

**Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Development of Sustainable Leadership
Competencies in K–12 Educational Leaders**

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Abstract

Educational leadership is a primary driver of school effectiveness, teacher performance, and student outcomes, yet leaders face heightened accountability, demanding stakeholders, and increasing social-emotional challenges. Most research emphasizes organizational factors behind leadership stress and turnover, but the impact of leaders' personal histories such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is less studied. ACE exposure can shape leaders' emotional regulation, resilience, decision-making, and well-being, potentially threatening leadership sustainability. This paper directly examines how ACEs shape the development and functioning of five key leadership competencies: emotional intelligence, trauma-informed leadership, resilience, stress management, and leader well-being. Using the frameworks of Trauma Theory, Resilience Theory, Transformational Leadership, and Ethical Leadership, we analyze current psychological, educational, and organizational research to reveal a critical gap in preparation programs. This gap, we argue, leaves leaders vulnerable. The paper concludes with policy and practice recommendations to foster ACE-informed, ethical, and sustainable K–12 leadership.

Keywords: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs); educational leadership; emotional intelligence; trauma-informed leadership; resilience; leader well-being

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Introduction

Educational leadership holds a critical function in shaping school effectiveness, teacher performance, and student outcomes. Research repeatedly identifies school leadership as the second most influential school-related factor affecting student achievement, surpassed only by classroom instruction (Leithwood et al., 2004; Grissom et al., 2021). Effective school leaders establish organizational vision, promote positive school climates, support teacher development, and create conditions that enable high-quality teaching and learning. Through these actions, principals and other educational leaders secondarily influence student outcomes by shaping schools' instructional and organizational environments. Over the past two decades, the responsibilities of school leaders have expanded significantly, requiring administrators to manage instructional leadership, high-stakes accountability systems, staff development, student behavior, crisis response, and community engagement, while also addressing the social-emotional needs of students and staff. These expanded responsibilities have contributed to elevated stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout within the educational leadership profession, eliciting concerns regarding the sustainability and long-term stability of educational leadership systems as a global priority (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020; Riley, 2023). National data indicate that approximately 11% of principals leave their positions annually, with similar percentages transferring to other schools within a single academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). High rates of principal turnover disrupt school improvement initiatives, weaken organizational coherence, and negatively influence teacher retention and student outcomes, making leadership sustainability a major concern for educational systems internationally (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020; Riley, 2023).

While substantial research examines school-level factors contributing to leader stress and turnover, this paper argues that individual factors specifically exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) deserve greater attention. ACEs include childhood abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction and are shown to impact neurological development, emotional regulation, and stress response throughout life (Felitti et al., 1998; Shonkoff et al., 2012). In the leadership contexts, our argument is that ACE exposure can shape emotional intelligence, trauma-informed practices, resilience, stress management, and leader well-being, influencing not just career trajectories but the sustainability of effective leadership itself.

The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) articulate competencies in vision and mission, instructional leadership, equity, organizational management, community participation, and ethical practice (PSEL, 2015). PSEL-aligned programs combine coursework, field experiences, and professional development to prepare leaders for the multiple responsibilities of the profession. While these programs address essential leadership skills, they often provide limited preparation in areas related to emotional intelligence, trauma-informed leadership, resilience, stress management, and leader well-being competencies critical to sustaining leadership effectiveness in mission-driven environments.

This paper addresses a critical issue: K–12 educational leaders in the United States must navigate complex, demanding roles while sustaining personal well-being and professional effectiveness. Despite growing recognition of trauma’s prevalence in school communities, few preparation programs or professional standards address the intersection between leaders’ own histories of adversity and leadership stressors. Our core argument is that neglecting this intersection leaves leaders underprepared for the emotional and mental rigors of their roles, increasing rates of burnout, attrition, and organizational instability.

This paper examines how ACEs may influence the development and functioning of key leadership competencies among K–12 educational leaders. Drawing on Trauma Theory, Resilience Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Ethical Leadership Theory, the research also explores how early adversity may shape the five leadership competencies: emotional intelligence, trauma-informed leadership practices, resilience, stress management, and leader well-being. Understanding these relationships carries important consequences for designing leadership preparation programs, professional development, and evaluations aligned with PSEL standards while concurrently addressing the personal and psychological dimensions of effective, enduring educational leadership.

Literature Review

Educational Leadership Standards

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) introduced the first national educational leadership standards in the United States in 1996. In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) released the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), which expanded expectations related to equity, social justice, and inclusive school cultures. These revisions reflected growing recognition that school leaders must address complex social challenges affecting student learning, including poverty, cultural diversity, and institutional inequities (Farley et al., 2019).

The PSEL framework contains 10 interrelated leadership standards that outline the knowledge, skills, and dispositions indispensable for effective school leadership. These standards address mission and vision development, ethical leadership, equity and cultural responsiveness, curriculum and instruction, school culture and student support, professional capacity building,

professional community development, family and community participation, operational management, and continuous school improvement. Collectively, these domains establish expectations for leaders to promote both scholastic achievement and student and school community health.

In 2018, NPBEA also approved the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, which focus on the basic knowledge and competencies required for aspiring school leaders. These standards guide the preparation, licensure, and evaluation of educational leaders and are widely used by universities to align coursework, field experiences, and leadership assessments with PSEL competencies (Murphy et al., 2017). Many state education agencies also use PSEL as the foundation for leadership certification requirements and evaluation models, helping ensure that leadership preparation programs produce graduates who meet nationally recognized expectations for effective leadership practice.

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Effect

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to potentially traumatic events occurring before the age of eighteen, including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. The first ACE study conducted by Felitti and colleagues demonstrated that exposure to childhood adversity is strongly associated with long-term physical, psychological, and behavioral health outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998). Later research has expanded this body of literature, demonstrating that ACEs influence adult emotional management, stress responses, and professional functioning across multiple occupational fields, including education. National data suggest that exposure to childhood adversity is widespread in the United States. Approximately 61% of adults report experiencing at least one ACE, and one in six report four or more ACEs, a threshold associated with increased risk for mental health challenges, chronic stress, and burnout (Merrick et al.,

2019). This evidence indicates that individuals entering leadership roles may carry unresolved trauma histories that shape their leadership styles, decision-making processes, and professional resilience.

