

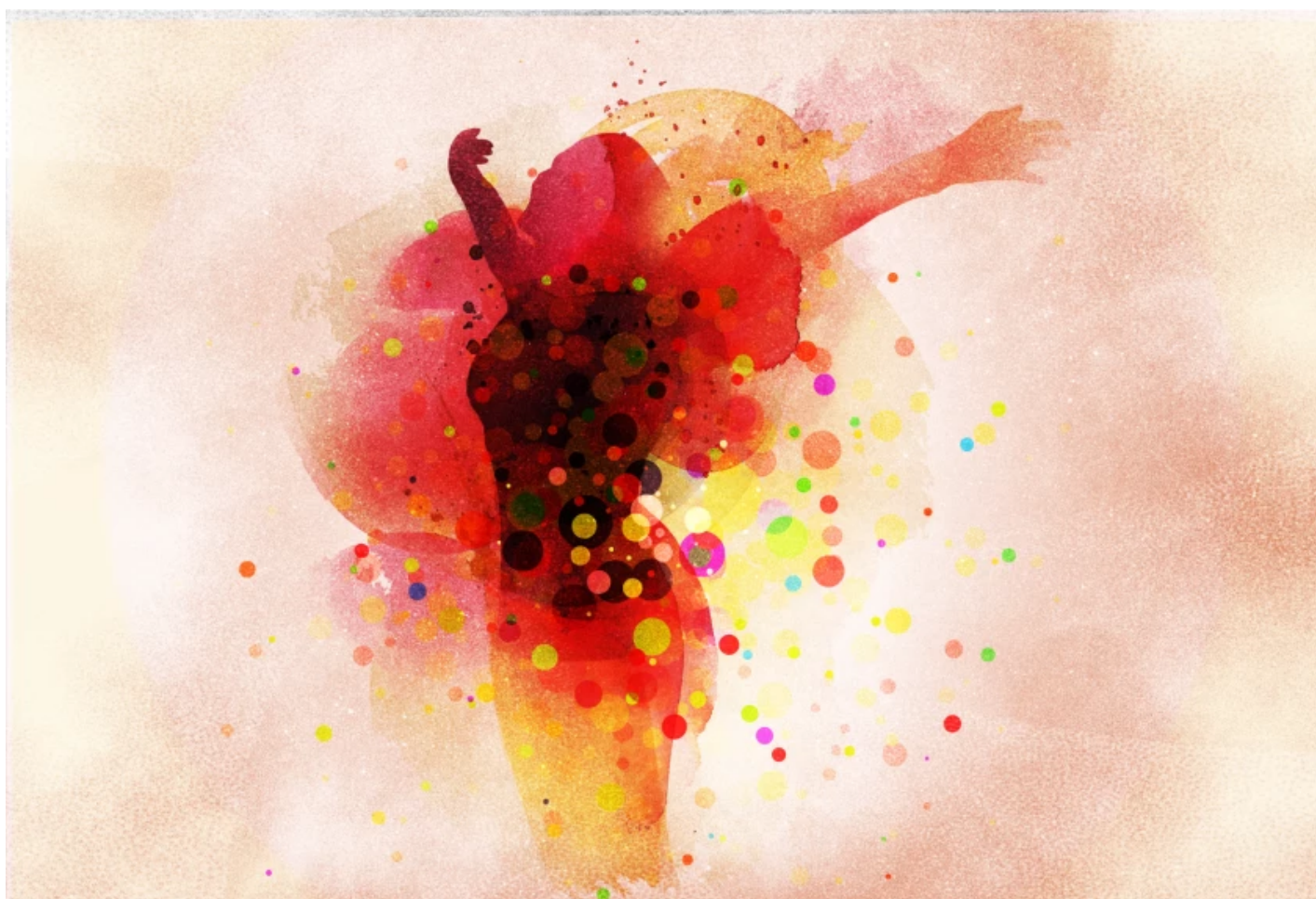
OPINION

SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT OPINION

Rx for Principals: Take in the Joy

Too often, the experiences that make schools happy places go unnoticed and unshared

By David E. DeMatthews & Eleanor J. Su-Keene — March 11, 2022 ⌚ 4 min read



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David E. DeMatthews & Eleanor J. Su-Keene

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As education researchers, we are concerned about principals' well-being in a divisive political climate after two years of managing schools in a pandemic. In a recent [poll](#) by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, almost 45 percent of principals said they had considered leaving their jobs or sped up their plans to exit the principalship because of COVID-related working conditions.

