

Impact of Amala's Healing-Centered Series

A small study with Austin ISD Principals

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Recent national research by the RAND Corporation indicates that teachers and principals report worse well-being than other working adults in the pandemic era, including higher levels of job-related stress, depression, and burnout. Eighty-five percent of principals experience frequent job-related stress, citing their staff's mental health and well-being as one of their top stressors (Steiner et al., 2022).

Aware of the unprecedented expectations placed on campus leaders, the Austin Ed Fund contracted the Amala Foundation to facilitate a healing-centered learning series for a cohort of AISD principals during the 2021-2022 school year. The purpose of the series was to provide dedicated time and space for up to 30 principals to intentionally assess, reflect, and continue to grow their skills in building healing-centered communities. The series included two half-day retreats as well as monthly, 2-hour workshops.

Before the series began, principals were asked to complete the core portion of the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT-C), in order to measure changes in burnout over time. Burnout is often synonymous with exhaustion, which is one of the core dimensions of the BAT-C, along with mental distance, cognitive impairment, and emotional impairment (Suchaufeli, Desart, & De Witte, 2020). Results from the pre-assessment indicated the majority of the principal cohort often experienced feeling drained, mentally and physically exhausted, and difficulty recovering energy after a day of work (Figure 1).

“I was seeking validation to focus on taking care of people first.”

- *Elementary school principal*

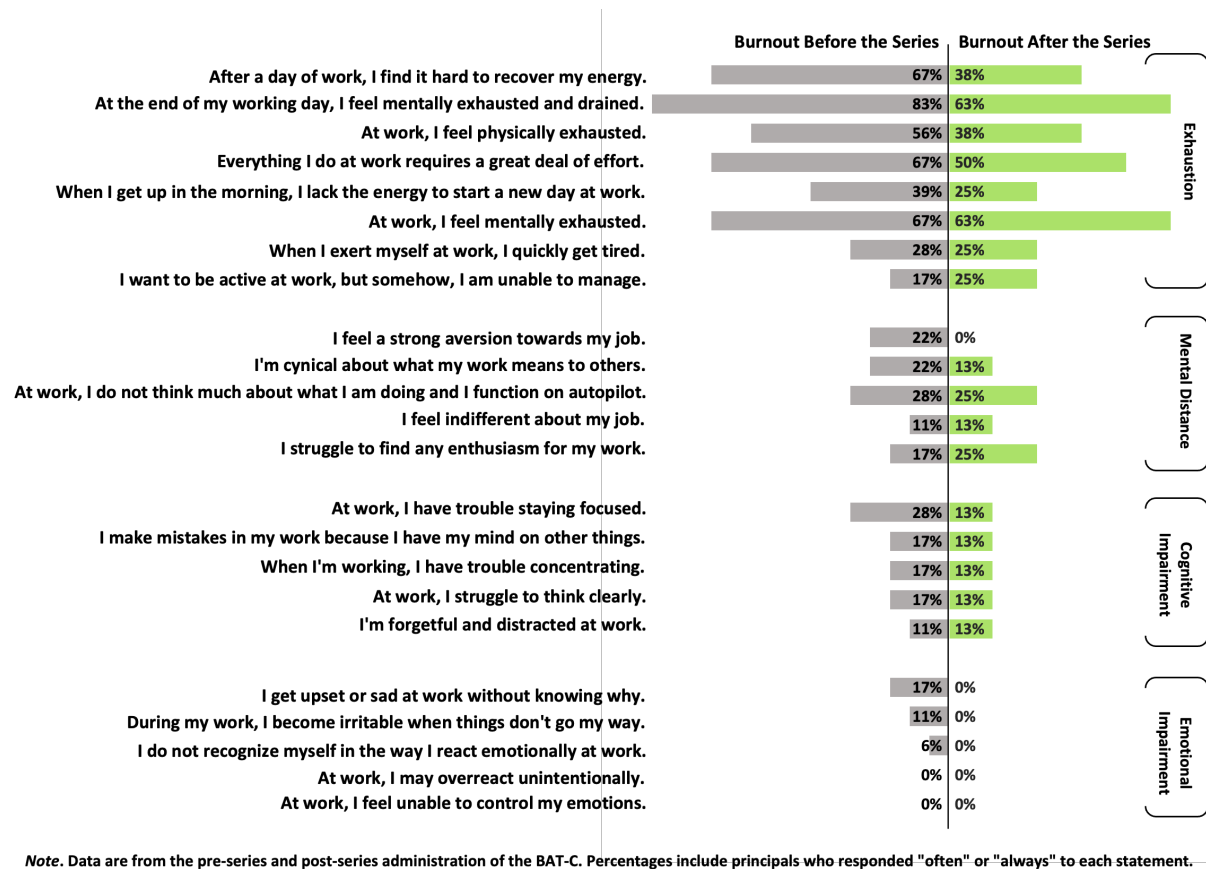
Indeed, when principals were asked what they were hoping to gain from participating in the cohort, some mentioned the need to energize themselves and to cultivate positivity. Others were looking for an opportunity to practice self-care. Most principals mentioned the desire to build community and connect with other principals in the hope that they would feel affirmed and validated.

During the sessions, principals engaged in a variety of healing-centered practices, including time spent in nature, guided meditation, journaling, gratitude practices, circle conversations, somatic movement, and art-based experiences. Amala staff prioritized in-person gatherings over virtual meetings, and technology (e.g., laptops) was rarely utilized. Principals were quick to note the effects of these healing-centered practices on their mental health, sharing that they left the sessions feeling “refreshed,” “less isolated,” “lighter,” “more confident,” and self-aware.

Furthermore, many principals provided examples of how they incorporated the approaches, exercises, and other resources they learned from Amala into their interactions with staff and students.

Upon conclusion of the series, principals completed the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT-C) again. Analysis of the pre- and post-series assessments revealed that the percentage of principals who reported frequent burnout decreased over time. It is particularly noteworthy that no principals (0%) reported frequent emotional impairment after participation in the healing-centered series (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Principals reported less burnout after Amala’s series than they did before the series.



Previous research suggests that peer support for principals may alleviate burnout, and that mitigating principal burnout affects not only principal retention, but also the overall stability of a school community. (DeMatthews, Carrola, Reyes, and Knight, 2021). Data from AISD's cohort of principals corroborates these findings. Novice and veteran principals alike expressed how the camaraderie of the principal cohort affected their well-being. Principals revealed that their time at Amala was unique, in that there were no other opportunities for principals to share openly with one another in a safe space.

Moreover, multiple principals credited their continued employment in the district to their participation in Amala's healing-centered series. At a time when the conservative cost of recruiting and training one new principal, \$75,000, (New Teacher Center, 2018) exceeds the yearly cost of Amala's healing-centered series, a strategic retention effort would be to invest in meaningful opportunities for principals to practice self-care and to build community with one another.

Should district stakeholders continue investing in the mental health and well-being of campus leaders via subsequent healing-centered series, principals and program staff offered a few recommendations: begin the series with an overnight retreat (as was done in previous years); pair participating principals with a former principal for 1-on-1 peer-support sessions; provide financial compensation to participants; hold in-person sessions only (i.e., no virtual meetings), and offer the healing-centered series to a cohort to assistant principals and/or executive directors.

“There were daily moments when I was ready to quit. Amala is part of the reason why I did not leave, and why my staff did not lose a principal.”

- High school principal



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