ACEs have also been linked to long-term neurobiological changes affecting stress regulation and executive functioning. Research indicates that early adversity can disrupt the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis and alter brain structures involved in affective regulation, mental adaptability, and decision making (Gong et al., 2025; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025). These changes may contribute to elevated emotional reactivity, elevated vulnerability toward anxiety or depressive symptoms, and issues in managing stress across the lifespan. Educational leaders operate in high-pressure environments that need persistent emotional, cognitive, and behavioral management. The combination of professional demands and untreated trauma histories may heighten vulnerability to dysregulated stress responses and occupational strain (Slopen et al., 2020). Neurodevelopmental research further links early adversity to impairments in working memory, planning, and mental flexibility. These capacities are essential for strategic judgments and organizational leadership (BMC Psychiatry, 2025).

In addition to psychological and cognitive effects, ACE exposure is associated with increased risk for chronic health conditions, sleep disturbances, and weakened immune functioning, which may reduce stamina and stamina in demanding leadership roles (Edwards et al., 2025). These cumulative effects may increase the likelihood of occupational burnout, diminished job satisfaction, and leadership turnover, particularly in highly stressful professions such as education (RAND Corporation, 2022; Education Finance and Policy, 2017).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is widely recognized as a critical competency for competent educational leadership. Leaders with elevated levels of EI demonstrate self-awareness, affective regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills that support the development of positive school climates and staff engagement (Goleman, 1998; George, 2000). In complex school environments, principals must navigate interpersonal conflicts, motivate staff, and build trust among numerous stakeholders. Research indicates that emotionally intelligent leaders are better able to interpret affective signals, manage their own responses, and nurture supportive organizational climates that promote collaboration and professional commitment (George, 2000; Mayer et al., 2008). As educational systems progressively emphasize collaborative leadership and integrative school cultures, the emotional competencies of school leaders have become an essential component of proficient leadership practice.

Beyond interpersonal relationships, emotional intelligence also supports leaders' capacity for reflective decision-making and flexible leadership. Educational leaders frequently operate inside dynamic environments characterized by policy modifications, accountability pressures, and diverse stakeholder expectations. Leaders with well-developed emotional intelligence are better able to regulate their affective reactions, interpret social relationships, and make balanced decisions that consider both institutional targets and human needs (Mayer et al., 2008; Boyatzis, 2009). Studies inside educational leadership literature further suggest that principals who demonstrate emotional awareness and relational sensitivity are more effective at building professional learning communities, fostering teacher collaboration, and sustaining positive school cultures (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Brackett et al., 2010). These competencies strengthen organizational relationships and support collaborative problem-solving within schools.

Emotionally intelligent leadership has also been associated with improved teacher well-being and institutional stability. Leaders who demonstrate empathy, supportive communication, and relational awareness are more likely to build environments in which teachers feel appreciated and supported, which contributes to higher job satisfaction and lower workplace stress (Humphrey, 2012). Research on teacher social and emotional competence further suggests that leaders who model affective regulation and relational leadership practices can positively influence the school's emotional environment, consequently supporting both teacher effectiveness and learner outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These findings highlight the connected nature of leader emotional competence, teacher morale, and overall school functioning.

Given the increasing demands placed on school leaders, leadership preparation and professional development programs have begun to incorporate emotional intelligence training through coaching, reflective practice, and experiential learning. Such programs seek to help leaders develop the emotional awareness, self-regulation, and interpersonal competencies necessary to operate within complex educational organizations (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Strengthening the emotional intelligence of educational leaders may therefore play a key role in improving leadership effectiveness, cultivating positive school climates, and promoting long-term leadership sustainability. While research continues to highlight the value of emotional and relational competencies in leadership practice, including the development of emotional intelligence within leadership preparation programs, this represents an important strategy for preparing leaders to address the multiple challenges of present-day educational systems.

Trauma-Informed Leadership

Trauma-informed leadership has gained heightened significance in educational research due to the pervasive exposure of students and teachers to traumatic stressors that adversely affect psychological functioning and academic outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Contemporary conceptualizations emphasize that leaders must understand trauma's neurobiological and behavioral impacts to establish school climates that support safety, predictability, and emotional regulation (Craig, 2016; Charteris & Nye, 2025). Emerging work also highlights trauma-informed leadership as an essential lens for addressing crisis preparedness and community wellbeing across diverse contexts, underscoring its relevance beyond traditional disciplinary paradigms (Charteris & Nye, 2025). Such leadership frameworks promote relational trust and organizational coherence, forming a foundation for trauma-responsive pedagogies and social-emotional support systems that are central to equitable educational practice.

Trauma-informed leaders are more able to recognize trauma-related behaviors and implement policies that move beyond punitive responses, directing attention to relational and restorative practices that support student engagement and resilience (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016; Craig, 2016). This shift is necessary not only to support students but also to address the secondary traumatic stress experienced by educators working with marginalized populations (Hydon et al., 2015). Recent systematic reviews indicate considerable variability in trauma-informed professional development design, including the requirement for culturally responsive, antiracist, and equitable content to ensure trauma-informed PD translates into effective classroom and school practices (Knox et al., 2025). Such findings show that high-quality professional learning experiences, when embedded within a broader organizational commitment, constitute the basis for moving schools from awareness to sustained, trauma-responsive action.

Trauma-informed leadership likewise contributes to positive organizational and instructional outcomes. Studies examining trauma-informed instructional models suggest that when leaders integrate trauma-responsive practices into whole-school frameworks, schools report enhancements in both well-being and preparedness to learn, which can subsequently bolster academic engagement (Stokes, 2022). Moreover, meta-analytic reviews underscore that trauma-informed care approaches within school systems support adaptive behavior and socio-emotional skills in students affected by adversity (Cafaro et al., 2023). These findings align with implementation research suggesting that developing organizational capacity for trauma-informed practices remains essential to their acceptability, feasibility, and fidelity in diverse educational settings (Hales et al., 2025). Collectively, this work reinforces that trauma-informed leadership can foster climates of trust, reduce conflict, and encourage equitable educational opportunities when included in instructional, relational, and policy frameworks.

