

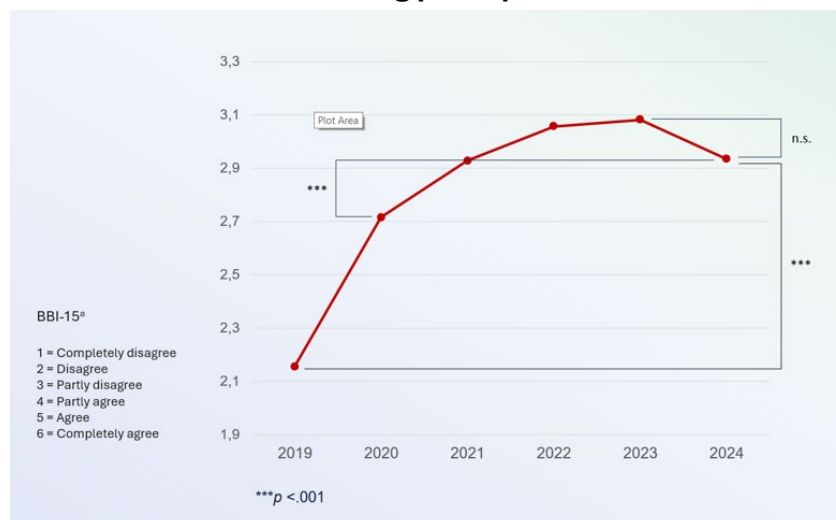
Light at the end of the tunnel for principals as burnout eases and engagement rebounds

After years of strain, the latest survey examining the workplace wellbeing of Finnish school leaders shows an upswing. For years, the annual Principals' Barometer painted a bleak picture of the pressure they were under. But 2024 marked a turning point. “The covid pandemic cast a long shadow,” says Academy Professor Katariina Salmela-Aro of the University of Helsinki.

Conducted each spring, the [Principals' Barometer](#) explores their workplace wellbeing. The data comprise an online questionnaire charting the school leaders' experiences of workplace wellbeing, professional and personal requirements and resources, stressors, training needs and tailoring work and leisure activities. In addition, Firstbeat measurements are conducted to register participants' heart rate variability, stress, sleep, physical activity and recovery. This provides a comprehensive overview of the leaders' overall strain and how work-related stress affects their leisure and sleep.

Born out of the initiative of the Finnish Association of Principals immediately before the pandemic, the barometer offers a detailed account of how the pandemic and subsequent events shaped school leaders' coping capacity. Their burnout increased dramatically from 2019 to 2023.

The trend of burnout among principals:



^aNäätänen, P., Aro, A., Matthiesen, S. & Salmela-Aro, K. (2003). Bergen Burnout Indicator-15. Edita. Y axis: Mean total BBI-15 score at each time point

“The pandemic worsened the drop in the leaders’ workplace wellbeing. However, the ongoing decline well after the pandemic suggests that other factors of workplace wellbeing and work engagement must also be considered. Although we now finally see improvements, we remain a long way from pre-pandemic conditions,” notes **Antti Ikonen**, President of the Finnish Association of Principals.

Three groups emerge from the data: “normative” (46%), “engaged” (29%) and “burned out” (25%). The pandemic reduced the number of individuals feeling strong work engagement, while increasing those who felt burned out. Work engagement did not begin to rise again until 2023 and 2024.

“It seems the past five or six years completely drained people’s reserves, and recovery has been slow. But now school leaders’ sense of doing meaningful work and having opportunities for influence is gradually being restored. Their sense of societal appreciation for their job has also grown,” says Academy Professor **Katariina Salmela-Aro**, who leads the study.

New skills required

The key stressors cited by school leaders in 2024 involved their workload and lack of time. These were followed by teachers’ ability to cope and lack of resources.

School leaders call for more training in areas such as managing school community wellbeing, crises leadership and socio-emotional skills training.

“A school leader’s role differs from that of a teacher and it requires both fundamental training to handle the job responsibilities but also sufficient continued education over the course of one’s career. For the second consecutive time, the development of leadership in educational institutions remains an objective in the Finnish government programme. The Ministry of Education and Culture has effective plans ready to go, and it’s high time they were put into effect,” says Ikonen.

Record number of survey participants

The latest survey of school leaders points to several positive findings as well: for example, the threat of violence and the bullying and other mental abuse experienced by school leaders have begun to decline. All in all, the violence reported is limited in scope.

A record number of school leaders, almost 800, completed the survey in 2024. Of them, some 150 participated in physiological Firstbeat measurements and have since received personal feedback on these.

Such measurements provide data that questionnaires cannot, explains Professor **Minna Huotilainen** of the University of Helsinki.

“The Firstbeat measurements of school leaders have shown that they experience less stress during the working day if they have tailored their leisure time to suit their well-being needs” she points out.

The school leader survey is part of the [EDUCA \(Education for the Future\) Flagship](#) funded by the Research Council of Finland, promoting education development based on research and supporting knowledge-based leadership. The Flagship focus areas include strengthening the skills of teachers and education leaders. The University of Helsinki is responsible for the annual school leader survey and it is conducted in collaboration with the international [Principal Health and Wellbeing research project](#).

[Summary of the 2024 survey findings](#)

Further information:

Iira Hartikainen, Communications and Interaction Specialist, University of Jyväskylä, EDUCA Flagship

iira.j.hartikainen@jyu.fi, +358 50 520 4652

Katariina Salmela-Aro, Academy Professor, University of Helsinki
katariina.salmela-aro@helsinki.fi, +358 50 415 5283

Minna Huotilainen, Professor, University of Helsinki
minna.huotilainen@helsinki.fi, +358 40 560 8304

Päivi Ikola, President, Finnish Association of Principals
paivi.ikola@tampere.fi, +358 40 594 0946