School Administrators' Perspectives on Labour Relations: Survey Results and Analysis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report analyzes the results of a survey of Ontario school administrators launched in May 2011. This survey was conducted as a component of the IRC’s education labour relations research initiative. The purposes of conducting this survey were to 1) gain a better understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and perspectives of school administrators as they relate to labour relations, and 2) inform the development of customized labour relations programmes for school administrators and other education sector stakeholders.

The data in this research brief are based on responses from 280 school administrators in school boards reporting to 2 of 6 regional offices of the Ontario Ministry of Education. The survey sought school administrators’ perspectives on the labour relations environment, their relationships with other stakeholders, school-level conflict management and grievance resolution, and opportunities for labour relations-focused professional development.

In general, the results of the survey suggest that:

- School administrators agree that fostering a healthy and productive labour relations environment is important to student success and achievement;
- School administrators perceive the labour relations environment to be healthier at the school-level than at the provincial- or board-levels;
- The relationships between school administrators and the majority of their teaching and support staff are quite good, and have improved in the recent past;
- The relationships between school administrators and union representatives are generally good, but have deteriorated somewhat in the recent past;
- School administrators’ relationships with school board managers and superintendents are generally good, but school administrators would prefer more support in labour relations matters;
- School administrators make a concerted effort to resolve teacher and support worker conflicts and grievances at the school level, but are often circumvented by senior management and union representatives;
- Frequent and open communication between school administrators and all stakeholders is an important determinant of a healthy and productive labour relations environment; and
- Relationships are the most productive in school boards where administrators are provided with labour relations-focused professional development and/or where school boards take active measures to ensure that administrators are familiar with collective agreements and human resource policies.
INTRODUCTION

School administrators (i.e. principals and vice-principals) are critical to the success of Ontario’s publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools. Although they are recognized primarily as educational leaders, their roles and responsibilities are much broader. In particular, the role of school administrators in labour relations and human resource management is increasingly important to the day-to-day operation of individual schools. However, initial research (Sweeney, 2011) suggests that many principals and vice-principals face numerous challenges—challenges for which they are often under-prepared—in their jobs. These challenges often impede the ability of school administrators to carry out their work to the full extent of their abilities. They also impact the ability of school boards to recruit and retain high-quality school administrators over the long-term.

The IRC is currently involved in a major research initiative focused on labour relations in Ontario’s publicly-funded elementary and secondary education sector. An overview of this initiative is available in the October 2011 Research Briefs. The research conducted and published through this initiative is of interest to education sector stakeholders, academics, LR/HR professionals, and policy-makers alike. It is also designed to inform the development of customized labour relations-focused professional development programming for education sector stakeholders.

As a component of this initiative, surveys of 4 separate groups of education sector stakeholders—including school administrators—were launched in May 2011. The survey of school administrators focused on 1) respondents’ perspectives on the labour relations environment, 2) their relationships with other stakeholders, 3) conflict management and dispute resolution strategies, and 4) opportunities for labour relations-themed professional development. This report begins with a brief discussion of the evolution of the roles and responsibilities of principals and vice-principals in Ontario’s publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools to provide context for the research initiative. Following this, the report describes the survey data and summaries key findings. The report concludes with a discussion of potential opportunities to manage conflict and address common irritants through labour relations-focused professional development for principals and vice-principals. In so doing, principals and vice-principals could then spend a greater proportion of their time working in partnership with teachers and staff to promote student success and healthy learning environments.

THE GOVERNANCE OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS IN ONTARIO

The roles and responsibilities of school administrators are integral to the operation of individual schools. They can also be highly contested, largely as a result of the complexity of the roles, responsibilities, and relationships that school administrators are required to assume. Moreover, school administrators represent an interesting group of managers in that the vast majority are trained as teachers. This phenomenon is increasingly rare, especially in many unionized environments, where employers frequently draw upon professional managers to fill leadership roles and promote bargaining unit members less and less frequently.

School administrators were members of Ontario’s teachers’ federations from 1975 to 1998. The original decision to include school administrators in teacher bargaining units was predicated on the notion that
they identified first and foremost with their teacher colleagues and were seldom involved in decisions that resulted in employee discipline (the latter being left to school board personnel) (Downie, 1992). Although school administrators were restricted from engaging in job action, they were governed by the same collective agreements as teachers. Until the late 1990s, many school administrators even took on leadership roles in their respective federations. As many school administrators and union representatives interviewed as a component of the research initiative attest, this experience was often valued by trustees and included as criteria for promotion to leadership positions within school boards.