Finally, trauma-informed leadership is increasingly recognized as a systemic process that shapes school culture, organizational learning, and educator wellbeing. Qualitative findings from school leaders reveal that trauma-informed approaches require not only knowledge and empathy but also deliberate action to build psychological safety and community resilience across the institution (Charteris & Nye, 2025). This extends earlier literature on trauma and educational leadership by stressing the active role of leaders in adapting policy, resource allocation, and professional learning to meet the complex needs of trauma-affected populations (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016; Knox et al., 2025). Thus, trauma-informed leadership includes both a philosophical commitment to human development and an evidence-informed strategy for reforming school systems to support sustainable wellbeing for students and educators as well.

Resilience

Resilience has emerged as a foundational leadership competency in school environments, enabling leaders to adapt to evolving challenges, persist through setbacks, and sustain effectiveness under stress (Masten & Reed, 2002; Bock et al., 2019). School environments defined by shifting policy demands, resource restrictions, and complex stakeholder needs, resilience supports leaders' capacity to navigate uncertainty and promote institutional stability (Valli & Buese, 2007). Conceptually, resilience is understood not as a fixed trait but as a set of adaptive processes that can be cultivated through experience, learning, and supportive professional contexts (Gu & Day, 2007; Reich et al., 2016). As such, resilient leadership contributes to constructive responses to change, including crisis management and tactical decision-making, while grounding leadership practices in sustained attention on student outcomes and institutional improvement.

Empirical studies consistently link resilience with key dimensions of effective educational leadership, including reflective practice, social-emotional competence, and adaptive problem-solving (Gu & Day, 2007; Park et al., 2021). Resilient leaders exhibit reflective engagement with challenges, drawing on past experiences to inform present decisions and promoting environments that value constructive feedback and learning (Day & Gu, 2014). This reflective orientation supports persistence in the face of adversity, facilitating a commitment to vision and purpose even when external pressures threaten organizational direction (Brock & Grady, 2019). Furthermore, resilience intersects with emotional regulation and interpersonal effectiveness, enabling leaders to model calm, purposefulness, and stability during periods of disruption (Taku et al., 2021). These competencies are particularly salient as educational leaders work to preserve coherence across instructional practices, staff morale, and community expectations.

Professional programs that intentionally strengthen resilience can improve leadership sustainability and well-being. Research suggests that structured mentorship, reflective practice protocols, and resilience-centered training contribute to the development of coping strategies that mitigate stress and burnout (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Herman et al., 2020). For example, participation in peer networks and coaching relationships provides leaders with opportunities for shared problem-solving, perspective-taking, and emotional support resources that are critically important for managing the complexity of school leadership roles (Kraft et al., 2018; Reeves et al., 2019). Additionally, curriculum systems that integrate resilience into leadership preparation emphasize developing self-awareness, stress management techniques, and adaptive leadership strategies, which promote sustainable practice (Day et al., 2016). Such professional learning approaches acknowledge that resilience is not only advantageous for individual leaders but also for the collective capacity of leadership teams to react effectively to organizational demands.

Resilience as a leadership competency also has implications for broader school outcomes, including organizational climate, teacher retention, and instructional improvement. Studies indicate that resilient leaders contribute to positive school climates by fostering collegial support, encouraging risk-taking in instructional innovation, and preserving clear, consistent communication during periods of change (Sun et al., 2022). Moreover, resilience in leadership is associated with increased teacher commitment and reduced turnover, as leaders who model adaptability and intentional self-care create conditions that support educator well-being (Browne-Ferrigno et al., 2021). These organizational effects are consistent with research suggesting that resilient leadership enhances collective efficacy, enabling schools to advance improvement initiatives even in the face of system-wide challenges (Day & Gu, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2020). Thus, resilience operates not only at the individual leader level but also

as a systemic resource that adds to the long-term health and effectiveness of educational organizations.

Stress Management

Effective stress management is necessary for educational leaders because chronic stress can impair cognitive functioning, decision-making, emotional regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness (Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, & Cordova, 2005; Kyriacou, 2001). School administrators frequently navigate high-stakes accountability demands, extended work hours, policy shifts, and complex stakeholder expectations, all of which intensify occupational strain (Bauer, Suleiman, & Shearn, 2020; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Chronic exposure to these stressors is associated with fatigue, diminished self-efficacy, and compromised professional judgment, underscoring the need for initiative-taking strategies that bolster leader capacity and resiliency (Herman, Hickmon-Roy, Reinke, & Hollenbeck, 2020). In this context, stress management emerges not simply as a personal coping strategy but as a core competency within effective leadership, influencing leaders' ability to sustain focus, model adaptive behavior, and promote corporate stability.

Leadership development programs progressively include evidence-based stress management strategies, including mindfulness practices, cognitive reappraisal, and time management techniques, as foundational components of professional growth (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Mindfulness-based interventions, for example, have been shown to enhance self-awareness, reduce rumination, and support regulatory control under pressure, capacities that are critical for managing the emotional labor inherent in school leadership (Roeser et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016). Cognitive reappraisal, which involves reframing stressors to reduce negative emotional impact, has been linked with greater

psychological resilience and improved coping effectiveness among leaders (Gross, 2015; Taku, Oshio, & Hirano, 2015). Moreover, the systematic incorporation of time management and prioritization skills into leadership preparation programs equips administrators to balance competing demands more effectively, thereby reducing overload and enhancing well-being (Harris et al., 2021).

Empirical research also indicates that administrators who obtain comprehensive training in stress management report lower burnout rates, higher job satisfaction, and improved leadership performance (Riley, 2023; Aasa, Rutberg, & Faskunger, 2019). Studies examining mindfulness training for school leaders reveal reductions in perceived stress, improvements in affective well-being, and enhanced capacity for reflective practice (Hutchinson, Vellanki, & Borden, 2018). Similarly, programs which emphasize cognitive-behavioral strategies have been associated with increased self-efficacy and greater adaptive responses to organizational challenges (Beltman & Cin, 2015). These outcomes align with longitudinal evidence suggesting that leaders who cultivate effective stress management skills are more likely to sustain career longevity, engage constructively with colleagues, and facilitate positive school climates (Reeves, Honig, & Itter, 2020).

