Evans was candid that prayer and grounding made her “more patient” and “more present with others.” She even mentioned praying by name for her staff. Dr. Jones said that it helps her deal with teachers and families with an air of “grace” and “understanding.” Mr. Green felt he was a better listener and more of an encourager as a result of his

wellness routine. The participants' responses suggested that tending to their own well-being gave them the stamina to support the people they serve.

Meaning

The participants noticed a heightened sense of meaning in their roles. They were finding a connection between their work and a broader purpose. Mrs. Evans saw leadership as a way “to serve the Lord” and stressed the need to be in touch with her “source.” Dr. Jones said prayer reminded her she was not carrying the burden of leadership alone and was clear about her calling to serve. Mr. Green viewed his work as having a purpose tied to the kind of impact he wanted to have. The well-being activities reinforced the values behind why they were educational leadership in the first place.

Accomplishment

The participants were showing more confidence and resilience, and they were also recognizing their own effectiveness. They began acknowledging small wins and personal growth. Mrs. Evans felt the mentoring allowed her to “trust my abilities,” while Dr. Jones credited her walking and journaling with giving her the tools to “manage it” and avoid burning out. For Mrs. Rickaby, being able to set healthy boundaries and still be effective was an accomplishment in itself. They viewed the ability to hold up under the demands of the role as a professional achievement, as well.

Summary of Research Question 3

The results point to PERMA-aligned mentoring activities having a positive effect on how principals perceive their well-being in every domain of the framework. The findings reveal optimism and peace within positive emotion; the focus that comes with

engagement; the compassion in their relationships; a deeper meaning tied to service; and a view of accomplishment that encompasses resilience and growth. It was evident to the principals that well-being was not something apart from good leadership but the basis for it.

An Emerging Observation

One thing to note is that meaning was the most pronounced of the dimensions. With four of the five principals, faith was the main way they made sense of their well-being and leadership. Dr. Jones was something of an exception; for her, these practices were more about reinforcing what was already there than forging a new purpose. It would seem PERMA-aligned mentoring activities can do both: build purpose in some and sustain it in those with a well-formed identity as a leader.

Table 16. Findings: PERMA-Aligned Mentoring Activities and Principals'**Perceptions of Well-being**

PERMA Theme	Description of Enhanced Well-Being	Representative Participant Evidence
Positive Emotion	Participants reported increased gratitude, peace, hope, and emotional balance through mentoring activities such as prayer, exercise, journaling, walking, and grounding practices. These activities helped them maintain optimism despite leadership demands.	Mrs. Evans: "I always end in gratitude and thanking God for all the gifts in my life... these things help me to be a lot calmer and feel more balanced." Dr. Jones: Prayer provided "strength and peace and mostly comfort during really challenging and rewarding seasons of being a leader."
Engagement	Principals became more intentional, focused, and present in their work and personal lives. Reflective practices helped them slow down, process experiences, and engage more fully rather than operating reactively.	Mr. Green: These activities helped him "really think through it before I just get up and move." Dr. Jones: Journaling allowed her to reflect on "the lessons that God has tried to teach me."
Relationships	Mentoring activities strengthened relationships by increasing patience, empathy, compassion, and attentiveness toward staff, students, families, and colleagues.	Mrs. Evans: "I'm a lot more compassionate and I'm a lot more present with others." She also prayed specifically for relationships within her school community. Dr. Jones: Prayer helped her lead with "patience and grace and understanding."
Meaning	Participants experienced a stronger sense of purpose and viewed leadership as an opportunity for service aligned with their values and beliefs. Faith and purpose emerged as central influences on well-being.	Mrs. Evans: "I am here to serve the Lord." Dr. Jones: Prayer reminded her that she was not carrying leadership responsibilities alone. Mr. Green: Leadership was connected to making a meaningful impact on others.
Accomplishment	Principals reported greater confidence, resilience, and recognition of personal and professional growth. Sustaining themselves through leadership challenges became an important marker of success.	Mrs. Evans: The activities helped her "trust myself and trust my abilities." Dr. Jones: These practices "gave me the ability to manage it so that I wouldn't burn out and just quit." Mrs. Rickaby: Accomplishment included maintaining healthy boundaries while continuing to lead effectively.