School administrators were removed from teacher bargaining units in 1998 by Mike Harris’ provincial Conservative government. By extension, they were also exempted from the Ontario Labour Relations Act and, like other managerial and confidential employees, unable to access any statutory framework for collective representation (Shilton, 2012). Many other participants in the IRC’s broader research initiative felt that this was done to formalize and prioritize their managerial responsibilities.

The removal of school administrators from teacher bargaining units had several significant consequences. First, many teachers were deterred from seeking administrative positions. Shortages of willing candidates and a lack of succession planning represent persistent challenges for many school boards in Ontario. These shortages are partly related to the increasing complexity and time pressures of the occupation and an increasing lack of collegiality between school administrators and teaching staff. Second, school administrators sought alternative forms of representation. Three principals’ councils—the Ontario Principals’ Council (OPC), the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario (CPCO), and the Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO)—have taken a more direct role in representing the interests of school administrators in Ontario since the late 1990s. Originally formed as voluntary professional associations, Ontario’s principals’ councils now play more formal roles in negotiating terms and conditions of employment and supporting their members in workplace disputes. While they lack statutory bargaining rights, a Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) issued by the provincial government in 2010 requires that school boards negotiate the terms and conditions of employment with principals and vice-principals, usually through their principals’ councils. The emergence of principals’ councils as legal non-statutory bargaining agents representing managerial workers is of great interest to the IRC and is the likely subject of future research. Finally, these challenges and innovations in representation over the past decade leave little doubt that school administrators play one of the most important roles in promoting and enhancing a safe, healthy, and productive environment that is conducive to student success. Enhanced support for school administrators—particularly in the area of labour relations—is likely to have noticeable and positive impacts on the overall success of publicly-funded elementary and secondary education in Ontario.

RESULTS

The survey was developed between January and April 2011 after consultations with several groups sponsored by the Ministry of Education. These groups included the Minister’s Principals Reference

1 Policy/Program Memorandum No. 152. Issued February 12, 2010. Available online at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/152.html

2 The author presented an initial review of the evolution of the governance of school administrators in Ontario at the Canadian Industrial Relations Association meetings in Calgary, Alberta on May 30, 2012.
Group (MPRG), the Support Workers Advisory Group (SWAG), and the Tripartite Teacher Advisory Committee (TTAC). French and English versions of the survey were initially launched online in May 2011 with the help of individual school boards.

The survey consisted of a total of 103 questions organized into 5 sections. Many questions were conditional upon previous responses, and several were open-ended. Section 1, Respondent Information, included 24 questions related to demographics and experience working in public education. Section 2, Labour Relations, included 18 questions related to the relationships of school administrators with other education sector stakeholders, 2 of which were open-ended. Section 3, Conflict Management and Grievance Resolution, included 16 questions related to the role of school administrators in conflict management and grievance resolution in their respective schools, 2 of which were open-ended. Section 4, Opportunities for Professional Development, included 31 questions to help determine the optimal audiences and content of labour relations-focused professional development for school administrators and other education sector stakeholders, 5 of which were open-ended. Section 5, Logistics of Delivering Professional Development, included 8 questions related to the practicalities of delivering professional development (e.g. length of program, time of year, location, barriers to participation), 2 of which were open-ended. The final section of the survey included 6 questions, 5 of which were open-ended and designed to provide respondents with opportunities to comment freely on several aspects of the survey.

A total of 384 respondents participated in the survey. Of this number, 366 elected to respond to the English version and 18 to the French version. The majority of respondents (280) worked in English-language school boards that reported to the Ministry of Education’s London and Ottawa regional offices. To ensure the validity of the data and to reduce outliers, this report focuses solely on this pool of respondents.