Given the relationship between leader well-being and school effectiveness, stress management should be positioned as both a professional and organizational priority within educational systems. Research on distributed leadership suggests that creating supportive environments in which stress management practices are normalized contributes to collective efficacy and reduces the isolating effects of administrative stress (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Harris, Jones, & Adams, 2016). Furthermore, organizational procedures that allocate time for reflective practice, professional learning communities, and wellness supports

can protect against stressors while encouraging sustainable leadership performance (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Riley, 2023). By embedding stress management into leadership development and organizational culture, educational systems can develop leaders who are not merely effective decision-makers but also resilient agents of long-term school improvement.

Leader Well-Being and Sustainability

Leader well-being plays a key role in sustaining effective educational leadership, as administrators' physical, emotional, and psychological health directly affects their capacity to lead and influence school outcomes (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021). Research suggests that leaders who maintain well-being show greater levels of engagement, clearer and more effective decision-making, and greater emotional management when interacting with staff and community stakeholders (Bauer et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2020). The emotional labor inherent in educational leadership, often intensified by accountability pressures, role ambiguity, and resource constraints, can contribute to stress and burnout if not addressed through intentional well-being supports (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Riley, 2023). Consequently, well-being is now recognized not only as a desirable attribute of individual leaders but as a systemic priority linked to organizational health and instructional coherence.

Professional development programs that incorporate self-care strategies, reflective practice, and wellness education have been shown to positively influence leader well-being and reduce the risk of burnout (Day & Gu, 2010; Herman, Hickmon-Roy, Reinke, & Hollenbeck, 2020). Mindfulness training, resilience coaching, and structured reflective protocols are among the approaches being integrated into leadership preparation and in-service professional learning to support administrators' adaptive capacities (Roeser et al., 2013; Aasa, Rutberg, & Faskunger, 2019). Such programs emphasize the development of self-awareness, stress management skills,

and intentional recovery practices that enable leaders to navigate the complex emotional and cognitive demands of school leadership (Hutchinson, Vellanki, & Borden, 2018). Emerging evidence further indicates that leaders who engage regularly in guided reflection and wellness activities demonstrate greater psychological capital. This is characterized by hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, which are positively associated with sustained performance and job satisfaction (Luthans, Youssef-Morgan, & Avolio, 2015; Riley, 2023).

Leader well-being also has important implications for organizational culture, as leaders who prioritize their own health are more likely to model and promote healthy practices among staff (Reeves, Honig, & Itter, 2020). Modeling well-being behaviors such as creating boundaries, practicing self-compassion, and engaging in restorative practices. This can shape school norms around work-life balance, collegial support, and emotional transparency, thereby contributing to positive school climates and enhanced teacher retention (Harris, Jones, & Adams, 2016; Browne-Ferrigno, Kowalski, & Young, 2021). Schools led by administrators who openly address well-being tend to report stronger professional relationships, increased staff morale, and a shared commitment to collective efficacy, all of which are linked to improved student outcomes (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Sun, Wang, & Shevlin, 2022). These organizational effects emphasize that leader well-being is not simply an individual concern but a tactical lever for facilitating sustainable school improvement.

Given the centrality of leader well-being to both individual and corporate success, educational systems are increasingly recognizing the need for supportive policies and structures that reinforce well-being as a dimension of professional practice. Organizational interventions such as workload adjustments, wellness incentives, time allocated for professional learning communities, and access to psychological health resources have been associated with decreased

stress and greater leadership sustainability (Harris et al., 2021; Riley, 2023). The distributed leadership frameworks that encourage shared responsibility and mutual support can mitigate isolation and reduce the emotional burden on individual administrators, thereby contributing to healthier work environments (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Day & Gu, 2010).

Through prioritizing well-being at both the individual and system levels, educational leaders and policymakers can strengthen the conditions for effective and enduring leadership to flourish.

Burnout and Turnover

Educational leadership roles are frequently associated with high levels of occupational stress and emotional exhaustion, indicating the demanding and multifaceted nature of school administration. In the United States, approximately 85% of principals report experiencing frequent job-related stress, with nearly half exhibiting symptoms consistent with burnout (Woo & Steiner, 2022). Leadership turnover remains a persistent concern, with nearly 18% of principals leaving their positions annually, contributing to organizational instability and disrupting school improvement initiatives (Goldring & Taie, 2018; Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021). These findings highlight the considerable pressures on school leaders, including accountability demands, high-stakes performance metrics, and complex stakeholder interactions, which can erode well-being and professional effectiveness (Bauer et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2020).

Assistant principals experience similar occupational stressors, managing discipline, operational planning, staff supervision, and instructional support simultaneously. Research shows that roughly 11% of assistant principals leave their positions each year, with an additional 12% transferring to other schools, resulting in high leadership mobility and possible gaps in organizational continuity (Meyer et al., 2020). These patterns underscore the cumulative burden on mid-level school administrators who must balance operational responsibilities with

instructional leadership, often without the autonomy or support structures afforded to principals (Brock & Grady, 2019). The resultant stress can limit leadership capacity and exacerbate systemic challenges in sustaining effective school practices (Day & Gu, 2010).

Teacher burnout further compounds leadership challenges, affecting both instructional outcomes and the broader organizational climate. National surveys indicate that approximately 59% of teachers report feeling burned out, with nearly one-third indicating intentions to leave the profession (Steiner & Woo, 2021). International data reveal similar trends: 19% of teachers across OECD countries report high levels of work-related stress (OECD, 2024). Such widespread occupational stress among educators places additional pressure on school leaders, who must navigate staffing shortages, maintain instructional quality, and foster supportive learning environments amid increasing demands (Kyriacou, 2001; Riley, 2023). Consequently, the interplay between teacher burnout and leadership stress creates systemic vulnerabilities within educational organizations.

Global studies additionally confirm the pervasive nature of stress across leadership levels. Longitudinal surveys, such as the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey, consistently report high levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, and excessive workloads among school administrators, with many principals working over 55 hours per week and experiencing burnout at levels significantly higher than the general population (Riley, 2023). At the district level, superintendents face pressures related to accountability systems, political scrutiny, and community expectations, with approximately 13% reporting intentions to leave their positions annually (Steiner et al., 2022). Collectively, these findings indicate that burnout and turnover affect multiple tiers of educational leadership, threatening workforce stability and highlighting the urgent need for targeted interventions to support leader well-being and

sustainability across the educational system (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Browne-Ferrigno et al., 2021).