Participants described experiencing increased positive emotions through gratitude and peace; deeper engagement through intentional reflection and presence; stronger relationships characterized by empathy and compassion; greater meaning rooted in faith, purpose, and service; and a broader understanding of accomplishment that included resilience, confidence, and personal growth. Among the five domains,

meaning emerged as the most prominent aspect of well-being, as participants consistently connected their leadership identities to their values, faith, and a sense of calling.

Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study revealed that mentoring and wellness actions aligned with the PERMA model were significant factors in the well-being of principals, emotional resilience, and the sustainability of principals. There was a great deal of informal relational support, including peer support, mentorship, churches, family, and wellness routines versus formal district wellness systems. Principals knew the importance of taking care of themselves, but many had problems as a result of a lack of time, leadership roles and self-giving expectations in the profession.

The study also identified that a structured mentoring program, accountability, and intentional wellness activities had a positive effect on emotional regulation, stress management, leadership focus, and resilience. Principals were able to reflect, recover, and reset by engaging in personal activities like golf, exercise, prayer, meditation, journaling, and walking. Consistency and change of wellness practices to sustainable practices were improved through mentoring relationships.

The overall findings show that principal flourishing is enhanced when intentional steps are taken to include wellness practices in professional leadership development programs via mentoring, reflection, and wellness routines that include the four pillars of PERMA.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter provides an interpretation and discussion of the results given in Chapter 4 and aims to link the findings of the study to the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the literature regarding the principal well-being, mentoring, and positive psychology. This chapter also looks at the effect of mentoring relationships and wellness activities that are grounded in the PERMA model on principals' emotional resilience, their effectiveness in their work, and their view of sustainability in the profession.

The findings indicated that intentional well-being practices, reflective mentoring relationships, and intentional emotional processing and accountability opportunities were beneficial for principals. The study also revealed principals frequently did not have district wellness systems and were dependent upon relationships to provide informal supports. Participants said they gained focus, better emotional regulation, stress management, and endurance of leadership through the involvement in PERMA-related mentoring activities like journaling, prayer, walking, meditation, golf, and exercise.

Summary of the Study

This action research study was qualitative, examining the effects of mentoring and PERMA-focused wellness activities on school principals' personal and professional wellness. The study was conducted on specific aspects of principals' current supports, the impact of mentoring relationships on the principals' resilience and perceptions of well-being, and the extent to which intentional participation in PERMA-related activities improved resilience and perceptions of well-being for principals. The study focused on the PERMA model for measuring well-being created by Seligman (2011) and drew on

action research cycles to explore experiences of principals related to flourishing, stress management, and sustainable leadership.

Five principals in elementary, middle, high school, and K–12 schools were involved in the study. Individual wellness activities, such as golfing, exercising, journaling, praying, meditating, and spiritual grounding, were part of the program. The data was gathered by interviewing, reflective mentoring conversations, responses of participants, and thematic analysis.

The findings suggest that principals mostly utilized informal relational supports, and the least frequently used were formal district wellness programs. Mentoring relationships, peer support systems, church communities, trusted colleagues, and individualized wellness activities were found to be key factors in emotional wellness and professional stamina. In each case, participants reported that the productive mentoring and accountability improved their commitment to well-being routines and increased their emotional agility, stress management, attention, performance, and leadership skills.

The findings also demonstrated the positive impact of principals' perceptions of flourishing from the mentoring activities focused on the five domains of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). Overall, the results indicated that well-being in the principals' roles would be enhanced and that mentoring, and wellness were explicitly included in leadership development and professional practice.

Review of the Research Questions

Three research questions were posed in the study that centered around the areas of well-being for principals, mentoring support for principals, and activities related

to principals' involvement in PERMA-aligned mentoring activities. Multiple and interrelated themes emerged and gave clear and consistent responses to each research question.