1. Respondent Information

At the time of the survey, just over two-thirds of respondents were employed as principals and just under one-third were employed vice-principals (Figure 1.1). Seventy per cent were employed by a public school board and thirty per cent were employed by a Catholic school board (Figure 1.2). Just over half of all respondents were female, nearly forty per cent were male, and one-tenth did not identify their gender (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.1 - Please select the option that best describes your current position:
On average, respondents had held their current position for just over 5 years. The vast majority had experience working as a teacher in Ontario, although a small number did not (Figure 1.4). The average amount of time that respondents worked as a teacher before accepting a job as a school administrator was just over 14 years. Some school administrators had teaching duties in addition to their administrative duties, although most did not (Figure 1.5). The majority of those with teaching duties were vice-principals. In fact, over two-thirds of vice-principals in the schools in which respondents worked had teaching duties (Figure 1.6). Of the school administrators surveyed, nearly thirteen per cent had worked in provinces other than Ontario (Figure 1.7). At least one respondent had worked in every Canadian province or territory, with the exception of Prince Edward Island and the Yukon (Figure 1.8). Additionally, over seven per cent had experience teaching (non-ESL) outside of Canada.

Most principals had experience working as a vice-principal (Figure 1.9). On average, these respondents worked as a vice-principal for just over 3 years prior to becoming a principal. The maximum number of years worked as a vice-principal was 8, and the minimum was 1. The average number of years that principals had been employed as such was almost 7. The minimum was 1 and the maximum was 29.
Figure 1.4 - Do you have previous experience working as a teacher in Ontario?

Figure 1.5 - Do you currently have teaching responsibilities in addition to your administrative duties?

Figure 1.6 - Do any of the vice-principals in your school have teaching responsibilities?
Figure 1.7 - Do you have experience working as a teacher elsewhere in Canada (outside of Ontario)?

![Bar chart showing the number of respondents who have experience working as a teacher elsewhere in Canada (outside of Ontario).]

Figure 1.8 - Other than Ontario, in which provinces or territories do you have experience working as a teacher?

![Bar chart showing the number of respondents who have experience working as a teacher in various provinces and territories.]

Figure 1.9 - Do you have experience working as a vice-principal in Ontario? (Note: question was conditional upon identifying as a principal)

![Bar chart showing the number of respondents who have experience working as a vice-principal in Ontario.]

Just over two-thirds of respondents worked in elementary schools. The remainder worked in secondary schools, save for a small number who worked in schools that taught both elementary and secondary students (Figure 1.10). Most worked in schools with an enrollment of either between 250 and 499 students or between 500 and 999 students (Figure 1.11). Almost half of the schools in which respondents worked had one vice-principal, where over a quarter had none. A small number had 2 or 3 vice-principals (Figure 1.12). The number of permanently employed teachers in the schools administered by respondents ranged from below 10 to over 100, with most falling in the 10-24 range (Figure 1.13). Over sixty per cent of schools had less than 10 support staff, although some had upwards of 50 (Figure 1.14).
Figure 1.12 - How many vice-principals are employed at the school in which you currently work?

Figure 1.13 - How many full-time, permanent teachers work in your school?

Figure 1.14 - Approximately how many support staff work in your school?
2. Labour Relations

There was a general consensus that the labour relations environment was important to student success and achievement. In total, only one respondent selected the ‘only minutely important’ option and only three selected the ‘neutral’ option. Over eighty per cent of school administrators surveyed believed that the labour relations environment was ‘very important’ to student success and achievement, and just over seventeen per cent believed that it was ‘somewhat important’ (Figure 2.1).

Respondents were also asked about their perceptions of the current labour relations environment in Ontario’s publicly-funded elementary and secondary education sector. More specifically, they were asked to share their perceptions of education sector labour relations at the provincial level, in the school board for which they worked, and in the school in which they worked. School administrators perceived the labour relations environment to be generally good. For the most part, they found it to be better in individual schools (Figure 2.2) than in school boards (Figure 2.3), and to be better in school boards than in the province as a whole (Figure 2.4). School administrators in public English-language elementary schools were particularly critical of the labour relations environment in Ontario’s publicly-funded elementary and secondary education sector (Figure 2.5). Their perceptions of school-level labour relations were also slightly more critical than their counterparts in secondary and Catholic schools (Figure 2.6). Principals were also more likely than vice-principals to have a critical view of labour relations at the provincial level (Figure 2.7).
Figure 2.3 - How would you describe the labour relations environment in the school board that administers the school in which you currently work?

