1. In what ways do you experience wellbeing in your work? How has this changed over your years of work?
2. What conditions (school and system levels) are necessary to support wellbeing and flourishing for administrators in their work?
3. What are some of the ways positive teacher leadership could be fostered in schools?

In order to facilitate conversation, I will offer some thoughts on my experiences as an elementary principal for sixteen years. These anecdotal “take-aways” are based solely on my observations and experiences. I am not linking these to any existing research. In order to keep things manageable, I will summarize these in a few slides…a Top Ten, if you will.
What is your vision of an effective, flourishing school?

Some things never change?

1. School Climate

A positive and supportive school environment is, in my experience, the most important element for all members of the school community - students, teachers, administrators, support staff, parents/guardians, volunteers and visitors. It really is all about building and maintaining positive, respectful and trusting relationships. That is the glue that holds it all together and allows the school community to flourish.
2. What You Give is What You Get

The Golden Rule - treat others as you would like them to treat you. Administrators need to be “the real thing” - genuine, honest, respectful, accessible and open to the views and suggestions of others. Maintain an “open door” policy. Be polite, happy and welcoming in all that you do...that positive, optimistic modelling sets the tone for everyone else.
3. Spend Quality Time With Your Students!

I think most of us would agree that one of the best parts of being an administrator, the most rewarding, is spending time with our students…something we would like to be able to do more often (coaching, clubs, planning Grad., school plays, setting up buddies and mentoring). I think you would also agree that, as a group, we not terribly fond of spending as much time and effort as we do on bureaucracy, meetings and paperwork…those endless forms, plans and reports. I worry that we sometimes spend too much time being “accountable” for what we do…time that could be better spent actually doing what we do. An example…too often, we have a meeting scheduled (e.g. monthly staff meeting), so we do what we can to “fill it up”. Why not do the opposite…have a meeting once there are important things to discuss and share? Time is a precious commodity in a school…use it wisely…you never get it back. “Do less…do it well.”
4. Recognize Professionals

Recognize that teachers and other staff as the professionals they are. Try to let teachers teach - don’t micromanage, you couldn’t do it even if you wanted to - there simply is not enough time. We have to trust our teachers and encourage them to take risks. Have clear expectations for staff, focus on strengths, make reasonable and clear expectations for improvement, follow up on them and have frequent, informal check-ins. Like our students, staff are always trying to improve and we all learn from our mistakes.
5. Celebrate!

Celebrate the great things that are going on at your school - special school events and celebrations, daily announcements, individual achievements, bulletin boards, newsletters, acknowledging positive results from your initiatives, ideas and hard work as a team, and receiving positive feedback from staff and parents. Sometimes you have to celebrate and build on those small successes, particularly for students with special needs. As long as we are moving forward, we are flourishing!
6. Team Building

Never ignore the social dimension...team building, things you can do together at school (games, sports, hikes, walks), gathering outside of school from time-to-time to blow off steam and see each other in a different light. Never underestimate the importance of a good sense of humour...in appropriate circumstances, of course. Teaching is a stressful job...we need to support each other. There is nothing better than physical fitness for helping for managing stress!
7. Look After Yourself

We are in the business of care and compassion, but we cannot ignore our own feelings and needs. “Who cares for the caregivers?” There is only so much one can do with what they have in the time that they have…come to accept that and be happy with what you do. Try to build in some quiet time each day…to catch your breath, reflect and think - this is good for our students and staff as well. Learn to recognize “the signs” in yourself. It is all right to admit that you are anxious or stressed out…it is a natural reaction, not a sign of weakness. Take a stress day, if needed, seek help and, most importantly, talk to somebody. You are never alone. If you are not well and flourishing in your job, your school will not be either…and they need you.
8. A Matter of Balance

Find that perfect balance…the Goldilocks Rule…getting it “just right”…

COMPASSIONATE >> YET TOUGH, WHEN NECESSARY
DECISIVE >> BUT NOT IMPULSIVE
SUPPORTIVE >> BUT NOT CONTROLLING
CONFIDENT/SELF-ASSURED >> NOT COCKY OR ARROGANT

You will find your equilibrium and unique style…what works for you.
9. Whose Problem Is It Anyway?

Remember…often it is not your problem, you don’t own it. You are simply attempting to assist others in making good decisions and solving problems. e.g. to begin a potentially “difficult” meeting, try, “We are all here today to formulate a plan to support X, to ensure that he is safe, happy and successful at school. While we might not always agree on everything, on how to get there, we all do want the same thing and we have to work together toward that end. Agreed?” The focus always needs to be on what is best for the student.
10. Do Some Research

There has been a real focus in Ontario in recent years on mental health and wellness for all members of the school community. Here are a couple you might want to check out…
Resilient, Active, and Flourishing:
Supporting Positive Mental Health and Well-Being in School Communities

Dr. Patrick Carney, Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board &
Dr. Michelann Parr, Nipissing University

Promoting well-being is one of the key actions listed in Achieving Excellence. Students (and teachers) who maintain positive mental health and experience a sense of well-being feel a) able to cope with adversity; b) physically well, nourished, and active; c) physically and psychologically safe; d) included, valued, and supported at home, school, and in the community; e) competent and able to participate in productive activities; and f) confident that others care about their well-being. These characteristics impact a student’s attention span, creative thinking, and capacity to learn; improve attitudes toward self and others; and decrease problem behaviours and potential emotional distress.

What Is Positive Mental Health?

Positive mental health is “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face.” It is “a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections, and personal dignity.” It is characterized by resilience, commitment to an active lifestyle, and the experience of flourishing.

Resilience allows us to cope with life’s disappointments, challenges, and pain. To be resilient, we need to believe in our own strengths, abilities, and worth. Resilient traits include flexibility, empathy, realistic action planning, listening and problem-solving skills, self-confidence, optimism,

PATRICK CARNEY, PHD, is a psychologist with the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board.

MICHELANN PARR, PHD, is Professor in the Schulich School of Education at Nipissing University.

The Student Achievement Division is committed to providing teachers with current research on instruction and learning. The opinions and conclusions contained in these monographs are, however, those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies, views, or directions of the Ontario Ministry of Education or the Student Achievement Division.
Thanks, everyone!

Are you able to bounce back?

Are you a oak or a willow?