The first research question dealt with what supports principals had in place to assist them with mentoring and to support their well-being, and the significance of these supports for principals' personal and professional lives before the beginning the mentoring activities which began in Cycle 2. The results showed that principals did not rely on formal support systems as their first choice of support, but on informal support, such as peer relationships, church groups, trusted peers, friendships, and family. It was noted that those supports were also crucial in maintaining emotional balance and effectiveness at work. In addition, the principals also said that they did not have formal wellness structures in place from the districts or the districts' leadership preparation programs.

The second research question explored the personal and professional benefits principals attributed to the mentoring activities they integrated into their routines. Overall, participants noted that mentoring activities were emotionally satisfying, reflective, and supportive. Consistency with attending to their own well-being and emotional awareness was strengthened as a result of increasing accountability through the mentoring process. There was also a decrease in feelings of isolation as they found a safe space for processing leadership stress through mentoring.

The third research question explored the relationship between principals' perceptions of well-being and resilience and engaging in PERMA-aligned mentoring activities. Findings revealed that there was a meaningful difference in emotions, stress

management, resilience, and leadership focus for personalized wellness activities. Participants cited feeling more accomplished, more fulfilled in their lives, emotionally healed, and more sustainable professionally as they intentionally engaged with exercising, golfing, journaling, praying, walking, and meditating. The results suggested that mentoring and purposeful self-care using the PERMA framework, in combination, had a positive effect on principals' flourishing and leadership sustainability.

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Literature

The findings of this study resonated with much of the literature on well-being and flourishing in the field of positive psychology, as well as literature on well-being and mentoring in the field of leadership. The findings demonstrated that principal wellness was not an isolated or personal issue but rather was a part of the effective principal and organizational sustainability.

The findings of this study resonate with the PERMA theory (Seligman, 2011). Seligman's theory is based on his belief that flourishing has little to do with avoiding stress and burnout and much more to do with actively cultivating positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. The evidence of growth within each of the PERMA domains was clearly evident at the completion of this study for activities including exercise, golf, journaling, prayer, walking, and mentoring interactions. The results indicated that principals shifted from a reactive to a more proactive and sustainable approach to wellness.

The results also strongly lend support to the emerging leadership model outlined Cherkowski and Walker (2018) in which they highlighted three elements, supportive relationships, reflective practice, and intentional care structures, as essential

components for growing flourishing school leaders. There were several mentions of relational support systems as important in supporting emotional endurance and effectiveness as a leader. Participants gained ways to manage stress in work through other situations, such as mentoring relationships, peer support, church relationships, friendships, and accountability activities.

The results of mentoring also reflect Reames (2025), who developed a mentoring for well-being model that emphasized the importance of reflective conversations, emotional support, and accountability to help keep educational leaders on track. The mentoring relationships participants reported were always a positive emotional affirmation and helped them find professional restoration. Structured check-ins, reflective questioning, encouragement, and purposeful discussions facilitated participants' consistency in wellness practices and processing leadership challenges.

The findings also corroborate those of Wheeler et al. (2024) on informal mentoring relationships and principals' well-being. Emotional support, trusted conversations, and relational connection were referred to as a consistent and repeated experience shared by participants that helped them overcome a sense of isolation that was often common among school leaders. Emotional support provided by informal mentoring and peer relationships was effective in stressful situations of leadership.

The findings of the study were also consistent with those of Mahfouz and Schussler (2021), who found that the principal's well-being qualities encompassed mindfulness, wellness, and equity-based leadership. The mindfulness exercises, journaling, prayer, meditation, and reflective walking in this study were shared as having a positive impact on emotional control, clarity of thought, and decision making. These

practices supported principals to be more intentional leaders and alleviated some symptoms of emotional exhaustion and burnout. The results align with the existing research and literature, which indicate that intentional inclusion of mentoring, accountability, reflection, and wellness practices in leadership development systems enhances principal flourishing.

Integration with the Conceptual Framework (PERMA)

The findings are robust in support of the use of the PERMA framework as an effective conceptual model to understand and promote the well-being of principals. Participant experiences and wellness activities throughout the study were representative of each of the PERMA domains.