Figure 2.4 - How would you describe the labour relations environment in Ontario’s education sector?

Figure 2.5 - How would you describe the labour relations environment in Ontario’s education sector?
Respondents were then asked to describe their relationships with teaching and support staff, school board managers and supervisory officers, and representatives of unions representing teachers and educational support workers. Two types of questions were included; one that captured the current state of the relationship, and another that captured the relationship over time. In general, respondents identified having good relationships with all parties, save for those (e.g. provincial representatives of teachers’ unions) with whom they had little or no contact and were not applicable. Respondents noted particularly good relationships with office/clerical/technical staff, with whom they communicate frequently. Similar to the general perspectives on labour relations, the most strained relationships were between school administrators and provincial-level representatives of teacher and support worker unions. It is unclear, however, with what frequency and for what purpose school administrators interact with provincial-level union representatives. These relationships are illustrated in Figures 2.8 through 2.13. An analytical discussion of these relationships—and what they might mean for education—is included later in the report.
Figure 2.8 - Please select the option that best describes your relationship with the following parties:

![Figure 2.8](image)

Figure 2.9 - Please select the option that best describes your relationship with the following parties:

![Figure 2.9](image)

Figure 2.10 - Please select the option that best describes your relationship with the following parties:

![Figure 2.10](image)
Figure 2.11 - Since you began working as a principal or vice-principal, how has your relationship with the following parties changed?

Figure 2.12 - Since you began working as a principal or vice-principal, how has your relationship with the following parties changed?

Figure 2.13 - Since you began working as a principal or vice-principal, how has your relationship with the following parties changed?
3. Conflict Management and Grievance Resolution

The first group of questions in this section sought to determine how familiar school administrators are with both their school board’s human resource policies and the collective agreements that govern teachers and educational support staff in their school. Respondents noted that they were generally familiar with both, although they were less familiar with their school board’s human resource policies than they were with the terms and conditions in collective agreements (Figure 3.1). Respondents also noted that they were more familiar with the terms and conditions in the collective agreements that governed teachers than those that governed support workers (Figures 3.2 and 3.3). This is not necessarily surprising considering that an overwhelming majority of school administrators have experience working as a teacher. Respondents also noted an increase in the number of grievances filed by both teachers and support staff in recent years (Figures 3.4 and 3.5).

**Figure 3.1 - How familiar are you with your school board’s human resource and labour relations policies and procedures?**

- **Very Familiar**
- **Somewhat Familiar**
- **Somewhat Unfamiliar**
- **Unfamiliar**

**Figure 3.2 - How familiar are you with the provisions of the collective agreements that govern teachers in your school?**

- **Very Familiar**
- **Somewhat Familiar**
- **Somewhat Unfamiliar**
- **Unfamiliar**
Figure 3.3 - How familiar are you with the provisions of the collective agreements that govern support workers in your school?

Figure 3.4 - To the best of your knowledge, to what extent have conflicts and grievances with teachers in your school changed over the past three (3) years?

Figure 3.5 - To the best of your knowledge, to what extent have conflicts and grievances with support workers in your school changed over the past three (3) years?
Respondents were then asked to rate the effectiveness and expediency of the procedures and mechanisms currently used to resolve disputes and grievances. Opinions were somewhat divided regarding the effectiveness of dispute resolution mechanisms and procedures, although many felt that they were at least somewhat effective (Figure 3.6). Opinions were also divided regarding the timeliness of dispute and grievance resolution (Figure 3.7).

Respondents were also asked about their familiarity with stipulations in collective agreements that encouraged the informal resolution of grievances and the frequency with which they engaged in grievance resolution at this stage. Interestingly, and despite the majority of respondents noting that they were ‘very familiar’ or ‘somewhat familiar’ with the terms and conditions of collective agreements that governed teachers and support workers, many were unsure of whether or not these same agreements included provisions that encouraged the informal resolution of disputes and grievances (Figures 3.8 and 3.9). Moreover, some respondents noted that the collective agreements that govern teachers and support
workers in their schools did not contain provisions for the informal resolution of disputes and grievance (collective agreements governing teachers and educational support staff in Ontario contain such a provision almost exclusively). One possible reason for this discrepancy may be that it is common practice in some schools or school boards to circumvent this stage of the procedure.