Emerging Themes, Perspectives, and Theories

The literature reviewed reveals several interconnected themes shaping educational leadership practice. Rather than existing as isolated constructs, leadership preparation, emotional functioning, trauma awareness, resilience, and professional sustainability operate across individual, organizational, and systemic levels. These factors also influence how leaders navigate complex educational environments. Collectively, these themes underscore that effective and sustainable leadership requires alignment among human capacity, organizational practice, and policy systems design. This integrated framing positions leadership effectiveness as both a personal developmental process and a structural outcome of educational systems.

Educational Leadership Preparation, Evaluation, and Ethical Identity

When examined across individual, organizational, and societal perspectives, educational leadership standards (PSEL and NELP) function not only as structural frameworks guiding preparation and evaluation but also as mechanisms for shaping ethical identity. Ethical identity reflects an internalized commitment to justice, integrity, and equitable treatment of stakeholders, extending leadership beyond compliance toward morally grounded practice.

Within this framework, leadership standards require leaders to demonstrate emotional awareness, ethical reasoning, and resilience in response to increasingly complex school environments. These expectations position schools as both instructional and social institutions responsible for addressing inequities while supporting student success and well-being. As a

result, leadership practice becomes inseparable from ethical responsibility and relational accountability.

Resilience and transformational leadership theories further conceptualize schools as protective environments that buffer the effects of adversity while also functioning as systems of change. Educational leaders therefore serve a dual role: they must sustain stable learning environments while simultaneously advancing equity and organizational improvement. This dual expectation reinforces the importance of leadership preparation programs that extend beyond technical skill development to include ethical identity formation and adaptive leadership dispositions.

Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Functioning

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a foundational leadership competency that enables self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and relational effectiveness. Leaders with strong EI are better equipped to manage conflict, sustain trust, and foster collaborative organizational climates that support instructional improvement and staff engagement. Research suggests that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) may disrupt emotional regulation and executive functioning, making EI development particularly critical for leaders with trauma histories. In this context, emotional intelligence is both a developmental need and a professional competency that supports sustained leadership effectiveness. Coaching, reflective practice, and experiential learning strengthen EI by enhancing interpersonal awareness and adaptive communication skills (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Schools led by emotionally competent leaders consistently demonstrate stronger morale, improved collaboration, higher teacher retention, and better student outcomes. This indicates that

emotional intelligence functions not only at the individual level but also as a driver of organizational climate and system stability.

The importance of EI is reinforced through trauma theory, transformational leadership theory, and ethical leadership theory. Trauma theory explains how ACEs affect emotional regulation systems; transformational leadership theory emphasizes EI in motivating and inspiring others; and ethical leadership theory highlights its role in fairness, trust, and moral judgment. Deficits in EI therefore represent both a professional limitation and an ethical risk for educational systems.

Trauma-Informed Leadership

Trauma-informed leadership is increasingly essential due to the widespread exposure of students and educators to adversity. Leaders with ACE histories may demonstrate heightened empathy but also increased vulnerability to secondary traumatic stress in high-demand environments. Trauma-informed leadership emphasizes the creation of environments characterized by safety, trust, and relational consistency. These conditions support staff collaboration and organizational stability while shifting school responses from punitive approaches to restorative and relational practices. In doing so, trauma-informed leadership strengthens both school climate and institutional resilience.

This approach aligns with trauma theory's emphasis on the long-term neurobiological effects of adversity, ethical leadership's focus on safe and equitable environments, and transformational leadership's emphasis on individualized consideration and empowerment. Together, these frameworks position trauma-informed leadership as both a relational practice and a systemic improvement strategy.

Resilience and Stress Management

Resilience refers to the capacity to adapt and recover from challenges, while stress management involves maintaining cognitive and emotional functioning under sustained pressure. In educational leadership, these competencies are essential for sustaining performance in environments characterized by accountability pressures, workload demands, and complex stakeholder expectations. ACE exposure may both strengthen and constrain resilience. While adversity can foster adaptive coping strategies, it may also increase susceptibility to stress-related dysfunction. This dual impact underscores resilience as a dynamic process shaped by both individual history and environmental conditions.

Resilient leaders demonstrate reflective practice, emotional regulation, and adaptive problem-solving, all of which contribute to organizational stability and improved school outcomes. Stress management strategies such as mindfulness, cognitive reappraisal, and structured prioritization support leaders in maintaining effectiveness under pressure (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Riley, 2023). When embedded in professional development systems, these strategies strengthen both individual capacity and organizational resilience.

Across theoretical frameworks, resilience is understood as adaptive capacity (resilience theory), vulnerability is explained through trauma theory, persistence and modeling are emphasized in transformational leadership theory, and sustained functioning is framed as an ethical responsibility.

Leader Well-Being and Sustainability

Leader well-being encompasses physical, emotional, and psychological health and is directly linked to leadership effectiveness and organizational outcomes. Leaders with higher

well-being demonstrate stronger decision-making, improved relational engagement, and greater professional sustainability. ACE exposure may disrupt long-term stress regulation systems, reinforcing the need for intentional supports such as resilience coaching, peer mentorship, wellness resources, and structured reflective practice. Organizational strategies including flexible scheduling, wellness initiatives, and access to mental health supports further enhance sustainability.

Importantly, leader well-being functions as both an individual and systemic concern. Leaders who model balance and self-care influence organizational culture by improving staff morale, strengthening relational trust, and supporting retention. In this way, well-being becomes a leadership practice that shapes institutional norms. Across theoretical perspectives, trauma theory and resilience theory emphasize vulnerability and adaptation, transformational leadership theory highlights modeling of healthy behaviors, and ethical leadership theory underscores the responsibility to maintain personal effectiveness in service of others.

Burnout, Turnover, and Systemic Instability

Burnout and leadership attrition remain persistent challenges across educational systems. High levels of stress and emotional exhaustion among principals and assistant principals contribute to significant turnover rates, undermining organizational continuity and school improvement efforts. Teacher burnout further compounds these challenges, producing systemic workforce instability that affects school climate and student outcomes.

These patterns demonstrate that burnout is not solely an individual issue, but a systemic condition shaped by workload expectations, insufficient supports, and structural constraints. The cumulative effect is weakened leadership pipelines and reduced capacity for sustained

organizational improvement. Within this context, trauma theory explains individual vulnerability to stress-related outcomes, resilience theory emphasizes adaptive capacity as a protective factor, and transformational and ethical leadership theories highlight the responsibility of leaders to sustain effective and equitable educational environments.