Greater mood stability, less stress, emotional recovery and enhanced feelings supported led to the expression of positive emotion while initiating mentoring conversations and engaging in wellness activities. Often the participants reported that they became calmer, more patient, emotionally balanced, and mentally refreshed upon participating in physical activity, golf, meditation, prayer or journaling activities.

Engagement was demonstrated by the participants' involvement in purposeful wellness practices. Golfing, exercising, journaling, walking, and reflective prayer provided opportunities for a mental reset, focus, and emotional refresh. These activities were reported by participants to temporarily remove them from the stressors of leadership and put them back in touch with themselves.

Relationships were crucial to the participants' sense of well-being. Emotional encouragement, trust, and connectedness were gained from mentoring, peer support, church communities, friendships, and accountability partnerships. Repeatedly,

participants noted that leadership might be an isolating role and relational support was essential for sustainability.

Meaning was created by the participants' reflections on purpose, faith, the identity of a leader, and service to others. Some principals directly linked their wellness to their effectiveness in caring for teachers, students, and schools. Finding meaning in their work again reminded them of why they became educators.

The feeling of accomplishment resulting from the interactions throughout the study helped the participants to have a higher level of adherence to the wellness activities, self-efficacy, and pride in participating in an intentional wellness practice. Participants shared their delight in learning to create a sustainable lifestyle, benefiting their personal health and leadership skills.

The findings suggest that PERMA is a robust model of supporting principals' flourishing and leadership sustainability (Donaldson et al., 2022).

Significance of the Findings

This study adds significantly to the developing body of research in the areas of principal well-being, positive psychology, mentoring, and educational leadership sustainability and demonstrates that working with well-being is not an individual responsibility but rather a part of school leadership. The results of this study have implications for the importance of principals' needs for structured mentoring, accountability, and intentional wellness practices to support them both emotionally and professionally. The PERMA-aligned activities and mentoring relationships participants engaged in made them feel they had become more emotionally resilient, better able to manage stress, focused, and more capable of being a leader in their team.

In addition, the study also provides implications for school districts, prospective principal leaders, principal preparation programs, and policymakers in that it highlights a need to create a systematic way of embedding principal wellness into the professional development system, rather than simply their individual responsibility for it. The results indicate that mentoring and purposeful wellness systems could have a positive impact on leadership sustainability, job satisfaction, retention, and school climate.

The study extends the application of positive psychology and the PERMA framework in the field of educational research and leadership as well as introduces the importance of the action research method for researching principal flourishing and resilience.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be noted when interpreting the findings. The study involved only five principals, and the results are not necessarily representative of principals not included in the study. The participants were from diverse school contexts, but the experiences recounted are not necessarily the views of all principals in differing contexts

Secondly, the study was restricted to principals in the state of Alabama in educational environments. School leaders' experiences may differ from state to state, district to district, policy and context, and demographics. This means that results might not be generalized to wider national educational contexts.

Thirdly, the study was self-reported by the participants through interviews and reflective discussion. Self-reporting may suffer from several biases, including selective recall, social desirability, or bias in the interpretation of experiences by the respondent.

One potential drawback was the fairly brief intervention period. Participants did indicate positive changes in their emotional wellness and emotional resilience; however, there was no follow-up time period to determine whether participants continued to practice emotional wellness and whether they continued to use mentoring long term.

Participants might have responded and experienced differently because of the researcher's involvement in the mentoring process. The reflective method, however, was utilized throughout the study, and regular data analysis procedures were employed to improve the trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

This study offers several implications for educational leadership practice, for district leadership, and for the preparation of principals. School districts should make a deliberate effort to incorporate mentoring and wellness support plans into leadership development and induction plans for principals. Emotionally restorative mentoring relationships and professionally supportive mentoring relationships were both consistently described as being key to maintaining leadership effectiveness.

Districts should also consider establishing protected wellness time for principals during the workday. Maintaining wellness practices surrounding longer tenures was an often-repeated challenge. Providing intentional time for reflection, mindfulness, exercise, prayer, journaling, or wellness breaks may improve emotional resilience and reduce burnout.

There should also be a module to train leaders for positive psychology, emotional regulation, stress management, and resilience incorporated into the program. There

would be value for anyone wishing to become a principal to learn about the link between wellness practices and leadership effectiveness and climate.