Respondents noted that they generally attempted to resolve grievances informally and that they seldom avoided doing so. This was the case for both teachers and support workers (Figures 3.10 to 3.13). However, there were several reasons why teacher- and support worker-initiated grievances might not be resolved informally. In fact, over half of all respondents chose to answer an optional open-ended question that sought to determine what might prevent them from resolving grievances informally. The fact that so many respondents chose to take the time and answer such a question signifies the importance of this matter. Table 3.1 aggregates this data and lists reasons that prevent school administrators from resolving grievances informally. It includes specific comments from respondents. While several reasons are noted,
the most frequent cause for concern amongst school administrators is a lack of support from school board human resources personnel. Comments made by almost one-fifth of respondents were consistent with this point. These comments also contradict and problematize the results of Figures 2.10 and 2.13, which suggest that the school administrators generally have good relationships with human resource superintendents and managers, to some degree. School administrators in public elementary schools and Catholic secondary schools made these comments most frequently.

Figure 3.10 - How often do you attempt to resolve teacher-initiated grievances or conflicts informally?

Figure 3.11 - Do you ever avoid resolving teacher-initiated grievances or conflicts at the informal stage?
Figure 3.12 - How often do you attempt to resolve support worker-initiated grievances or conflicts informally?

Figure 3.13 - Do you ever avoid resolving support worker-initiated grievances or conflicts at the informal stage?
### Lack of Support from Senior Management

“...The dynamic between school staff and senior staff has gradually deteriorated. HR superintendent is a root cause. I hope our issue is predominantly caused by personal incompetency, my fear is that the impact upon personnel issues will become entrenched or systemic.”

- P/8/12/N/EN/SEC/P

“It is my perception that there is currently a breakdown in relationships (trust) between the Board and principals. This has been a deciding factor in my decision to retire.”

- P/8/19/F/EN/ELE/P

“The relationship between principals and superintendents or senior administrators is not a positive one in this board. We would NEVER treat our staff in the manner we are treated.”

- P/2/23/F/EN/SEC/C

“Many senior staff do not want Principals to have the autonomy to discuss issues or solutions with other stakeholders. Dialogue is significantly restricted. The us/them mentality is enforced by senior staff. Collaboration and transparency appear to be the biggest enemy!”

- P/8/12/N/EN/SEC/P

### Unaware of Grievance

“...Principals usually are not informed of a grievance until it has been filed by the local bargaining reps. Teachers don’t often initiate the grievance. They may not even agree that a grievance is necessary, but local officials take it to Board personnel on their own.”

- P/8/20/M/EN/SEC/C

“The board ignores principals and vice-principals and works directly with the teacher union.”

- P/7/17/M/EN/SEC/C

“Teachers consult their unit representative, then the grievance goes to the S[upervisory] O[fficer], then the Principal gets the phone call from the S[upervisory] O[fficer]. There needs to be a step in place whereby the teacher must bring the concern to the Principal first for a resolution.”

- P/5/24/F/EN/ELE/C

“Principals usually are not informed of a grievance until it has been filed by the local bargaining reps.”

- P/8/20/M/EN/SEC/C

### Uncertainty/Lack of Confidence

“Fear of doing something which will be outside the expected process and that may end up escalating things instead of leading to resolution.”

- VP/2/20/F/EN/ELE/P

### Interpretation of Collective Agreement

“There are many different interpretations of the collective agreement. So, even when someone is familiar with the agreement (and most are not) there is still disagreement about what it all means for the day to day operation of the school.”

- VP/2/6/M/EN/ELE/P

### Workload

“There is insufficient time for communication in the early stages due to other time commitments, and then things have moved past the informal stage, the process has moved forward too quickly and other agencies become involved.”

- P/8/21/M/EN/ELE/C

### Formal Grievances Encouraged

“Union stewards sometimes are encouraged to set a precedent by going to formal processes rather than solving an issue at a school level.”