Integrative Human Capacity, Organizational Practice, and Systems Design

The literature and theoretical frameworks collectively reveal three interconnected perspectives shaping educational leadership: human capacity, organizational practice, and policy and systems design. From a human capacity perspective, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) influence cognitive, emotional, and motivational systems that shape intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and decision-making. These influences may create enduring patterns that affect leadership functioning, particularly in high-demand environments requiring emotional regulation and reflective judgment.

From an organizational practice perspective, leadership effectiveness is shaped by relational dynamics and workplace conditions. Positive leader–teacher relationships are associated with improved retention, stronger school climate, and enhanced student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021). However, when leaders are insufficiently prepared for emotional and trauma-related demands, the risk of burnout and diminished effectiveness increases, contributing to organizational instability.

From a policy and systems design perspective, leadership preparation, professional development, and evaluation systems play a central role in shaping readiness for practice. Although these systems emphasize instructional and managerial competencies, they often underemphasize emotional, psychological, and relational dimensions of leadership. This

misalignment creates a gap between preparation and the lived realities of school leadership, weakening long-term sustainability.

Across all three perspectives, the literature consistently demonstrates that sustainable educational leadership requires integration across human, organizational, and systemic domains. Strengthening emotional intelligence, trauma responsiveness, resilience, and well-being within leadership preparation and policy frameworks is essential for developing leaders capable of sustaining effective schools and fostering healthy educational communities.

Ethical Implications

Educational leadership involves complex decision-making processes that directly affect students, teachers, families, and communities. Ethical Leadership Theory emphasizes that these decisions carry a profound societal responsibility, requiring leaders to ensure that schools remain environments that promote opportunity, fairness, and overall well-being. The ethical implications of leadership extend beyond individual actions to include how leaders are prepared, supported, and sustained within their roles. When leadership systems do not intentionally cultivate the emotional, psychological, and professional capacities necessary for effective practice, they risk undermining equitable and ethical leadership. In such conditions, leaders may engage in reactive, inconsistent, or inequitable decision-making, which can negatively influence school climate, teacher well-being, and student outcomes.

At the core of ethical leadership is the leader's internal capacity to regulate emotions, engage in reflective thinking, and respond to complex situations with intentionality and care. Leadership is not solely a technical function but also a deeply human process shaped by cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors. Exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) may significantly influence these internal processes by shaping how individuals interpret

stress, regulate emotions, and approach decision-making. Research indicates that ACEs can affect neurological development, stress-response systems, and perceptions of control, all of which contribute to patterns of motivation and behavior across the lifespan. These influences can shape how leaders respond to challenges, interact with others, and make decisions in high-pressure environments.

When leaders have trouble regulating stress or managing emotional demands, their ability to make ethically grounded decisions may be compromised. Chronic stress can impair cognitive flexibility, limit reflective judgment, and increase the likelihood of reactive responses. In these situations, leaders may prioritize immediate problem-solving over thoughtful, equitable decision-making, potentially conflicting with ethical responsibilities. Additionally, shifts in self-efficacy or locus of control associated with early adversity may influence a leader's sense of agency, affecting their willingness to advocate for change or challenge inequitable practices. These dynamics illustrate that ethical leadership is closely tied to a leader's capacity for self-awareness, emotional regulation, and resilience.

The ethical framework developed by Beauchamp and Childress (beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, and respect for persons) provides a critical lens for understanding these challenges. Beneficence requires leaders to act in ways that promote the well-being of students and staff, while nonmaleficence emphasizes the responsibility to avoid harm. Justice calls for fairness and equity in decision-making, and respect for persons highlights the importance of honoring the dignity and individuality of all members of the school community. When leaders are not adequately equipped to manage stress or engage in reflective practice, their ability to consistently uphold these principles may be diminished. Ethical decision-making requires not

only knowledge of these principles but also the internal capacity to apply them thoughtfully in complex and often emotionally charged situations.

The organizational context in which leaders operate further shapes the ethical dimensions of leadership. Schools are relational environments where leadership decisions influence trust, collaboration, and professional culture. Research demonstrates that strong relationships between school leaders and teachers are associated with improved teacher retention, more positive organizational climates, and better student outcomes. Leaders who are able to communicate effectively, demonstrate empathy, and foster supportive environments contribute to cultures of trust and shared responsibility. These relational dynamics are essential for sustaining ethical practice, as they create the conditions in which fairness, respect, and collaboration can thrive.

However, when leaders are overwhelmed by stress or lack adequate preparation to navigate complex emotional and organizational demands, these relationships may be strained. High levels of stress and emotional exhaustion can reduce a leader's capacity for patience, empathy, and reflective engagement, leading to interactions that may be perceived as inconsistent or unsupportive. Over time, this can erode trust and weaken the organizational climate, making it more difficult to sustain collaborative and equitable practices. Such outcomes raise ethical concerns, as they may indirectly contribute to harm within the school community, conflicting with the principle of nonmaleficence.

Leadership stability is another critical factor influencing ethical practice. High rates of burnout and turnover among school leaders disrupt school improvement efforts, weaken organizational coherence, and negatively affect teacher retention and student outcomes. When leaders leave positions frequently, schools may experience a lack of continuity in vision, inconsistent implementation of policies, and diminished trust among staff. These disruptions can

create inequities in student experiences and access to resources, raising concerns related to justice. Ethical leadership, therefore, requires not only effective decision-making in the present but also the ability to sustain leadership over time in ways that support long-term organizational stability.

The broader systems that prepare and evaluate educational leaders play a significant role in shaping these outcomes. Leadership preparation programs, professional development initiatives, and evaluation frameworks are designed to equip leaders with the knowledge and skills necessary for their roles. However, these systems often emphasize technical competencies such as instructional leadership, data analysis, and operational management, while providing limited attention to emotional intelligence, trauma-informed practice, resilience, and well-being. This imbalance creates a gap between the demands of leadership and the preparation leaders receive, raising important ethical concerns.

When leaders are placed in high-stakes roles without adequate preparation to manage stress, navigate trauma-informed contexts, or engage in reflective decision-making, the risk of ethical compromise increases. Leaders may struggle to respond effectively to the diverse and complex needs of students and staff, potentially leading to decisions that are inconsistent, inequitable, or reactive. From an ethical standpoint, this represents a failure to fully uphold the principles of beneficence and justice, as leaders may be unable to consistently promote well-being and fairness within their schools.