Additionally, school systems and policymakers should aim to model the integration of principals' well-being as an aspect of their leadership and not allow well-being to be considered secondary to schoolwork. Often, participants expressed guilt related to putting their needs first and mentioned high levels of leadership that encourage sacrifice.

Districts could develop peer support groups, mentoring groups, and school wellness groups to support principals. These relational arrangements can create a sense of connection and build leadership continuity over time.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies may further investigate principal well-being, mentoring, and principal leadership practices across a wider school environment using the framework of PERMA. More comprehensive research on principals in various districts and states would help build knowledge about the effectiveness of mentoring and wellness systems on principals' sustainability in different contexts. There is also a need for future studies to examine differences in principal well-being experiences between rural, suburban, and urban school types. Leadership stress and wellness practices can be significantly shaped by changes in the demands of the workload, the community's expectations, staffing issues, and resource limitations.

Recommendations for further research could include assessing the sustainability of principals' own wellness practices (based on the PERMA model) and the impact of mentoring relationships on principals' resilience, job satisfaction, and leadership

effectiveness beyond the intervention. Further, mixed methods research that includes quantitative assessments of stress, burnout, resilience, and emotional well-being could offer more empirical evidence on the effectiveness of mentoring and PERMA-based interventions. Finally, future studies could examine the impact of principal flourishing on the wider organization, such as teacher morale, school climate, staff turnover, and student outcomes. Knowing these connections could help strengthen the need to embed wellness into the educational leadership system.

Final Thoughts and Conclusions

This study revealed that wellness practices, when intentionally structured, relationally supported, and professionally validated, will enhance principal well-being. Findings indicated that there were meaningful opportunities for principals' reflections, emotional replenishment, accountability, and development of resilience through mentoring relationships and activities in the areas of the PERMA domains.

Participants consistently noted that activities such as golf, exercise, journaling, walking, meditation, prayer, and mentoring conversations strengthen emotional awareness, stress management, leadership concentration, and professional endurance. The study also found principals have very few formal wellness programs in place in their school leadership and, instead, rely on informal systems and personal coping in their leadership roles

The results revealed an emerging paradigm that needs to be adopted for educational systems in terms of the role of wellness in principals' leadership but not as their personal responsibility. To help pave the way for healthy, resilient, and sustainable

future school leaders, school district professional development can include mentoring, reflection, accountability, and school wellness based on the PERMA domains.

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Appendix A: IRB Protocol



AUBURN UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board

NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION

January 15, 2026

Ellen Hahn
334-844-4460
reamseh@auburn.edu

Dear Ellen Hahn:

On 1/15/2026, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Protocol Information	Submission Details
Type of Review:	NHSR
Title:	Mentoring School Principals by Engaging in Well-Being Activities
Investigator:	Ellen Hahn
IRB ID:	STUDY00000954
Funding:	None
Grant Title:	N/A
Grant ID:	None
IND, IDE or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Protocol Angeila Scarborough, Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations.

IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human subjects, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Sincerely,
IRB Administration
540 Devall Drive
Auburn, AL 36849
irbadmin@auburn.edu
(334) 844-5966

Appendix B: Training Certificates



Completion Date 02-Nov-2023
Expiration Date 02-Nov-2026
Record ID 59455134

This is to certify that:

Angeila Scarborough

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

IRB # 2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - AU Personnel - Basic/Refresher
(Curriculum Group)
IRB # 2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - AU Personnel
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Not valid for renewal of
certification through CME.

Under requirements set by:

Auburn University



101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US
www.citiprogram.org

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wd8f8e36b-89c0-49d0-bb7a-21b988398aca-59455134



Appendix C: Interview Questions

Section 1: Context and Background

These questions situate the principal's experience.

- Can you describe your current role and years of experience as a school principal?
- What types of support systems were available to you when you first entered the principalship?
- How have your support needs changed over time?

Section 2: Mentoring Supports (Kram – Career & Psychosocial)

These questions identify *what mentoring structures exist* and how they function.