- P/4/11/N/EN/ELE/P
4. Professional Development

The majority of respondents thought that labour relations-themed professional development would be useful for stakeholders in Ontario’s publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools (Figure 4.1). Principals with less than 5 years of experience and vice-principals were identified as 2 particular parties for whom such professional development would be useful (Figure 4.2). Respondents also identified specific subject matter knowledge and skills that are being addressed currently through professional development (Figure 4.3) delivered by school boards and principals’ councils and those that they believed could be effectively addressed through labour relations-focused professional development (Figure 4.4). Of these, dispute resolution and conflict management skills were identified as being the most important, followed by communication skills. The most desirable outcomes of such professional development were also identified (Figure 4.5). Improved relationships and communication with teachers, teachers’ union representatives, and support workers were identified as the most desirable outcomes. Also identified were reduced grievances and disputes and better understanding of collective agreements.

Figure 4.1 - Do you think labour relations-focused courses or workshops would be beneficial for Ontario’s education sector?

![Bar chart showing the percentage of respondents who think labour relations-focused courses or workshops would be beneficial.]

Figure 4.2 - For which parties would labour relations-focused courses be most useful?

![Bar chart showing the number of respondents who think labour relations-focused courses would be most useful for different parties.]
Figure 4.3 - What type(s) of labour relations-focused professional development is currently available to principals and/or vice-principals in your school board?

![Bar chart showing availability of professional development topics](chart1.png)

Figure 4.4 - Please identify the themes/issues that would be particularly useful to address through professional development:

![Bar chart showing themes/issues](chart2.png)

Figure 4.5 - In your opinion, what are the most desirable outcomes of labour relations-focused professional development?

![Bar chart showing desirable outcomes](chart3.png)
DISCUSSION

The results of this survey highlight several important aspects of the roles and responsibilities of school administrators as they relate to labour relations. Also noteworthy is that the perspectives and opinions provided in this survey are only those of administrators. They do not include those of other stakeholders, namely school board supervisory officers and human resource managers, teachers’ and support workers’ union representatives, and staff. These perspectives are captured in additional surveys conducted by the IRC, from which published summaries and reports are forthcoming. The results of the survey do, however, raise several interesting points that warrant further discussion.

One of the most notable points is the different perceptions of public elementary school administrators when compared to their public secondary and Catholic counterparts. Interesting still is the fact that public elementary school administrators are employed by the same school boards as public secondary school administrators. Why then, do public elementary school administrators perceive the labour relations environment to be more challenging? One, or a combination, of several factors may be the cause. First, the union representing elementary school teachers in English-language boards (ETFO) was the last of the 4 teachers’ unions to conclude agreement during negotiations in 2008 and 2009. Moreover, the eventual agreements included wage increases that were lower than those negotiated with teachers in public secondary, Catholic, and French-language school boards. The perceptions of public elementary school administrators may be related to this in some way. Second, there may be stressors associated with the responsibilities of elementary school administrators that are not present in secondary schools. These might include more frequent interaction with parents and the day-to-day concerns that accompany the administration of a staff responsible for pre-adolescent children. Third, and relatedly, elementary school administrators are more likely to work in smaller schools with no vice-principals (i.e. managerial colleagues) and fewer teaching and support staff. While the aggregate volume of responsibilities may be similar to those of a school administrator in a larger secondary school, the breadth of an elementary school principal’s responsibilities may be much greater. In any case, it appears that more research is necessary to better understand the difference in the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of elementary and secondary school administrators (Sweeney et al. 2012).

Also interesting is that respondents noted that there relationships with school board superintendents, directors, and managers were generally good, but that many also expressed frustration with the lack of support from school board senior management in labour relations matters. In other words, school administrators represent a group of frontline supervisors who are responsible for individual worksites, but who often lack the power or authority to make and implement the decisions that affect the staff employed at those worksites. This may be the result of ambiguity or confusion regarding roles and responsibilities of school administrators relative to those in school boards. It also may require further research regarding the manner in which different school boards devolve responsibilities to administrators in individual schools and the challenges and benefits associated with doing so.