Furthermore, the absence of structured supports for leader well-being and professional growth can contribute to burnout and attrition, exacerbating systemic challenges within education. Leaders who do not have access to mentorship, reflective practice opportunities, or wellness resources may find it difficult to sustain their effectiveness over time. This not only

affects individual leaders but also has broader implications for the stability and effectiveness of educational systems. Ensuring that leaders are supported in developing and maintaining their well-being is therefore an ethical imperative, as it directly influences their ability to serve others effectively.

Integrating competencies such as emotional intelligence, trauma-informed leadership, resilience, stress management, and well-being into leadership preparation and professional development is essential for addressing these challenges. These competencies support leaders in navigating the emotional and cognitive demands of their roles while maintaining alignment with ethical principles. Emotional intelligence enhances the ability to engage in empathetic and respectful interactions, while resilience and stress management support sustained performance under pressure. Trauma-informed leadership ensures that leaders are equipped to recognize and respond to the needs of individuals affected by adversity, promoting environments that are safe, supportive, and inclusive.

Ultimately, ethical educational leadership requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes the interconnected nature of individual capacity, organizational dynamics, and systemic structures. When any of these elements are insufficiently addressed, the potential for ethical compromise increases. Leadership systems that fail to adequately prepare and support leaders may unintentionally undermine the very principles they are intended to uphold. Addressing these gaps requires intentional efforts to align leadership preparation, professional development, and organizational supports with the full scope of leadership demands. By prioritizing the development of emotional, psychological, and ethical capacities alongside technical skills, educational systems can better ensure that leaders are equipped to meet the complex challenges of their roles. In doing so, they strengthen the ability of leaders to make

thoughtful, equitable decisions that promote the well-being of students, teachers, and communities. This alignment is essential not only for effective leadership practice but also for upholding the ethical foundations of education as a system committed to opportunity, fairness, and human development.

Recommendations

Beyond leadership preparation, educational systems must also reconsider how leaders are supported once they enter professional roles. Organizational structures that prioritize leader well-being, distributed leadership, and collaborative decision-making can mitigate the isolation and workload pressures frequently experienced by school administrators. Leadership evaluation systems should extend beyond traditional performance indicators to include measures of relational leadership, ethical practice, and the capacity to cultivate supportive and equitable school cultures.

Furthermore, policies that ensure sustained professional learning opportunities, access to mental health resources, and realistic workload expectations are essential for maintaining leadership sustainability and advancing equity. By aligning leadership preparation, professional development, and evaluation systems with competencies emphasized in trauma-informed, ethical, and transformational leadership frameworks, educational systems can develop leaders who are better equipped to sustain effective practice while supporting the well-being of students, educators, and communities, particularly those from historically marginalized or underserved populations.

Policy recommendations for sustainable educational leadership emphasize the integration of trauma-informed leadership competencies within preparation programs aligned to Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). Embedding trauma-informed practices enhances

leaders' ability to address the needs of students and staff in ethical and equitable ways, fostering safe and inclusive school environments while promoting professional sustainability. This includes providing training on the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on neurodevelopment, stress regulation, and executive functioning (Felitti et al., 1998; Gong et al., 2025), as well as incorporating evidence-based interventions to support trauma-affected students and staff in practical, school-based contexts (Cole et al., 2013; Burke et al., 2019).

In addition, leadership preparation programs should explicitly integrate emotional intelligence (EI) development through both coursework and ongoing professional learning. Strengthening EI enhances leaders' capacity to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics, sustain positive organizational climates, and make ethically sound decisions under pressure (George, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This can be operationalized through coaching and mentorship models that emphasize self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001), alongside the use of assessment tools that monitor growth in EI competencies and inform continuous development.

Equally important is the inclusion of resilience and stress management training as a core component of leadership development. Professional learning opportunities focused on resilience-building equip leaders to cope with occupational demands, maintain effectiveness, and reduce burnout, thereby contributing to overall school stability. Establishing peer support networks and mentorship structures can foster both social and professional resilience (Gu & Day, 2007), while incorporating practices such as mindfulness, cognitive reappraisal, and reflective exercises promotes adaptive coping strategies (Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

Leader well-being must also be prioritized as a central element of sustainable leadership practice. Supporting the mental health and well-being of school leaders promotes longevity in

leadership roles, reduces turnover, and models healthy organizational practices for staff. Leadership preparation and professional development programs should integrate self-care, mental health awareness, and work–life balance strategies (Day & Gu, 2010; Riley, 2023). At the systems level, districts should provide wellness resources, access to counseling, and workload management structures to reduce chronic stress, while incorporating regular assessments of leader well-being into evaluation frameworks to ensure that supports are data-informed and responsive.

ACE-informed leadership policies further extend this work by recognizing the influence of adverse childhood experiences on leadership performance and development. Policies at the state, district, and university levels should incorporate ACE-informed perspectives to support ethical and effective leadership in trauma-affected educational contexts. This includes integrating reflective practices and ACE awareness into preparation programs, offering targeted coaching for leaders with higher ACE exposure, and ensuring that leadership assessment frameworks evaluate socio-emotional competencies and well-being alongside instructional and operational performance indicators.

Finally, implications for professional development and state standards underscore the importance of aligning leadership systems with socio-emotional, trauma-informed, and well-being competencies. Grounded in PSEL and related policy frameworks, these efforts should explicitly integrate such competencies into leadership preparation while incentivizing ongoing professional development in emotional intelligence, resilience, and trauma-informed practice. Measurable outcomes tied to evaluation and advancement can reinforce these priorities. Additionally, international research, including longitudinal findings from the Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey, highlights the importance of systemic

interventions to reduce burnout and leadership turnover (Riley, 2023), further supporting the need for comprehensive, policy-driven approaches to sustainable educational leadership.

Across these domains, leadership policy should operationalize implementation through structured preparation requirements, ongoing assessment systems, and embedded professional learning expectations. This includes formal integration of trauma-informed competencies, emotional intelligence development metrics, resilience and stress management training, and leader well-being indicators within leadership evaluation and advancement systems. Collectively, these aligned mechanisms ensure that leadership preparation is not only conceptual but also measurable, actionable, and sustained through policy structures.