- What formal mentoring programs or structures are currently available to you as a principal?
- Do you have an assigned mentor, coach, or leadership supervisor? If so, how would you describe that relationship?
- Beyond formal programs, what informal mentoring relationships (e.g., peers, networks, colleagues) support you?
- In what ways do these mentors provide:
 - Career-related support (e.g., guidance, problem-solving, advancement)?
 - Psychosocial support (e.g., encouragement, confidence-building, stress relief)?
- How frequently do you engage with these mentoring supports?
- What aspects of these mentoring relationships are most valuable to you?

Section 3: Well-being Supports (PERMA-Aligned)

These questions explore supports tied to well-being domains.

- What types of well-being supports are available to you in your role (e.g., professional development, wellness programs, peer groups, district initiatives)?
- Which of these supports do you actively use? Why or why not?
- To what extent do your current supports help you with:
 - Managing stress and maintaining positive emotions

- Staying engaged and energized in your work
 - Building meaningful relationships
 - Finding purpose or meaning in your role
 - Experiencing a sense of accomplishment
- Are there specific practices or routines you use to support your own well-being as a leader?

Section 4: Perceived Importance and Impact

These questions get directly at the *importance* of supports.

- How important are mentoring supports to your effectiveness as a principal?
- How important are well-being supports to your ability to sustain your role over time?
- Can you describe a specific example where mentoring or well-being support made a difference in your leadership?
- In what ways do these supports influence:
 - Your decision-making
 - Your leadership confidence
 - Your work-life balance
 - Your intention to remain in the profession

Section 5: Gaps and Needs

These questions identify missing supports and improvement opportunities.

- What mentoring supports do you feel are currently missing or insufficient?
- What well-being supports would you like to see implemented or strengthened?
- How could districts or leadership programs better support principals' well-being?
- If you could design an ideal support system for principals, what would it include?

Optional Probing Questions-you use these to deepen their answers if needed.

Use as needed to deepen responses:

- Can you tell me more about that?
- How did that affect you personally? Professionally?
- Why do you think that support was (or was not) effective?

Cycle 2 Interview Questions

- How would you describe your overall experience with mentoring as a school principal?
- In what ways, if any, did the mentoring activities you did influence your personal well-being?
- How often did you do these activities. You can describe different amounts of time based on the different activities you did.
- How have the mentoring activities you participated in affect your professional well-being as a school leader?
- Can you describe specific mentoring practices or activities that have been most meaningful or beneficial to you? It could include the ones you were exposed to during this study or other mentoring activities.
- How have the mentoring activities you did influenced your confidence, resilience, or ability to manage stress in your leadership role?
- In what ways have the mentoring activities you did supported your relationships with teachers, staff, students, or other administrators?
- How has participation in the mentoring activities influenced your work-life balance or self-care practices?
- Can you describe a time when mentoring helped you navigate a challenging leadership situation?
- Since doing the mentoring activities, what aspects of mentoring do you believe contribute most to principal well-being and flourishing?
- What recommendations would you offer for improving mentoring programs to better support the personal and professional well-being of school principals?

- As a school principal, how do you describe your experiences as you participated in the PERMA-aligned mentoring activities?
- In what ways, if any, have these mentoring activities influenced your overall sense of well-being?
- How have PERMA-aligned mentoring activities affected your ability to manage stress and challenges associated with school leadership?
- Which components of the mentoring activities (e.g., positive relationships, reflection, meaning, accomplishment, engagement) have been most impactful for you, and why?
- Can you describe a specific situation in which participation in the mentoring activities strengthened your resilience as a principal? · How have mentoring activities influenced your emotional well-being or mindset in your leadership role?
- In what ways have these mentoring experiences affected your relationships with staff, colleagues, students, or mentors?
- How have PERMA-aligned mentoring activities influenced your confidence, motivation, or sense of professional accomplishment?
- What aspects of the mentoring activities contributed most to your ability to flourish personally and professionally?
- What recommendations would you provide for designing mentoring programs that better support principal well-being and resilience?