The matter of conflict management and grievance resolution also necessitates further discussion. It is apparent that school administrators prefer to resolve disputes within their own schools, but that many grievances are resolved by union representatives and school board superintendents without the
administrator’s knowledge. School administrators are then left to implement a decision that they did not make. However, it should be explicitly noted that while the survey found that school administrators noticed an increased in conflicts and grievances in the recent past, it did not inquire about the nature and severity of these conflicts and grievances. Nor did it inquire as to why union representatives bring grievances directly to superintendents or human resource managers, and why superintendents and human resource managers take the initiative to resolve them, rather than referring the grievance back to school administrators (despite provisions in collective agreements that provide options for informal and formal grievance resolution at the school level). There is some thought that unions and school boards are concerned that even the most well-meaning school administrators may render decisions or solutions that may be satisfactory in an individual school or for an individual employee, but that set precedents and have broader implications for other employees and other worksites. Such decisions also have the potential to result in policy grievances that can be costly, lengthy, and are more likely to result in arbitration. More communication between school board superintendents and managers, union representatives, and school administrators regarding the process and outcomes of grievance resolution may help alleviate the concerns of the latter. The general desire for more labour relations-focused professional development also signifies an environment where senior management are unwilling to devolve responsibility to frontline managers who, despite their expertise in education and administration, are not trained as labour relations professionals.

There also appears to be some discrepancy between the subject matter of professional development being delivered to school administrators and the professional development desired by school administrators. The results suggest that school administrators seek more specifically-focused professional development that helps address particular challenges, such as dispute resolution and partnership development, while courses that focus on leadership and emotional intelligence are more commonly offered. Interestingly, the principals’ councils appear to be taking a more active role in providing professional development for Ontario’s school administrators. This trend is anticipated to continue in the near future pending any major systemic restructuring. It will be interesting to see the extent and manner in which the principals’ councils develop partnerships with school boards, teachers’ and support workers’ unions, and third parties to assist in the delivery of professional development to their members.

CONCLUSION

The results of this survey indicate the importance of school administrators to the labour relations environment in Ontario’s publicly-funded elementary and secondary schools. The data also identify several of the challenges that school administrators face in their day-to-day work. Moreover, the results of this survey suggest that labour relations can vary widely between different school boards. This is in some ways surprising considering that there has been a shift towards more centralized policy, funding, and collective bargaining by successive provincial governments.

More specifically, the results of this survey suggest that school administrators would prefer to take a more active role in conflict management and dispute resolution. This may require more professional development directed towards this subject area; something the majority of respondents believed would be useful. The results also suggest that school board human resource superintendents are extremely
important to the labour relations environment. School board human resource superintendents play a
critical role not only in their interactions with school administrators, but with district or bargaining unit
representatives of teachers’ and support workers’ unions as well. These interactions are noted to set the
‘tone’ of the labour relations environment in individual schools.

In general, open and consistent lines of communication between school administrators, staff, school board
supervisory officers and managers, and union representatives are key to the labour relations
environment. However, communication requires effort from all parties. Without mutual cooperation, it is
extremely difficult to engage in productive and respectful dialogue and to distinguish between disputes
that are systemic in nature and beyond the control of local parties, those that are more personal in nature,
and those that present opportunities for meaningful cooperation between parties. By maintaining an
environment that promotes open and respectful communication, parties may be better able to recognize
and diagnose the roots of their challenges and build a relationship that emphasizes problem-solving in a
manner that improves the day-to-day relationships between school boards, school administrators, and
employees, and by extension, fosters a safe, healthy, and productive learning environment.
REFERENCES


Brendan Sweeney

Brendan holds a B.A. in Labour Studies from McMaster and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Economic and Labour Geography from Queen’s. He is also a graduate of the IRC’s Labour Relations Certificate program, and has spent time as a Visiting Fulbright Scholar at the University of Washington and as a lecturer at both McMaster and the University of Manitoba.

Brendan’s research focuses on employment relations and collective bargaining in the education, pulp and paper, logging, and tree planting industries. His research is published in a number of academic journals, including *Advances in Industrial and Labour Relations*, *Labour/Le Travail*, *Antipode*, *the Canadian Geographer*, *BC Studies*, and *Gender, Place, and Culture*. He also worked at the former Westinghouse factory in Hamilton and in a variety of positions in forestry and silviculture.

Brendan is also an accomplished athlete and coach. He captained both the McMaster and Queen’s varsity lacrosse teams, and coached both men’s and women’s lacrosse at Queen’s and McMaster, and women’s lacrosse at the University of Washington. He was named the OUA Coach of the Year in 2005 after coaching the Queen’s University Varsity Women’s Lacrosse team to an undefeated regular season and an OUA silver medal.