Summary

Educational leadership plays a central role in shaping school effectiveness, teacher performance, and student achievement. Research consistently identifies school leadership as the second most influential school-based factor affecting student outcomes, after classroom instruction. Effective leaders establish vision, shape school culture, support instructional quality, and build conditions that promote teaching and learning. However, the scope of the principalship has expanded significantly over the past two decades. Today's school leaders are responsible for instructional leadership, accountability compliance, staff development, student behavior, crisis response, and community engagement, while also addressing the social-emotional needs of students and staff. These expanding responsibilities have contributed to elevated stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, raising concerns about leadership sustainability and system stability.

Leadership turnover is a persistent challenge in K–12 education. National data indicate that a notable percentage of principals leave or transfer annually, disrupting school improvement

efforts, weakening organizational coherence, and negatively affecting teacher retention and student outcomes. These patterns highlight leadership stability as a critical issue in educational systems. While organizational and structural factors influencing burnout have been widely studied, this paper emphasizes the importance of individual-level factors particularly Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in shaping leadership functioning and sustainability.

ACEs refer to experiences of childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction that can have long-term effects on neurological development, stress regulation, emotional functioning, and behavior across the lifespan. A substantial proportion of adults report exposure to at least one ACE, with many experiencing multiple forms of adversity. Research indicates that ACEs can alter stress-response systems and executive functioning, influencing emotional regulation, decision-making, and coping under pressure. In the context of educational leadership, these effects may shape how leaders manage stress, respond to conflict, and sustain professional effectiveness in high-demand environments. As a result, ACE exposure may contribute to differences in emotional intelligence, resilience, stress tolerance, and overall leadership sustainability.

Educational leadership expectations are guided by the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), which emphasize vision, instructional leadership, equity, ethical practice, school culture, and community engagement. These standards, along with the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards, define the competencies required for effective leadership practice and inform preparation and evaluation systems across the United States. While these frameworks address technical, instructional, and organizational competencies, they often provide limited emphasis on emotional intelligence, trauma-informed

leadership, stress management, resilience, and leader well-being. This gap is significant given the emotional and psychological demands of modern school leadership.

Emotional intelligence is a foundational competency for effective leadership. It includes self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skill. Leaders with strong emotional intelligence are better able to manage conflict, build trust, support staff, and maintain positive school climates. Emotional intelligence also supports reflective decision-making and adaptability in complex environments. Research consistently links emotionally intelligent leadership to improved teacher morale, stronger collaboration, and more stable school environments. Given the potential impact of ACEs on emotional regulation, emotional intelligence development is especially important for leaders with trauma histories.

Trauma-informed leadership has also become increasingly essential in education due to widespread exposure to trauma among students and educators. Trauma-informed leaders create environments characterized by safety, consistency, and relational trust. They shift disciplinary approaches from punitive models toward restorative and supportive practices, which improves school climate and student engagement. Trauma-informed leadership also helps address secondary traumatic stress among educators. When implemented effectively, it contributes to stronger organizational coherence, improved staff collaboration, and more equitable school practices.

Resilience and stress management are closely related competencies that support leadership effectiveness under pressure. Resilience refers to the ability to adapt and recover from challenges, while stress management involves maintaining emotional and cognitive functioning in high-pressure conditions. Educational leaders must navigate accountability pressures, workload demands, and complex interpersonal dynamics. Resilient leaders demonstrate

reflective practice, emotional regulation, and adaptive problem-solving, which support organizational stability and continuity. Stress management strategies such as mindfulness, cognitive reappraisal, and structured prioritization have been shown to reduce burnout and improve leadership effectiveness.

Leader well-being is a central factor in sustaining effective leadership practice. Physical, emotional, and psychological health directly influence decision-making, relational engagement, and leadership performance. Leaders who maintain well-being are more likely to model healthy behaviors, foster supportive organizational cultures, and promote staff retention. Conversely, chronic stress and burnout can impair judgment, reduce effectiveness, and contribute to leadership attrition. As such, well-being is both an individual responsibility and a system-level priority essential for long-term leadership sustainability.

Burnout and turnover remain significant challenges across all levels of educational leadership, including principals, assistant principals, and superintendents. High levels of stress and emotional exhaustion contribute to leadership attrition, which disrupts school continuity and weakens improvement efforts. Teacher burnout further compounds these challenges, creating systemic strain that increases demands on school leaders. Collectively, these patterns illustrate that burnout is not an isolated individual issue but a systemic condition shaped by workload, limited supports, and organizational structures.

Across the literature, several key themes emerge. First, leadership effectiveness is not solely a technical skill set but a combination of emotional, psychological, and ethical capacities. Second, ACEs may influence leadership functioning by shaping emotional regulation, stress response, and resilience. Third, leadership preparation systems often underemphasize these human dimensions, creating a gap between preparation and practice. Finally, sustainable

leadership requires integration across three levels: individual capacity, organizational practice, and system design.

From an ethical perspective, these findings raise important concerns. Educational leaders are responsible for promoting fairness, well-being, and opportunity for all stakeholders. However, when leaders are insufficiently prepared to manage emotional demands or supported in sustaining well-being, their ability to make ethical decisions may be compromised. Chronic stress can reduce reflective judgment and increase reactive decision-making, which may negatively affect school climate and equity. Ethical leadership therefore requires not only technical competence but also emotional stability, self-awareness, and organizational support.

Policy and practice implications emphasize the need to expand leadership preparation and evaluation systems to include emotional intelligence, trauma-informed leadership, resilience, stress management, and well-being. Leadership development programs should incorporate coaching, reflective practice, mentorship, and mindfulness-based strategies. At the organizational level, districts should provide wellness supports, manageable workloads, and professional learning structures that promote sustainability. Leadership evaluation systems should also assess relational and ethical competencies, not solely instructional performance.

In conclusion, sustainable educational leadership requires a more comprehensive approach that integrates human capacity, organizational support, and system-level design. Addressing the emotional and psychological dimensions of leadership particularly in relation to ACEs, trauma, and stress strengthens leadership effectiveness and stability. By aligning leadership preparation, professional development, and policy frameworks with these competencies, educational systems can better support leaders in maintaining well-being, improving school outcomes, and sustaining long-term organizational success.

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