Appendix D: PERMA Well-being Activities Chart

PERMA Well-being Activities for School Principals				
PERMA ELEMENT	PSYCHOSOCIAL / PERSONAL ACTIVITIES (For Self)	CAREER / PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES (In Leadership Role)	EVIDENCE (How Activities Support Well-being & Leadership)	SELECTED CITATIONS*
 POSITIVE EMOTION	- Gratitude journaling; pen gratitude notes - Engage in joy-filled activities (nature walks, time with family) - Practice random acts of kindness - Mindfulness, meditation, relaxation (breathing/grounding) - Positive affirmations and self-compassion exercises - Reflect on positive experiences; plan restorative time - Create social connections; physical activity; listen to uplifting music	- Facilitate team-building activities (scavenger hunts, retreats) - Build relationships with students, staff, and faculty (e.g., tour the school/office) - Use icebreakers and positive affirmations with staff - Reflect together on successes and milestones - Record work gratitudes; identify obstacles and strategies; exchange ideas - Celebrate achievements; expand novices' leadership roles	Gratitude, mindfulness, and positive relationships increase positive affect, reduce stress, and strengthen emotional resilience. Principals who regulate emotions and support others report lower burnout and higher well-being, improving decision-making and leadership effectiveness.	- Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2017) - Neff & Germer (2013) - Boyatzis, Goleman, & McKee (2013) - Emmons & McCullough (2003) - Floman & Brackett (2025) - Feng & Wang (2025)
 ENGAGEMENT	- Identify and use personal strengths (e.g., Clifton StrengthsFinder) - Pursue skill development (creative pursuits, sports, yoga) - Write a blog or do a podcast - Network and attend community events - Join a book club or study group - Delve into topics of personal interest	- Identify strengths to build role, foster environment, and develop relationships - Take growth-expanding classes and assume leadership roles - Present at conferences; write articles; listen to podcasts/videos - Join professional learning communities and platforms	Strengths-based activities and continuous learning increase engagement, vitality, and persistence in leadership, leading to higher job involvement and emotional resilience.	- Clifton & Harter (2003) - Shankland & Rosset (2017) - Couple Therapy (2024)
 RELATIONSHIPS	- Spend time with family and friends; make new acquaintances - Volunteer in the community - Contemplative practices (journaling, meditation, prayer, yoga) - Share meals and participate in social gatherings	- Practice empathy—active listening and heart-to-heart conversations - Engage in team-building exercises - Network via social media platforms and events - Build mentoring and peer support networks	Strong relational connections reduce isolation and stress, cultivate trust, and create supportive communities, enhancing staff climates and collective efficacy.	- Cherkowski & Walker (2018) - Boyatzis, Goleman, & McKee (2013) - Food & Wine (2025) - LaVenía, Smylie, & Duncan (2024)
 MEANING	- Clarify personal values (Bull's Eye exercise) - Develop a personal mission statement - Journal about obstacles and growth - Practice mindful conversations; suspend judgment - Life-mapping to identify patterns, passions, meaningful growth - Reflect on purpose and alignment	- Clarify professional values (Bull's Eye; ACT) - Develop a professional mission statement - Use reflective journaling to identify growth opportunities - Ask inspiring questions: "What inspires you in your work?" - Life-mapping for work (mind map, timeline, vision board, wheel of life) - Align decisions and actions with core values	Living and leading with purpose increases meaning, well-being, and commitment. Values-aligned reflection and mindfulness help principals stay centered and resilient during challenging times.	- Day (2007) - Lomas et al. (2017) - Giannopoulos & Vella-Brodick (2011)
 ACCOMPLISHMENT	- Set personal goals and review progress - Use SMART goals in daily living - Write and share reflections on personal accomplishments - Practice strengths and celebrate progress	- Set professional goals using SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) - Celebrate novices' milestones and successes - Write and share reflections on professional accomplishments - Build psychological capital (optimism, hope, resilience, efficacy)	Goal-setting and celebrating progress build mastery, confidence, and a sense of accomplishment. Developing psychological capital strengthens optimism and resilience for long-term leadership success.	- Locke & Latham (2002) - Luthans & Youssef-Morgan (2017)
* These selected citations represent key sources supporting the activities and evidence in this figure. Full references appear below.				
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