Yes, working conditions for principals have been tough. But that's only part of the story. Even in the current circumstances, schools remain sites of joy. Principals regularly experience this joy, and it could make a big difference in how they perceive their working conditions.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other authorities offer time-tested ways of coping with the stress of the past two years: exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy diet, avoiding alcohol, seeking counseling if needed, and more. We hope every principal heeds such advice.

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But even if it is followed—despite the constraints of workload and family responsibilities—it does nothing to improve a school’s working conditions. And it does not capitalize on the joy that exists in every school. Educators can tap into that joy, though, in part using methods that psychologists have been developing over the past 20 years.

When we talk to principals, the conversation typically begins with concerns: student and teacher absences, declining student mental health, regression in reading and mathematics skills, and continued high-stakes-accountability pressure from district administrators and state departments of education. During the omicron surge, one middle school principal in a rural district, frustrated with the district administration’s constant accountability pressure, lamented, “How can I even plan when I don’t know if three, five, or 20 teachers will be absent until that morning?”

But we also hear joy when we scratch below the surface of those frustrations. The same principal covered for an absent teacher and reflected on the positive experience: “I had not taught in years, it was so fun, and the next day, some of the kids came up to me to thank me and ask me when I was coming back to visit.”

If you ask principals about their positive experiences, you will hear a steady stream of stories and see their faces light up with smiles. For example, an elementary school principal in an urban district described being moved to tears seeing an English-learner student, after a difficult year of transition, reading in two languages. Another principal talked about how meaningful she found coaching a novice teacher who was struggling but also improving by the day. Such experiences too often go unnoticed and unshared.



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Schools are places where positive events far outnumber negative ones, though that may not be readily apparent to principals caught up in the unrelenting workflow. Now is the time for principals (and all of us) to take a moment to pause and recognize, celebrate, and remember the daily joys of schooling.

One specific way to do this is “savoring,” which has been explored by psychologists [Fred B. Bryant and Joseph Veroff](#). They define savoring as a practice of noticing and deepening positive emotions and experiences.

Schools are excellent places to enact savoring, and they provide principals with opportunities to [savor the present, past, and future](#). To savor the present, principals can pay closer attention to the physical sensations such as warmth that accompany smiling and laughing. When positive emotions occur, principals need not do anything more in the moment than be present and hold on to those feelings for just a bit longer than usual before getting back to the other tasks at hand.

To savor the past, principals can spend a few minutes at the end of each day and week reflecting on the positive events that occurred at school. They can recall a student or a teacher experiencing success or a favorable outcome for a family. Sitting quietly with those thoughts for a few minutes can make a world of difference.

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To savor the future, principals might imagine the joy of an upcoming graduation or the possibility of a state-championship win for a strong team.

While these practices may seem like common sense, it is important to recognize that, in reality, they take time and practice to develop. Most of us naturally focus on negative experiences as a way to protect ourselves from them. To change our focus to positive experiences can require commitment.

One coping strategy often named by school administrators is meeting up with fellow principals for drinks, dinners, or informal check-ins. Principal support networks are critical to managing job-related stress. Savoring can enhance the benefits of these networks if principals take time to share not only their stressors but also their positive moments. Sharing multiplies the benefits of savoring.

We are not suggesting that principals' stress will be alleviated if they just "stop and smell the roses." Rather, we believe principals can tap into an abundant natural resource within their schools: happy events that can initiate and reinforce positive feelings.

Just as one might savor a delicious meal, savoring the joy in schools is all about recognizing, focusing on, and remembering the positive experiences that come with supporting teachers, students, and families.

We would like to see principals be happy and resilient for however long they choose to stay in their positions. They should recognize and be proud of their positive contributions. Savoring is not just about persisting and doing more work. It's also about being able to feel joy even in what is another difficult year of pandemic schooling.

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A version of this article appeared in the March 16, 2022 edition of *Education Week* as *Rx for Principals: Take In the Joy*

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